

## Language Documentation & Linguistic Theory 2

**Null arguments and homonymy flight in the development  
of creole pronoun systems**

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## Null Arguments and Homonymy Flight in the Development of Creole Pronoun Systems

Contrary to the generally accepted assumption that Creole inflectional systems are too impoverished to permit the insertion of referential null subjects (cf. Roberts 1999 among others), a large proportion of the Creole languages has adopted *pro*-drop properties. I will show that the development of such characteristics and its consequences for the corresponding null pronouns and pronoun systems varies between the different Creole languages.

In some Creole languages new null forms have emerged due to the fact that overt weak pronouns lost their referential properties completely or at least partly and turned into functional agreement markers by reanalysis. In Haitian Creole (cf. de Graff 1993) and in some non-standard varieties of Saramaccan (cf. Veenstra 1996), for example, atonic subject pronouns have gained properties of verbal functional markers but nevertheless retained some pronominal features on their grammaticalization path to functional agreement morphemes. As a consequence, the resulting subject null forms are not able to refer freely but rely on their being bound as anaphors by the quasi-pronominal agreement morphology of the finite verb. Since, in contrast to non-pronominal overt subject DPs (1a), overt strong subject pronouns co-occur with those functional agreement markers (1b), the special development of the weak subject pronouns in the languages concerned has had the welcome side effect that the homonymy between object pronouns and strong subject pronouns was abolished.

### (1) Non-Standard Saramaccan

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|---|---|
| <p>(a) <i>Jan (*a) bì dú hén.</i><br/>         Jan 3SG PERF do it<br/>         “Jan has done it.”</p> | <p>(b) <i>Hén<sub>i</sub>/pro<sub>i</sub>*(a<sub>i</sub>) bì t<sub>i</sub> dú hén.</i><br/>         he 3SG PERF do it<br/>         “HE / he has done it.”</p> |
|---|---|

In other Creole languages, as for instance in present-day Seychellois, Réunionnais and Mauritian Creole (cf. Corne 1977; Michaelis 1994), weak subject pronouns obtain a null representation in TMA-marked clauses as soon as their *phi*-feature content is recoverable by their association with a prominent discourse topic (Adone 1994) (2). I will elucidate that, in accordance with the *Subset Principle* (Halle 1997), which requires the insertion of the most specific exponent into a given morpheme, the corresponding null forms are generally preferred to their overt weak counterparts in colloquial speech because they decisively differ from the strong forms. Therefore, their implementation not only brought about a considerable economizing of the discourse but also led to the deletion of homonymous forms from the paradigm of definite subject pronouns. Syea (1993) points out that, moreover, two types of indefinite null pronouns have come into existence in Mauritian Creole. As I will show, this development enriches the pronominal system with strictly unambiguous representations for generic (3a) and specific (3b) indefinite subject pronouns.

### (2) Seychellois

- (a) *pro pran bann fey ....*  
 take PL leaf  
 “We took leaves....”

### (3) Mauritian Creole

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|---|--|
| <p>(a) <i>pro van puasō dā bazar</i><br/>         sell fish in market<br/>         “One sells fish in the market”</p> | <p>(b) <i>pro fin koke Anand so loto.</i><br/>         PERF steal Anand his car<br/>         “Someone has stolen Anand’s car.”</p> |
|---|--|

In Cape Verdean Creole (cf. Baptista 2002) subject null pronouns with anaphoric properties (4a) as well as discourse oriented null subjects (4b) arose. Whereas the development of the former null subjects has resulted in the removal of homonymous forms from the paradigm of the strong *Speech Act Participant* pronouns, the introduction of the latter has effected a phonological distinction in the paradigm of the weak pronouns.

### (4) Cape Verdean Creole

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|---|--|
| <p>(a) <i>Bo<sub>i</sub>/pro<sub>i</sub> bu<sub>i</sub> ta t<sub>i</sub> pode lenbra.</i><br/>         you 2SG COND can remember<br/>         “YOU / you could remember.”</p> | <p>(b) <i>pro nase me mil novsenti kinzi.</i><br/>         be-born self thousand nine-hundred fifteen<br/>         “I was born in 1915.”</p> |
|---|--|

Thus, in all Creole languages I will discuss the rise of *pro*-drop properties has caused an enrichment and morphological specialization of the corresponding pronoun system. I will conclude that homonymy flight has at least a considerable influence on the development and prevalence of null arguments in languages whose pronoun system originally lacks any morphological strong-weak or case distinction.