

Martinican Creole “definite” wh-questions: At the interface between syntax and pragmatics

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0. Introduction

The bigger picture

- Several reasons to study of language contact:
 - Language contact is a major driver of language change.
 - It informs us about fundamental aspects of the Language Faculty.
 - It has become especially important in the context of globalization.
- My research is interested in both aspects of language contact.

Some of the big questions

- **What are the effects of contact on the languages in presence?**
 - Are all the components of language equally affected?
 - When does language contact result in the emergence of a new language/dialect?
- **Can we predict the outcome of language contact?**
 - If so, what are the factors (linguistic and otherwise) which should be considered?
 - Are there conditions which may nullify the effects of language contact?

Why Martinique?

- Martinican Creole: a product of extreme language contact
 - West African languages + French ⇒ Martinican creole
- Ongoing contact between Martinican Creole and French
 - Emergence of a regional variety of French
 - Changes in the grammar of Martinican Creole (Térosier 2023)
- Complex society, notably because of incomplete decolonization
 - Language choice is not neutral (Térosier 2017; Térosier et al. 2022)

Today's plat du jour

- Martinican Creole has two types of *wh*-questions (i.e. content questions):
 - “Indefinite” *wh*-questions (IWQs) – (1a)
 - “Definite” *wh*-questions (DWQs) – (1b)

- (1) a. Kisa ou wè?
what 2SG see?
‘What did you see?’
- b. Kisa ou wè **a**?
what 2SGS see CD
‘What did you see (given our shared knowledge that you saw something)?’

DWQs: their characteristics

- DWQs are characterized by the **presence of a CD in sentence-final position**.
- The CD is **homophonous with the definite article**.

(2) doktè a
doctor DEF
'the doctor'
- Both encode **familiarity**.

DWQs: their characteristics (cont'd)

- Consequently, DWQs **cannot be uttered out of the blue.**

(3) Context: no previous conversation

a. Kisa ou wè?

quoi 2SG see

'What did you see?'

b. * Kisa ou wè a?

quoi 2SG see CD

'What did you see (given our shared knowledge that you saw something)?'

DWQs: their characteristics (cont'd)

- DWQ **do not tolerate** *nothing*-type answers.

- (4) a. A: Kisa ou wè a?
what 2SG hear CD
'What did you see (given our shared knowledge that you saw something)?'
B: # Nothing.
- b. A: Kisa ou wè?
what 2SG see
'What did you see?'
B: Nothing

Two research questions

1. Synchronously, how can we account for the distinctive properties of DWQs?
2. Diachronically, how did these constructions emerge in MC (given the fact that they have no obvious source in French)?

Roadmap

1. Background information on Martinican Creole
2. A description of Martinican Creole "definite" *wh*-questions
3. The role of the clausal determiner
4. The origin of DWQs
5. Conclusions and outstanding questions

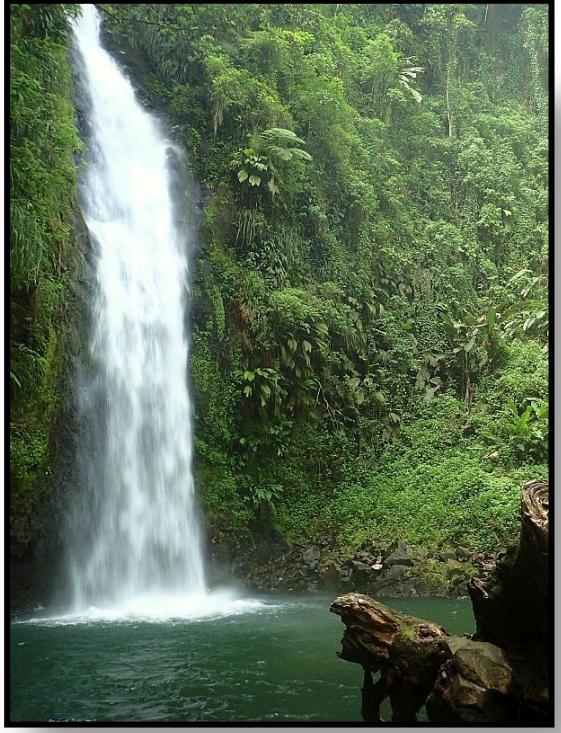
Appendix A: DWQs and the interaction spine

1. Background information on Martinican Creole

Martinique

- French overseas territory
- Located in the Lesser Antilles
- Approx. 360,000 inhabitants
- Main languages:
 - French
 - Martinican Creole
 - Most speakers are bilingual (Bernabé 2004, 2009)





The emergence of MC

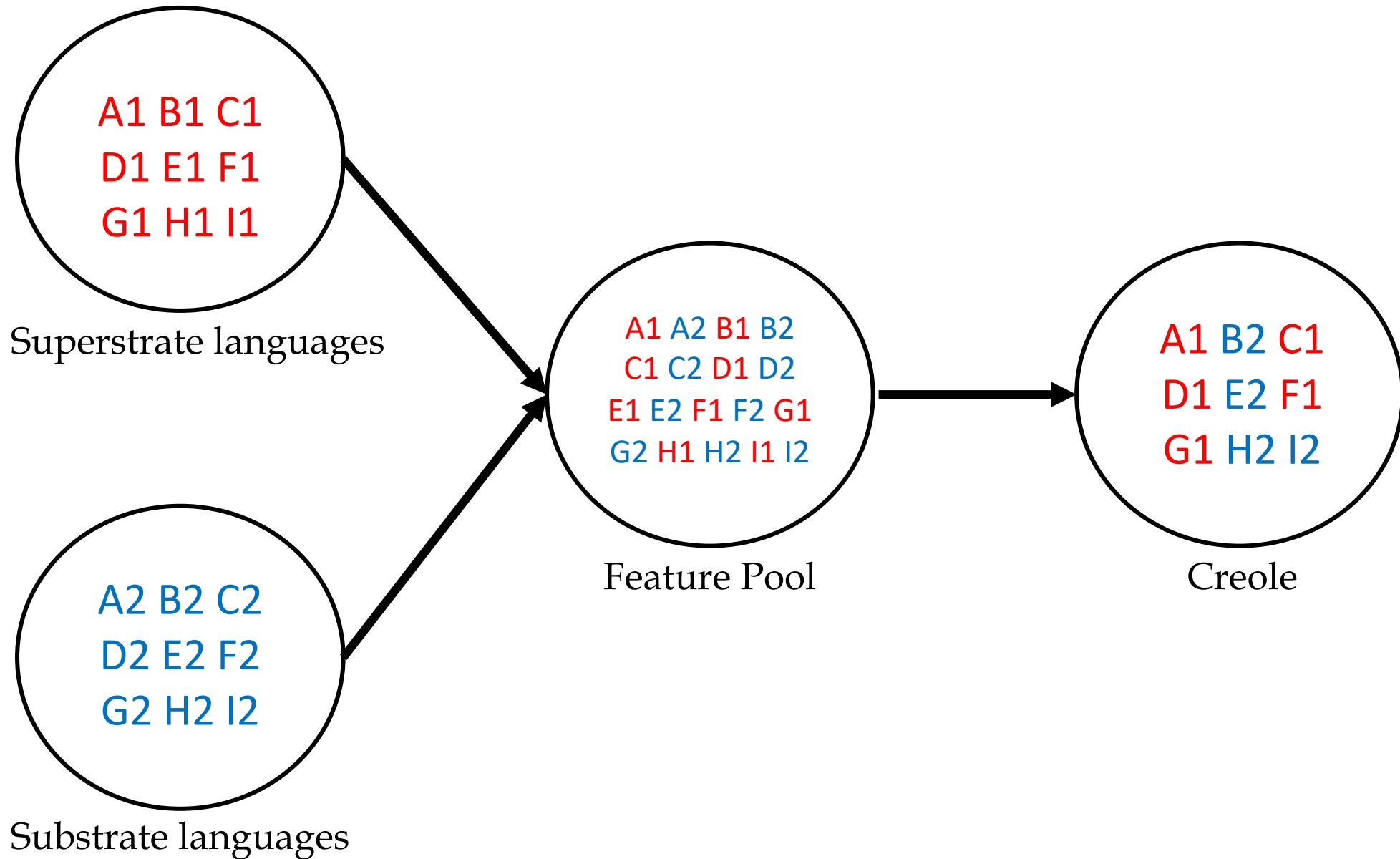
- Situation of **extreme language contact** in the context of slavery and colonization
 - Substrate languages: Kwa (esp. Gbe) and Bantu languages
 - See Fallope (1983) for Guadeloupe; Singler (1996) for Martinique proper; Lefebvre (1998a) for Haiti
 - Superstrate languages: various French dialects and, most likely, some koine (i.e. a mixture of dialects)
- Outcome: MC

The main characteristics of MC

- French-based creole
 - The bulk of its lexicon comes from French.
 - Hybrid syntax, i.e. a recombination of features inherited from substrate and superstrate languages + some innovations.
 - SVO language with limited inflectional morphology
- (5) Sé moun tala té ka palé kréyol
PL person DEM PST IPFV speak creole
'These people were speaking Creole.'

Feature recombination

- Aboh (2015): **Feature Recombination Hypothesis**
 - Builds upon Mufwene's (2001, 2008) Feature Pool Hypothesis
 - Feature pool composed of features from substrate and superstrate languages
 - Creole = recombination of the features found in the feature pool



2. A description of MC DWQs

Two types of *wh*-questions

- Recall that MC distinguishes between IWQs (6a) and DWQs (6b).

- (6) a. Kisa ou wè?
what 2SG see
'What did you see?'
- b. Kisa ou wè a?
what 2SG see CD
'What did you see (given our shared knowledge that you saw something)?'

	IWQs	DWQs
<i>Presence of a clausal determiner</i>	No	Yes
<i>Can be uttered out of the blue</i>	No	Yes
<i>Tolerate nothing-type answers</i>	Yes	No

2.1. More on the clausal determiner

Apparent homophony

- The CD is **apparently homophonous with the definite article.**
- It is **subject to the same phonologically conditioned allomorphy.**
 - Four realizations depending on the immediately preceding segment (Bernabé 1983): *la, lan, a, an*

Illustrations

- Before an oral consonant

- (7) a. chat **la**
 cat DEF
 ‘the cat’
- b. Ki moun yo bat **la?**
 WH person 3PL beat CD
‘Who did they beat (given our shared knowledge that they beat someone)?’

Illustrations

- Before a nasal consonant

- (8) a. kann **lan**
 sugarcane DEF
 ‘the sugarcane’
- b. Kisa ou vann **lan?**
 what 2SG sell CD
 ‘What did you sell (given our shared knowledge that you sold something)?’

Illustrations

- Before an oral vowel

- (9) a. bè a
butter DEF
'the butter'
- b. Kisa ou pè a?
what 2SG fear CD
'What are you afraid of (given our shared knowledge that you're afraid of something)?'

Illustrations

- Before a nasal vowel

- (10) a. pen **an**
bread DEF
'the bread'
- b. Ki moun ou penyen **an?**
WH person 2SG comb CD
'Whose hair did you do (given our shared knowledge that you did someone's hair)?'

Other languages

- **Clausal/event determiners are found in other languages.**
 - E.g. in HC and Fongbe (Lefebvre 1992, 1998a,b; Larson 2003) and Ga (Renans 2021).

(11)	Jan	rive	a	(Haitian Creole)
	Jan	wá	ó	(Fongbe)
John arrive CD				
'Actually, John arrived.'				
(Adapted from Lefebvre 1998a:99)				

2.2. The pragmatic properties of DWQs

DWQs cannot be uttered out of the blue...

(12) Context: no previous conversation...

- a. Kisa ou fè yè?
what 2SG do yesterday
'What did you yesterday?'
- b. * Kisa ou fè yè a?
what 2SG do yesterday CD
'What did you yesterday (given our shared knowledge that you did something yesterday)?'

Previous conversation is required...

(13) A: I wasn't home last night.

B: Ki koté ou alé?

WH place 2SG go

'Where did you go?'

B': Ki koté ou alé **a**?

WH place 2SG go CD

'Where did you go (given our shared knowledge that you went somewhere)?'

...but not just any conversation.

- (14) A: I was busy last night.
B: Ki koté ou alé?
 WH place 2SG go
 ‘Where did you go?’
B': * Ki koté ou alé a?
 WH place 2SG go CD
 ‘Where did you go (given our shared knowledge that you went somewhere)?’

Where does the difference lie?

- The crucial difference between (13) and (14) lies in the **entailments of A's utterance**.
 - (12): there is at least a place x such that A went out to x the night before.
 - (13): there is at least a thing x such that A did x the night before
 - BUT NOT that there is a place x such that A went out to x the night before

Generalization: licensing conditions

- Stalnaker (1978, 2002): the *common ground* is the set of propositions taken to be true in common by the speech participants.
- A DWQ is licensed if the common ground contains a proposition which asserts that there is an entity of the same type as the DWQ and with the same properties.

Sources of the antecedent proposition

- As illustrated in (13), it can be the entailment of a previous utterance, but it could, of course, also simply be **part of the proffered content** (15).

(15) A: I met someone last night.

B: Ki moun ou jwenn?
WH person 2SG meet
'Who did you meet?'

B': Ki moun ou jwenn **lan**?
WH person 2SG meet CD

'Who did you meet (given our shared knowledge that you met someone)?'

Source of the antecedent proposition

- It can be **any type of inference** from a previous utterance.
 - See, e.g., weak definites (Carlson et al. 2006) through their enriched semantic content (16).

- (16) A: I went to the market this morning.
- B: Kisa ou achté?
what 2SG buy
'What did you buy?'
- B': Kisa ou achté **a**?
what 2SG buy CD
'What did you buy (given our shared knowledge that you bought something)?'

Nothing-type answers

- Because of the licensing conditions of DWQs, we can explain why they do not tolerate *nothing*-type answers.
 - An inconsistent common ground would cause a conversational crisis (Farkas & Bruce 2010).

- (17) a. A: Kisa ou tann?
 what 2SG hear
 ‘What did you hear?’
 B: Nothing
- b. A: Kisa ou tann lan?
 what 2SG hear CD
 ‘What did you hear (given our shared knowledge that you heard something)?’
 B: # Nothing.

What is the source of these properties?

- It is logical that we should try to establish a link between the various properties of DWQs.
- **Null hypothesis:** it is the CD found in DWQs which is responsible for their distinctive pragmatic properties.

3. The role of the clausal determiner

True homophony?

- The CD and the definite article are apparently homophonous.
- To determine if this a true case of homophony, we must look at their semantics.

No overlap in their semantics \Rightarrow true homophony

Overlap in their semantics \Rightarrow instance of multifunctionality

3.1. A closer look at the definite article

What the literature says...

- Several studies have been dedicated to the definite article *la*
 - See, i.a., Bernabé (1983, 2003), Damoiseau (1999), Gadelii (2007), Déprez (2007), Zribi-Hertz & Jean-Louis (2014), Térosier (2019).
- Most papers suggest that *la* is in fact a marker of specificity.
 - But see Térosier (2019) for a different view.

Anchoring

- Claims based on the observation that the felicitous use of definite noun phrases requires some type of anchoring: deictic (17) or anaphoric (18).

(18) Gadé! Lapli **a** ka tonbé.
look rain DEF IPFV fall
'Look! It's raining' (lit. 'The rain is falling.')

(19) An nonm ek an fanm antré. Fanm **lan** té ka pòté an chapo.
a man and a woman get.in woman DEF PST IPFV wear a hat
'A man and woman got in. The woman was wearing a hat.'

Familiarity

- These examples (esp. (19)) suggest a **familiarity-based analysis** of definiteness in MC (Christophersen 1939).
- Thus, I adopt Heim's (1982) **Familiarity Condition**.
 - Definite noun phrases must refer to familiar entities.
- **Does the Familiarity Condition apply to MC definite *wh*-questions as well?**

3.2. DWQs and familiarity

Common ground and familiarity

- The notions of *common ground* and *familiarity* are closely related.
- A proposition which is included in the common ground is, by definition, familiar to the speech participants.
- This suggests that there should be a parallel between definite noun phrases and DWQs.

The parallel between DWQs and definite noun phrases

Definite noun phrases

- The referent of a definite NP must be familiar.
- It is impossible to deny the existence of the referent of a definite NP.

DWQs

- The antecedent proposition of a DWQ must be familiar (because it is in the common ground).
- It is impossible to contradict the antecedent proposition of a DWQ.

Not a true case of homophony

- Because of the semantic overlap between the CD and the def. article, we can safely conclude that **this is not a case of homophony.**
- Instead, it appears that **this is a multifunctional lexical item.**

4.3. A multifunctional determiner

Economy argues against homophony

- If the CD and the def. article were homophones, we would have two lexical items which share:
 - the same phonological realization
 - the same semantics (familiarity)
- In fact, there should be even more “determiners” homophonous with the definite article.

Distributional evidence

- LA can scope over constituents of various categories.

(20) a. an Frans lan
in France LA
'in France'

b. * Frans lan
France LA
'(Intended) France'

c. [[PP an Frans] lan]

(21) a. andidan an
inside LA
'inside'

b. * an andidan
a inside
'(Intended) an inside'

c. [[AP andidan] an]

Other contrasts

- Assuming that LA encodes familiarity may help account for certain contrasts.
- *talè* probably simply means something akin to ‘some time other than now’.

- (22) a. I kay vini talè
 3SG PROSP come TALÈ
 ‘S\he is coming later.’
- b. Man wè 'y talè a
 1SG see 3SG TALÈ LA
 ‘I saw him\her earlier.’

Multifunctionality of LA

- There is a single lexical item LA.
- It encodes familiarity.
- It is underspecified in its selectional restrictions.
 - Note: The terms *clausal determiner* and *definite article* are used in a strictly descriptive fashion.

4.4. The syntax of LA in DWQs

The position of LA in DWQs

- LA appears **obligatorily in sentence-final position** in DWQs.
- It also scopes over high adverbials, and thus over the entire clause.

(23) Kisa ou rayi franchman **an?**
what 2SG hate frankly CD

‘What do you frankly hate (given our shared knowledge that you frankly hate something)?’

The position of LA in definite NPs

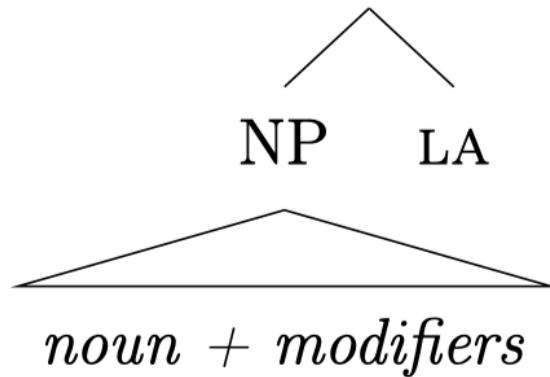
- In definite NPs, la scopes over the noun and all its modifiers.

(24) piti bel kay blan **an**
little beautiful house white
'the beautiful little white house'

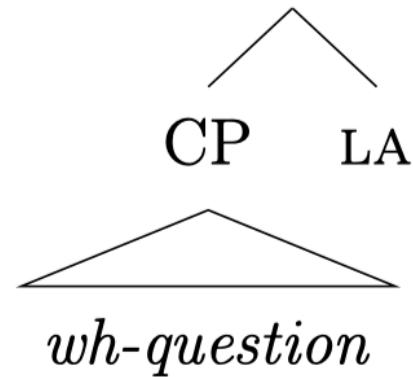
The presupposition of LA

- The sister of LA is presupposed/familiar.

(25) a.



b.



Interim summary

- LA is a multifunctional element
 - It can take constituents of various categories as its complement.
- It encodes familiarity and is thus responsible for the pragmatic properties of DWQs.

4. The origin of DWQs

The origins of the MC definite article

- Consensus in the literature: **the source of LA is the French deictic reinforcer *là* ‘there’ found in French demonstrative noun phrases** (Déprez 2007; Zribi-Hertz & Jean-Louis 2014).

(26) ce livre-là
DEM book=there
'this book'

The origins of the definite article (cont'd)

- The French definite article did not serve as a source for the MC definite article.
 - Evidence comes from the frequent cases of agglutination.

- (27) a. an lapo (French: la peau 'la peau')
a skin
'a skin'
- b. lapo **a**
skin DEF
'the skin'

- (28) a. an léchel (French: l'échelle 'the ladder')
a ladder
'a ladder'
- b. léchel **la**
ladder DEF
'the ladder'

Gbe influence

- The reanalysis of *là* as a determiner is likely to have been guided by the existence of a postnominal specific marker in Gbe languages.

(29) a. timanmay **la** (Martinican Creole)
child DEF
'the child'

b. **v᷑ ó** (Fongbe)
child DET
'the child'

(Adapted from Lefebvre 1998a:81)

The role of congruence

- This outcome can be accounted for by appealing to **congruence** (Baptista 2020).
 - Syntax: both French *là* and Fonge ó appear in postnominal position.
 - Semantics: both involve deictic/anaphoric anchoring.
- Thus, MC LA can be described as a hybrid form.
 - Phonology: French
 - Syntax: Overlap between French and Gbe
 - Semantics: Overlap between French and Gbe

From the definite article to the clausal determiner

- Interestingly, in several Gbe languages, the specific marker doubles as a clausal determiner.

(30) Súnù ó wé ó
man DET arrive DET

‘Actually, the man arrived.’

(Adapted from Lefebvre 1998a:226)

- Once French *là* was reanalyzed as a definite article, it was then available as a CD because of Gbe influence.

Martinican Creole vs. Haitian Creole

- Similar phenomenon in both creoles but **the MC clausal determiner is restricted to *wh*-questions.**
- **Wider distribution in Haitian Creole** (as in Gbe): declaratives and *yes-no* questions.

- (31) a. Jan pa rive a
John NEG arrive CD
'Actually, John did not arrive.'
- (Adapted from Lefebvre 1998a:227)
- b. Jinyò rive a?
Junior arrive CD
'Has Junior arrived (as we expected that he would)?'

A possible explanation

- Haiti gained its independence from France in 1802.
 - Following independence, reduced exposure to French.
- Martinique is still a French overseas department.
 - Continued exposure to French.
- **Conjecture:** Because of greater exposure to French, the syntax of MC (and its clausal determiner) is closer to French syntax.

Why MC syntax isn't just Gbe syntax

- Contra Lefebvre (1998a), creolization \neq relexification
 - No wholesale transfer of Gbe syntax
- Aboh (2015): feature recombination is most likely to concern interface phenomena (see also Sorrace 2011).
 - Especially, the syntax-pragmatics interface, but not all aspects of that interface are equivalent.
 - Turn-taking and common ground management are encoded in the syntax (Wiltschko 2021).

Takeaway

- The source of LA is the French demonstrative reinforcer *là*.
- Because of Gbe influence, it was first reanalyzed as a definite article and then became available as a clausal determiner (as in DWQs).
- It provides evidence for the role of congruence in creole genesis.
- Outcome: a hybrid form.

5. Conclusions and outstanding questions

Research questions

1. Synchronously, how can we account for the distinctive properties of DWQs?
2. Diachronically, how did these constructions emerge in MC (given the fact that they have no obvious source in French)?

Regarding question 1...

- The licensing of MC DWQs depends on the inclusion of an antecedent proposition in the common ground.
- This proposition must assert the existence of an entity of the same type as the *wh*-question and with the same properties.
- As a result, DWQs cannot be uttered out of the blue and do not tolerate *nothing*-type answers.

Regarding question 1...

- These properties can be attributed to the clausal determiner.
- It is in fact a multifunctional lexical item (LA) which encodes familiarity.

Regarding question 2...

- LA initially emerged as a definite determiner during the formation of MC as a result of congruence.
- Owing to Gbe influence, it then extended to the sentential domain.
- It is a hybrid form; which lends support to the greater likelihood of feature recombination at the syntax-pragmatics interface.

Regarding the bigger picture

- We should **take a closer look at the syntax-pragmatics interface** in situations of language contact.
- However, we should consider the **distinction between those aspects of the syntax-pragmatics interface which are part of the grammar and those which are not**.
- Feature recombination seems to be **constrained by congruence**.
- It is likely to be **mitigated by the amount of exposure**.

Outstanding questions

- Why is LA restricted to *wh*-questions in the sentential domain in MC (cf. Haitian Creole)?
- More generally, what are the restrictions on the distribution of clausal determiners in MC and beyond?

A scenic tropical beach photograph. In the foreground, a sandy beach meets the ocean where white waves break. Several people are in the water. To the left, a lush green hill rises. The middle ground shows more hills and a rocky coastline. The sky is blue with scattered white clouds. In the upper portion of the image, large, bold, white text is overlaid.

Thank you!

Mèsi anpil!

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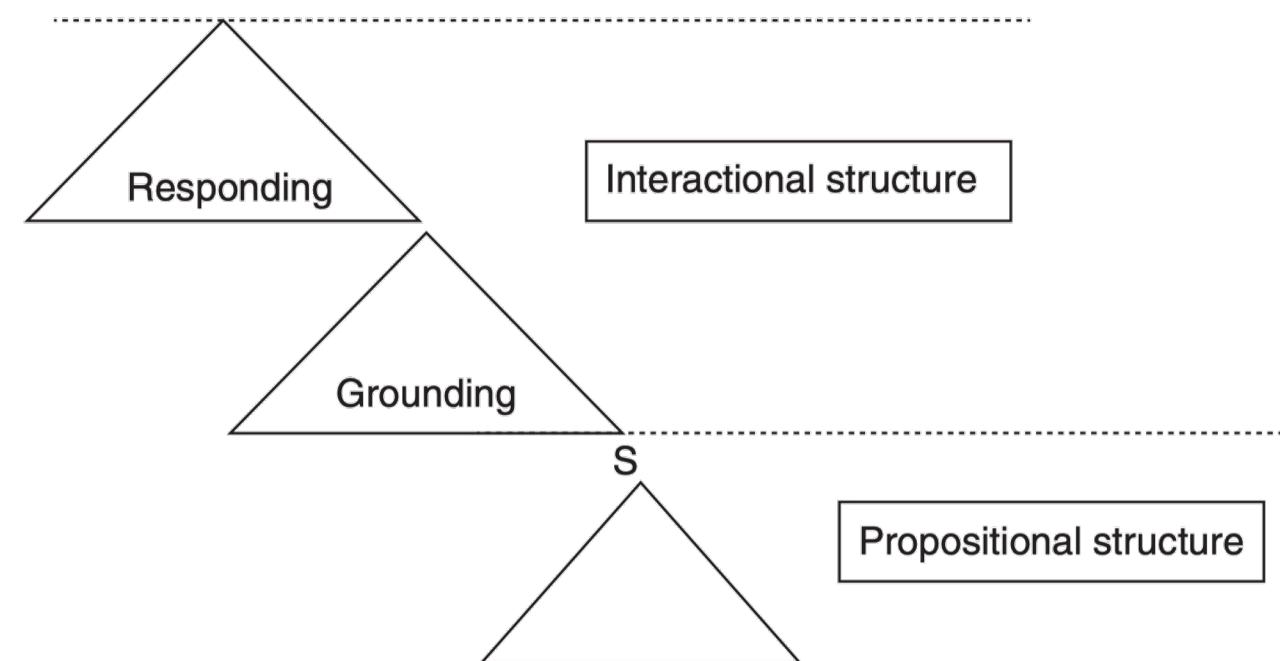
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Appendix A: DWQs and the interaction spine

The Interactional Spine hypothesis

- Wiltschko (2021): Certain aspects of discourse are encoded in the syntax:
 - Turn-taking management
 - Common ground management
- Two syntactic layers:
 - Turn-taking \Rightarrow RespP
 - Common ground \Rightarrow GroundP

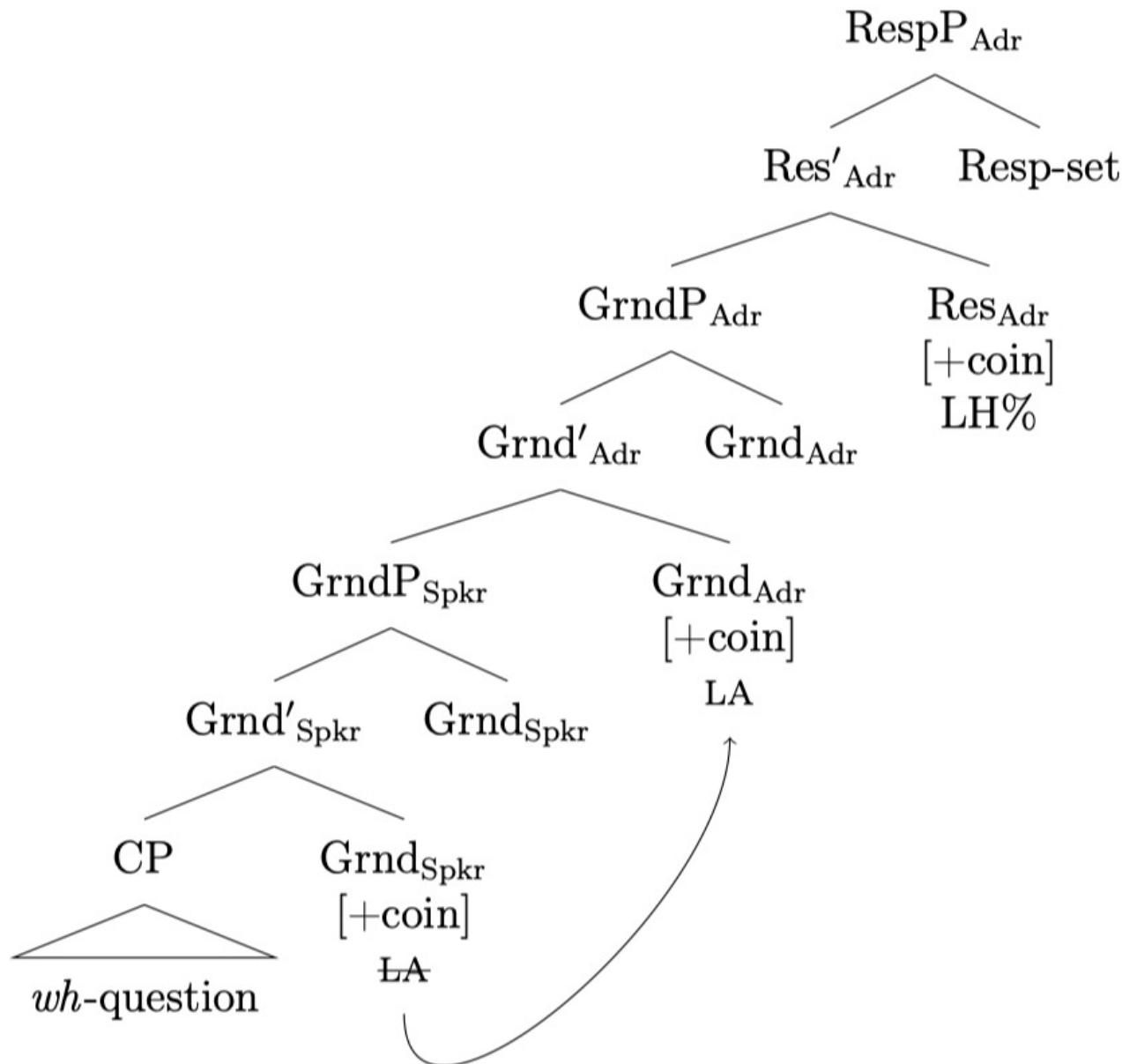


Reproduced from Wiltschko (2021:3)

Reconsidering the common ground

- According Wiltschko (2021), **the common ground is not a primitive notion** (see also Farkas & Bruce 2010).
- It is **the intersection of two grounds**:
 - Speaker's ground
 - Addressee's ground
- Suggests the following representation of DWQs (see next slide).

(32)



A *wh*-question in the ground

- As suggested in the representation, a *wh*-question is in the ground.
- **Antecedent existential proposition \Rightarrow issue to be solved**
 - The unassigned variable need to be assigned.
 - Issue added to the Table (Farkas & Bruce 2010) which takes the form of a *wh*-question
 - Potential question under discussion
- In other words, a DWQ denotes a familiar issue.

A possible account of vanilla *wh*-question

- Vanilla *wh*-questions tolerate *nothing*-type answers.
- But they have been argued to trigger presuppositions (e.g. Karttunen (20167).
 - But Abusch (2010) convincingly shows that these presuppositions can be canceled.
- A possible account could be that **the *wh*-question and its existential presupposition are only in the Speaker's ground.**
 - **The Addressee is thus free to deny that presupposition**, as his ground remains consistent.