

Études

Créoles

Studies in comparative constructions: Introduction to the volume

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This volume of *Études Créoles* focusses on comparative constructions in a selection of creoles, with special attention given to the syntactic and semantic aspects involved in the cognitive operation of comparing. The mental activity of comparing can be considered a universal feature insofar as all speakers of all languages are required to compare and contrast entities or actions in order to better conceptualise them in terms of similarities and differences (Fuchs, 2014). However, the linguistic operations used to express similarities and differences are not universal, as the existing literature on the subject shows.

There is an abundance of literature on comparative constructions be it on the spectra of comparisons or on specific types of comparative constructions. For instance, Haspelmath & Buchholz (1998), Henkelmann (2006) and Haspelmath *et al.* (2017), focus mainly on equative constructions and simulative constructions. Other studies adopt an areal approach (Heine 2003; Stolz 2013) or a relatively broad typological perspective (Cuzzolin & Lehmann 2004; Dixon 2008; Stassen 1985 & 2013), while yet others focus on a specific language (Chamoreau 2017; Creissels 1995; Muller 1983). Many of these studies can be found in collections which focus on languages that are rarely studied (Treis & Vanhove 2017; Treis & Wojtylak 2018; Treis & Chamoreau 2019). All these contributions are valuable sources of information that improve our knowledge of the syntactic and semantic processes involved in expressing comparisons.

Studies on creoles broaden this growing body of research on comparative constructions. Some noteworthy works are the investigations of the comparison of superiority published in Holm & Patrick (2007), Kortmann & Lunkenheimer (2013), Michaelis & the APiCS Consortium (2013) and Syea (2017). Mention can also be made of studies by Jeannot-Fourcaud, (2019), Lainy (2017) and Nunez, (2019) which focus on the expression of comparison in a specific creole. Although these works make pidgins and creoles their sole object of study, in no way do they aim at demonstrating that they are exceptional linguistic products displaying syntactic phenomena that are unique to them. If anything, they make up for the lack of empirical data on pidgins and creoles.

This edition of *Études Créoles* proposes to take the research further in the field of the expression of comparisons. The contributing authors focus mainly on comparisons of inequality (superiority and inferiority) although Lainy and Prescod also analyse expressions of the comparison of equality in Haitian Creole and Vincentian Creole respectively.

All the studies investigate the morphosyntactic and semantic influences that the languages involved in the genesis of the creoles have had on comparative constructions, *i.e.* constructions

which express that two entities have a quality or property in equal or unequal degree. Of the two entities, the comparee is necessarily overtly expressed. Conversely, there are absolute (as opposed to relative) comparisons such as those expressed in the tokens: *This book is interesting*; *This book is more interesting*; and *This book is the most interesting* where the standard of comparison is implicit. The omission of the standard does not impede proper understanding of the message. Absolute comparisons can be expressed along the same lines in other languages as can be seen from the equivalent sentences in French: *Ce livre est intéressant*; *Ce livre est plus intéressant*; *Ce livre est le plus intéressant* or in Portuguese: *Este livro é interessante*; *Este livro é mais interessante*; *Este livro é o mais interessante*. These constructions that exhibit no standard of comparison and, therefore, no standard marker, seem to be more frequent than relative comparisons in discourse but research is lacking in this area (Cuzzolin & Lehmann 2004: 1214).

In each of these environments, the parameter must be gradable granted that all parameters do not lend themselves to gradation. For instance, it is unusual to apply gradation to complementary pairs of predicates (see Combettes 1984, among others). In the field of lexical semantics, these concern adjectival predicates that can be readily categorised as binary antonyms. Thus, while the statement *Il est vivant* ‘He is alive’ may suggest that an underlying (gradable or non-gradable) comparison is possible with a standard whose putative existence has at some point been attested prior to but not at the discourse time, (thus, *Il est mort* ‘He is dead’), it is difficult to make a case for the acceptability of absolute comparisons like *Il est plus mort* ‘He is more dead’; *Elle est plus enceinte* ‘She is more pregnant’. Unlike the predicate *être mort* ‘be dead’ which inevitably calls to mind its binary antonym *être vivant* ‘be alive’, the parameter *être ennuyeux* ‘be boring’ is not necessarily the antonym of *être intéressant* ‘be interesting’. The comparee in question can be (a little) less interesting without being boring. Semantic considerations therefore come into play. The fact that these examples are not perfectly felicitous is an indication that all predicates are not typically grounded in the principle of gradation. The idea of absolute comparison therefore poses a genuine semantic problem when it comes to non-gradable adjectival predicates.

Data from three of the five studies included in this volume (Kihm, Nunez and Prescod) were presented at a workshop for Master’s students at the Université de Picardie Jules Verne, organised in April 2017 by the co-ordinators of the present volume. The aim of this workshop was to initiate reflection on the influence of lexifying languages on comparative constructions in their related creoles, the morphosyntactic variations observed, the contextual factors that shed light on the strategies available to speakers and the pragmatic implications associated with expressions of comparison. Hassamal and Lainy were invited to provide studies to complete the volume.

The nature of the input from European languages in creole formation is highlighted in each of the studies. [Nunez](#) and [Kihm](#) – for the Portuguese-based creoles of Casamance and Guinea-Bissau respectively – trace the origin of the parameter marker *ma(s)* ‘more’ to the Old

Portuguese adverb *mais*. The markers *pli(s)/pi*, *mwin(s)/mwens* ‘more’, ‘less’ observed in Mauritian Creole, in [Hassamal’s study](#), and in Haitian, in [Lainy’s study](#), originate in French varieties during the formative period of the respective creoles. Lainy suggests that we analyse the morphemes *tankou* ‘tout comme’ = ‘autant que’ and *kòm* ‘comme’ as calques from French. Both markers express similarity in Haitian. For the English-based Vincentian Creole, [Prescod](#) reports that the marker *mo(o)* ‘more’, the analytical morpheme *-a < -er* in *biga* ‘bigger’ and the fossilised morphemes *beta* ‘better’ / *wos* ‘worse’ originate from English.

The selected features of the creoles studied here, albeit limited, reveal several notable characteristics. We will only discuss four of these: variability, polyfunctionality, redundancy and instability.

The analyses and descriptions provided in this volume allow us to get a better understanding of the **variability** and **polyfunctionality** associated with comparative constructions in these creoles. To express a comparison of superiority, the speaker of Bissau-Guinean Kriol can use the parameter marker *ma(s)* in such a way that it takes as its complement either an oblique pronoun or a full noun phrase. In either case, this parameter marker appears to have verb qualities. However, in other environments, it can modify a verb phrase, in which case it functions as an adverb. It should be noted that this same marker may or may not be accompanied by the pivot *di ki*, which is related to *do que* ‘which’ in Portuguese. **Variability** can also be observed on the stylistic level: *ma(s)* sometimes follows the parameter to find itself linearised and directly preceding the pivot and the standard. On this basis, Kihm makes the case for recategorization. He posits that items from African substrates were recategorised when they came into contact with Portuguese.

Casamancese Creole exhibits **polyfunctionality** much like Kriol. For Nunez, besides functioning as verb and adverb, the morpheme *má(s)* serves as a parameter marker in comparative constructions. In line with Kihm’s analysis for Bissau-Guinean Kriol, Nunez shows that the pivot *di ki* is not systematically used in comparative constructions in Casamancese Creole. Word order also reveals remarkable **variability** in this creole affecting both the parameter and the morpheme *pasá* ‘pass’, ‘surpass’. The parameter is syntactically flexible: it can precede or follow the standard, or even *pasá*.

There is just as much variation in the French-based creoles. Lainy’s contribution on Haitian Creole gives multiple evidence of **variability** between *pase, pi ... pase* and *plis ... pase* within the same statement that expresses a comparison of superiority. According to Lainy, *pi* and *plis* select a non-nominal predicate and a nominal predicate, respectively. The author sets out to show that omitting *pi* or *plis* from these constructions does not compromise the evaluative scope intended by the speaker.

With reference to Mauritian Creole, Hassamal argues that the variation between *pli* and *plis*, on the one hand, and between *mwin* and *mwins*, on the other hand, is not conditioned by

phonological factors but is due to syntactic and semantic constraints. *Mwin / pli* and *mwins / plis* are combined with predicative, non-count and count nouns which can be found on a scale of intensity whereas only nouns / adjectives modified by *mwins* and *pli* respectively can be associated with a scale of quantity and frequency. Hassamal also reports that the syntactic position of the parameter marker may vary: it appears either before or after the adjectival or verbal parameter it modifies.

Variability is noteworthy at the phonological and morphosyntactic levels in Vincentian Creole. While *moo* ‘more’ is used more generally, either preceding or following the parameter, there are no instances where *mo*, a variant of shorter vowel duration, follows the parameter. It is its association with the pivot *dan* ‘than’ which imposes vowel lengthening. Although word order is not variable when the parameter marker is analytically expressed, speakers may alternate between using the parameter marker *mo* or *moo*, only once, in front of the parameter and repeating just before the pivot to produce *moo dan*. In addition to these two ways of expressing a degree of superiority, speakers of this creole can intensify comparisons by means of the suffix *-a* which merges with the parameter. This accumulation of parameter markers can be analysed as an instance of **redundancy** in the syntactic chain to the extent that the single occurrence of the parameter marker is otherwise sufficient to express the comparison.

Kihm and Nunez report similar **redundancies** in Kriol and Casamancese Creole, particularly with respect to the synthetic forms of Portuguese which have been transferred to these two creoles. Thus, *mindjor* (from Bissau-Guinean Kriol) and *miñjor* (from Casamancese Creole) < ‘better’ *melhor* function as fixed forms but still require the parameter marker *ma/má(s)*. Nunez also points out that *piyor* ‘worse’ and *má(s) piyor* are competing forms in Casamancese Creole.

A final remark is in order, concerning the grammatical and/or semantic property of the parameter markers analysed by the contributors. **Instability** is pervasive here. Kihm underscores that the marker *ma* fluctuates between prepositional and adverbial uses in Kriol. According to Kihm, its evolution can be explained by internal factors not related to contact with substrates. With respect to Haitian Creole, Lainy chooses the notion of function word to account for *pi /plis...pase* but he does not seem to resist the idea that they are adverb and verb respectively insofar as these morphemes find their source in the French adverb *plus* and verb *dépasser*. It remains unclear what semantic values are entailed in *pase*. When associated with a non-meliorative parameter *pi...pase* encodes a depreciative or inferior value even though it expresses a comparison of superiority.

In conclusion, it should be emphasised that, as already stated above, the operation of comparison, which is regarded as universal and deeply rooted in cognition, gives rise to extremely diverse linguistic expressions across and within languages. Despite being limited to a handful of creoles and to a small inventory of phenomena related to the way they construe comparatives, the studies in this volume provide a sufficiently solid basis for further research on comparative expressions in creoles.

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