

VERB FRONTING IN ISLE DE FRANCE CREOLE

Chris Corne
(University of Auckland)

I use the label "Isle de France Creole" as a cover term for the three closely related languages spoken in Mauritius, Rodrigues, and Seychelles. Mutual intelligibility is high, and all three derive from the Creole French which emerged in Mauritius, formerly known as "Isle de France", during the eighteenth century.

There is available today a relatively large body of data on Isle de France Creole (IdeFC) and on the language spoken in Reunion.¹ This latter language is generally referred to, both in the literature and by the inhabitants of Reunion, as Reunion "Creole". However, as I have shown elsewhere (Corne 1980, 1981, and Baker & Corne ms.), Reunion "Creole" is in fact a levelled variety of seventeenth century popular and regional varieties of French.² Reunionese (R) has a grammatical system based, like French, on a relatively rigid "parts of speech" classification of lexical items. IdeFC, in contrast, has a system based on the multifunctionality of lexical items (what Bentolila 1978, discussing Haitian Creole, refers to as "syntactic liberty") and is typologically identical to the languages of diverse lexical origin known as the "Atlantic" Creoles. For a contrastive analysis of IdeFC and R, see Corne 1981.

In this brief study, I present data concerning movement rules for the purpose of focus in IdeFC. The structures concerned lend weight to my contention that IdeFC and R belong to essentially different linguistic traditions.

In IdeFC, focussed constituents are moved to sentence-initial position. The following Seychelles Creole (SC) sentences will serve to illustrate (for other examples and discussion, see Corne 1977: 196-200):

1. (SC) *divà i n kas ban bràs parey u n dir mua* 'the wind has broken the branches, like you told me'

By focussing on the NP subject *divâ*:

2. (SC) *(sa) divâ ki n kas ban brâs ...* 'it is the wind which has broken the branches ...'

on NP object *ban brâs*:

3. (SC) *(sa) ban brâs ki divâ i n kase ...* 'it is the branches which the wind has broken ...'

on PP *parey u n dir mua*:

4. (SC) *parey u n dir mua ki divâ i n kas ban brâs* 'it is like you told me that the wind has broken the branches'

In these sentences, the focussed constituent has been fronted (and, in the case of an NP, the definite/demonstrative marker *sa* may optionally occur as a focus-marking device), it has been deleted from its original position in the clause, and the relativiser *ki* serves to embed the clause. So far, this procedure is not essentially different from that used in English or French.

But now consider the following sentences from Mauritian Creole (MC) and from SC:

5. (MC) *rode zâ ti ape rod so lisiê, me li pa fin truv li* 'search for his dog as he might, John couldn't find him'
6. (MC) *debat li ti debat, me vag la ti resi zet li â-deor brizâ* 'struggle as he would, the waves succeeded in throwing him beyond the reef'
7. (MC) *galupe li ti pe galupe, me zot ti resi trap li* 'run as he might, they were able to catch him'
8. (MC) *malad li ti ape malad, me dokter napa ti kapav soÿ li* 'although he was falling gravely ill, the doctor could not treat him'
9. (SC) *taye i ape taye, me lapolis i ape vin derier li* 'although he is running as fast as he can, the policeman/men is/are coming up behind him'

(The SC example, and others like it, were obtained from an elderly speaker resident in New Zealand, but the structure does not appear to be used in SC today [A. Bollée and P. Baker, personal communications].) In all such sentences that I have observed to date, the basic meaning is invariably one of emphasis and (contextually) concession ('although', 'in spite of', 'be in vain.')

All recent descriptive statements concerning IdeFC have

overlooked this structure. However, a similar structure occurs in the Rodrigues Creole (RoC) text presented by Baker (1972:195; it is commented on briefly in Corne & Stein 1979:78). The context is a conversation between a dog and a king, in a folk-tale:

10. (RoC) *zape mem, to pa kon zape?* 'don't you even know how to bark?'

Baker remarks (p.207) that this sentence-initial use of a "verb" + *mem* 'emphasis' is not acceptable in modern MC. But it is perfectly acceptable in SC:

11. (SC) *zape mem, u pa kon zape?* 'id.'

12. (SC) *zape mem, u pa kone?* 'id.'

(the first of these is not acceptable to all SC speakers, but the second seems uncontroversial). The meaning here is simply emphasis of the fronted lexical item.

Sentences (5)-(11) differ from (2)-(4) in at least three respects. The definite/demonstrative *sa* may not occur, nor the relativiser *ki*, and the "verb" or "adjective"³ which is fronted is not deleted at its extraction site (note that in (12) deletion has taken place, thus bringing the sentence more into line with NP or PP focussed sentences). I return to this third difference below.

The fronting of Verbals for focus is a feature of the Atlantic Creole languages generally (cf. Alleyne 1980:103-104). The fronted Verbal in these languages is often preceded by an element meaning 'it is' as a focus-marking device. The meaning may be simply emphatic, but it is often explanatory as well (see Taylor 1977:183-184 for a short discussion). Some examples from various languages:

13. (Lesser Antillean) *(se) kuri mwê te ka kuri* 'I was running; it is because I was running' (Taylor, loc. cit.)
14. (Lesser Antillean) *(se) las u las* '(it is because) you are tired' (Taylor, loc. cit.)
15. (Haitian) *lò m a rive, se kusie m a kusie* 'when I arrive I shall go straight to bed' (Taylor, loc. cit.)
16. (Sranan) *(a) lon mi wani lon gowe* 'what I want to do is run away' (Taylor, loc. cit.)
17. (Jamaican) *a kom yu waan kom* 'it is just that you want to come' (Taylor, loc. cit.)

18. (Djuka) *na kii mi dda kii tu pakila* 'my father killed two peccaries' (Huttar 1975:15)
19. (Cameroonian) *na ròn i bin ròn bòt di jandam bin dei fò i baksai* 'even though he ran as fast as he could, the policeman was catching up with him' (L. Todd, personal communication)
20. (Guyanese) *a sii Jan bin sii wan uman* 'John had seen a woman, had really seen a woman' (Bickerton, in press)

In sentence (19), there is the same meaning of concession and emphasis as in IdeFC. Taylor (1977:184) notes a similar case in Lesser Antillean and in Jamaican. Here, nominal determinants precede the fronted Verbal:

21. (Lesser Antillean) *tut kuri mwè kuri, mwè pa te sa juèn yo* 'run as I might, I was unable to overtake them'

These examples show what is clearly the same structure, with very close if not identical meaning, existing in IdeFC and in the Atlantic Creole languages.

Consider now the following historical and modern data from MC:

22. (MC, 1855) "Filao là na pas tini qui li tini!" 'the filao (*Casuarina equisetifolia*) holds really fast' (Lolliot:26)
23. (MC, 1880) "napas tini qui li tini" '(s)he/it holds fast'
"napas vané qui li vané" '(s)he runs + emphasis' (Baissac:199)
24. (MC) *napa rode ki zot ti rode, ler Zan ti perdi so lasen lor* 'they really searched diligently when Jeanne lost her gold chain'
25. (MC) *napa bure ki voler la ti bure, me lapolis ti resi may li* 'the thief ran as fast as he possibly could, but the policeman managed to catch him'

This negation of the fronted Verbal is used for greater emphasis, as I have tried to indicate in the glosses given. The subordinator (relativiser?) *ki* is obligatory, whereas it is excluded in sentences of the type (5)-(9) above.⁴

Sentences (22)-(25) are exactly paralleled in Jamaican:

26. (Jamaican) *no tiif Kofi tiif di manggo* 'Kofi did steal

the mango' (Bailey 1966:95)

This is in sharp contrast to the negation of the whole sentence which occurs in Djuka and in Jamaican, and no doubt elsewhere, using in Djuka the negative particle *ná* 'not, not be' and in Jamaican *a no* 'it is not':

27. (Djuka) *ná kii mi dda kii tu pakila* 'my father did not kill two peccaries' (he merely wounded them; Huttar 1975:16)

28. (Jamaican) *a no tiif Kofi tiif di manggo* 'Kofi did not steal the mango' (Bailey 1966:95)

It appears then to be the case that in spite of minor local differences, there is no IdeFC verb-fronted structure which is not paralleled by a similar structure in other Creole languages.

To the best of my knowledge, there is no similar structure in any variety, ancient or modern, of Reunionese. Indeed, if I am correct in my claim that R is a levelled variety of French, then such structures will of necessity be absent: French fronts everything but the verb, in the frame *c'est* _____ *qui/que* the blank being filled by NP, PP, Adverb, but not, significantly, by Verb or Adjective). This prediction is advanced somewhat tentatively, however: the very fact that a structure reported by Baissac in 1880 should have gone unnoticed by various investigators of IdeFC in recent times, is proof enough of the caution needed, and it remains a possibility (although I believe it to be a remote one) that more detailed investigation of R may reveal the existence of similar structures in that language.

I turn now to another structure, marginally attested in IdeFC, which at first glance might be taken as an example of verb fronting for focus. There is a Verb + *que* + Verb structure (or structures) widely attested in the Romance languages generally, whose semantics are somewhat similar (emphasis, repetition, progression, concession), but whose syntax is at best a very imperfect parallel, to the structures I have described above (see the detailed study of the Romance structures in Lombard 1938:112-120, and cf. Bollée 1978). In French, the Romance Verb *que* Verb structure is reflected in such cases as *côte que coûte* 'whatever it may cost, at all costs', *vaille que vaille* 'whatever its value'. In at least some varieties of IdeFC, there are reflexes of these French expressions. In MC, I have noted *kut ke kut* 'at all costs' (note the use of *ke* in lieu of the more usual MC subordinator *ki*), while A. Bollée reports (personal communication) for SC:

29. (SC) *mâz ki mâz, prezâ ki i ana mâze* 'he can eat

however much he wants, there is still food'
(gloss hers)

Although I do not at present have any examples, it seems reasonable to suppose that R also has reflexes of this structure.⁵

I do not believe that any convincing case could be constructed to show that the Romance Verb *que* Verb structures are the model for the verb fronting for focus of IdeFC or the Atlantic Creoles. At most, they may perhaps be seen as having a reinforcing role in the development of verb fronting, although even this I believe to be unlikely. In the two IdeFC examples given above of the Verb *que* Verb structure, note that the (prepausal) second "verb" (*kut*, *mâz*) has lost its final vowel (the citation forms are *kute* 'cost', *mâze* 'eat'), whereas IdeFC "verbs" in this position normally do not (cf. the prepausal "verbs" of sentences (5), (7), (9), and (10), all with *-e*). Thus, Verb *que* Verb is as syntactically aberrant in IdeFC as it is synchronically in the modern Romance languages.

On the evidence, then, we appear to have in verb fronting for focus in IdeFC, a structure which has no French model and no known analogue in R. It is however essentially identical, semantically and syntactically, to structures reported for the Atlantic Creoles generally.

Verb fronting for focus is a highly marked procedure, in that it is rather rare in the world's languages. It does however have a parallel in the West African 'Kwa' group of languages. This fact is discussed, with examples, by various authors writing on the Atlantic Creole (English) languages (Alleyne 1980:171-172, Holm 1980, Huttar 1975; cf. also Bickerton, in press). Is it then possible that the structure has its Creole origins in these languages?

P. Baker shows convincingly (Baker & Corne, ms) that there were speakers of 'Kwa' languages in Mauritius in the period 1727-35, that is, in the earliest stages of the island's colonisation which began in 1721. Thus the possibility of a 'Kwa' substratal influence cannot be ruled out *a priori*, at least for IdeFC. But there are at least two difficulties with this explanation. Firstly, how is it that speakers of Fon or related 'Kwa' languages were able to bequeath this highly marked syntactic structure to IdeFC without having left any other unambiguously identifiable structure? Secondly, in spite of a number of lexical items in IdeFC whose etymology is clearly Fon or a related 'Kwa' language (Baker, personal communication), none of these items appears in the core vocabulary (cf. Bollée 1981). So again the question is how did speakers of 'Kwa' languages impose, in a creolisation situation involving

a large number of unrelated languages, a highly-marked syntactic structure while having so little influence on the lexicon?

D. Bickerton (in press) sketches another explanation, namely independent innovation, for the emergence of verb fronting for focus. It is based on the hypothesis that most Creole languages do not have VP as a major category, but do have V as such a category. Given a fronting rule which moves all major constituents (including V but not VP in Creoles), problems would arise in Creole languages, and in any other languages which have V as a movable constituent, unless the fronted V were to remain at its extraction site (by a copying rule and/or a non-deletion rule): preposed particles would remain stranded (thus (MC) *li pe galupe* 'he is running' → **galupe li pe*), and other interpretation difficulties would arise (see Bickerton, in press, chapter 2 for a detailed discussion). Bickerton's explanation, then, is that any language with movement rules that involve V only, rather than VP, must develop a copying/non-deletion rule, and it is not therefore necessary to invoke borrowing from any 'Kwa' language to account for the Creole facts. This does not of course rule out inter-Creole borrowings in Creoles with the same superstrate-derived lexicons and coexisting in relatively close geographical proximity, or which have common historical links (as in MC and SC, to take an obvious example). Such cases are simply irrelevant to Bickerton's argument.

Of the three possible explanations for the emergence of verb fronting for focus in IdeFC (superstrate French influence, substrate 'Kwa' influence, and independent development of a rule), the first can be ruled out entirely. French does not have such a rule, and cannot have by virtue of its not having V as a movable constituent. The presence of speakers of Fon and/or related languages in Mauritius in the early period of colonisation means that the possibility of substratal influence, even if only in a minor role of reinforcement, must be retained as one element of any comprehensive explanation of the IdeFC case. The independent development of a rule in a language constrained (for sociohistorical reasons pertaining to the conditions of its genesis) by a genetic programme, such that given a fronting rule then copying or non-deletion must occur, is a radical notion that many will be hesitant to accept. Bickerton (in press) argues cogently for just such an explanation, and the linguistic, historical, and demographic evidence concerning the emergence of IdeFC in eighteenth century Mauritius amassed by Baker and Corne (ms.) is at least broadly consistent with it.

Whatever the ultimate explanation may turn out to be, the

point I wish to establish here is that IdeFC has a rule of verb fronting for focus while R does not. The IdeFC rule is to all intents and purposes the same as the rule found in the Atlantic Creole languages. In the *napa*-initial version of the rule illustrated in sentences (22)-(25), the element *ki* occurs, as it does in the NP (etc.) fronted sentences (2)-(4). In both cases, the Atlantic Creoles do not have any subordinator/relativiser, but this difference simply reflects the fact that IdeFC tends to show heavier superstrate influence in some of its syntactic structures, including relativisation. But the existence of verb-fronted sentences, with obligatory copying/non-deletion at the extraction site, reflects the "deepest" Creole nature of IdeFC, and the absence of the superstrate *ki* is therefore to be expected. Thus, IdeFC can be seen to belong to a linguistic tradition from which R is largely (if not entirely, cf. note 2) excluded, and any theory which seeks to explain the emergence of IdeFC by transmission of an early form of R (cf. Chaudenson 1974, 1979) would have to account for the presence of verb fronting not only in IdeFC but also in the Atlantic Creole languages. That is to say that even in the unlikely event of verb fronting for focus turning up somewhere in a detailed investigation of all varieties ancient and modern of R, such an occurrence would show simply that R indeed merits its usual appellation of *créole* (and that my claim that it is basically a levelled variety of French is therefore potentially wrong): it would not account for the presence of verb fronting in the English-lexicon Atlantic Creoles.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Alleyne, Mervyn C. 1980. *Comparative Afro-American*. Ann Arbor, Karoma.
- Bailey, Beryl Loftman. 1966. *Jamaican Creole syntax*. Cambridge, CUP.
- Baissac, Charles. 1880. *Etude sur le patois créole mauricien*. Nancy, Imprimerie Berger-Levrault.
- Baker, Philip. 1972. *Kreol. A description of Mauritian Creole*. London, Hurst.
- and Chris Corne. Ms. *Isle de France Creole: affinities and origins*.
- Bentolila, Alain. 1978. "Créole d'Haiti - nature et fonction - fonction naturelle", *Etudes créoles*, 1:65-75.
- Bickerton, Derek. In press. *Roots of language*. Ann Arbor, Karoma.

- Bollée, Annegret. 1977. *Le créole français des Seychelles. Esquisse d'une grammaire -- textes -- vocabulaire.* Tübingen, Niemeyer.
- 1978. "Reduplikation und Iteration in den romanischen Sprachen", *Archiv für das Studium der neueren Sprachen und Literaturen*, 215.2:318-336.
- 1981. "Le vocabulaire du créole haïtien et du créole seychellois: une comparaison", paper presented to the Third International Colloquium on Creole studies, St. Lucia, May 1981.
- Chaudenson, Robert. 1974. *Le lexique du parler créole de la Réunion.* Paris, Champion.
- 1979. *Les créoles français.* Paris, Nathan.
- Corne, Chris. 1977. *Seychelles Creole grammar.* Tübingen, Narr.
- 1980. "A re-evaluation of the predicate in Ile-de-France [*sic*] Creole", in Pieter Muysken (Ed.), *Generative studies on Creole languages*, Cinnaminson/Dordrecht, Foris Publications. Pp. 103-124.
- 1981. "Analyse contrastive du système verbal en réunionnais et en créole de l'Isle de France", *Bulletin de l'Observatoire du français contemporain en Afrique Noire*, 2: 46-78.
- and P.-M.J. Moorghen. 1978. "Proto-créole et liens génétiques dans l'Océan Indien", *Langue française*, 37:60-75.
- and Peter Stein. 1979. "Pour une étude du créole rodriguais", *Etudes créoles*, 2:58-84.
- Forman, Michael L. 1972. *Zamboangueno texts with grammatical analysis: a study of Philippine Creole Spanish.* PhD thesis, Cornell University.
- Holm, John. 1980. "The Creole 'Copula' that highlighted the world", in J.L. Dillard (Ed.), *Perspectives on American English*, The Hague, Mouton. Pp. 367-375.
- Huttar, George L. "Some Kwa-like features of Djuka syntax", paper presented to the International Conference on Pidgins and Creoles, Hawaii, January 1975.
- Lolliot, Pierre. 1855. *Poésies créoles.* Port Louis.
- Lombard, Alf. 1938. *L'infinitif de narration dans les langues romanes: étude de syntaxe historique.* Uppsala, Almqvist & Wiksell; Leipzig, Harrassowitz.
- Moorghen, P.-M.J. 1975. "Analyse des marqueurs pré-verbaux des créoles de l'Océan Indien", paper presented to the International Conference on Pidgins and Creoles, Hawaii, January 1975.
- Papen, Robert A. 1978. *The French-based Creoles of the Indian Ocean: an analysis and comparison.* PhD thesis, University of California at San Diego.

Taylor, Douglas. 1977. *Languages of the West Indies*.
Baltimore/London, Johns Hopkins University Press.

NOTES

- 1 For Reunion: Chaudenson 1974; for Mauritius: Baker 1972; for Rodrigues: Corne & Stein 1979; for Seychelles: Bollée 1977, Corne 1977; for the Indian Ocean Creoles generally, the most comprehensive work is that of Papen 1978, while shorter studies of specific topics include Moorghen 1975 and Corne & Moorghen 1978. The present study is a somewhat modified version of section A 5.2 of Baker & Corne (ms.), to appear in the near future, and it is based on work supported by a grant from the University of Auckland Research Committee.
- 2 There is evidence of some degree of creolisation (in the sense of Bickerton, in press) in eighteenth century Reunion, but none to suggest that any body of usage emerged and stabilised to give a Creole language, typologically similar to IdeFC, which has since decreolised towards French.
- 3 "Verb" and "adjective" are used merely as labels for Verbals, cf. Corne 1980.
- 4 In passing, it should be noted that Baissac (1880:199) gives a third sentence:

(MC, 1880) "napas apéle vané ça qui li vané" 'that's not called running!'

Baissac identifies "napas vané qui li vané" as an "ellipsis" of this sentence, but this does not seem to be a necessary conclusion: the example with "apéle" looks more like an expansion of a basic Creole structure.
- 5 There is a reflex of the Spanish Verb *que* Verb structure in Philippine Creole Spanish (Zamboanguño), mentioned briefly in Forman (1972:222); while Forman claims (p.235) that in Zamboanguño this structure follows a pattern common in the languages of the Philippines, the Spanish model cannot be dismissed as a possible source.