

VERBS, ADJECTIVES, AND PREDICATE MARKING IN ISLE de FRANCE CREOLE: BACK TO BASICS

Jeffrey Waite
(University of Auckland)

This paper examines the working of the verbal predicate in Isle de France Creole (IdeFC, a cover term for the Creole French languages of Mauritius (MC), Rodrigues (RoC) and the Seychelles (SC), v. Papen 1978, xl), and attempts to show that in this very central area of Creole syntax, at least, IdeFC is one of the 'mainstream' Creole languages, as defined by Bickerton (1981, ch. 2).¹

In what follows, the words 'verbal predicate' apply to those predicates whose central element is a verb or an adjective. According to this definition, the following sentences contain verbal predicates:

(1) *nou pa ti koz lo sa size ankou* (Abel 1982:3)²
'we didn't speak about it again'

(2) *me toud mem nou pa ti fase*
'but, even so, we weren't angry' (ibid.)

while the following do not; in (3), the predicate is nominal:

(3) *son lakaz ti en trou dan en gro siko* (Accouche 1976:15)
'his home was a hole in a large tree-stump'

and in (4), it is a prepositional phrase:

(4) *mé son lidé ti lo fiy Msie ek Madame Lémartir*
'but he had his mind on the daughter of Mr and Mrs L.'
(Accouche 1976:35)

Previous analyses of this area of IdeFC syntax have presented differing accounts of the way in which the verbal predicate functions.

Corne (1970:16-19) lists constituents which can act as predicate head. This list includes verbs and adjectives. In sentences such as

(5) (MC) *li oblize vini* (Corne 1970:18)
'he is obliged to come'

oblize is seen as an adjectival element derived from the corresponding verb *obliz/e* 'to oblige'.

Corne (1977) retains the word classes of verb and adjective, but introduces a concept happily absent from his 1970 MC grammar, that of an underlying copula, in sentences such as (5), and indeed in all similarly stative sentences. Thus, both (5) and (6) contain a zero copula.

- (6) *lerua i bet* (Corne 1977:62)
'the king is stupid'

That is:

(5') *li COP oblize vini*

(6') *lerua i COP bet*

Bollée (1977) and Papen (1978) adopt the same analysis.

Corne (1980) finds reason to re-evaluate this analysis of IdeFC predicates. He dispenses with the concept of underlying copula, and sets up a tripartite distinction in the predicate: state, change of state (or process), and action (1980:111). According to this analysis, state predicates are represented by such sentences as:

- (7) *labutik i ferme ozordi* (Corne 1980:114)
'the shop is closed today'

process predicates by:

- (8) (MC) *li pe mor* (Corne 1980:111)
'he is dying'

and action predicates by:

- (9) *divā pe kas ban brās* (ibid.)
'the wind is breaking the branches'

Using this tripartite distinction, Corne (1980:112-113) states that the markers FIN³ 'completive' and APE 'progressive' cannot occur before a state verbal. When these markers occur before adjectives, the analysis classes such adjectives as process verbals:

- (10) *banan i n mir komela* (Corne 1980:113)
'the bananas are ripe now' (= have become ripe)

- (11) *mō pe ā-koler* (Corne 1980:112)
'I am getting angry'

This analysis does away with the need for the distinctive feature [+durative] within the stative class which Corne had postulated in his 1977 analysis (1977:62). There, states were seen either as being 'generally true' i.e. [+durative]

(12) *sə basə pa ti kuver* (Corne 1977:62)
'his pond was not covered (on any day)'

or as having 'become true' i.e. [-durative]

(13) *loto i n kuver* (ibid.)
'the car is covered (now)'

with only [-durative] able to co-occur with FIN or APE. In the 1980 analysis, [+durative] states correspond to state verbals, while [-durative] states are renamed process verbals (1980:113).

The IdeFC phenomenon of Final Vowel Truncation (FVT), discussed with varying degrees of detail in all previous descriptions, is now seen by Corne as having a semantic motivation:

"Final vowel truncation applies only when the subject is the Agent" (Corne 1980:114)

Corne (1982) retains this analysis of the predicate, the only change being that FVT is now stated as marking Action. Note that in the 1982 analysis, the term 'verb' does not have any linguistic significance, but is merely used as a convenient label (Corne 1982:49). In neither the 1980 analysis nor its 1982 version can sentences such as (14) and (15) be satisfactorily accounted for, since the nominal items *labutik* in (14) and *ə lon* in (15) are required to be labelled 'agent'.

(14) *labutik i ferm siz-er* (Corne 1980:114)
'the shop closes at six o'clock'

(15) *ə lon i kut de rupi* (ibid.)
'one ell costs two rupees'

Let us now briefly examine the shortcomings of Corne's reassessment (1980, 1982) of the IdeFC predicate, and propose an analysis which avoids the pitfalls of all previous efforts, but which resembles most closely the analysis given in Corne's 1970 MC grammar.

Firstly, the present analysis does not postulate an underlying copula (cf. Corne 1982:33-35). Secondly, the present analysis rejects the notion of a semantic dimension to FVT, instead relying on the categories of word-class to adequately define the range of FVT application. Thirdly, the tripartite distinction in the predicate is rejected in favour of Bickerton's binary distinction (1975, ch. 2). Thus, Corne's process and action classes are collapsed into a single non-stative class.

That IdeFC does not have an underlying copula can be accepted without hesitation (cf. Corne 1980, 1982:33-35). I use the terms 'Verb' and 'Adjective' to denote two of the word-classes of IdeFC. Verbs and adjectives behave in very similar

ways in Creole languages (Bickerton 1981:68-69); IdeFC is no exception:

(16) *i taye* '(s)he runs, (s)he ran'

(17) *i ris* '(s)he is rich'

(18) *i pe taye* '(s)he is running'

(19) *i pe ris* '(s)he is becoming rich'

Nevertheless, distributional differences do exist; for example, a verb can directly follow *ule* 'to want', while an adjective cannot:

(20) *i ule taye* '(s)he wants to run'

(21) **i ule ris* '(s)he wants to be rich'⁴

An adjective following *ule* requires a 'verbalising' item, such as *vin/i* 'to come, become':

(22) *i ule vin ris* | '(s)he wants to become rich'

There exists in IdeFC, as in other languages, a subclass of adjectives derived directly from verbs; thus, in (23) *kas* is a verb:

(23) *divâ i n kas ban brâs* (Corne 1980:116)
'the wind broke the branches'

while in (24) *kase* is an adjective derived from the verb:

(24) *ê brâs kase* 'a broken branch'

Now, such adjectives are not subject to FVT, whereas verbs, and only verbs, are. In fact, it is only a morphological subset of verbs which are subject to FVT, and then only in certain syntactic environments (for details, see Corne 1977:75-86).

Since FVT applies only to members of the word-class 'Verb', there is no need to postulate a semantic dimension to FVT, namely that it marks Action, an analysis which poses problems when one is faced with sentences like (14) and (15) as well as (25) and (26):

(25) *en ti apel Sesil* (Corne 1977:82)
'one was called Cécile'

(26) *sa lager ti n ariv efreyâ* (Corne 1977:82)
'the war had become so frightening'

where the verbs are all subject to FVT, but where it is difficult to see the subjects as agents.

The tripartite distinction adopted by Corne (1980) creates an artificial class of predicate, namely that of 'process'. Thus, the adjectives in the following sentences are termed

'process verbals':

(27) *mò pe dakor ek li* (Corne 1980:112)
'I am beginning/coming/getting to agree with him'

(28) (MC) *mo pe oblize fer sa* (Corne 1980:112)
'I am being obliged to do it'

(10) *banan i n mir komela* (Corne 1980:113)
'the bananas are ripe now'

Note that in all cases, these 'process verbals' are preceded by either APE or FIN. This is in fact the case for all such 'process verbals'. 'Processivity' therefore is not an inherent feature of the adjective itself, but is assigned to it by the accompanying marker (APE or FIN).

Adopting Bickerton's binary distinction, stative vs. non-stative, sentences like (8), (10), (11), (13), (19), (27) and (28) are analysed as containing an adjective which is normally stative (as in (2), (5), (12) and (19)) but which becomes non-stative when, and only when, it is preceded by either the progressive marker APE or the completive marker FIN.

In conclusion, the following facts may be stated:

(i) there is no underlying copula in IdeFC (Corne 1970, 1980, 1982).

(ii) FVT applies only to verbs.

(iii) FVT is not dependent upon any semantic criterion that cannot be directly derived from the opposition 'Verb vs. Adjective', i.e. that is not redundant.

(iv) all verbal predicates can be classed as either stative or nonstative. Most verbs are nonstative, although there are some stative verbs (e.g. *kon/e*); all adjectives are stative, except when marked by APE or FIN, in which case they become nonstative.

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NOTES

- ¹ This paper is based on research carried out during 1981 in the Department of Romance Languages, University of Auckland. I wish to thank Derek Bickerton and Chris Corne for their helpful comments on an early draft. Of course, responsibility for everything herein rests with me, since neither man necessarily agrees with anything I have written.
- ² Unless otherwise stated, all sentences cited are from SC. All examples retain the orthography of the source publication.
- ³ FIN represents the completive marker in all its forms:
- | | |
|-----------------|-------------------|
| (SC) (MC) (RoC) | <i>fin, in, n</i> |
| (RoC) | <i>fini</i> |
- APE likewise represents the progressive marker:
- | | |
|-----------------|-------------|
| (SC) (MC) (RoC) | <i>pe</i> |
| (SC) (RoC) | <i>ape</i> |
| (RoC) | <i>apre</i> |
- ⁴ Corne (1970:32) gives an example (MC) *li ule ris* but confirms (pers. comm.) that this is unacceptable to many (most?) speakers.