

Feature Recombination and Number Agreement in Saramaccan Relative Clauses

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In historical linguistics, as well as in creolistics and bilingual acquisition studies it is commonly assumed that cross-linguistic influence plays a crucial role in the emergence of new speech patterns that may result in language change. Yet, main stream generative syntax offers no precise theory of how cross-linguistic influence operates: How are patterns or features of one language embedded in another developing grammar? Traditionally, this question is answered in terms of parameter setting: learners set a parameter in the target language based on L1 knowledge and develop a grammar whose outputs show a certain distance with the target grammar. However, parameters seem too global to account for some local changes. In the Haitian determiner system, for instance, the specificity marker is mapped onto the Gbe languages but the indefinite marker follows French syntax (cf. Aboh 2015). Such a change would require two independent parameters. Cases like these indicate that parameters might be too general to account for subtle local changes that may occur under cross-linguistic influence.

In order to account for cross-linguistic influence and the emergence of grammar competence in a multilingual context, this paper argues that linguistic change should be sought in the recombination of linguistic features: a cognitive process central to acquisition that enables learners to merge linguistic features selected from the inputs into new lexical items which drive syntactic derivation (Borer 1984, 2005a, b, Chomsky 1995). Under this view, change is rooted in the featural content of lexical/functional items and how these are licensed in syntax. Language change relates primarily to the interfaces between internal and external syntax.

To support this view, this paper discusses number agreement in relative clauses in Saramaccan, a maroon creole which developed in 17th century colonial Suriname out of contact between English, the Gbe languages (Kwa), Kikongo (Bantu), and to some extent Portuguese. Since Smith's (1987) seminal work, it has been demonstrated that the grammar of Saramaccan shows heavy influence from Gbe. For instance, Saramaccan exhibits COMP-agreement in relative clauses (1) (cf. Huttar, Aboh, and Ameka 2013).

- (1) a. Di fisi **di** mi tata kisi bigi
DEF.SG fish REL.PL 1SG father catch big
'The fish that my father caught is big.'
b. Dee fisi **dee** mi tata kisi bigi
DEF.PL fish REL.PL 1SG father catch big
'The fish that my father caught are big.'

In (1a), *di fisi* 'the fish' is singular and combines with the singular relativizer *di*. In (1b), *dee fisi* 'the fish/es' combines with the plural form *dee*. These examples illustrate what Booij (2005: 110) refers to as governed inflection, a case of contextual inflection, whereby number on the relative head triggers number agreement on the relativizer.

English, the lexifier of Saramaccan, lacks number agreement in relative clauses. Instead, such agreement patterns are a robust property of Western Gbe languages. This is illustrated by the following Gengbe facts, in which the relativizer agrees with the noun head even though the latter

shows no number specification:

- (2) a. [[Axó má] [CP kè lè kplǒ á jí á]] nyó. [Kagni 1989: 26]
 book REL BE.located table DET on DET be.good
 ‘The book that is on the table is good.’
- b. [[Axó má] [CP kè-wó lè kplǒ á jí á]] nyó.
 book REL-PL BE.located table DET on DET good
 ‘The books that are on the table are good.’

Since Chomsky (1977), relative clauses have been analyzed as involving a link between the relativized noun phrase, the complementizer hosting the relative wh-pronoun or the relativizer, and the gap associated with the base position where the relativized noun phrase is interpreted. Under this view, agreement with the relativizer is triggered by movement of the relativized DP to the left periphery as informally schematized in (3) for sentence (1b), in which the extraction site contains the deleted copy [~~dee fisi~~].

- (3) [~~dee fisi~~] **dee** mi tata kisi [~~dee fisi~~] bigi
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In accounting for these facts, I propose that *di/dee* alternation in Saramaccan can be described as in (4), with the vowel change (i.e., *-i / -ee*) being sensitive to number features on the relativized noun head.

- (4) REL_[SG] = d + INFL_[SG] → d-i
 REL_[PL] = d + INFL_[PL] → d-ee

In this description, number features of ‘Gbe origin’ are recombined with a complementizer that derived from English and exhibits English syntax essentially. This can be shown by the fact that relative clauses in English and Saramaccan display a head-initial sequence in which the determiner precedes both the relativized noun and the relative clause. This is unlike Gbe in which the relative clause involves a seemingly relativized bare NP in sentence-initial position, followed by the relativizer and the relative clause which in turn precede the determiner that marks the relativized noun in sentence-initial position (2). We conclude that the emergence of number agreement in Saramaccan relative clauses results from syntactic recombination: an English-type relativizer, which is underspecified for number, acquired an uninterpretable number feature under the influence of Gbe, thus yielding the Saramaccan relativizer.

References

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