Reflexives and constraints on the borrowing of discourse function: creoles and Tahitian French

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This paper concerns some data from creole languages and Tahitian which pose potential problems for previous accounts of binding phenomena (Chomsky 1981; Reinhart & Reuland 1993). I will propose one possible modification to the proposal put forth by R&R which captures the relevant facts. In light of this proposal, I will then turn to some apparently unrelated phenomena in which Tahitian French preserves the syntactic structure of Standard French but borrows the multi-purpose discourse functions of the Tahitian reflexive element *iho*. Ultimately I will conclude that, under the circumstances, the type of borrowing which occurs is far from accidental; rather, it is precisely what we expect.

The following examples exhibit a marked ambiguity:

(1) 'Ua horohorōi 'oia 'iāna teie po'ipo'i (Tahitian)
PST wash-repeatedly he (by)-him this morning
'He$_i$ washed him$_{i/j}$ this morning.'

(2) i$_i$ bat li$_{j/i}$ (Seselwa)
he hit him
'He hit him(self)'

(3) li$_i$ fin pandi li$_{j/i}$ (Mauritian Creole)
he made hang him
'He hanged him(self)'

Tahitian and several creoles also contain an explicitly reflexive element which is optional and unambiguous in reference:

(4) a. 'Ua aroha 'oia 'iāna (Tahitian)
PST love he (to)-him
'He$_i$ loved him$_{i/j}$.

b. 'Ua aroha 'oia 'iāna **iho**
PST love he (to)-him self
'He$_i$ loved himself$_{i/*j}$.'

Further, there are some constructions in Tahitian which are inherently reflexive; when added to these constructions, the explicitly reflexive element *iho* yields another ambiguity:

(5) a. 'Ua mutu 'oia ('i te tipi)
PST break-off he (with a knife)
'He$_i$ cut himself$_{i/*j}$ with a knife.'

b. 'Ua mutu 'oia **iho** ('i te tipi)
PST break-off he self (with a knife)
'He HIMSELF cut himself (with a knife). (No one else was responsible.)' or
'He cut HIMSELF (with a knife). (No one else was cut.)'

Tahitian French shows a similar ambiguity which is not present in Standard French or Québecois, both of which permit the first gloss of (6b) but not the second:

(6) a. Nous nous sommes mariés
We us are married
'We married each other.'

b. Nous nous sommes mariés nous-mêmes
We us are married ourselves
'We married each other ourselves (we performed our own marriage ceremony).' or
'We married EACH OTHER (emphatic).'

The first set of data above is problematic for both the traditional binding theory and also for the more recent approach of R&R, and indeed for any account couched in overt syntactic distributional differences between pronouns and anaphors. It is difficult to see how one might give a syntactic account of the difference between reflexive anaphors and non-coreferential pronouns when there seems to be a difference in neither their syntactic distribution nor the phonetic realization of the predicates containing them. R&R's account depends crucially on the notion of reflexive-marking, but as we have seen, reflexives are not overtly marked in the creole data. I propose that reflexive-marking can occur via some null operator, and the realization of this operator is limited by restrictions imposed by the impoverished morphological paradigms of creoles and some other languages. Further, I suggest that the type of reflexive-marking which creates SELF-anaphors is crucially different in kind from that which marks a verbal complex inherently reflexive. As (6b) demonstrates, both types of reflexive-marking may be present non-redundantly; the morphological realization of reflexive-marking in one position does not prohibit a similar realization in another position. The crucial difference between the creole data and equivalent examples in Tahitian French (shown in (a) and (b) below, respectively) is the fact that creoles tend to lack the verbal morphology of Tahitian French; in both cases, reflexive-marking applies to the verb and a separate operator is responsible for the SELF-anaphor:

(7) a. li get limem dan laglas (Mauritian Creole)
he look-at himself in mirror
'He$_i$ looks at himself$_{i/*j}$ in the mirror.'
b. nous nous sommes mariés nous-mêmes

Tahitian French retains the syntax of Standard French – in which both types of reflexive-marking may appear in the overt syntax – but takes (a crucial aspect of) the information structure of Tahitian: where Tahitian displays an ambiguity in the use of the SELF-anaphor, so does Tahitian French. Assuming some variety of a principles-and-parameters framework, speakers of Tahitian French share with speakers of Standard French identical syntactic parameter settings; that is, in both varieties of French, both reflexive-marking operators may apply overtly. It is the theory of use of Tahitian French – in this case, the information-packaging function of overt SELF-anaphors – which draws heavily from the Tahitian substrate.

This is consistent with the claims put forth by Prince (1992) with respect to constructions and the borrowing of discourse function in language contact situations. The speaker of Tahitian learning French has at her disposal an overtly reflexive SELF-anaphor which can be used for two informational purposes: agentivity or emphasis, as shown above in (5). She hears an overt SELF-anaphor in French, which she takes to be the same (or highly similar). In all cases where she hears this SELF-anaphor, it is being used agentively. That is, the evidence she hears is entirely consistent with her own pattern of use in Tahitian, as she too can use SELF-anaphors agentively. The Tahitian learner of French then extends the perceived parallelism and uses the French SELF-anaphor as she would use the apparently comparable element in Tahitian – that is, she will use the French SELF-anaphor not only to convey its canonical agentive function, but also to express the emphatic function common to the similar SELF-anaphor in Tahitian.

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