

How complex is creole inflectional morphology? The case of Mauritian

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While it is now firmly established that creole languages can have morphology (see Plag, 2006 and references therein), there is an expectation that creole morphology should be ‘simple’, ‘easy’, ‘unmarked’, ‘natural’, or ‘canonical’. In the domain of inflection we thus expect affixal morphology expressing clearcut morphosyntactic features with no inflectional classes and little irregularity. This paper is a case study of the morphology of verbs in Mauritian, based on an exhaustive examination of the 2140 entries in (Carpooran, 2009). We show that although inflection is simple in the trivial sense that paradigms are small, the system does not meet the usual criteria for inflectional simplicity or naturalness.

Paradigm structure Mauritian verbs exhibit a paradigm with exactly two cells, called the long form (LF) and the short form (SF). Table 1 provides sample paradigms, written in phonemic transcription. About 30% of the verbs have syncretic long and short forms. That we are dealing with a true morphological alternation rather than a phonological phenomenon (*pace* Corne, 1982) is shown by the fact that neither form is uniformly predictable from the other. Verbs with a LF in -e tend to drop it when it is preceded by a single consonant, and never drop it when it is preceded by a branching onset; but both situations are found when the verb penultimate syllable has a nonempty coda (kõsiste~kõsiste vs. egziste~egzis) or when the single consonant is a glide (brije~brij ‘mix’ vs. brije~brije ‘glow’). Almost all verbs with a LF in -i are syncretic, but there are two exceptions (sɔrti~sɔrt and vini~vin), which are not phonologically distinguishable from syncretic verbs (resp. parti~parti and fini~fini). Only verbs with a final consonant in the LF are uniformly syncretic. In the other direction, there is no hope of deriving the phonology of the LF from that of the SF: verbs with a vowel-final SF are always syncretic, but verbs with a consonant-final SF may have a syncretic LF, a LF in -e or a LF in -i: compare brize~briz and friz~friz, arete~aret and aparet~aparet, mine~min and vini~vin, pɔrte~pɔrt and sɔrti~sɔrt, vāde~van and atan~atan.

LF	brize	arete	mine	frize	vāde	pɔrte	resikle	mɔ̃tre	brije	brije	kõsiste	egziste
SF	briz	aret	min	friz	van	pɔrt	resikle	mɔ̃tre	brij	brije	kõsiste	egzis
TRANS.	‘break’	‘stop’	‘undermine’	‘curl’	‘sell’	‘carry’	‘recycle’	‘show’	‘mix’	‘glow’	‘consist’	‘exist’

LF	sāti	parti	sɔrti	fini	vini	LF	kuver	fɛr	friz	aparet	atan
SF	sāti	parti	sɔrt	fini	vin	SF	kuver	fɛr	friz	aparet	atan
TRANS.	‘feel’	‘leave’	‘go out’	‘finish’	‘come’	TRANS.	‘cover’	‘do’	‘freeze’	‘appear’	‘wait’

Table 1: Sample paradigms of Mauritian verbs with LFs in -e, -i and -C

Although we are dealing with multiple of conjugation patterns, the LF is a very good predictor for the SF. The simple implicational rule in (1) accounts for over 93% of verbs, and this figure can be raised to 99% by using a slightly more complex set of implications; such a set of implications can be taken to describe the regular patterns of Mauritian conjugation. No set of rules predicting the LF from the SF comes close to such a score. Thus despite the concatenative character of Mauritian morphology, implicative patterns between surface forms provide for a better description of the system than a constructive approach relying on stems and affixes.

- (1) If the LF is polysyllabic and the last syllable is a nonbranching onset followed by e, the SF drops the e. Otherwise the LF and the SF are syncretic.

Morphosyntactic import (Henri & Abeillé, 2008) discusses the contexts of use of each form in syntax. The SF is used only when the verb is immediately followed by a nonclausal complement (2). The postverbal argument of unaccusative verbs counts as a complement (2b), as do predicative APs (2c) and locative goals (2d). Verbs with a clausal complement take a SF only if another nonclausal complement precedes it (2e). A LF is used if the verb is clause final (3a), even if a complement is present but extracted (3b), or when the verb is immediately followed by a clausal complement (3c) or by an adjunct (3d). In addition, if the verb carries *Verum Focus*, it has to be a long form, irrespective of other factors (4).

- (2) a. Mo ti manz/*manze kari.
1SG PST eat.SF/*LF curry
'I ate curry.'
- b. Inn ariv/*arive enn aksidan.
prf arrive.SF/*LF INDF accident
'There has been an accident.'
- c. Nou res/*reste malad.
1PL stay.SF/*LF sick
'We are still sick.'
- d. Li pe mars lor disab.
3SG.M PROG walk.SF on sand
'He is walking onto the sand.'
- e. Mari inn demann/*demande [ar tou
Mary PERF ask.SF/*LF with all
dimounn] [kiler la].
people what_time DEF
'Mari asked everyone what time it was.'
- (3) a. Mo ti manze/*manz.
1SG PST eat.LF/*SF
'I ate.'
- b. Tibaba ki mo mama ti
little_baby COMP POSS mother PST
veye/*vey toule zour.
look_after.LF/*SF every day
'It's little babies that my mother looked after every day.'
- c. Mari inn demande/*demann [kiler
Mary PERF ask.LF/*SF what_time
la] [ar tou dimounn] .
DEF with all people
'Mari asked everyone what time it was.'
- d. Li pe marse lor disab.
3SG.M PROG walk.LF on sand
'He is walking on the sand.'
- (4) Mo ti krwar Mari pa MANZ kari pou!
1SG PST think Mary NEG eat.SF curry chicken
'I thought Mary DIDN'T eat chicken curry!'

In addition, both forms are used by the lexeme formation process of attenuative reduplication. This process creates new verbal lexemes whose SFs is the concatenation of two copies of the base's SF, whereas the LF is the concatenation of the base's SF with the base's LF—see Table 2. This contrasts clearly with intensive and contrastive (5) reduplications, which are syntactic rather than morphological processes, and where both reduplicants are always exact copies.

- (5) An example of contrastive reduplication

Li=nn sante sante?
3SG=PERF sing sing
'Did she really sing?'

LF	sāte	sātsāte	balje	baljebalje
SF	sāt	sātsāt	balje	baljebalje
TRANS.	'sing'	'hum'	'sweep'	'sweep carelessly'

Table 2: Examples of attenuative reduplication

Thus the distribution of SF and LF follow a typical morphomic pattern (Aronoff, 1994): when used in syntax, each form is used in a collection of contexts that does not form a natural class; in addition, both forms are used in lexeme formation in a way that does not reflect any morphosyntactic property.

References Aronoff 1994. *Morphology by itself*. MIT Press— Carpooran 2009. *Diksoner Morisien*. Koleksion Text Kreol— Corne 1982. The predicate in Isle de France Creole. Baker & Corne, eds., *Isle de France Creole. Affinities and Origins*, pp. 31–48. Karoma— Henri & Abeillé 2008. Verb form alternations in Mauritian. *Proceedings of the 15th Conference on HPSG*, pp. 378–398. CSLI Pubs — Plag 2006. Morphology in Pidgins and Creoles. Brown, ed., *Encyclopedia of Language and Linguistics, 2nd ed.*, vol. 8, pp. 304–308.