Nana-constructions in Reunion Creole: distinguishing broad focus clefts from related constructions

Alina McLellan, The University of Manchester

In this talk, I present an analysis of nana-constructions in Reunion Creole (RC), a French-based Creole spoken on Reunion Island. I focus on the broad focus construction illustrated in (1), which is functionally comparable to the avoir clefts of French, illustrated in (2).

(1) Hier soir nena un num privé la tel amwin
    yesterday night have INDF number private PRF phone 1SG
    ‘Last night a private number phoned me’ (Cougnon 2012)

(2) Y’a le téléphone qui sonne!
    PF-have.3SG DEF telephone REL ring.3SG
    ‘The phone’s ringing!’ (Lambrecht 1988: 137)

Avoir clefts are similar to the well-studied c’est-clefts in that they are bi-clausal constructions that express a single proposition, but they are typically associated with broad focus rather than narrow focus. Their function is presentational or event-reporting: they introduce a new referent into the discourse and then predicate something about that referent, or they report an event (Lambrecht 1988). Based on a corpus of written and oral materials, I argue that RC’s nana-construction in (1) was once a bi-clausal cleft but has developed into a monoclausal construction, where nana is a broad focus construction marker rather than a copula. I present a Role and Reference Grammar (cf. Van Valin & LaPolla 1997; Van Valin 2005, 2008; Bentley et al. 2023) analysis of both the monoclausal construction and the bi-clausal cleft from which the former has developed. A key feature of the broad focus cleft analysis is that the relative clause is in focus and contains the main assertion of the sentence, so it does not behave like a true subordinate clause.

When analysing broad focus nana constructions like those in (1), I distinguish it from two closely related constructions: narrow focus nana clefts (equivalent to English narrow focus there-clefts) Error! Reference source not found. and existentials with a relative clause Error! Reference source not found. 

(3) Na ali i sava
    have 3SG FIN go
    ‘There’s him that’s going’

(4) Dann la komine Bras Panon nana in zoli lékol i apèl Ma Pensée
    in DET commune Bras Panon have INDF nice school FIN call my thought
    ‘In the commune of Bras Panon, there is a nice school that is called Ma Pensée’

Although the three constructions in (1), Error! Reference source not found. and Error! Reference source not found. are at first sight similar in form, involving nana and, in the case of Error! Reference source not found. and Error! Reference source not found., an (often zero-marked) relative clause, they have different semantic and discourse-pragmatic properties, which I outline in the talk. A crucial difference lies in their discourse function: the monoclausal nana construction in (1) is presentational or event-reporting, whereas narrow focus nana-clefts serve to assert the existence of a value for a variable (cf. Pavey’s (2004) analysis of narrow focus there-clefts), and existentials “express a proposition about the existence or presence of someone or something in a context” (Bentley, Ciconte and Cruschina’s 2015: 2). This talk aims
to address an important gap in our understanding of this family of related constructions, namely, the distinct analysis of broad focus clefts.

References