Variation in the French Creoles determiner systems: the structuring role of grammaticalization.

The purpose of this talk is to analyze observed linguistic variation in the syntactic organization of nominal constituents in a variety of French Lexifier Creoles (FLC). As is well known, FLC present both a notable uniformity in the inventory of their overt determiners and a striking diversity in their syntactic distribution, thus offering a particularly fertile ground for a micro-parametric investigation of linguistic variation. To illustrate briefly, most FLC make use of an indefinite singular determiner plausibly derived from the French numeral *one*, of a definite determiner *la* (if there is one), of a demonstrative form *sa/ta (la*) and of similar possessives pronouns. Yet, as seen in table (1) for *sa* and *la* for instance, their syntactic distribution presents much variation:

	Singular		**Plural**	
RC	Def/Dem **NP** (def)	La/sa **NP** (la)	Dfpl/Dempl (PL) **NP** (def)	Le/se (ban) **NP** (la)
SC	Dem **NP**	Sa **NP**	Dem PL **NP**	Sa ban **NP**
MauC	Dem **NP** Def	Sa **NP**-la	Dem PL **NP** Def	Sa ban **NP**-la
Ant C	**NP** Dem Def	**NP**-sa-(l)a, **NP**-ta-(l)a	PL **NP** Dem Def	Se **NP**-sa-(l)a, Se **NP**-ta-(l)a
GuaC	**NP** Def Dem	**NP**-la-sa	PL **NP** Def Dem	Se **NP**-la-sa
mLC	Def **NP** Dem (def)	La **NP** sa-la	Dfpl **NP** Dem(def)	
mLC	**NP** Def/m	**NP**-la	**NP** (Dem) PL	**NP**-(sila)ye
GyC	Dem **NP** Def	sa **NP** la	Dem **NP** PL Def	Sa **NP**-y(e-l)a
HC	**NP** Dem Def	**NP**-sa-a	**NP** Dem PL	**NP**-sa-yo

A comparable range of variation is also observed across FLC in the distribution of possessive and plural markers. Yet distributional uniformity is also in evidence across FLC nominal structures. Some determiners like the indefinite singular determiner or the cardinal numerals invariably occur in pre-nominal positions in all FLC, and the distribution of adjectives is largely post-nominal. These striking similarities and differences raise important empirical and theoretical questions that are at the core of current theorizing on linguistic variation. Do the observed order variations reflect distinctions in the basic functional architecture of nominal projections, as was suggested for sentential constituents by Ouhalla (1991) and others, or on the contrary, can FLC be analyzed as having a single common underlying functional architecture for their nominal constituents? If the latter, how can the observed variation be accounted for? Could variation here be traced back to substrate variation as a strict relexification and dialect-leveling approach would predict or can other deep processes such as grammaticalization be shown to matter? Are there common syntactic operations behind the observed variations and if so, do the distributional differences derive from lexical distinctions despite the apparent similarity in form?

This paper explores an analysis built on two central assumptions: 1) That FLC nominal projections have a common basic architecture and 2) that the observed variation stems from extensive but highly constrained phrasal movements inside the proposed DP architecture that are driven by differences in the grammaticalization of superficially similar determiners. The first step in developing this analysis is to provide a common underlying architecture for the nominal projections of FLC. The structure I propose parallels in essential respects the functional architecture developed for nominal constituents within the recent generative literature (cf the cartographic approach). I argue that the comparative creole data provide in fact strong empirical support for the existence of a number of distinct functional projections hierarchically organized in a fixed order above the projection of the lexical noun (DP/DefP > DemP/AgrP > NumP > NP). The distinct orders, I suggest, systematically derive from a cascade of phrasal movements governed by a single generalization:

(1) FLC nominal functional heads must have filled specifiers.

(1), I propose, can further be derived from two minimalist assumptions:

A. DP are phases in the sense of Chomsky (1998,2001)

B. Interpretable/Valued Phi features must be accessible outside nominal phases.

The Phase Impenetrability Condition of Chomsky (2001) dictates that information can be accessed only at the edge of phases. For DP, this means that if the feature information they carry is relevant for sentence computation (Agree), it must either be on the head or in the specifier of the topmost DP projection or be made accessible either through head movement (fusion) to D or by phrasal movement to its Spec. The idea pursued here is that the order variations observed in FLC nominals result from the interplay between these requirements on feature accessibility and grammaticalization. Given (1), much of the order variation observed among the FLC determiners can be predicted from their status as lexical specifiers (XP) or as functional heads (X^o), a choice that, I argue, reflects their variable degree of grammaticalization. Grammaticalization is taken to commonly imply 'Semantic Bleaching', a process I take to affect the interpretability of lexical features in the following way: Interpretable lexical features that provide valuation (goal) become un-interpretable functional feature that seek valuation (probe). Thus a det with interpretable features can merge in a Spec position in the functional architecture and provide valuation, while a det with uninterpretable feature merges as a head that triggers checking through XP movement to its Spec, resulting in a constituent final position. The paper motivates 'Semantic bleaching' on the basis of a sublte semantic comparison between FLC determiners.