Some notes on nominal phrases in Haitian Creole and in Gungbe: A Trans-Atlantic Sprachbund perspective

Abstract

Haitian Creole (HC) and Gungbe (GG) share the property of allowing "bare nouns" (BNs) in all argument positions. By "BN" we mean noun phrases that may include certain modifying expressions (e.g., adjectives, numeral, relative clauses) but that lack elements that would correspond to determiners like *the* in English or *le*/*la*/*les* in French. Besides BNs, HC and GG also display nominal expressions that are marked with a determiner-like element. We refer to these as determined nouns (DNs). While one could expect BNs and DNs to have contrasting distributive properties, the striking fact about HC and GG is that BNs can occur in a variety of positions where DNs also occur—and these positions form a superset of those where BNs occur in a language like English. In addition, BNs in these languages manifest a semantic range that overlaps with that of DNs, including the sort of definite specific semantics that is usually associated with nouns marked with definite determiners in languages such as English and French. We hope to use the BN- and DN-related comparative data from GG and HC nominal phrases as a window on the syntax and semantics of "definite" determiners cross-linguistically and on certain (universal?) aspects of the structure of nominal phrases (and sentential phrases).

In particular we will ask the following questions:

(i) What is the property of HC and GG bare nouns that allow them to receive a specific definite interpretation?

(ii) What are the properties of the HC and GG "definite" determiners that make them different from their counterparts in, say, French and English?

(iii) One of the properties in (ii) is related to the fact that in both HC and GG the "definite" determiner that is associated with DPs can also be found associated with CPs. Is there any sense in which the contrasts between BNs and DNs in HC and GG find analogues at the CP level?