

Is Haitian Creole really a CV language?

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This paper aims to examine the status of branching or complex consonantal onsets in three languages, namely French, Haitian Creole and Gen. The focus of the research will be on the status of word initial complex onsets in these languages which are generally assumed to be a single complex syllabic constituent (Davis 1990, Dell 1995).

The first part of this paper will examine Klein's (2006) and Blevins' (1995) typology of syllable structures in Creoles and in the world's languages and will comment briefly on the advantages and disadvantages of the parameter based approach to syllable structure.

The second part of this paper will present empirical evidence on the properties of attested word initial consonant sequences in French, Haitian Creole and Gen. The results based on forms found in Valdman (1981) and Pazzi (1980) show that:

- a) The most frequent type of word initial complex onset in both French and Haitian consists of an obstruent followed by a liquid (French 4452/6342 or 70.20% occurrences and in Haitian 779/1298 or 60.01%);
- b) The second most frequent type of word initial complex onset in both French and Haitian consists of an obstruent followed by a glide (French 1075/6342 occurrences or 16.95% and in Haitian 518/1298 or 39.90%);
- c) When combined together, the vast majority of complex onsets in these languages consist of an obstruent followed by an oral sonorant or a glide (French 5527/6342 occurrences or 87.15% and in Haitian 1297/1298 occurrences or 99.92%). On the other hand, there are relatively few cases where an obstruent is followed by another obstruent or by a nasal consonant. Complex onsets are thus of the form consonant + liquid or consonant + glide.

Gen resembles both French and Haitian in that the second consonant of most of the complex onsets consist of either the liquids /l/ (61.11%) or /r/ (15.43%) or the glides /j/ (12.35%) or /w/ (11.11%). Together these types of onset represent 161/162 or 99.38% of all complex onsets found in this source for Gen. In short, all three languages show a strong preference for a liquid or a glide as the second member of a complex onset. The difference between Gen and French or Haitian, lies in the first segment used in the complex onset. While both French and Haitian prefer voiceless stops as the first element of the complex onset, Gen uses voiceless stops (27.16%), voiced stops (19.14%), voiceless fricatives (24.07%) and even nasals (9.26%) as the first member of a word initial complex onset. Onset sequences which appear to violate the Sonority Sequencing Principle (Selkirk 1992) such as /sr/, /xl/, /ml/, /ŋw/ all appear in Gen, while they are never attested in French or Haitian.

The third part of this paper will present a distinction between adjacent consonantal segments (consonant clusters) which are subject to phonological constraints on possible consonant combinations and non adjacent consonantal segments (consonant chains) that show few or virtually no constraints on possible combinations.

The final part of the paper will present a new interpretation of the notion of onset clusters in the languages mentioned above and will argue that the difference between French, Haitian Creole and Gen lies in whether or not they tolerate empty syllabic nuclei, whether they allow empty nuclei to license adjacent consonantal positions and whether they allow sonorants to syllabify within the nucleus. We will argue that the syllabic properties of Haitian Creole are cannot be attributed either to the syllabic properties of French or of Gen, but rather represent a particular combination of specific syllabic properties of each of these languages.

References

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