From Noun to Name: 
On Definiteness Marking in Modern Martinikè

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1 Introduction

This article bears on two functional morphemes written l(a)- and lé and pronounced [l(a)] and [le] which have developed in Modern Martinikè as definiteness markers of a sort, alongside the better known enclitic definite determiner la, which is common to all French-lexifier creoles (cf. Bernabé 1983, Gadelli 1997, Lefebvre 1998, Déprez 2007, Zribi-Hertz and Glaude 2007, Alleesaib 2012, a.o.). We shall argue that la conveys “pragmatic definiteness”, as defined by Löbner (1985, 2011), while l(a)- and lé form “semantically definite” DPs denoting individual terms in the manner of definite proper names. Since French—the lexifier language—ambiguously marks semantic and pragmatic definiteness by means of the same “definite article”, and since the definite determiner in Gbe languages—a plausible substratic influence on Caribbean creoles—is restricted to pragmatic definiteness (cf. Aboh 2001), the fact that the grammar of Martinikè should have developed three distinct overt markers of definiteness is, incidentally, evidence that creolisation cannot be viewed as a “simplification” process, as claimed by McWhorter (2001).

1 Previous stages of the research which led to this article were presented orally to various audiences—the International Conference on Bare Nouns and Genericity (Université Paris 7, October 2010), FACS 2 (Berlin, November 2010), the GRGC seminar (Paris, November 2011), the Genius 3 Conference (Paris, December 2011), the Weak Referentiality Workshop (Utrecht, March 2012), and the ATIFL montly seminar in Nancy (March 2013), whom we gratefully acknowledge for their critical ear. We owe a special debt of gratitude to Muhsina Alleesaib, Claire Beyssade, Patricia Cabredo Hofherr, Joaquim de Carvalho, Maxime Deglas, Henriette De Swart, Malik Ferdinand, Guillaume Fon Sing, Herby Glaude, Fabiola Henri, Bert Le Bruyn, Ora Matushansky, Lea Nash, Isabelle Roy, Emmanuel Schang, Elena Soare, Alice ter Meulen, Florence Villoing, Roberto Zamparelli and Joost Zwarts for their precious feedback, and to Riona Charlery, Guy Deslauriers, Luc and Thérèse Milcent and Loïsa Paulin for their judgements on the Martinikè data.

2 The form(s) taken by this morpheme vary across creoles, and in some of them according to the phonological context. The spelling la we adopt here is meant to ignore this morphological variation, and the spelling -la below, to specifically identify the la morpheme of Martinikè, which crucially behaves as a phrasal enclitic.
We first summarise (section 2) Löbner’s (1985) distinction between semantic and pragmatic definiteness (refined in Löbner 2011), which provides a theoretical background for the description to follow. Section 3 summarises some relevant information on DP syntax in Martinikè, and argues that the phrasal enclitic determiner -la must be semantically characterised as a pragmatic definiteness marker, in Löbner’s (1985, 2011) sense. The next two sections present the morphological, distributional and semantic properties of l(a)-N (section 4) and lé+NP (section 5), arguing that their behaviour echoes that of definite proper names, regardless of the lexical (“proper” or “common”) nature of their head noun. Section 6 recapitulates and argues that l(a)-N and lé+NP in Martinikè instantiate a class of DPs we propose to call Names, characterised semantically as a subtype of semantic definites denoting individual concepts, and syntactically, by the occurrence of a special functional (“Name”) projection distinct from nP.

2 Semantic vs. Pragmatic Definiteness

This distinction is developed by Löbner (1985, 2011), whose theory of Definiteness somewhat differs from such classical views as those proposed by Russell (1919), Strawson (1950), Hawkins (1978) Heim (1982), Kadmon (1990), Abbott (1999), Roberts (2003), Barker (2005), a.o., which characterise definite descriptions in terms of “referential uniqueness”, cf:

(1) A use of a definite description is felicitous if and only if there is exactly one object in the context that satisfies the content of the description.
[informal phrasing from Barker 2005]

Contrary to these authors, Löbner (1985) claims that definiteness involves non-ambiguity (uniqueness) of identification, rather than uniqueness of reference.3 According to this author, the definite article indicates that the (head) noun identifies the referent via the unambiguous role it plays in the relevant situation: “It is not uniqueness [of reference], but non-ambiguity which is essential for definiteness. Non-ambiguity is the property of an expression that allows for only one interpretation (possibly under additional constraints). Uniqueness of reference is always an accidental property of a sortal concept (…)

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3 A rather similar view is developed by Corblin (passim).