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**Clause versus Sentence  
in St. Lucian French Creole**

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# Clause Versus Sentence in St. Lucian French Creole

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## I. Introduction

The sentence, in English at least, is commonly characterized by the formula  $S \rightarrow NP VP$ ; that is, a sentence is made up of a noun phrase followed by a verb phrase. There are several things worth noting about this characterization of the sentence. First of all, it is a strictly formal characterization. An approach that takes function into account might rather say that a sentence is made up of a subject plus a predicate. The subject function, of course, would usually be manifested by a noun phrase and the predicate by a verb phrase. Secondly, in the case of transitive ‘sentences’ (or clauses), the object is understood to be a part of the verb phrase. Some of us would prefer to put the object on an equal level with the subject and the predicate, and indeed when making cross-linguistic comparisons this is commonly done as linguists talk about SVO languages, SOV languages, and so forth. Thirdly, and most importantly in the context of this paper, there is a growing awareness that for English and many other languages the NP + VP or subject + predicate (+ object) combination is a characterization of the CLAUSE level; the sentence level, while it may be manifested by a single independent clause, is potentially much more complex than the clause and the formula  $S \rightarrow NP VP$  cannot do it justice. This paper examines the concept of sentence as it applies to St. Lucian French Creole language data.<sup>1</sup>

In his seminal article ‘Sentence Structure as a Statement Calculus’, Robert Longacre begins with the proposition that ‘Sentence structure in the sense of combination of clauses into larger units has been little studied. What is usually termed sentence structure in linguistic literature is rather clause structure’ (1970:783). Now, it is obvious to all that a sentence *may* consist of a single independent clause, a simple NP VP combination.<sup>2</sup> If that were always the case, then it would not be necessary to distinguish between clause and sentence level. In fact, even the consideration of coordinate clauses, embedded clauses, or clauses merged together such as by an equi-NP deletion are not enough to necessitate the distinction between clause and sentence. But it must be taken into consideration that clauses often combine by means other than coordination, embedding, or juxtaposition. In the model that Longacre presents, the sentence is made up a nucleus, an optional inner periphery coming before and/or after the nucleus, and an optional outer periphery coming at the beginning or end of the sentence or sometimes shifted to a more central location in the sentence, as follows:

**sentence = (outer periphery) (inner periphery) nucleus (inner periphery) (outer periphery)**

The nucleus in Longacre’s model consists of an independent clause, possibly containing

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<sup>1</sup> I wish to thank Shin Ja Hwang for her help in putting together the bibliographical references cited in this article. I also wish to thank my St. Lucian friends Wilfred Auguste, Gertrude Augustin, Mary Calixte, Celina Dalson, Cletus Henry, May Joseph, and Mary Tobierre for their contribution in providing the language data used in this analysis, and colleague Paul Crosbie for help in gathering language data and for the insights into French Creole that I have gained from him.

<sup>2</sup> Huttar (1973:77) comments, ‘A clause may be a limiting case of a sentence – namely, a sentence can be made up of just one clause, and nothing else. This phenomenon of minimal, one-clause (simple) sentences is so common in English that it is probably a major source of the confusion between the two levels.’

relative or complement clauses; or it could be two or more independent clauses in coordination or merged together by one of various means. The inner periphery might be what is commonly called an adverbial subordinate clause coming before or after the independent clause. And Longacre finds a place for such things as sentence conjunctions, vocatives, and tag questions, which are usually left out of the kinds of sentences that linguists make up to exemplify their theories but which occur often enough in natural connected discourse, as the outer periphery of the sentence. Longacre also describes chaining languages, which do not fit this mold, but the model just presented applies to English and to a great many other languages, and it also happens to apply well to St. Lucian French Creole.

Huttar continues this line of thought in his 1973 article, 'On Distinguishing Clause and Sentence'. He reasons that the proper distinction between clause and sentence levels is based on 1) a patterning that seems to be consistent with other pairs of levels in the grammatical hierarchy, e.g. the comparison of noun and noun phrase levels; 2) the desire to capture maximum generalization and achieve maximum simplicity; and 3) an observed difference in function between clause and sentence. With respect to the search for simplicity and maximum generalization, Huttar provides examples showing that an analysis of a complex sentence in terms of phrases misses the important fact that these phrases group together in recurring patterns (i.e., clauses).<sup>3</sup>

Todd's 1974 thesis 'Clause versus Sentence in Choctaw' provides morphological evidence that clause and sentence levels need to be distinguished in this American Indian language. He presents an analysis of a set of suffixes, up until then poorly understood by non-native speakers, that distinguish nominative from oblique case when applied to the clause level but which distinguish same subject from different subject when applied to the sentence level.

In the 1980s a specialized area of linguistic inquiry known as the study of 'clause combining' began to mature, based on the foundation laid by Longacre and others.<sup>4</sup> In some of the literature the term 'clause combining' applies equally to relative clauses, to complement clauses, and to adverbial clauses, while in some of the literature the term applies only to the latter in contrast with the former two. In any case, much of the attention in studies of clause combination has been given to what have traditionally been called adverbial subordinate clauses,<sup>5</sup> which are poorly accommodated by sentence grammars such as the Transformational-Generative model. Those linguists pursuing the study of clause combination generally are those open to the study of function and not just form, and in the study of connected discourse. Much

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<sup>3</sup> See also Thompson and Longacre (1985:206): 'Part of the usefulness of setting up sentence margins is seen on the sentence level itself, i.e., we assume that there are essentially fewer sentence types, because not every margin-nucleus combination constitutes a new sentence type. It simply reflects a further distribution of a given sentence margin.'

<sup>4</sup> In this brief overview of the literature on clause combining I have begun with Longacre 1970, skipping over some of his earlier but less prominent writings on the subject. It is important to note that I have also skipped over other foundational studies by Roger Fowler, M. A.K. Halliday, Kenneth L. Pike, and others.

<sup>5</sup> Although in earlier writings Sandra Thompson freely uses the term 'adverbial subordinate clause', in a 1988 article she and Christian Matthiessen argue that the use of that term is misleading (Matthiessen and Thompson 1988:277,284-6). They argue that the term 'subordinate' is too vague and that both the terms 'subordinate' and 'adverbial' give the misleading impression that the kind of clause in question is embedded in another clause. They also feel that these terms confuse form with function, while they would prefer to keep considerations of form and function strictly separate. The term they prefer to use is 'enhancing hypotaxis', taken from Halliday. I agree with part of their argument, though I prefer to keep form and function integrated as much as possible in my analysis rather than being separated. At any rate, with some reservation I am sticking with the term 'adverbial subordinate clause'. Note that Matthiessen and Thompson's article gives reasons why these adverbial clauses should not be considered as instances of embedding (1988:280-2).

attention has been given to the function of adverbial clauses both in the sentence context and also in the larger discourse context.<sup>6</sup>

## 2. Characteristics of French Creole Clause Structure

We now turn our attention away from the general theory of clause combining and toward the specifics of St. Lucian French Creole. First a word about the theoretical model used in this analysis of French Creole language data. Some linguistic models strive to be exclusively formal, such as standard Transformational-Generative grammar and the American Structuralist model out of which it evolved. Others are geared toward functional considerations, including Halliday's Systemic model and the Rhetorical Structure Theory of Sandra Thompson *et al.* Among those models geared toward function, some would say that considerations of function should be kept separate from considerations of form; they might say, for example, that there are units of form, such as the sentence, and there are units of function, such as discourse. The analysis used in this paper, taken from the Tagmemic model of Pike and Longacre, holds that considerations of form and function must be kept integrated. That is, all linguistic units are recognized as such because of the interplay of form and function. It is necessary, of course, to understand the difference between form and function and be able to discuss each separately, but we reject the notion that some linguistic units are units of form and others are units of function. Rather, all linguistic units, including phoneme, syllable, word, phrase, clause, sentence, and even paragraph and text, are seen as units of form and function.

In this section the discussions of form and function are kept somewhat distinct, but it should be kept in mind that the French Creole clause is recognized as a grammatical unit based on the interplay of form and function.

2.1 THE FUNCTION OF CLAUSES IN FRENCH CREOLE. The basic function of the clause is predication. According to Huttar (1973:79), 'A clause..., as the expression of a simple proposition, has various objects and an event or state plus relations between these, as constituents.' Discourse studies show that, generally speaking, subordinate clauses provide background information or supply cohesion in a text while independent clauses form the backbone of the text (though Hwang 1990 shows that at crucial points in a text this normal relationship can be reversed).

2.2 THE FORM OF CLAUSES IN FRENCH CREOLE. St. Lucian French Creole is a Subject-Predicate-Object ordered language. There are five major clause types in French Creole. The most common type is the TRANSITIVE clause with a subject coming before and an object coming after a verb such as sav 'know', tann 'hear', ni 'have', bat 'hit', pwan 'take', ouvè 'open', wè 'see', tchébé 'hold', and pitché 'stab'. Approximately half the clauses used in narrative texts are of this type. The following chart gives examples of French Creole transitive clauses:

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<sup>6</sup> In fact the thesis of Matthiessen and Thompson 1988 is that 'it is not possible to define or even characterize "subordinate clause" in strictly sentence-level terms. In other words, in order to characterize what it is that distinguishes a "subordinate" from a "main" clause, one must appeal to the discourse context in which the clause in question appears' (1988:275). For more on the topic of the function of adverbial clauses in connected discourse, see this article and also Chafe 1984, Thompson and Longacre 1985, Ramsey 1987, and Hwang 1990.

**Transitive clause chart**

Subj.	Pred.	Obj.	
ou	pa sa jenmen fin sav	ki moun ki ka gajé	<i>You can never know who is doing witchcraft.</i>
papa mwen	tann	an chyen, an bagay ka goumen èk sé chyen nou-an dòwò-a	<i>My father heard a dog, a thing fighting with our dogs outside.</i>
bagay-la	ka ni	tan kouwi	<i>The thing has time to run.</i>
bagay-la	ka ni	tan ay séwé anba jaden-an	<i>The thing is having time to go hide under the garden.</i>
an bagay la	ka bat...ankò	sé chyen-an	<i>A thing there is beating the dogs again.</i>
m	'a fin sav	sa papa mwen fè-a	<i>I never found out what my father did.</i>
mwen	ni	lidé i fè an ti jès	<i>I have an idea he did a little trick.</i>
i	pwan	an ti koutla nou té ni an féto kay-la	<i>He took a little cutlass we had in the rafters of the house.</i>
i	pwan	an ti koutla fin	<i>He took a little thin cutlass.</i>
i	ouvè	lapòt galwi-a	<i>He opened the gallery door.</i>
nou	we	an chyen	<i>We saw a dog.</i>
yo	pwan	an chal	<i>They took a torch.</i>
yo	pitché	'y	<i>They stabbed him.</i>
<b>NP, Pro</b>	<b>VP</b>	<b>NP, Pronoun, Noun Clause</b>	

The second most common type of clause in French Creole is INTRANSITIVE, comprised of a subject followed by a predicate involving usually a verb of motion such as alé ‘go’, antwé ‘enter’, doubout ‘stand/stop’, pati ‘depart’, kouwi ‘run’, vini ‘come’, and viyé ‘return’. Other less common clause types include DITRANSITIVE, which involves a verb such as di ‘say’ or bay ‘give’ and an indirect object as well as a direct object following the verb; EQUATIVE, which uses the copula verb sé to link a noun phrase coming before it with a complement coming after; and DESCRIPTIVE, which has no verb but just a subject followed by a complement. Any of these five contrastive clause types can be made into an adverbial clause if a subordinating conjunction is attached to the beginning.

### 3. CHARACTERISTICS OF FRENCH CREOLE SENTENCE STRUCTURE

The St. Lucian French Creole sentence, like that of English and most other European languages, follows a co-ranking pattern. This is in contrast with a clause chaining pattern used in Korean (Hwang 1990) and certain other languages (Longacre 1983, 1985). A language with a co-

ranking pattern of clause combination may distinguish between independent and subordinate clauses, but the verb forms used in each would be the same and the order among the various types of clauses is flexible. A clause chaining language, on the other hand, has sentences made up of a series of clauses each with a dependent form of the verb except for the last.

The French Creole sentence can and often does consist of a single clause. If it always did there would be no need to distinguish the clause level from the sentence level. But the fact that the sentence can be expanded beyond that is significant. As an analogy one might consider the need to make a distinction between the noun and the noun phrase levels. For example, in French Creole, the noun *koutla* ‘cutlass’ could unmodified be used as the subject or object of a verb or the object of a preposition. But because we recognize the fact that the subject or object of a verb or the object of a preposition could also very well take the form of a noun accompanied by various modifiers including determiners, adjectives, and relative clauses – e.g. *an ti koutla fin* ‘a thin little cutlass’, *an ti koutla nou té ni an féto kay-la*, ‘a little cutlass we had in the rafters of the house’ – we say that it is a noun phrase that fills these slots, which consists of a noun as the nucleus optionally preceded or followed by modifiers. What defines the noun phrase and distinguishes it from the noun is its potential for expansion.

Similarly, what distinguishes the sentence from the clause is its potential for expansion. A sentence would typically have an independent clause functioning as the nucleus, but it might also have one or more optional marginal elements such as intersentential connectors and adverbial clauses. It is the fully expanded form of the sentence that we must use in defining its character, as we note which parts are optional and which parts are obligatory. More details of French Creole sentence structure are to come, following a brief discussion of the function of sentences.

**3.1 THE FUNCTION OF SENTENCES IN FRENCH CREOLE.** It is interesting to not only compare and contrast the function of the clause, which is typically the encoding of a single predication, with that of the sentence, which can involve a combination of predications and the relationships among them, but also compare and contrast the function of the sentence with that of the paragraph, which also encodes a combination of predications in some kind of interpropositional relationship with each other. Thus Longacre (1985:235) writes,

In discourse, whether dialogue or monologue, simple predications combine into larger units. Clauses – the surface structure units which correspond most closely to individual predications – combine into clusters of clauses which are distinguished in most languages as sentences versus paragraphs. They commonly have more cross reference between their component parts (clauses) and more ‘closure’ (i.e., it is somewhat easier to tell where one stops and another starts) than is the case with combinations of sentences which we call paragraphs. Although paragraphs encode essentially the same relations (see section 2) as those found in sentence structures, they are looser and more diffuse.

**3.2 THE FORM OF SENTENCES IN FRENCH CREOLE.** The sentence in French Creole fits the pattern that is typical of co-ranking clause combining languages. A formula for the basic sentence pattern is as follows:

**sentence = (outer margin) (inner margin) nucleus (inner margin) (outer margin)**

This formula indicates that a sentence is comprised of a nucleus optionally preceded and/or followed by inner and outer margins. The nuclear slot is filled by a single independent clause, a combination of independent clauses in coordination or juxtaposition with each other, or a merged sentence nucleus. The inner margin would take the form of an adverbial subordinate clause introduced by padan ‘while’, lè ‘when’, avan ‘before’, pou ‘in order that’, paskè ‘because’, or some other subordinating conjunction. The outer marginal slot could be filled by such categories as vocative, sentence conjunction, or tag question marker. Unlike English sentence conjunctions such as ‘however’ and ‘then’, French Creole sentence conjunctions cannot be shifted to any position other than the beginning of the sentence.

The following examples give some idea of the variety that can be found in French Creole sentences. In these examples, all sentence margins are double underlined and outer margins are in bold face type. Context is given in parentheses.

- simple sentence: Yo kouwi. ‘*They ran.*’
- juxtaposed sentence nucleus: Papa mwen tchébé mwen, i ban mwen von volé.  
‘*My father grabbed me, he gave me a beating.*’
- preposed adverbial clause: Lè mwen tounen dèyè, mwen wè papa mwen ka vini.  
‘*When I turned back, I saw my father coming.*’
- sentence conjunction as outer margin: **(Papa mwen toujou té ka vèti nou pou pyé gwiya sala. I di nou, jou nou tonbé anlè’y nou ka pwen kou. I pa mélé sa ki fèt. Nou kay pwen kou.) Mé nou pa mélé.**  
‘*(My father would always warn us about that guava tree. He told us the day we fell out of it we are getting a beating. He didn’t care what happened. We will get a beating.) But we didn’t care.*’
- postposed adverbial clause: Mwen pléwé an chay mwen kwè mwen té kav mò, paskè pòpòt-la kwazé èk manman mwen pa té sa achté an lòt ban mwen.  
‘*I cried so much I thought I would die, because the doll was broken and my mother couldn’t buy another one for me.*’
- compound sentence nucleus: Lè i antwé la, sé chyen-an vini, yo tchébé’y anpami ti bwen zèbakouto, épi you ba’y kou, mé yo pitché’y èk koutla-a, yo pitché’y, yo pitché’y konmen kou, èk then yo viyé vin lakay.  
‘*When he entered there, the dogs came, they grabbed him among a little bit of razor grass, and they gave him blows, but they stabbed him with the cutlass, they stabbed him, they stabbed him so many times, and then they returned to come home.*’

sentence conjunction + adverbial clause + compound nucleus:	<p><u>Mé avan i alé wè pwèt-la, i ka antwé an tchwizin pwèt-la, èk i ka bwè soup pwèt-la, épi i ka manjé tout sa pwèt-la ni la.</u></p> <p><i>‘But before she went to see the priest, she is entering into the kitchen of the priest, and she is drinking the priest’s soup, and she is eating all the priest had there.’</i></p>
merged sentence nucleus:	<p><u>Mwen twaway wèd ka mélé san èk koupé ti lonyon.</u></p> <p><i>‘I worked hard mixing blood and cutting green onions.’</i></p>
both preposed and postposed adverbial clauses:	<p><u>Lé nou té kontanté mwen di’y, “Annou bò laplas...” pas skwè-a té fémé.</u></p> <p><i>‘When we were satisfied I told him, “Let’s go by the market...” because the square was closed.’</i></p>
embedded relative clauses:	<p><u>Well, listwa-a mwen kay di la-a sé about an jan gajé papa mwen dégajé tchèk tan ki pasé.</u></p> <p><i>‘Well, the story that I am going to tell is about a witch that my father rendered powerless some time ago.’</i></p>

An analysis of the precise nature of the different constructions that fill the nuclear and marginal slots of the sentence has yet to be worked out and is beyond the scope of this paper. And it may be possible to distinguish contrastive sentence types in French Creole, but that is also beyond the scope of the present paper (but see Frank 1990b). What this paper attempts to do is simply to give some indication of the general differences between St. Lucian French Creole clause level and sentence level constructions.

#### 4. Conclusions

When examined from the point of view of either form or function, clause and sentence are different. If every sentence could be characterized by the formula  $S \rightarrow NP VP$  then we might not be able to make that statement, even if the NP or the VP consisted of or contained embedded clauses. But the fact that sentences are often made up of clauses combined with a relationship other than embedding prevents us from collapsing the two levels into one. While a sentence might often consist of a single clause, a fair description of the sentence level must account for the sentence’s potential expansion, which often goes far beyond the constraints of NP + VP. A recognition of the difference between clause and sentence better equips us to deal with the complexity of sentence structure found in natural language data and connected discourse.

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