

PA2.2 – Variation and Multifunctionality in Cape Verdean Creole

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I. The form-meaning mismatch

- Cape Verdean Creole (CVC) is the oldest living creole:
superstrate substrates
Portuguese + Wolof, Temne, Mandinka
- This project investigates **1:0 form-meaning mismatches**.
- E.g. the verbal marker *ta* expresses habitual, progressive and irrealis, but for a certain group of speakers it conveys no clear semantic meaning.
N trabadja onti
1SG work yesterday
“I worked yesterday”
N ta trabadja onti
1SG TMA work yesterday
“I worked yesterday”
- Ta* exemplifies a broader typological pattern found in many creoles: morphosyntactic underspecification.
- Other markers that exhibit variation in their grammatical function are *kabesa* (reflexive) and *sata* (progressive).

Research questions:

- How do different speaker groups use the verbal marker *ta*, and what social meanings are indexed through its variation?
- What does the usage of *ta* reveal about language change and grammaticalisation for CVC?

II. Methodology and hypotheses

Methodology:

- Usage-based approach, field-based methods
- Data gathered through elicitation and spontaneous speech
- Speakers profiled by age, gender, rural/urban.

Hypotheses:

- ta* → structurally obligatory in certain VPs, even no clear aspectual or modal meaning.
- Patterns of vacuous usage are shaped by sociolinguistic factors, e.g. speaker’s age, gender, place.
- Ta* also functions as a social index, signalling style, identity, or group affiliation — not just grammatical meaning.

III. Expected results and discussion

Vacuous usage of *ta* signals 1:0 form–meaning mismatch

Factor	Predicted Pattern	Interpretation
Age	Younger speakers (~under 30) use <i>ta</i> vacuously more often	Innovation, grammatical reanalysis
Region	Urban speakers use <i>ta</i> more broadly, including vacuous contexts	Standardisation, Portuguese influence
Discourse	Spontaneous speech shows more vacuous <i>ta</i> than structured elicitation	Unmonitored, natural grammar

Discussion

ta is undergoing a process of semantic bleaching — where the original aspectual meaning is weakened or lost — while becoming structurally entrenched as part of the VP.



IV. Consequences and follow-up questions

- The core challenge is understanding why certain forms end up losing their semantic content or function.
- Social meaning can explain cases like the morphosyntactic variation in Cape Verdean Creole. However, there are cases where discourse-related structures seem to become syntacticised over time, leading to a complete loss of content.
- An interesting case is the purely syntactically motivated movement of the verb, which has sometimes been linked to the loss of certain discourse particles in many Indo-European languages.
- Focusing on one or possibly a group of Indo-European languages, Cohort 3 will investigate the interaction between particles, syntax, prosody, and information structure, with attention to the consequences of diachronic processes for meaning mapping onto form.