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Sak-relatives in Reunion Creole: examining the distinction between light-headed and free relatives

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Abstract: This article revisits the issue of light-headedness in relative clauses, arguing that the distinction between light-headed and free relative clauses is not clear-cut in Reunion Creole. Analysis of a heterogeneous set of first-hand data from Reunion Creole reveals that at least two distinct light-headed structures exist for the same surface form, one likely deriving from the other. I argue that a third structure, which is a true free relative clause and not a light-headed one, may be developing from two light-headed ones, meaning that demonstratives could be a source for free relative pronouns in this language. The article contributes, on the one hand, to our knowledge and understanding of an underrepresented language, and on the other hand, to our understanding of the typology of headless relative clauses. In examining the distinction between light-headed and free relatives in Reunion Creole, the article sheds light on a possible pathway of grammaticalisation, from light-headed relative to free relative, that has to date received little attention.

Keywords: Reunion Creole; syntax; free relative clauses; light-headed relative clauses; grammaticalisation; demonstratives

1 Introduction

A typical distinction is made in the literature between headed relative clauses and headless relative clauses.¹ The former are clauses that modify an antecedent, as in (1a), where *hat* is the antecedent, and the latter are clauses that replace a phrasal constituent, forming a referential phrase themselves, as in (1b). In English, headless relative clauses are formed with *wh*-pronouns, which is typical of these constructions cross-linguistically (e.g. Caponigro 2003; Keenan and Hull 1973; Posner 1985).

¹ The glossing abbreviations used in this article follow the Leipzig conventions, with the following additions: FC = free choice, FIN = finite, FR = free relative pronoun, PREP = preposition.

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(1) a. *I like the hat [that you bought].* Headed relative clause
 b. *I like [what you bought].* Headless relative clause

Within the category of headless relative clauses, some authors distinguish between light-headed relative clauses (LHRs) and free relatives (FRs) (e.g. Caponigro 2021; Lehmann 1984). Free relative clauses, like the English example (1b) have no nominal antecedent, while light-headed relatives (a term coined by Citko (1999, 2004)), like the Polish example (2), function similarly to FRs but are not truly free as they have a ‘light’ antecedent, which, rather than being lexical is a pronominal element or a determiner (e.g. Caponigro 2021; Citko 1999, 2004; de Vries 2002; Gutiérrez-Bravo 2012; Lehmann 1984; Smits 1989).

(2) *Jan czyta to, co Maria czyta.* Polish
 Jan reads this what Maria reads
 ‘Jan reads what Maria reads.’
 (Citko 2004: 97)

Caponigro (2021, 2023) distinguishes another type of headless relative: super-free relatives (see also ‘complementiser free relatives’, Sadler and Camilleri 2018). Super-free relatives do not contain a *wh*-pronoun, but rather, a complementiser or a non-*wh* relative pronoun (3). They are attested in Maltese, Arabic vernaculars (Sadler and Camilleri 2018: 126), the Mesoamerican languages and in Adyghe (Northwest Caucasian), but not in Romance or Germanic (Caponigro 2023: 767).

(3) *Għamil- t [li għid- t- l- i.]* Maltese
 do.PFV- 1SG COMP say.PFV- 2SG- DAT- 1SG
 ‘I did what you told me.’
 (Sadler and Camilleri 2018: 125)

Presenting first-hand data from Reunion Creole (RC), a French-based Creole spoken on Reunion Island, I argue that the primary type of headless relative found in the language was originally a light-headed one, but that the distinction between light-headed relatives (LHRs) and FRs is not clear-cut in the present-day language. I present evidence that at least two different structures exist involving the same surface form, two being distinct light-headed structures. I go further and argue that these structures appear to be grammaticalizing into a third structure, which appears to be truly free rather than light-headed.² In doing so, I explore the possibility of an understudied pathway of grammaticalisation from an LHR to a FR structure. I offer syntactic representations of the LHR and FR structures in Section 5.1, though the purpose of the article is not to argue for a certain syntactic analysis of the structures

² I also consider a super-free analysis of this third structure (cf. (3)) in Section 5.2.5, but ultimately favour the free relative analysis.

but, rather, to focus on (i) understanding the development of these structures in RC, and (ii) understanding the boundary between different types of headless relative and investigating the possibility of an understudied pathway of grammaticalisation, from LHR to FR.³

Contrary to crosslinguistic trends, in RC, the interrogative pronouns *kisa* ‘who’ and *kosa* ‘what’ are not the preferred pronouns for forming headless relatives - in fact, they occur infrequently in corpora and receive low acceptability ratings by native speakers (McLellan 2023a; forthcoming). Instead, the form *sak*, which has four phonological variants, *sék*, *sat*, *sét* and *sad*, and is not an interrogative pronoun, is preferred in headless relatives, illustrated in (4). I will call relative clauses formed with *sak* or a variant ‘*sak*-relatives’.⁴

(4) *Ti-Pierre té i agard trankiman sak té i⁵ espas.*
Ti-Pierre IPFV FIN watch peacefully sak IPFV FIN happen
'Little Pierre was peacefully watching what was happening.'

(Children's Story)

In this article, I investigate the structure of *sak*-relatives, arguing that they originate in a light-headed structure (*sa-k* ‘DEM-REL’), but that *sak* and its variants, at an earlier stage of RC, developed into demonstrative pronouns, found outside of a relative clause context. Demonstratives are good candidates for light heads, and I provide evidence that these new demonstrative pronouns do indeed also act as light heads, forming a second light-headed structure for *sak*-relatives (cf. (6)). I explore the possibility that a new free relative pronoun in *sak* and variants may be emerging from this once light-headed structure, arguing that RC’s *sak*-relatives are ambiguous between a LHR and a FR structure and exhibit clear signs of grammaticalisation. The three types of *sak*-relative are illustrated in Table 1.

The remainder of the article is organised as follows. In the next section, I briefly introduce the RC language and the data used for this study. In Section 3, I outline the criteria found in the literature for LHRs and in Section 4 I explore these criteria with respect to *sak*-relatives, arguing that the two distinct light-headed structures illustrated in (5) and (6) exist. In Section 5, I explore the possibility that the free relative structure in (7) is emerging via the grammaticalisation of the light-headed structures,

3 For a detailed syntactic analysis of LHRs and FRs within the Role and Reference Grammar framework, see McLellan (2023a).

4 Given that the structure of *sak*, and thus *sak*-relatives is ambiguous (cf. Table 1), I gloss *sak* and all variants as *sak* unless illustrating a particular structure.

5 The form *i*, found in example (4) and others, is a marker of finiteness, which immediately precedes most finite verbs.

Table 1: Three types of *sak*-relative.

LHRs	
Headed by <i>sak</i>	(5) <i>Sa ke mwin la vi yèr</i> DEM REL 1SG PRF see yesterday 'That which I saw yesterday'
Headed by <i>sak</i> or a variant	(6) <i>Sat/sak (ke) mwin la vi yèr</i> DEM REL 1SG PRF see yesterday 'That which I saw yesterday'
FR	(7) <i>Sak mwin la vi yèr</i> FR 1SG PRF see yesterday 'What I saw yesterday'

and I discuss the implications of these findings for our understanding of headless relatives before concluding in Section 6.

2 Reunion Creole

RC is a French-based Creole spoken on the Indian Ocean Island of Reunion. Following Zribi-Hertz (2022), French-based Creoles are understood to be languages that arose in French colonial territories as a result of language contact between regional, spoken varieties of French from the 16th-18th centuries and the various languages spoken by the enslaved populations in those contexts. RC was formed via the interaction of varieties of spoken French with Malagasy and, to a lesser extent, Bantu languages (Corne 1999: 73) and Tamil (Watbled 2020: 155). RC is spoken as a mother tongue, alongside French, by the majority of Reunion's population and by a diaspora in France, altogether totalling approximately 800,000 (Bollée and Maurer 2016). It is typical to find a high degree of variation in creole language-speaking contexts, but this is thought to be particularly high in Reunion due to its unique history and sociolinguistic situation (for details, see Bollée 2013; Chaudenson 1974; Corne 1982; Holm 2004; Mather 2001; Watbled 2020).

The data for this study comes from a corpus of written and oral materials compiled by the author (see Appendix A) and interviews with 40 native speakers of RC. The interviews, which involved acceptability judgements and translations, were conducted online via Zoom in 2021 and during a fieldwork trip to Reunion in 2022. The interview participants came from all over the lowlands of the island and were aged between 18 and 70.⁶

⁶ The centre of Reunion Island is mountainous, and the highlands are also inhabited. The study may therefore not be representative of varieties spoken in the highlands.

3 Light-headed relatives

LHRs are typically grouped with FRs as headless relatives (e.g. Caponigro 2021; Lehmann 1984; Smits 1989), although they are somewhere in between an FR and a headed relative because, like headed relatives, they have an antecedent, albeit a light one. The head is 'light' in the sense that, rather than being a lexical noun, it is a grammatical element, such as a demonstrative (8a) or an article (8b) (Caponigro 2021: 16).

Citko (2004) and Caponigro (2021) argue that the interpretation of LHRs distinguishes them from FRs, the interpretation of the former being reliant on that of the light antecedent while FRs, according to Caponigro (2021: 18), always receive a definite-like interpretation, illustrated by the paraphrase of the FR in (9a) with the definite description in (9b).

(9) a. *I bought what is on the table.*
b. *I bought the things that are on the table*
(Caponigro 2021: 7)

Caponigro (2021) notes two exceptions, where FRs are not equivalent to a definite description: if the FR is accompanied by a free choice marker such as *-ever* (10) or is the complement of an existential predicate (11).

(10) *Pablo (simply) voted for whoever was at the top of the ballot.*
(Caponigro 2021: 13)

(11) *C'è chi dice sempre sì.* Italian
there's who say.IND.PRS.3SG always yes
'There are people who say yes all the time'
(Caponigro 2021: 10)

The free choice marker that has received the most attention in the literature is English *-ever* (see Dayal 1997; Jacobson 1995; Tredinnick 1993; von Fintel 2000 among others). Caponigro (2021) describes free choice FRs as ones that are obligatorily accompanied by a free choice marker, which triggers inferences of indifference and/or ignorance (see Šimák 2018 for more on the ignorance and indifference inferences).

For example, on hearing example (10), it is inferred that Pablo did not know and/or care who was at the top of the ballot.

Note that *-ever* has also been associated with a universal reading (see Šimík 2020; van Riemsdijk 2017); for example, the FR in (12a) is equivalent in meaning to the universal description in (12b).

- (12) a. *Whatever Adam presented sounded plausible.*
- b. *Everything Adam presented sounded plausible.*

(Šimík 2020: 9)

Free choice marking is relevant to the distinction between LHRs and FRs: according to Caponigro (2021: 16), LHRs are incompatible with a free choice marker, demonstrated for English in (13b).

- (13) a. *I chose that which is on the table.*
- b. **I chose that whichever is on the table.*

From this reported incompatibility, it follows that LHRs differ from FRs not only in their interpretation, but also their syntactic distribution. According to Izvorski (2000: 235), LHRs (externally-headed relatives in her terms) are not permitted as free adjuncts, while FRs are. Free adjunct FRs (14) are sentence-level adverbials, and semantically, they consistently bear a concessive relation to the main clause (Izvorski 2000; van Riemsdijk 2017). Free adjunct FRs have also been described as a type of unconditional, following Rawlins (2013) (see also Hirsch 2016; Šimík 2018).

- (14) *Whatever John cooks, he will win the cooking contest.* (Izvorski 2000: 232)

Free adjunct FRs reportedly require the presence of a free choice marker like *-ever* (Izvorski 2000), illustrated in (15).

- (15) **What John cooks, he will win the cooking contest.*

The report that LHRs are not permitted as free adjuncts may therefore be related to reports that LHRs are incompatible with a free choice marker. In Section 5.2, I point out that *sak*-relatives are compatible with free choice markers and can be found as free adjuncts, providing evidence for an FR structure alongside the LHR one.

Another criterion distinguishing LHRs from FRs is their behaviour with respect to the ‘matching effects’: FRs exhibit such effects while LHRs do not (Citko 2004; de Vries 2002: 44). To illustrate, consider the English FR examples adapted from Smits (1989) in (16).

- (16) a. *Jane loves whom you despise.*
- b. **Jane loves to whom you were talking.*

(adapted from Smits 1989: 138)

Given that the free relative pronoun has a syntactic relation to the relative clause predicate, and the FR containing the free relative pronoun has a syntactic relation to the matrix clause predicate, the syntactic category of both must match. Example (16a) is grammatical because the two predicates take NP complements; however, (16b) is ungrammatical because *talk* takes a PP complement but *love* requires an NP complement, resulting in a mismatch.⁷ The matching effects are not observed in LHRs because the light head satisfies the selectional requirements of the matrix predicate while the relative pronoun satisfies that of the relative clause predicate, as illustrated in (17).

(17) *I will notify those [to whom this request does not apply].*

In languages with case systems, the free relative pronoun must also satisfy the case requirements of the matrix and the relative clause verbs, but again, this matching effect is not observed with LHRs. The case matching effect is not universal because not all languages have morphological case marking, and RC is one such language.⁸

The criteria described in this section show that, when defining LHRs as a distinct category of relative clause in a given language, LHRs are often described in terms of their differences from both FRs and headed relatives. Descriptions of the distinctions, or diagnostics, can thus be language specific. The issue faced when analysing the RC data is that there is not such an appropriate FR model of comparison because, as noted in Section 1, the interrogative pronouns *kisa* ‘who’ and *kosa* ‘what’ are not typically found in FRs (see McLellan 2023a). This poses a challenge for determining whether the form *sak* (and its variants) have become new free relative pronouns, or whether *sak*-relatives remain light-headed. Although Caponigro (2021) classifies LHRs as a subtype of headless relative clause, this author has a strict definition for FRs, stating that they obligatorily involve a *wh*-word.⁹ In Section 5.2, with new data from RC, I question this assumption that a non-*wh*-word cannot have the same syntactic structure, assume the same function and receive the same interpretations as a *wh*-word in an FR.¹⁰ In Section 5.2.6, I also offer arguments for favouring an analysis of *sak* as a free relative pronoun over a complementiser, which would instead lead to a super-free relative analysis (cf. example (3)).

7 English has an alternative formulation where the preposition is stranded (*Jane loves who you were talking to*), allowing the syntactic category requirements of each predicate to be satisfied (van Riemsdijk 2017: 1677).

8 See de Vries (2002: 44) for illustration of the case matching effect in German.

9 Those involving a non-*wh* relative or a complementizer are classified as super-free relatives (cf. Section 1).

10 As pointed out by a reviewer, non-*wh* free relatives have also been found in varieties of German (see Fuß and Grewendorf 2014; Hanink 2018).

4 LHRs in Reunion Creole

The most common way to form a headless relative in RC is not with an interrogative pronoun but with *sak* or its phonological variants *sat*, *sét*, *sék* and *sad*, which are illustrated below.

(18) a. *Sak nou la bozwin pou viv lé tro sher: (...)*
 sak 1PL have need to live cop too expensive
 ‘What we need in order to live is too expensive: (...)’
 (Newspaper)

 b. *(...) nou poura fé sat nou vé, (...)*
 1PL able.FUT do sak 1PL want
 ‘(...) we will be able to do what we want, (...)’
 (Newspaper)

 c. *Mi rozèt pa sét mon kamarad i di.*
 1SG=FIN reject PL NEG sak POSS.1SG friend FIN say
 ‘I do not reject what my compatriot says.’
 (Interview)

 d. *(...) apré sék bann gramoun-la i di.*
 according.to sak PL old.person-DEM FIN say
 ‘(...) according to what those elderly people say.’
 (Baude 2010)

 e. *Tikok i mazine osi sad Tikarl la di ali lot-kou.*
 little-cockerel FIN imagine also sak Little-Carl PRF say 3SG other-time
 ‘Little-Cockerel is also thinking about what Little-Carl said the other time.’
 (Zistoir *Tikok*, C Fontaine, cited by Quartier and Gauvin 2022: 238; glosses and translations mine)

Sak and variants are not specified for gender, number or animacy: they can refer to inanimates (illustrated above in [18]) and animates (illustrated below in [19]), and to single or plural entities.¹¹

(19) a. *Sak la pa voulu alé i fezé monté leskalyé.*
 sak PRF NEG want go FIN make.IPFV climb stair
 ‘Those who/whoever didn’t want to go, they made them go up the stairs.’
 (Baude 2010)

¹¹ A reviewer points out that these properties shed doubt on *sak* and variants being pronouns at all, and suggests that they may instead be relative complementisers, following Sadler and Camilleri’s (2018) analysis of what they call ‘complementiser free relatives’ in Maltese (see also ‘super free relatives’, Caponigro (2021)). This proposal will be considered further in Section 5.2.6.

b. (...) *sat i di sa li lé manter.*
 sak FIN say DEM 3SG COP liar
 '(...), whoever/he who says that is a liar.'
 (Newspaper)

c. *Zot i pé invit sék/sét zot i vé.*
 3PL FIN can invite sak 3PL FIN want
 'They can invite who they want.'
 (Constructed; accepted in interviews)

d. *Sad la parti lager la pwin la sas.*
 sak PRF leave war have NEG DEF luck
 'Those who went to war are not lucky.'
 (Papen 1978: 328; glosses mine)

On the basis of my synchronic data, in this section, I argue that two distinct light-headed structures exist for *sak*-relatives, beginning with the light-headed structure from which *sak*-relatives likely originated.

4.1 *Sa*-headed light-headed relative

To ascertain whether *sak*-relatives derive from a light-headed structure, it is first useful to introduce RC's headed relative clauses. In RC, relative clauses are externally-headed, postnominal and optionally marked with an invariant relative marker, *k(e)*.¹²

(20) *Nou la retrouv de mo [ke minm mon granpèr i utiliz pu.]*
 1PL PRF find INDF word REL even POSS.1SG grandpa FIN use NEG
 'We found words that even my grandpa doesn't use anymore.'
 (YouTube sketch)

A distinguishing feature of headed relatives in RC is that they favour zero-marking, illustrated in (21). This preference for zero-marking is strongest in subject relative clauses (McLellan 2019, 2023a, 2023b).

(21) (...) *mi rogard bann marmay [Ø i oz pa tro kozé, (...)]*
 1SG=FIN watch PL children REL FIN dare NEG too.much speak
 '(...) I watch the children who aren't really daring to speak (...)'
 (Documentary)

12 RC does not have an official orthography; the relative marker may be spelt *k* or *ke*.

Returning to *sak*-relatives, Chaudenson (1974: 365) and Corne (1995: 61), in their own terms, suggested that *sak*-relatives are (or were) light-headed, segmenting *sak* into two words and referring to *sa* as the antecedent of a relative clause:

(22) a. *sa k lé vni a sin-zozéf*
DEM REL be come to Saint-Joseph
‘those who came to Saint-Joseph’
(Chaudenson 1974: 265; glosses and translation mine)

b. *sa ke moi mi vé manzé*
DEM REL 1SG 1SG=FIN want eat
‘what I want to eat’
Lit. ‘that which I want to eat’
(Barat, Carayol and Vogel 1977: 13, cited by Corne 1995: 61; glosses mine)

The relativiser *k(e)* is the same marker found in headed relatives in RC (cf. [20]), and *sa* is a demonstrative pronoun, likely deriving from French demonstrative *ça*. Outside the relative clause context, *sa* occurs as an independent pronoun, exemplified in (23).

(23) *Mi koné pa kisa la di sa, (...)*
1SG=FIN know NEG who PRF say DEM
‘I do not know who said that, (...)
(Newspaper)

Unlike French *ça*, RC *sa* can have human antecedents, illustrated by (24a-b), which also show that *sa* can refer to singular or plural entities.

(24) a. *Sa lé bét, sa!*
3 COP silly 3
‘He’s silly, that one!’
(Watbled 2021a: 82; glosses and translation mine)

b. *Alor lé zanfan i sava lékol. Sa i kozé vréman fransé*
so DEF.PL child FIN go school DEM FIN talk really French
sé ti garson la.
DEM little children DEM
‘So the children go to school. They really spoke French, those little boys.’
(Baude 2010)

Assuming that *sak*-relatives do derive from the LHR structure described, the first question to ask is whether or not this structure still exists in modern-day RC. If *sak*-relatives are light-headed, they do not behave like RC’s headed relatives with respect to relative marking. Chaudenson (1974) and Corne (1995) noted that the antecedent *sa* must be followed by the relativiser *k(e)*, and my data, collected several decades later,

Table 2: Relative marking in headed relative clauses (with a lexical antecedent).

Grammatical function in relative clause	Marked		Total
	Count	Proportion	
Subject	44	19 %	232
Object	39	34 %	114
Total	83	24 %	346

Table 3: Relative marking in relative clauses with *sa* as proposed antecedent.

Grammatical function in relative clause	Marked		Total
	Count	Proportion	
Subject	32	97 %	33
Object	48	96 %	50
Total	80	96.4 %	83

suggest that this remains the case.¹³ Tables 2 and 3 illustrate, respectively, the patterns of relative marking found in headed relative clauses (with a lexical antecedent) in my corpus data and that found in *sak*-relatives (under the assumption that *sak*-relatives are light-headed with *sa* as an antecedent). In Table 3, the number of examples where *sa* is found alone in a relative clause (not followed by *k/t/d*) is compared with that where *sa* is followed by *k*. I did not count examples where *sa* is followed by *t* or *d* because these are not relative markers in RC.

The figures in Table 3 indicate that relative *k* is virtually obligatory with *sa*, occurring in 96.4 % of examples compared with only 24 % in regular headed relatives. Given the high frequency, or virtual obligatoriness, of *k* following *sa*, in Section 5.1 I will consider the proposal that *sa + k* has been reanalysed as one word, which, in relative clause contexts, functions as a new free relative pronoun. The first clue in support of the proposal is the very occurrence of the phonological variants *sat*, *sét* and *sad*. Note that these non-*k* forms are by no means rare: there were 167 examples in my corpus, making them more frequent than *k*-forms (of which there were 80). The existence of these *t*- and *d*-forms suggests that the combination of *sa* and *k* was reanalysed as one word, *sak*, which subsequently underwent phonological change. If we consider the number of examples where *sa* is found in a zero-marked relative as compared with any of the five variants of *sak*, including the *t*- and *d*-forms, *sa* is even rarer in the headless relative clause context, occurring in 3/250 (1.2 %) examples.

¹³ The descriptive works and texts used in Corne's study date from 1883 to 1985, and Chaudenson's data was collected up until the early 1970s.

Despite observations that *sak* may have been reanalysed as a single unit by most speakers, there do remain some remnants of the light-headed structure, as indicated by the figures in Table 3: there were three examples where *sa* was found alone in a relative clause, offering some evidence that an LHR exists with *sa* as light head. One such is example is given in (25).

(25) *Toutsat nou fé lé kalké su sa zot la désid po zot.*
 Everything 1PL do COP calculated on DEM 3PL PRF decide for 3PL
 'Everything we do is planned around what they have decided for
 themselves.'
 (Newspaper)

This evidence indicates that *sa* can behave as the light head of a zero-marked relative clause, following the pattern found in RC's headed relative clauses.¹⁴ In the next section, I reveal a second LHR structure for *sak*-relatives.

4.2 *Sak*-headed light-headed relative

Relevant to our investigation of the structure of *sak*-relatives is the observation that the same five forms are found outside of a relative clause context as demonstrative pronouns in RC. These demonstrative pronouns often occur as the head of a possessed phrase, illustrated by (26a-c).

(26) a. *Sad out marèn lé pa parèy.*
 DEM POSS godmother COP NEG same
 'Your godmother's is not the same.'
 (Watbled 2021a: 82; glosses and translation mine)

b. *M'i ramaz sak lézot akoté.*
 1SG-FIN collect DEM others beside
 'I collect those of the others beside me'
 (Albers 2019: 416; glosses and translation mine)

c. *Pran loto-la, sat papa lé kasé.*
 take car-DEM DEM dad COP broken
 'Take that car, Dad's is broken.'
 (Armand 2014: X; glosses and translation mine)

¹⁴ An alternative possibility is that the occurrence of *sa* alone in free relatives is a new innovation, where *sa* is a new free relative pronoun. A reviewer points out that this is less likely without independent evidence, but could perhaps be a phonological variant of *sak/sat/sad* via simplification by deletion.

These demonstrative pronouns cannot occur independently: they must either be followed by their possessor NP as in the examples above in (26) or by adverbial *la* as in the examples below in (27).

(27) a. *Trap sak-la.*
 catch DEM
 ‘Catch that one.’
 (Albers 2019: 267; glosses and translation mine)

b. *bèf lombraj, sad-la !*
 beef shade DEM
 ‘It’s a shade ox, that one!’
 (Cellier 1985: 336)

The presence of *sak*, *sat*, *sét*, *sék* and *sad* as demonstrative pronouns with no following relative clause indicates that these forms exist in RC as units where *k*, *t* and *d* cannot be analysed as relative markers. It is likely that *sad* was the original form in this context, deriving from French *ça de* ‘that of’. However, in present-day RC the other four variants are interchangeable with *sad* in this context: they are all attested in corpora and/or the literature (e.g., Albers 2019; Quartier and Gauvin 2022; Watbled 2021a) and received equally positive acceptability judgements in interviews.

Bearing in mind the distribution of *sak* and variants, the next question to ask is whether the five forms that occur in this non-relative context are the same as those that occur in a headless relative context. In other words, given that demonstratives are good candidates for light heads (cf. Section 3), are the forms *sak*, *sat*, *sét*, *sék* and *sad* that occur in headless relatives actually demonstrative heads of an LHR structure, which has developed as a distinct structure from the original LHR headed by *sa?*

Evidence that *sak* and variants can indeed be demonstrative heads of an LHR was found in interviews. Speakers were asked for acceptability judgements of examples like (28), in which *sat/sak* is followed by a relativiser *ke*.¹⁵ Note that no such examples were found in the corpus.

(28) *Sat/sak ke mwin la vi yèr lété sher.*
 sak REL 1SG PRF see yesterday be.IPFV expensive
 ‘The one I saw yesterday was expensive.’

The judgements of (28) and similar examples were varied but a non-negligible number (9/14 participants asked) accepted an example with *sat ke*.¹⁶ Those speakers

15 For reasons of time, I only tested the variants *sak* and *sat*. These variants were selected as they were the most common variants in corpora.

16 The alternative examples were only marginally different: they were still examples in which the LHR functioned as a subject of the matrix clause predicate and the demonstrative head in the LHR functioned as an object of the relative clause predicate.

judged the same sentences with *sak ke* as considerably worse, noting that *k* is redundant because it already occurs in *sak*, which itself lends support for the argument that *sak* has been reanalysed as one word (see Section 5.1). Although there was a discrepancy between the judgements of *sak* and *sat* in examples like (28), example (29), produced by an interview participant, offers further evidence that *sak* can also be a light head. The participant found *sak* and *sat* to be interchangeable in this example.

(29) *Lo fly, sat/sak pou ki ou ékri in shanson, lé zèn.*
 DEF girl sak for who 2SG write INDF song COP young
 'The girl, the one for whom you are writing a song, is young.'

In (29), *sak/sat* is the head of an LHR in which the relative pronoun *ki*, whose antecedent is *sak/sat*, functions as the complement of a preposition. The presence of *ki* indicates that *sat/sak* does not function as a free relative pronoun in this sentence and that the *k/t* of *sak/sat* is not a complementiser, but rather, that *sat/sak* is a demonstrative pronoun, which is co-referent with the preceding NP *lo fly*.

To return to the question of whether the *sak* found in *sak*-relatives is the same functional element - a demonstrative pronoun - as that found outside of relative clauses, an implication of the evidence presented in this section is that we could, in theory, propose that all *sak*-relatives are LHRs with *sak* and variants as their head, but that usually they occur with zero relative marking, as represented in (30).

(30) *Sat/sak [Ø mwin la vi yèr] lété sher.*
 sak REL 1SG PRF see yesterday be.IPFV expensive
 'The one I saw yesterday was expensive.'

For the speakers who did not accept such sentences with an overt relativiser (*ke*) (cf. (28)), their judgements may be related to the language's preference for zero-marking in headed relatives (cf. Section 4.1). In other words, even if *sak*-relatives are light-headed with *sat* and variants as the light head, they may be consistently zero-marked.

To summarise, I have presented evidence to indicate that there are two LHR structures for *sak*-relatives: one headed by demonstrative *sa*, and one headed by a newer demonstrative, *sak* and variants. In the next section, I consider the evidence that these two LHR structures may be giving rise to a third structure for *sak*-relatives, which is not light-headed.

5 Grammaticalisation of *sak* into a free relative pronoun?

In Section 4.1 I introduced the proposal that speakers may have reanalysed the sequence *sa-k* 'DEM-REL' as *sak*, where *sak* is a single unit, and that this has subsequently led to the emergence of the phonological variants *sat*, *sét* and *sad*. In this

section, I expand upon this proposal and offer evidence that *sak* and variants are grammaticalizing into a new item, which I argue could be a new free relative pronoun.¹⁷ The pathway of grammaticalisation from demonstrative to relative pronoun and complementiser is well-known (cf. Diessel and Breunesse 2020), but research to date has focused on the development of relative pronouns found in headed relatives rather than those found in FRs. I thus aim to shed light on a lesser-studied pathway of grammaticalisation which we may be observing in RC, from LHR to FR. It is important to point out that the arguments made are based on a synchronic analysis of RC corpus and interview data, not a diachronic corpus. The synchronic data is useful for studying this language change for two key reasons: (i) the diachronic change can be reconstructed from the synchronic forms, and (ii) the synchronic data suggests that the change is still ongoing, and thus offers a snapshot of what that looks like, helping us to better understand the boundary between different types of headless relative clause. In the next section, I explain the syntactic reanalysis that occurred in *sak*-relatives, using the Role and Reference Grammar framework. In Section 5.2, I present the evidence that *sak*-relatives are grammaticalizing into free relative pronouns, but also consider an alternative analysis of *sak* as a complementiser in Section 5.2.6. Ultimately favouring the free relative pronoun analysis, the implication of this is that demonstratives could be a source for free relative pronouns in RC. While this change is not well-documented in the literature, in Section 5.3, I explain why it should not be so surprising, building upon Diessel (2003) to highlight the commonalities between demonstratives and interrogatives, which are the most common source of free relative pronouns.

5.1 Reanalysis in *sak*-relatives

Reanalysis is understood as “change in the structure of an expression or class of expressions that does not involve any immediate or intrinsic modifications of its surface manifestation” (Langacker 1977: 58). As pointed out by Detges et al. (2021: 3), Langacker’s definition implies that the form of the expression is open to two alternative structural interpretations. I argue here that *sak*-relatives are open to not only two but three structural interpretations (cf. Table 1).

Although orthography is not a reliable indication of syntactic structure, particularly in a language with no standard orthography as is the case for RC, it does give an indication of how native speakers analyse a sequence and is thus useful for understanding reanalysis. Of the 52 written instantiations of *sak* or *sék* in my corpus, all but

¹⁷ In Section 5.2, I consider an alternative analysis of *sak* as a complementizer, as suggested by a reviewer, but ultimately favour the free relative pronoun analysis.

one was written as one word. The orthographic choices of native speakers thus support the argument that the sequence *sa + k* was reanalysed as one word. This reanalysis implies a syntactic re-bracketing from the structure in (31a) to that in (31b), involving a ‘boundary shift’ in Langacker’s (1977) terms. Crucially, there is a structural ambiguity in the surface form allowing the reanalysis to take place.¹⁸

(31) a. [Sa [k mwin la vi yèr]]
DEM REL 1SG PRF see yesterday
‘That which I saw yesterday’

b. [Sak mwin la vi yèr]
FR 1SG PRF see yesterday
‘That which I saw yesterday’

The change in syntactic structure can be explained using the Role and Reference Grammar (RRG; Bentley et al. 2023; Van Valin 2005, 2008a; Van Valin and LaPolla 1997 and others) notion of the Reference Phrase (RP). RPs are referring expressions which serve as an argument of a verb or ad-position and are typically described as NPs or DPs in other frameworks.¹⁹ RRG does not assume a universal set of lexical categories, nor that a syntactic category is a projection of its head. A predicate can be of any lexical category, and a similar approach is taken for RPs. RPs have a parallel structure to a clause, which themselves have three layers: the nucleus, which contains the predicate; the core, containing the predicate and its arguments, and the clause, which contains the predicate, arguments and non-arguments. Non-arguments are found in what is termed the periphery, which can modify any of the three layers of the clause. Like the clause, RPs have a layered structure, with a nucleus that can be of any category, though it is often a noun. In RRG, a headed restrictive relative clause together with its antecedent is analysed as a complex RP, where the antecedent occupies the nucleus of the RP and the relative clause is a modifier found in the periphery of the nucleus of the RP (McLellan 2023a; París 2023; Pavey 2004; Van Valin 2005, 2012; Van Valin and LaPolla 1997). In McLellan (2023a), a parallel structure is proposed for RC’s LHRs, with the light antecedent occupying the nucleus of the complex RP. This structure is illustrated in Figure 1 using example (31a).²⁰ Relative *k* in Figure 1 is a relativiser, which is represented as

¹⁸ Note that on an alternative view, ambiguity is not a prerequisite for reanalysis, but rather a result of reanalysis (e.g. Detges and Waltereit 2002, De Smet 2009).

¹⁹ Van Valin (2008b: 170) acknowledges that not all argument expressions are referential; for example, the dummy pronoun in sentences such as “*It is raining*” is not referential. He thus proposes that RPs be considered “potentially referential expressions”, whose default referential interpretation can be blocked, as determined by constructional factors.

²⁰ In Figure 1, the perfective marker *la* is not linked to a position in the constituent projection because it is an operator rather than a referring or predicating element. Operators are functional

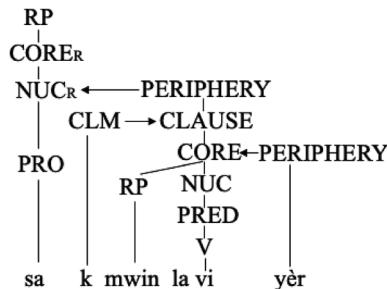


Figure 1: Syntactic representation of LHRs in RC.

a Clause Linkage Marker (CLM) in RRG - an element that links units in complex constructions.

Reanalysis of the LHR structure (cf. Figure 1) into an FR results in a structure that differs in a few key respects. Rather than being a complex RP containing nuclear modification, an FR is an RP which itself contains a clause, illustrated for (31b) in Figure 2.

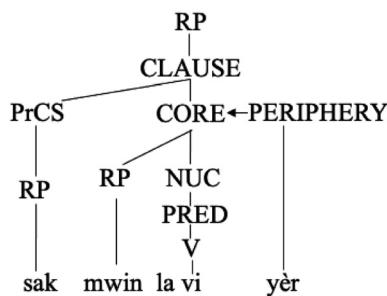


Figure 2: Syntactic representation of true FRs in RC.

In Figure 2, *sak* is analysed as a free relative pronoun, found in the pre-core slot, a position in the structure of the clause that is motivated by word order and information structure considerations. The pre-core slot is reserved for fronted, focal elements and *wh*-words in languages like English, in which they occur at the beginning of the clause, not in-situ. Although *sak* is not a *wh*-pronoun, I place it in the pre-core slot because it is found at the front of the clause irrespective of its relation to

categories and are represented in their own projection, which is omitted here as it is not relevant for our purposes.

the predicate. If instead *sak* was analysed as a complementiser, under a super-free relative analysis, then *sak* would be represented as a CLM and the structure would lack a pre-core slot. This would pose a challenge for the linking between syntax and semantics (for details of this linking in RRG, see Van Valin 2023) because, while *see* links to *sak* in the pre-core slot in Figure 2, if *sak* was represented as a CLM, *see* would have a missing argument. I discuss the issue further in Section 5.2.6.

In Section 4.2, I offered evidence that an LHR exists with the demonstrative pronoun *sak* as its head, the key evidence being that *sak*-relatives can be marked with an overt relative marker for some speakers, even if they are usually zero-marked. This evidence points to there being a second LHR structure for *sak*-relatives, illustrated in (32a), which presents another opportunity for reanalysis of an LHR structure to an FR structure (32b) to occur, with the same result as that described above:

(32) a. [Sak [Ø mwin la vi yèr]]
DEM REL 1SG PRF see yesterday
'That which I saw yesterday'
b. [Sak mwin la vi yèr]
FR 1SG PRF see yesterday
'That which I saw yesterday'

Also an LHR, example (32a) has the same syntactic template as example (31a) (cf. Figure 1), but instead of *sa*, the demonstrative head *sak* occupies the nucleus position and the structure often lacks a CLM position as the complementiser is usually absent. The three structures - two LHRs and one FR - are illustrated in Figure 3.

The consistency of the relative marking patterns of both LHR structures means there is consistently an ambiguity between the LHR structures and the FR structure, making reanalysis into the true FR structure possible. LHRs headed by *sa* are virtually obligatorily marked with *k* (cf. Table 3), and LHRs headed by *sak* virtually always occur with zero-marking - recall that, although some speakers accepted the

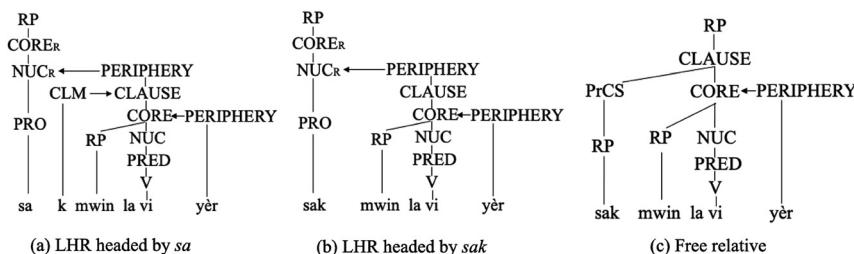


Figure 3: Three syntactic structures for *sak*-relatives.

structure in (31a) with an overt complementiser (cf. [(28)]) other speakers rejected it, and such a structure did not occur at all in corpora nor has it, to my knowledge, been reported in the literature.

Another factor that may be relevant in the reanalysis is that the original LHR structures and the resulting FR structure are all RPs. The fact that phrases are not necessarily endocentric in RRG means that the RP can be of any lexical category. The syntactic reanalysis from LHR to FR results in a less complex, more cohesive RP because there is no nuclear modification in the resulting structure, and reanalysis often results in simplification of syntactic structures, an example of which would be boundary reduction (Langacker 1977: 103), which is what I argue has happened in the case of *sak*.

There has been much debate about the relationship between reanalysis and grammaticalisation (see Detges et al. 2021: 36–37), but many authors conceive of reanalysis as a mechanism that is required for grammaticalisation to occur, though the reverse is not true: reanalysis can occur without grammaticalisation (Hopper and Traugott 2003: 39–63). Given that reanalysis is typically conceived of as a change that is not overtly manifested in the form of what is being reanalysed (Detges et al. 2021), the development of the variants *sat*, *sét* and *sad* presupposes the reanalysis of *sak* as a single unit, and, as will be explored in the following sections, supports the suggestion that these variant forms have subsequently grammaticalised as free relative pronouns. Note that all instances of a *t*- or *d*-form were written as one word in the corpus, and interview participants commented that *sak* was one word, interchangeable with *sat*, *sét*, *sék* and *sad*, corroborating the view that *sa + k* was reanalysed as a single unit that subsequently underwent phonological change. This phonological change is seen as one of the several signs of grammaticalisation of *sak*-relatives, discussed in the next section.

5.2 Arguments for the grammaticalisation of *sak* as a free relative pronoun

Grammaticalisation is understood as “the development from lexical to grammatical forms and once the grammatical form has evolved, the development of further grammatical forms” (Narrog and Heine 2021: 1). As observed in this definition, grammaticalisation can involve the development of grammatical items from lexical items but also from already grammatical ones. Here I consider the proposal that *sak* and variants are grammaticalising into free relative pronouns from a demonstrative, which is typically considered to be an already grammatical item. Demonstratives are a well-known source for grammaticalisation into various other functional items, including definite determiners, copulas, complementisers and relative pronouns (Bollée 2004; De Mulder and Carlier 2011; Diessel 1999a, 1999b, 2006, 2013; Diessel and

Breunesse 2020; Diessel and Coventry 2020; Himmelmann 1997; Lehmann 2015[1982] among others); however, one that has received less attention is the grammaticalisation of free relative pronouns.

It is often noted that free relative pronouns are identical to interrogative pronouns, but it is less clear whether this is because free relative pronouns typically derive from interrogative pronouns or rather whether there is something inherently similar about the functions of these two types of pronouns that makes many languages not distinguish between them; I return to this point in Section 5.3. In RC, interrogative pronouns encoding the ontological categories of person or thing – *kisa* ‘who’ and *kosa* ‘what’ – are only marginally accepted in a headless relative context. Instead, *sak* and variants are preferred, indicating that RC’s headless relative system does not reflect crosslinguistic trends and, as I will argue, demonstratives may instead be the source of RC’s FR pronouns. The origins of the demonstrative itself have not been clearly traced back to a lexical source (Diessel 1999a), which Diessel (1999a, 2006, 2013) takes as evidence for the argument that deictic demonstratives are a basic element of human communication and constitute a class of their own, distinct from lexical and grammatical classes. Diessel argues that the development of new grammatical items comes from either lexical items or deictic demonstratives. Whatever its own origins, the RC demonstrative *sa* is the source of both the demonstrative *sak* and variants (cf. Section 4.2) and, as I propose here, a new free relative pronoun, so we are not dealing with the emergence of a new grammatical item from a lexical item.

Diessel (1999a: 118) proposes the following criteria to assess the grammaticalisation of demonstratives.

(33) Diessel’s (1999a) criteria for the grammaticalisation of demonstratives

Functional changes

1. Grammatical items that have developed from demonstratives are no longer used to focus the hearer’s attention on entities in the outside world.
2. They are deictically non-contrastive.

Syntactic changes

3. Their occurrence is often restricted to a particular syntactic context.
4. They are often obligatory to form a certain grammatical construction.

Morphological changes

5. They are usually restricted to the distal or, less frequently, the proximal form.
6. They may have lost their ability to inflect.

Phonological changes

7. They may have undergone a process of phonological reduction.
8. They may have coalesced with other free forms.

In what follows, I explore RC's *sak*-relatives with respect to Diessel's criteria above, arguing that they meet the majority of these criteria as well as exhibiting more general principles of grammaticalisation.

5.2.1 Functional changes

The core function associated with demonstratives is “to focus the hearer's attention on objects or locations in the speech situation” (Diessel 1999a: 2). That core function is what Diessel (1999a) describes as the exophoric use of demonstratives, which he distinguishes from three other pragmatic functions of demonstratives, described as endophoric: anaphoric, discourse deictic and recognitional. Endophoric demonstratives do not refer to entities within the speech situation: anaphoric and discourse deictic demonstratives refer to NPs and propositions, respectively, within the discourse, while recognitional demonstratives have a referent whose identity is recovered via shared knowledge (see also Himmelmann (1996) for a similar categorisation). Examples of demonstratives in each function are given in (34).²¹

- (34) a. Exophoric
Look at this!
- b. Anaphoric
I saw a woman on the street yesterday. This woman came up to me...
- c. Discourse deictic
My friend got made redundant yesterday. That really shocked me.
- d. Recognitional
Those people we met the other day are opening a restaurant.

In the corpus, there are headless relatives in which *sak* and variants are anaphoric, clearly exhibiting a pragmatic function of demonstratives but not the core, exophoric function:

- (35) *Navé dot té i koz pa dutou-dutou kréol, kisoi sak*
 have.IPFV other IPFV FIN speak NEG at.all-at.all creole that.it.be sak
 zot paran lavé pa transmèt azot la lang, (...)
 POSS.3PL parent NNEG NEG pass.on 3PL DET language
 ‘There were others who didn't speak Creole at all, be that those whose
 parents had not passed on the language, (...’)
 (Magazine – *Kriké* 5)

21 While some of the English demonstratives in the examples in (33) are determiners rather than pronouns, note that in their demonstrative function, *sak* and variants only occur as pronouns, not determiners. Demonstrative *sa*, on the other hand, can occur as a determiner, but is usually, or even obligatorily accompanied by post-nominal *-la*, e.g. *sa ti komik-la* 'that little comedian' (Albers 2019: 74).

Recognitional demonstratives (cf. (34d)) can occur as the head of a relative clause (36), a function in which they have been called 'determinatives' (Diessel 1999a: 135; Himmelmann 1997: 77–80; Quirk et al. 1972: 217).

(36) *Those who backed a similar plan last year hailed the message.*
(Himmelmann 1997: 77)

In examples like (36), Himmelmann (1997) argues that the head of the LHR is semantically empty and serves as an anchor for the following relative clause. There are plenty of examples of *sak*-relatives of this type in the corpus, where *sak* serves as an anchor for an LHR:

(37) *Zot i protèz pa sat lé atèr.*
3PL FIN protect NEG sak COP on.ground
'They do not protect those who are on the ground.'
(Newspaper)

Himmelmann (1997) and Diessel (1999a: 108, 1999b) consider the presence of determinative demonstratives to be an early sign of their grammaticalisation, which offers support for the argument that *sak* and variants are grammaticalising. Diessel (1999a: 119) in fact argues that all endophoric demonstratives are, to varying extents, already grammaticalised and that the boundary between endophoric demonstratives and new grammatical items is not clearcut. Under this view, even English LHRs such as that in (36) would be considered to some extent grammaticalised. However, as will be explored in the subsequent sections, RC's *sak*-relatives seem to be further grammaticalised, exhibiting not only functional signs but syntactic, morphological and phonological signs of grammaticalisation. The fuzzy functional boundary between demonstratives and grammatical items is thus one contributing factor among others making the distinction between LHRs and FRs in RC not clearcut.

The range of interpretations available for *sak*-relatives suggests that *sak* has taken on meanings associated with *wh*-pronouns and not demonstratives. In interviews, *sak*-relatives were found to readily receive a free choice reading, without necessarily including an additional free choice marker (cf. Section 3). To illustrate, according to my participants, example (38) is compatible with a reading where the speaker does not know and/or care what their family wants. The speaker can thus be expressing ignorance and indifference, the inferences associated with a free choice interpretation (cf. Section 3).

(38) If I won the *Freedomillion*²²...
Mi asétré sak/sat/sét/sék/sad mon famiy i vé.
1SG=FIN buy.COND sak poss.1SG family FIN want
'I'd buy whatever my family want.'

Translation tasks between French and RC corroborated the finding that free choice readings are available for *sak*-relatives. When participants translated the French sentence (39a) into RC, sentences like (39b) were produced, with *sak* having a free choice interpretation. In this example, *sak* is not referential so cannot be analysed as a demonstrative.

(39) a. *Il tombe amoureux de quiconque il rencontre.*
 3SG.M fall.PRS.3SG in.love of whoever 3SG.M meet.3SG
 'He falls in love with whoever he meets.' French
 b. *Lu tomb amoro de sat lu kwaz.*
 3SG fall in.love of sak 3SG cross
 'He falls in love with whoever he meets.' RC

Examples (38)–(39) indicate that *sak*-relatives can receive a free choice interpretation instead of a definite one.²³ In Section 3 it was pointed out that the interpretation of LHRs is dependent on the interpretation of its light head. Therefore, if *sak*-relatives were always headed by a demonstrative, then they can only receive a definite interpretation; FRs, on the other hand, can receive a non-definite interpretation when they occur either with a free choice marker or as the complement of an existential predicate (Caponigro 2021; cf. example (11)). Although *sak*-relatives can receive a free choice interpretation with no additional free choice marking as above, *sak* and variants can also co-occur with an explicit free choice marker, which are reportedly incompatible with LHRs (cf. Section 3). Caponigro (2021: 14) notes that free choice marking (i.e., marking that obligatorily triggers a free choice interpretation) can be realised as a suffix, an independent word, a prefix or a clitic. McLellan (2023a) revealed that RC exhibits considerable variation in the expression of free choice marking, with several strategies available. The examples in (40) illustrate that *sak* and variants are compatible with numerous different free choice markers, realised as independent words, including *kinport* (< deriving from French *qu'importe* 'what matter'), *sof* (< French *sauf* 'except') and *kissrès* (< French *qui/que serait-ce* 'who/what it would be').

(40) a. *Kinport sék ma fèr apré ma lisans, mé mi resra pa isi.*
 what.matter sak 1SG=FUT do after my degree but 1SG=FIN stay.FUT NEG here
 'Whatever I do after my degree, I am not going to stay here.'

23 A reviewer points out that this is not conclusive evidence that *sak* and variants have become free relative pronouns because definite nominals have been found to allow for a free choice interpretation (e.g. Jacobson 1995), which means a free choice interpretation is still compatible with a demonstrative analysis of *sak* and variants. However, it contributes to exemplifying the range of readings available for *sak*-relatives and shows that if *sak*-relatives are still composed of a demonstrative, that in this construction, the demonstrative is straying from what is considered the core function of a demonstrative.

- b. *Sof sak la arrivé, fo pa trèt domoun koma.*
FC sak PRF happen must NEG treat people like.that
'Whatever happened, you must not treat people like that.'
- c. *Kissrès sak li la (pu) di aou, lé bèt.*
FC sak 3SG PRF can say 2SG COP stupid
'Whatever he might have said to you, it's stupid.'

The above examples offer support for the argument that *sak*-relatives are not always light-headed as *sak* and variants are compatible with free choice marking and they can occur in FRs functioning as free adjuncts, both of which are reportedly impossible for LHRs (cf. Section 3).²⁴

Moreover, *sak*-relatives can also occur as the complement of an existential predicate (41), where they receive an indefinite interpretation and thus cannot contain a demonstrative head.

(41) *Rekrayason lékol, nana sak i okip bann marmay.*
break school have sak FIN look.after PL child
'At the school break, there are people who look after the children.'

The *sak*-relative in example (41) has an existential interpretation rather than a definite one, as confirmed with a native speaker and exemplified in the translation.²⁵ This example, along with the others presented in the section indicate that *sak*-relatives certainly meet the first functional criterion for diagnosing grammaticalisation in (33): *sak* is no longer used to focus the hearer's attention on an entity in the speech situation. The second functional criterion, that grammaticalised demonstratives are deictically non-contrastive, concerns whether the demonstrative expresses a contrast in the distance of its referent from the speaker and/or hearer. This criterion is also met by *sak*-relatives because (i) it is only exophoric uses of demonstratives that are deictically contrastive (Diessel 1999a: 119) and we find plenty of non-exophoric uses of *sak* and variants in relative clauses, and (ii) *sak* and variants do not themselves express a distance contrast when found in a relative clause context or elsewhere.²⁶

²⁴ However, a caveat of this evidence is that RC does allow *sak* to be replaced by a definite description in some of the examples in (40) – for example, *lo trazédi* can replace *sak* in (40b). Therefore, as pointed out by a reviewer, we cannot be sure that the *sak*-relatives in (40) are not vanilla LHRs.

²⁵ Note that existential FRs are not possible in English (Caponigro 2021:10).

²⁶ A distance contrast can instead be expressed via the adverbial demonstrative that *sak* and variants combine with:

Pran sat-la pou ou, don amoin sat-làba.
take DEM for 2SG give 1SG DEM
'Take this one, give me that one.' (Staudacher-Valliamée 2004: 70)

5.2.2 Syntactic changes

In this section, I argue that *sak*-relatives meet the syntactic criteria for grammaticalisation of demonstratives: *sak* and variants are restricted to a particular syntactic context (criterion 3), and they have become virtually obligatory for forming headless relatives (criterion 4). *Sak* and variants cannot occur alone: they must either be followed by their possessor NP or an adverbial *la* in their demonstrative function (cf. Section 4.2), or they must occur in a relative clause construction. Their restricted distribution as demonstratives suggests that demonstrative *sak* and variants are more grammaticalised than demonstrative *sa* - the pronoun from which they derive - as *sa* has greater distributional freedom (cf. the examples in (23) and (24), where *sa* occurs as an independent pronoun).

The consistency of *sak* and variants being found instead of interrogative pronouns in FRs indicates that they have become the specialised pronouns for FRs. ‘Specialization’ is another general feature of grammaticalisation (Hopper 1991: 22), related to Lehmann’s (2015[1982]) notion of ‘paradigmatic variability’. Lehmann argues that increasing obligatoriness of a particular form within a paradigm signals an increasing degree of grammaticalisation of that form. While RC does have FRs formed with interrogatives, which is the more common type of headless relative cross-linguistically, there is an overwhelming preference for *sak* and variants over interrogative pronouns for forming headless relatives that encode the ontological categories of person or thing in RC.²⁷ To illustrate, Table 4 shows the frequency of headless relatives found with *sak* or a variant as compared with a *wh*-word in my corpus.

Table 4 indicates that *sak* and variants are clearly preferred over *kisa* and *kosa*. The pattern found in the corpus was supported by native speaker judgements in interviews: while *sak* and variants were widely accepted in FRs, the acceptability of

Table 4: Count of *sak* and variants vs interrogative pronouns in headless relatives.

	<i>sak/variant</i>	<i>wh-pronoun</i>
Who	99	<i>kisa</i> : 2
What	146	<i>kosa</i> : 10 <i>kwé</i> : 4
Where	0	<i>ousa</i> : 11
When	0	<i>kansa</i> : 3

²⁷ Note that *sak* is not found to encode place, time or reason. RC does have apparently LHR alternatives for *kansa* ‘when’, involving *lérk* ‘the time-that’ and *kank* ‘when-that’. However, their discussion, and indeed whether they remain LHRs rather than FRs, is beyond the scope of this article.

kisa and *kosa* was low, and subject to considerable variation (see McLellan 2023a). Notably, there were no instances where *kisa* and *kosa* were preferred over *sak* or a variant by the majority of participants. Based on cross-linguistic trends, the interrogative pronouns *kisa* and *kosa* would be expected to function as FR pronouns; the reasons for their low but variable acceptability remain somewhat unclear. However, I would suggest that the specialisation of *sak* and variants as the primary forms found in headless relatives has been at the expense of *kisa* and *kosa* taking on this function.²⁸

A final piece of syntactic evidence indicating that *sak* and variants have turned into FR pronouns comes from the observation that they can occur as relative pronouns in LHRs with another type of light head - *tout* 'everything' (42) – and even headed relatives with a lexical head (43).

(42) *Nou lé dakor èk tout sat li la di.*
 1PL be agree with everything sak 3SG PRF say
 'We agree with everything that he said.' (Newspaper)

(43) *Bann fanm çak²⁹ i amène la vie-la, té i rir kank zot*
 PL woman sak FIN lead DEF life-DEM IPFV FIN laugh when 3PL
té i woi çä.
 IPFV FIN see DEM
 'The women who lead that lifestyle were laughing when they saw that.'
 (A. Gauvin *Kartié troi lète*, cited in Quartier and Gauvin 2022: 629; glosses and translation mine)

Examples (42) and (43) illustrate that *sak* and variants, while forming light heads themselves in their demonstrative function, can also fill the *wh*-pronoun position of LHRs, like those found in languages like Polish (cf. Citko 2004), and even headed relatives, offering clear evidence that *sak* is no longer only a demonstrative in RC.³⁰

5.2.3 Morphological changes

While the demonstrative component of LHRs is clearly separable from its complementizer in languages like English and Romance languages, via inflection on the

²⁸ It is worth acknowledging that the interrogative pronouns clearly bear a morphological relation to the demonstrative, containing *sa* too. This merits exploration, but see Diessel (2003), Ruys (2023) and Section 5.4 for discussion of the connection between *wh*-words and demonstratives.

²⁹ I retain the author's original spelling of *sak* as *çak*, though note that this spelling variant was not found in my corpus.

³⁰ Note that *sak* as a headed relative pronoun is rare; headed relatives are far more commonly zero-marked or marked with *ke* (cf. Section 4.1).

head, that is not the case in RC. A comparison between RC and its lexifier, French, reveals that RC's demonstrative pronouns *sa* and *sak/sat/sét/sék/sad* did not retain the inflection that their French counterparts exhibit, cf. *celui* (M.SG), *celle* (F.SG), *ceux* (M.PL), *celles* (F.PL). The lack of inflection on the head in RC contributes to the ambiguity between a LHR and a FR structure; without inflection on the head, the form *sak* becomes invariable³¹ and we have less evidence to analyse the sequence as a demonstrative separable from a complementizer. Moreover, the variant forms *sat*, *sad* and *sét* cannot be parsed as a demonstrative and complementizer because the forms *-t* and *-d* are not complementizers elsewhere in RC.

RC does not exhibit a contrast between a distal and proximal demonstrative (Bollée 2013), so Diessel's morphological criterion 5, that grammaticalised elements from demonstratives typically exhibit the distal form, cannot be tested for *sak*-relatives.

5.2.4 Phonological changes

The development of the four phonological variants of *sak* supports the suggestion that the original demonstrative *sa* coalesced with another free form, *k*, thus meeting criterion 8 in (33). The emergence of the five variants in a headless relative context seems to be related to their emergence in a demonstrative context. The form *sad* was likely the original form in the possessed/demonstrative context, originating from French *ça de* 'that of' (cf. Section 4.2). The *sat* form plausibly arose in that same context via the devoicing of the *d* in *sad* (Watbled 2021b: 82). The form *sak* arose in the headless relative context from the combination of *sa* and *k*, ultimately originating in the French demonstrative *ça* and complementiser *que* (cf. Section 4.1). Hopper's (1991) notions of specialization and obligatoriness (cf. Section 5.2.2) are also relevant to the coalescence of *sa* and *k* as *sak*. If *sak*-relatives were light-headed with demonstrative *sa* as their head, then there were in theory two options for realising this LHR: one with relative marking (*sa k*) and one without (*sa Ø*). As seen in Section 4.1, the marked option is virtually obligatory, and this consistency in the marking of *sa*-headed relative clauses likely enabled their coalescence. The variant *sat* possibly also developed in the FR context from *sak*, via a process of assimilation to the *s* in the place of articulation. As for the é variants (*sék* and *sét*), one factor influencing this vowel change may have been the French demonstrative determiner *cet/cette* 'this' and another French *ce que* 'what'. The functional overlap of the *t*-forms in the demonstrative and headless relative contexts probably caused speakers to gradually

³¹ It is variable in that there are five phonological variants, but their distribution is not governed by syntactic or semantic considerations.

analyse all five forms as free variants, meaning *sak* took on the demonstrative function too and likewise *sad* emerged in the headless relative context.

5.2.5 Summary of evidence for grammaticalisation of *sak*-relatives

To summarise, the evidence presented in the preceding sections has highlighted that *sak*-relatives not only meet the majority of Diessel's criteria for diagnosing the grammaticalisation of demonstratives, but that the data also reflect general signals of grammaticalizing structures. *Sak* and variants take on endophoric demonstrative functions in headless relatives, which for Diessel already constitutes evidence of grammaticalisation from their core function (cf. Section 5.2.1); *sak* can receive non-definite readings and thus cannot be a demonstrative in such cases (cf. Section 5.2.1); *sak* has become the specialized form for headless relatives to the near exclusion of interrogative pronouns (cf. Section 5.2.2); *sak* can occur as a *wh*-pronoun in LHR and headed relative structures (cf. Section 5.2.2); the demonstrative heads of *sak*-relatives do not inflect meaning they cannot clearly be separated from the following complementiser (cf. Section 5.2.3); *sak* has undergone phonological changes resulting in the four variant forms *sék*, *sét*, *sat* and *sad* (cf. Section 5.2.4).

The data exhibit a particularly high degree of variation – more so than other similar structures investigated (headed relative clauses, cleft constructions and presentationals; see McLellan 2023a). This variation observed in the data is consistent with the view that *sak*-relatives are grammaticalizing, as a high degree of variation is characteristic of grammaticalizing structures. One reason for this variation is that, within the domain of headless relatives, there is layering (cf. Hopper 1991) of the two LHR structures with the newer FR structure: while there is evidence that *sak* may be grammaticalising into a new free relative pronoun, there are still remnants of the original LHR from which *sak* and variants originate (cf. Section 4.1), as well as the LHR structure with *sak* as its head (cf. Section 4.2). That is to say that the older LHR structures exist alongside the newer structure: when new structures emerge within a functional domain, it does not necessarily lead to the disappearance of older structures, but rather, they co-exist and interact with one another (Hopper 1991: 22).

5.2.6 Consideration of a complementiser analysis for *sak*

Before reflecting on the implications of the RC data in the next section, I will consider an alternative analysis. A reviewer points out that because *sak* and variants are not specified for gender, number or animacy, there is some doubt cast on their analysis as pronouns at all. The reviewer suggests considering an alternative where they are analysed as complementisers.

To begin with, I should note that an argument regarding the invariance of *sak* does not carry much weight in RC because this language's pronouns often do not inflect for features like gender, number, animacy and case. For example, recall that the pronoun *sak* can refer to singular and plural entities, and animate and inanimates (cf. (23), (24)), and that there is very little morphological case marking in RC (cf. Section 3). Accordingly, the lack of inflection does not mean that *sak* cannot be a pronoun.

Evidence against a complementiser analysis of *sak* comes from the observation that, although rarely, *sak* can be preceded by a preposition:³²

(44) *Lo moun pou sak mi travay lé gabyé.*
 DEF person for sak 1SG=FIN work be nice
 'The person for whom I work is nice.'

Moreover, *sak* is not attested elsewhere as a complementiser: complement clauses in RC are zero-marked or marked with a complementiser *ke*. I should add that complement clauses (*ke-* or zero-marked) are not attested in my corpus in subject position, but *sak* can occur in subject headless relatives (e.g. (7)), which casts some more doubt on *sak* being a complementiser.

Lastly, as noted in Section 5.1, if *sak* was analysed as a complementiser - a CLM in RRG – any analysis of this structure would be faced with a problem in explaining a missing argument of the free relative clause predicate (e.g. the object of *see* in (31)), particularly as object drop is not a typical structure of RC.³³

While a complementiser analysis should not be discarded, a free relative pronoun analysis for *sak* is clearly more viable and suitable to the language under discussion. In the next section, pursuing an analysis of *sak* as a free relative pronoun, I reflect on the implications of the RC data for our understanding of headless relatives.

5.3 Why are demonstratives a source for free relative pronouns?

In Section 5, I suggested that two LHR structures appear to be grammaticalising into an FR structure, implying that demonstratives could be a source of FR pronouns in RC. If demonstratives are indeed another source for the function of FR pronoun in languages,

32 Such examples are rare because *sak* is found less frequently as a headed relative clause marker; there are other strategies that are favoured in headed relative clauses – for example, zero-marking or alternative relative pronouns such as *kisa*.

33 Object drop is possible only if the referent is easily recoverable from the preceding discourse (cf. Albers 2019: 59; McLellan 2023a: 34).

then we should seek explanation for why that is. Diessel (2003), who considers the relationship between demonstratives and interrogatives and their place in language, offers compelling insights on the matter. Diessel distinguishes demonstratives and interrogatives from grammatical markers, arguing that they have a special status in language. He argues that the core function of demonstratives (cf. Section 5.2.1) and interrogatives is not the same as that of grammatical markers, which serve to relate lexical expressions to one another or qualify them. Demonstratives and interrogatives, on the other hand, are concerned with the interaction between speaker and hearer, rather than being language-internal (although they can be). Diessel (2003) argues that demonstratives and interrogatives are both directives: they both initiate a search for the identity of a referent. In the case of demonstratives, the speaker focuses the hearer's attention on a particular referent, which is identified in the surrounding situation with the help of perceptual and contextual information from the physical and discourse contexts. In the case of interrogatives, the speaker also initiates a search for a particular referent, which, with the help of the discourse context, is identified by the hearer's knowledge. Although the speaker knows the identity of the referent in the case of demonstratives, but not in the case of interrogatives, the commonality is that the speaker initiates a search for information, which in both cases is also aided by the ontological features encoded by the demonstrative or interrogative, e.g. person/thing, place, manner. Furthermore, along with sharing a similar pragmatic function and encoding the same ontological features, Diessel (2003) points out that interrogatives and demonstratives also often include the same derivational morphemes, which is indeed the case in RC.³⁴ RC's interrogatives share *sa*: *kisa* 'who', *kosa* 'what', *kansa* 'when', *ousa* 'where' (cf. Table 4).

Concerning the commonality between demonstratives and interrogatives, I would argue that initiating a search for the identity of a referent is also what free relative pronouns do. While the search for the referent is aided by the surrounding situation and discourse context for demonstratives and by the hearer's knowledge for interrogatives, the identity of the referent of a free relative pronoun is aided by the information given in the relative clause. The finding that demonstratives are a source of free relative pronouns in RC thus offers support for Diessel's argument concerning the similarity between demonstratives and interrogatives, and simultaneously helps to explain why demonstratives have developed into free relative pronouns in this language.

³⁴ See also Ruys (2023), who goes even further than Diessel (2003) on the connection between interrogatives and demonstratives, arguing that interrogatives *are* demonstratives.

6 Conclusions

In this article, I revisited the distinction between LHRs and FRs in light of fresh, first-hand data from RC, an underrepresented language. I identified two distinct LHR structures in RC, involving the same form: an LHR headed by *sa* (45a) and an LHR headed by *sak* (45b). I argued that these two LHR structures have been reanalysed as an FR structure where *sak* is a new free relative pronoun (45c).

(45) a. [Sa [k mwin la vi yèr]]
DEM REL 1SG PRF see yesterday
'That which I saw yesterday' LHR headed by *sa*

b. [Sak [Ø mwin la vi yèr]]
DEM REL 1SG PRF see yesterday
'That which I saw yesterday' LHR headed by *sak*

c. [Sak mwin la vi yèr]]
FR 1SG PRF see yesterday
'What I saw yesterday' Free relative

Given that there are three plausible structural interpretations of *sak*-relatives, I argued that the distinction between LHRs and FRs is not clear-cut in this language. In arguing that an FR structure appears to be developing from two LHR structures, it follows that demonstratives could be the source of free relative pronouns in this language. The diverse range of pragmatic functions that demonstratives take on in language, and the understanding that they are a common source of new grammatical items contributes to the ambiguity between the LHR structure and the FR structure in RC. As Diessel (1999a) points out, the distinction between endophoric demonstratives (i.e., those that do not focus attention on an entity in the speech situation) and grammatical markers is not clear-cut, and it is exactly this that makes the line between LHRs and FRs in RC equally hard to delineate. *Sak*-relatives were found to meet the majority of Diessel's criteria for identifying the grammaticalisation of demonstratives, as well as exhibiting more general signs of grammaticalisation: there was a high degree of variation in the data and evidence that several layers exist within the domain of headless relatives in RC. While grammaticalisation theory helped to explain the data, the data also add to our understanding of an understudied pathway of possible grammaticalisation from LHR to FR. This article has enhanced our understanding of the typology of headless relatives by documenting their system in a lesser-known language. While further research is needed to monitor this ongoing change, I have pointed out that demonstratives may grammaticalize into free relative pronouns, and that free relative pronouns perhaps need not be identical to *wh*-pronouns.

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Appendix A: List of corpus sources

Source	Date
Written	
Blog: <i>Oté</i>	2019
Brochure: Expo 2015 “Nout Manjé”	2015
Play script: “Pou in grape létshi”	2009
Children’s Story: “Ti Pierre èk le Lou”	2016
Children’s Story: “La femme devenue vache”	2013
Magazine: 7 editions of <i>Kriké</i>	2014-17
Newspaper: 19 editions of <i>Fanal</i>	2015-20
SMS4Science Corpus (Cougnon 2012): 12,000 SMS	2008
Oral	
Documentary film clips	
“Zourné internasional la lang matérnèl 2017”	2017
“Zourné internasional la lang matérnèl 2018”	2018
Baude (2010) oral corpus of RC	
19 interview recordings	1970–1978
9 interview recordings	2005
Radio clip: conversation between Bruno & Francky (<i>Radio Free Dom</i>)	2020
TV programme: <i>Koz Pou Nou</i> (1 episode)	
“Koz Pou Nou avec J Huges Lucian et Francky de <i>Free Dom</i> ”	2019
YouTube comedy sketches (by <i>Le Letchi</i>)	
“Tonton Politicien”	2020
“Celui qui défendait la musique réunionnaise”	2016

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