

The existential-presentational conundrum: New evidence from Kréol Rényoné

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Sentences that describe existence and presence in a context and sentences that introduce a new event into discourse are known to share formal features in many languages and have been argued to be indistinguishable. Availing ourselves of authentic corpus evidence and of the findings of interviews with native speakers, in this article we analyse such constructions in Kréol Rényoné, a French-based creole spoken on Reunion Island. We find that despite the shared word order and the marking with a form of the verb ‘have’ (NANA), existentials, or descriptions of presence in a context, and cleft presentationals, which introduce new events, differ in syntactic and semantic terms. We disentangle and analyse their meaning and syntax and we capture their intersection. The shared marking follows, in our analysis, from the way the two constructions interface with discourse: the propositions that they express are interpreted and evaluated in terms of the deictic coordinates present in the common ground when the sentence is uttered.

KEYWORDS: existential, presentational, cleft, relative clause, discourse, stage topic, parallel architecture, creole, Kréol Rényoné.

1. Introduction

Sentences describing existence or presence and sentences introducing new participants and events into discourse are known to share formal features in many languages. To give an example, in French, such sentences exhibit an etymologically locative proform and a copula in clause-initial position (*y a*), preceded, in some registers, by the clitic pronoun *il* (Lambrecht 1988a, 1988b, 2001). The observation that both types of (*il*) *y a* sentence occur in the same range of discourse contexts has led some scholars to argue that they belong to one and the same existential-locative constructional and conceptual type (Carlier & Lahousse 2023; see also Karssenbergh 2017). According to these scholars, existential, locative and presentational interpretations arise from the context of occurrence and from clues like the definiteness value of the focal constituent.

The object of this article is the relation between, and intersection of, the expression of existence and the introduction of new events into the universe of discourse. Drawing on Francez (2007), among others, we pursue the hypothesis that expressions of existence and presence that bear special marking introduce entities in a context or properties of a context, and hence describe relations of containment in a context, whereas sentences that introduce new events describe states of affairs. This semantic contrast has consequences in syntax, such as the requirement of a verb phrase in the latter type of sentence but not the former. We test our hypothesis against primary evidence from Kréol Rényoné (henceforth **KR**), a language where existential sentences and cleft presentationals (i.e. cleft sentences that introduce new events) can share the marker *NANA* (see McLellan 2023, 2024, and, for KR, Papen 1978; Caid 2000, 2008; Corne 1982, 1995; Cellier 1985a, 1985b; Ramassamy 1985; Holm 2004; Staudacher-Valliamée 2004; Bollée 2013; Albers 2019, 2020, 2021, 2024; Gaze 2019; Watbled 2014, 2015, 2020, 2021; Quartier & Gauvin 2022).

Our findings indicate that, despite the shared marking, KR existentials and cleft presentationals are distinct constructions. We disentangle and analyse the semantic and syntactic properties of KR existential sentences and cleft presentationals, and we capture their intersection, in a parallel-architecture account (Jackendoff 2002; Van Valin 2023), which builds on Bentley *et al.* (2015), McLellan (2023, 2024), Bentley & Ciconte (2024) and Balogh *et al.* (2026). The shared formal marking follows, in our analysis, from the way the two constructions interface with discourse: the propositions that they express are interpreted and evaluated in terms of the deictic coordinates present in the Immediate Common Ground (Berio *et al.* 2017; see also Krifka & Musan 2012). While the principal objective of the paper is theoretical, we also hope to enhance understanding of KR, and to offer a methodological contribution to fieldwork-assisted syntactic research (see Bentley & McLellan 2025).

2. Existential sentences and cleft presentationals

We begin by introducing the constructions under investigation. Existential sentences are known to express propositions about existence and presence (McNally 2011: 1830) and to be context-dependent (Francez 2007, 2010). Consider the examples below.

(1) *There is no bread.*

(2) *There are no easy solutions.*

(3) *There are people who sleep four hours a night.*

(4) *There are no unicorns.*

While all these sentences fall within McNally's (2011: 1830) definition of existential sentence ("a specialized or non-canonical construction which expresses a proposition about the existence or the presence of someone or something"), they differ in non-trivial ways. Example (1) does not describe existence in an ontological sense but rather makes a statement about the absence of bread in a specific situation: the sentence cannot be interpreted, and its truth value cannot be determined, independently of that context (Francez 2007, 2010). Example (2) would be felicitous in a situation where solutions are being sought for a problem. For this reason, it can also be said to rely on a context for its interpretation. Example (3) may be true of humankind, while (4) does describe existence in an ontological sense. In our judgement, (3) and (4) could be rephrased with the verb *exist* more naturally than the other examples.

Similar facts are reported in typological research. Although sentences expressing presence are not easily paraphrased with EXIST verbs, in many languages structures with such verbs are substitutable with structures which typically express presence (Creissels 2014). This asymmetrical relation, and the contrast between the examples in (1-4), suggest that the context which an existential sentence relies on for its interpretation may vary considerably in scope and specificity: it can be the here-and-now discourse situation, or the there-and-then situation that is understood or explicitly encoded at a given point within a text, but it can also be a broader, unspecified, domain, in which case the sentence may express existence in an ontological sense. Be that as it may, we take context dependence to be a property of existential sentences by definition and, in due course, we will assume that an implicit argument is part of the semantic representation of these sentences.¹

As can be seen in (3), a relative clause can follow the postcopular noun phrase. In agreement with an existing tradition, we call the postcopular noun phrase the pivot and the relative clause the coda, although this latter term can also designate other phrases following the pivot (e.g. *in trouble* in *There are people in trouble*).² For our current purposes, it is important to note that an existential sentence with a relative clause in the coda is not truth-conditionally equivalent with its counterpart lack-

ing existential and relative markers: *people sleep four hours a night* is not a paraphrase of *there are people who sleep four hours a night* because only in the existential sentence does *people* take the lowest scope (Heim 1987).

Many languages lack an existential construction with distinct morphosyntax (Creissels 2014; Guerrero 2025), though this does not necessarily mean that their existentials are not context-dependent or do not have special pragmatic properties (Sarda & Lena 2023: 20-21). In other languages, however, existential sentences require special, or non-canonical, morphosyntax (McNally 2011: 1830). In English, they exhibit VS order, the copula BE, and unstressed *there* (Milsark 1979: 9; Lyons 1999: 236-237) in pre-copular position. Interestingly, the formal properties of existential sentences vary considerably across languages. The expression of existence ranges from locative, possessive or comitative predications, where the pivot is the locatum, the possessee or the companion, to constructions in which the pivot is incorporated in a predicate meaning ‘be an N owner’ (Creissels 2014). This variation is revealing with respect to the vexed question of whether the pivot is the argument or the predicate of existential sentences (Williams 1984; La Fauci & Loporcaro 1993, 1997; Francez 2007, 2009; Cornilescu 2009, etc.). Clearly, the pivot can be encoded as a predicate or as an argument, as a consequence of the broad spectrum it covers along a scale of referentiality. The two types of encoding are found both across languages and within individual languages (Bentley *et al.* 2015: 119-145).

An unambiguous case of existential sentences with non-referential pivots is found in Romance languages of Southern Italy, where existential sentences with adjectival pivots (cf. (5a)) stand in a minimal pair relationship with ascriptive copular constructions (cf. (5b)).³

- (5) San Tommaso, Calabria
- | | | | |
|----|---|----------------|----------------|
| a. | <i>(Alla stazione) c’</i> | <i>è</i> | <i>luardu.</i> |
| | at.the station PF | be.3SG | dirty |
| | ‘It’s dirty at the station.’ | | |
| b. | <i>A stazione è</i> | <i>luarda.</i> | |
| | the station be.3SG | dirty | |
| | ‘The station is dirty.’ (Bentley <i>et al.</i> 2015: 134) | | |

The adjective describes dirtiness as a property of a context, in the existential sentence, and as a property of the referent of the noun phrase subject, in the ascriptive construction.⁴

At the other end of the referentiality scale are semantically definite – i.e. specific – pivots, such as *Mary* and *your Dad* in (6b).

- (6) a. Context: *Who can give me a lift to the station?*
 b. *There’s Mary, if she is free, otherwise there’s always your Dad.*

These structures do not occur in as broad a range of contexts as existentials with indefinite pivots. Instead, they are normally only meaningful when a specific context, or purpose, is given, and thus they have been named ‘contextualized existentials’ (Abbott 1993, 1994). In addition, they only admit negation if this is construable as the negation of the availability of the pivot referent for the specific purpose under discussion. In some languages this reading is not possible, because of special negation or copula forms, which coerce a construal whereby the pivot alone is in the scope of negation. It makes no sense to negate the existence of a specific entity, whose existence is by definition established in discourse (Enç 1991), and, therefore, negation is banned in such cases (Bentley 2013: 697-698). These facts suggest that contextualized existentials do not introduce specific referents as such but rather describe their presence or availability in a given context.

The discussion of existential sentences with definite pivots leads us to the other pattern that is under scrutiny in the present study, namely cleft presentationals. These have received a great deal of attention in the Romance literature (Lambrecht 1988a; Cruschina 2012; Bentley *et al.* 2015; Karssenbergh 2017; Karssenbergh & Lahousse 2018, etc.) and we illustrate them here with a French example.

- (7) French
Y 'a le téléphone qui sonne.
 PF have.PRS.3SG the phone REL ring.3SG
 ‘The phone is ringing.’ (Lambrecht 1988a: 137)

The pattern in (7) is presentational in that it introduces an event into discourse: the postcopular noun phrase is introduced as a participant in this event and the contents of the *that*-clause – called here ‘cleft relative clause’ following an existing convention (e.g. Karssenbergh 2018) – cannot be omitted. In fact, cleft presentationals are truth-conditionally equivalent with their declifted paraphrases.⁵ The specificity of the noun phrase is neither a requirement nor is it known to give rise to any particular construal. Cleft presentationals are also said to reject wide scope negation, as is clear from the negative counterpart of (7) (*#Y'a pas le téléphone qui sonne*) (Lambrecht 1986a: 276), although Karssenbergh (2018: 41-44) discusses *prima facie* counterevidence to this claim. Lastly, in some languages cleft presentationals circumvent a violation of a constraint against focal subjects in clause-initial position (Lambrecht 1986a, 2010). Several authors have noted that *il y a*-clefts only permit subject cleft relative clauses (Karssenbergh 2018: 38), which may be a consequence of the constraint against focal subjects in clause-initial position.

The cluster of morphosyntactic, semantic and, as will become clear, discourse properties of both existential sentences and cleft presentationals warrants their characterization as ‘constructions’, i.e. constellations of properties, or instructions, which do not follow in their entirety from the general principles of the grammatical architecture or the default principles of the grammar of a given language (Van Valin 2023: 126-127).

Both typological research and in-depth studies of individual languages have shown that existentials and presentationals need not exhibit the same morphosyntax (Creissels 2014, Gaeta 2023). In fact, cleft presentationals are but one of the presentational strategies that are available in the Romance languages, bare VS order being another one, subject to constraints which are beyond the scope of this article (see, e.g., Bentley *et al.* 2015: 119-129). Nonetheless, the formal similarities of the two constructions in some languages require an explanation. Analysing authentic corpora, scholars have found that, in French and Italian, existentials and cleft presentationals figure in the same range of discourse configurations, the common denominator of these configurations being that the postcopular constituent is in focus (Karsenberg 2017, 2018; Karsenberg *et al.* 2017; Carlier & Lahousse 2023). In light of such results, Karsenberg (2017) claims that French *il y a* is a focus marker, whether it occurs in existentials or presentationals. In turn, Carlier & Lahousse (2023) argue for a unified analysis of French *il y a* and Italian *c'è* sentences as structures with locative-existential meaning that have one and the same discourse function: presenting the postcopular constituent as non-topical.⁶ These treatments draw on a scholarly tradition which has sought to explain why a single proposition should be cleaved as in (7) with reference to the focal status of the postcopular noun phrase. This tradition originated with Lambrecht (1986a: 134), who claimed that (*il*) *y a* presentationals avoid the violation of a communicative constraint against introducing a referent and talking about it within the same clause.

3. *The problem*

Having introduced the constructions under investigation, we now lay out the analytical problem addressed in this study. While underscoring the similarities of existentials and presentationals, the literature does draw a distinction between the two. Thus, in their study of French and Italian, Carlier & Lahousse (2023: 174) state:

- (8) Beyond the fundamental unity of locative, existential and cleft *il y a / c'è* constructions, it is possible to position these three subtypes on a grammaticalization scale (LOCATIVE > EXISTENTIAL > CLEFT). Since *il y a / c'è* clefts are the most advanced on the grammaticalization scale, it comes as no surprise that the feature of LOCATION for this subtype must not exclusively be conceived of in spatial terms but can be of a more abstract nature.

Our objective is to provide an explicit analysis of existential sentences and cleft presentationals, which whilst capturing the shared properties of the two constructions also duly disentangles them. Although this analysis will inevitably be language-specific, since constructions are language-specific (Van Valin 2023: 126-127), it will draw on the insights of theoretical and typological research and aims to shed light on the expression of existence and the introduction of events crosslinguistically. Put crudely, the question addressed in this study is: what does it mean for a structure that bears existential-presentational marking to be construed as an existential or a presentational construction?

Our assumption, already anticipated above, is that an existential construction describes a relation of containment of an entity or a property in a context: the absence of *bread* in (1) and of *easy solutions* in (2), the condition of being dirty in (5a), the availability of specific individuals in (6b), etc. Different languages express this relation in various different ways: with locative, comitative, transitive or incorporating possessive predicates, etc. (Creissels 2014). In contrast, a cleft presentational introduces a new event into discourse, and new discourse referents are introduced in cleft presentationals *qua* participants in the new event. This distinction is supported by the following contrasts, emerging from the studies discussed above.

- (9) Existentials vs cleft presentationals
- i. Since existentials describe properties, they can exhibit adjectival pivots (cf. (5a)). In contrast, the postcopular constituent of cleft presentationals cannot be adjectival.
 - ii. Since the context of an existential sentence may vary in scope and specificity, the existential pivot will vary in specificity accordingly. It will abide by definiteness, i.e. specificity, restrictions, unless a specific context is given (cf. (6a-b)). In contrast, the postcopular noun phrase of cleft presentationals is not subject to the same restrictions (cf. (7)).
 - iii. Since cleft presentationals introduce a new event into the universe of discourse, they jar with negation, when this takes the whole event in its scope. Existentials only pose restrictions on the negation of a definite pivot, since it makes no sense to negate the existence of a specific entity, though it is possible to negate its presence for a particular purpose.
 - iv. Existentials need not have a relative clause (RC) in the coda (cf. (1-4)), whereas cleft presentationals require a cleft relative clause (CRC), which contains the assertion about the clefted constituent (cf. (7)).

- v. If there is a RC in the coda, the pivot can be the antecedent of its subject or object, whereas the postcopular noun phrase of cleft presentationals tends to be the subject of the CRC. This latter restriction is discussed in Karszenberg (2018: 38), where it is ascribed to Lambrecht (1986b), and is assumed in subsequent literature, though it is yet to receive an explanation. Drawing on Lambrecht's (1986a) analysis of French, we tentatively assume that this constraint should only hold true of languages where cleft presentationals are a strategy to avoid focal subjects in clause-initial position.

In the remainder of this article, we discuss whether and to what extent the properties listed in (9i-v) distinguish existentials and cleft presentationals in KR. We explore any further contrasts that emerge from the study of this language, and we propose an explicit analysis of the two constructions at the discourse-semantics-syntax interface. While we have so far been non-committal with respect to the marking shared by the two constructions, KR provides important evidence regarding this marking, which will be factored into our analysis.

4. Our study

4.1 *Kréol Rényoné*

KR is a French-based creole spoken on Reunion Island, a French overseas department in the Indian Ocean. The language formed in the context of French colonization beginning around the 16th century (Zribi-Hertz 2022): it is the product of colonial varieties of spoken French being reshaped with influence from Malagasy, Tamil and Bantu languages (Chaudenson 1974; Baker & Corne 1986; Cellier 1985a; Holm 1989; Corne 1999; Bollée 2013; Watbled 2020; Albers 2025). KR is an SVO language which, unlike many other creoles (Zribi-Hertz 2022: 16), exhibits some verbal inflection for tense (see Watbled 2014, 2015, 2021), though it does not inflect for number or gender as does French.

McLellan's (2023, 2024) analysis of NANA constructions should be mentioned here to contextualize our study. McLellan found that the relativizer *k(e)* does not occur in broad focus constructions formed with NANA 'have' followed by a noun phrase and a CRC.

- (10) *Hier* *soir* *néna* *un* *num* *privé* *la* *tel* *amwin.*
yesterday evening have INDF number private PRF phone me
'A private number phoned me last night' (SMS)

In addition, NANA does not normally inflect for tense in such cleft presentationals, i.e. it does not figure as past *navé/lavé*, future *nora* or

conditional *noré*. Instead, it figures in the present tense forms *na(na)/néna*, which appear to occur in free variation. In contrast, NANA can inflect for tense in existentials and narrow focus clefts, as is shown in (11), an existential sentence where the pivot *bokou d'gens* ‘many people’ is followed by a RC overtly marked by the relativizer *k(e)*.⁷

- (11) ...é lavé bokou d' gens ki parlé kom sa kan ou
 and have.PST many of people REL=FIN speak.PST like this when you
 lété marmay.
 be.PST children
 ‘There were lots of people who spoke like this when you were children.’ (Conversation)

It could be objected that whether (11) is an existential construction, as opposed to a cleft presentational, is a matter of interpretation. We would argue that this example does not describe an event of speaking because it would be infelicitous in the context of the question ‘What happened?’. Instead, (11) describes the presence of *bokou d'gens ki parlé kom sa* ‘many people who spoke like this’ in a spatio-temporal context described by the adverbial clause *kan ou lété marmay* ‘when you were children’.

Lastly, McLellan (2023, 2024) noted that NANA does not take negation in cleft presentationals, failing to behave like a copula, although it is in principle possible that the absence of negation is a property of the whole construction (§§2-3).

These facts led McLellan (2023, 2024) to hypothesize that a change is under way in NANA presentationals: the biclausal cleft construction is being reanalysed as a monoclausal structure marked by a non-verbal form NANA. The loss of verbal properties of NANA and frequent use of the reduced form *na* – a sign of phonetic erosion (cf. Heine & Kuteva 2007) – suggest that NANA is grammaticalizing in presentational constructions. We return to McLellan’s (2024) proposal in section 5.3.

4.2 The survey: corpus data

Our data was collected through, on the one hand, the analysis of a 300,000-word corpus (McLellan 2023) composed of newspapers, magazines, blog posts, stories, SMS messages, conversations, YouTube clips, TV shows, and radio programmes, and, on the other, questionnaire-assisted interviews with three native speakers. In KR corpora, code-switching between French and KR is extensive, and the boundary between the two languages can be difficult to delineate. Passages entirely in French were excluded from the study. However, if a passage was identified as well-formed in KR and had an identical French counterpart (disregarding orthographic differences), it was included in this study.

For further details of the corpus materials and method for distinguishing between French and KR, see McLellan (2023).

A total of 1055 NANA constructions were analysed from the corpus, of which 369 were relevant.⁸ The analysis of these data mostly corroborates the claims of the literature on French *(il) y a* and Italian *c'è* constructions (§2), insofar as the noun phrase following NANA is always in focus. We provide an example of an existential sentence with narrow focus on the pivot in (12) and one of a broad focus NANA presentational in (13).

- (12) (...dann liv-la néna in CD.
in book-DEM have INDF CD
‘(...in that book) there is a CD.’ (Magazine)

- (13) {NPERS} la fai boir amwa et ma parti danC⁹
NAME PRF make drink me and 1SG=PRF go dance
é na in ga la touch touch amwa
and have INDF guy PRF touch touch me
‘NAME made me drink and I went out dancing and there’s a guy that touched me’ (SMS)

Furthermore, while starting from the assumptions and definitions provided in section 2, it was not always possible to tell the two constructions apart. Consider (14).

- (14) na 2fanm malgach y koz in ta!
have two.women malagasy FIN talk a lot
‘There’s two Malagasy women who are talking loads’ (SMS)

Is this a statement about the presence, in an environment, of two Malagasy women who are talking a lot or a statement about an event of talking by two Malagasy women? This difficulty of interpretation might suggest that existentials and cleft presentationals are at best distinguished within their context (or co-text) or perhaps they are altogether indistinguishable.

Nonetheless, we identified 347 NANA existentials and 19 NANA presentationals adopting the following criteria: (a) our judgement of the suitability of each example as an answer to the questions ‘What is/was there?’, for existentials, and ‘What happened?’, for presentationals; (b) the decliftability of the examples that included a (C)RC (see note 5). Admittedly, the latter criterion proved to be difficult when classifying some examples: there were 41 examples that seemed more suitable in response to the question ‘What is/was there?’ than ‘What happened?’, and, yet, did appear to be decliftable:

- (15) *Na in bonpé demoun lé là.*
 have a lot people be there
 ‘There are a lot of people that are there.’ (Religious text)

In these instances, criterion (a) overruled criterion (b) because this was felt to be more fundamental to the distinction between these two constructions, particularly given that deleftability is often cited as a positive diagnostic for clefts but is not necessarily explicitly excluded for other constructions (Karssenbergh 2018: 22).¹⁰ The remaining three corpus examples were more difficult to classify as belonging to one type or the other (cf. (14)).

The 366 examples classified as presentational or existential had the properties listed in Table 1.

	EXISTENTIAL	CLEFT PRESENTATIONAL
postcopular adj	0	0
definite postcop NP	50 (14.4%)	5 (26%)
negation	48 (13.8%)	0 (0%)
(C)RC	85 (24.4%) (76 subject) (4 object) (5 oblique)	19 (100%) (19 subject CRCs)
relativizer <i>k(e)</i>	16 (18.8%) ¹¹	0 (0%)
inflected copula	118 (34%)	2 (10.5%)
Totals	347	19

Table 1. Properties of corpus examples.

We found both definite and indefinite existential pivots (cf. (16-17)), though the former pivot type was less frequent and only occurred in contextualized existentials.¹²

- (16) [*Apréla, in lartis plastisien la vni travay ansanm bann marmay dann la klas pou fé bann zilustrasion.*]
Konn plastisien, navé MEGOT, Alicia DEVEAU ek Béatrice ICHAMBE.
 as visual.artist have.PST MEGOT Alicia DEVEAU and Béatrice ICHAMBE
la done la min.
 PRF give the hand
 ‘[Afterwards, a visual artist came to work with the children in the class to do illustrations.] As visual artists, there was MEGOT, Alicia DEVEAU and Béatrice ICHAMBE who helped out.’ (Magazine)

- (17) ...*nana une kaz lé toute seule dan in ti kwin.*
 have INDF house be all alone in INDF little corner
 ‘There is a little house which is all alone in a little corner’ (Conversation)

In Table 2 we provide a breakdown of the counts of the forms of NANA found in the corpus.

	EXISTENTIAL	CLEFT PRESENTATIONAL
Present: <i>na/nana/néna</i>	229	17
Past: <i>navé</i>	57	1
Past: <i>lavé</i>	35	1
Future: <i>nora</i>	25	0
Conditional: <i>noré</i>	1	0

Table 2. Forms of NANA in corpus examples.¹³

Apart from two examples, NANA occurs in the present in the cleft presentationals. *Néna* may be a mere orthographical variant of *nana*. As for the reduced form *na*, illustrated in (18), it appeared in 68% of the presentational examples in which NANA was in the present tense.

- (18) *Na {NPERS} et {NPERS} i rente ek nous ce soir.*
 have NAME and NAME FIN return with us this evening
 ‘There’s NAME and NAME who are returning (coming home) with us tonight.’ (SMS)

In addition to the 366 examples discussed above, there were 13 examples which were virtually indistinguishable from a possessive construction (cf. (19)), in that they exhibited a subject pronoun followed by NANA. Apart from the subject pronoun, the examples under discussion here could be analysed as presentational (cf. (20)) or existential (cf. (21)); note how the subject pronoun *ou* could be left out of (21) with no repercussions on the truth conditional meaning of this statement, as implied in Creissels’ (2023) treatment of the corresponding constructions of English and French. (We return to this point in section 5.3.1).

- (19) *Moin néna létshi po Monsieur Le Roi, out papa.*
 I have lychee for Mr DEF king your father
 ‘I have lychees for the King, your father.’ (Play script)
- (20) *Bin mwin nana mon beau-frère la hin la koz bisik mèm.*
 well I have my brother.in.law DEM DISCOURSE.MARKER PRF say bisik FOC
 ‘Well, I have my brother-in-law there, right, who said *bisik*’ (Conversation)

- (21) [...des jeunes zot i vyin èk une évolution zot i abrège tous ces mots-là pour fé in kréol plu korèk... en croyant être plus correct,]
 apré ou na lé vyé d' avan
 then you have DEF old from before
 '[Young people they come with an evolution, they shorten all those words to speak a more correct creole... believing they're speaking more correctly,] and then you have the old people from before' (Conversation)

Although presentationals were infrequent in the corpus compared with existentials, it is striking that they were only attested in two genres: conversations and SMS messages. In contrast, existentials are distributed across all genres in the corpus. Presentational constructions are known to be a feature of oral language (Lambrecht 1986a, 2001), and it is not surprising that they also appear in SMS messages, given that text communication is close to oral speech (see Tagg 2009, among others).

4.3 The survey: interviews

The questionnaire included both elicitation tasks and acceptability judgement tasks aimed at verifying the contrasts in (9i-v).¹⁴ We also tested the following language-specific properties.

- (22) Existentials vs cleft presentationals in KR (tentative)
- i. An existential with a RC in the coda is biclausal, regardless of *k(e)* omission. Instead, NANA presentationals can be monoclausal.
 - ii. NANA can be invariant – or omitted altogether – in the cleft presentational but not in the existential construction.
 - iii. The reduced form of NANA (*na*) may occur in both constructions, or in the presentational construction alone, but not in the existential alone.

The contrasts in (22i-iii) follow from McLellan's (2024) observations and reanalysis hypothesis (§4.1); (22iii) also reflects the idea that NANA might be further along a grammaticalization path in presentationals than in existentials, where it originates (cf. (8)). We begin with a finding of the elicitation tasks. This comprised 12 questionnaire entries and yielded 36 tokens; 15 of these exhibited NANA and, in 10 of these, a verb phrase followed the noun phrase immediately. In 7 of the 10 tokens with a VP, the form of NANA was *na*, in the remaining 3 it was *néna*. The 5 elicited tokens with no verb phrase after the NP all exhibited *néna*. These findings are summarized in Table 3.

NANA	NANA + NP	NANA + NP + VP
<i>na</i>	0	7
<i>néna</i>	5	3

Table 3. Elicitation tasks: tokens with NANA.

This finding should, of course, be replicated on a much larger scale to allow us to reach any firm conclusions. Yet, we note that, in accordance with the findings of the corpus analysis, the distribution obtained through elicitation suggests a preference for the reduced form *na* in the examples which can in principle be construed as a cleft presentational.

Apart from this tentative observation, the interviews confirmed unequivocally that the existential construction is obligatorily marked with NANA, the verb ‘have’ in KR (cf. (19)). In (23a-b) we report two existential sentences, which were produced by our informants as descriptions of a photo of a field with the sunlight in the background and of a glass window covered with condensation, respectively.

- (23) a. *Dann foto la néna zérb èk réyon d’ solèy.*
in photo DEM have grass with ray of sunshine
‘In that photo there is grass with a ray of sunshine.’ (Participant 2, 25/01/2025)
- b. *Néna dolo su la vit loto.*
have water on DEF window car
‘There is water on the car window.’ (Participant 3, 10/02/2025)

Existential NANA proved to inflect for tense and to be compatible with negation, thus behaving as a fully-fledged verb. In addition to *néna* (cf. (23a-b)), *nana* and *na* were produced and accepted as its present tense forms, which would appear to occur in free alternation in affirmative sentences. The past tense of NANA, *lavé*, is illustrated in the complement clause in (24a), while negation occurs in the second coordinate clause in (24a) and in (24b-c).

- (24) a. *Li la di k’ lavé in sèl Bondié, na pwin dot.*
he PRF say COMP have.PST INDF only God have NEG other
‘He said that there was only one God, there is no other.’
- b. *Na pa pliss domoun i asiz ke domoune i travay.*
have NEG more people FIN sitting.down than people FIN work
‘There are not more people sitting down than people working.’
- c. *Nana / na // na pwin / la¹⁵ pwin létshi mir dan la kour!*
have have // have NEG / have NEG lychees ripe in the courtyard
‘There are // there are no ripe lychees in the courtyard!’

The questionnaire entries in (24a-c) were accepted by all the participants. We did not provide or elicit a context for (24a-b), but the context *kosa nana* ‘what is there?’ was unanimously chosen for (24c); the alternatives in this example were listed as separate entries in the questionnaire. The three examples indicate that the combinations of copula and negation *na pa*, *na pwin* (and *la pwin*, see fn. 15) are grammatical in existential sentences.

The data in (24a,c) also indicate that the existential construction does not require a RC. If a RC was present, however, the judgements of our informants suggested that this can be a subject or object relative clause (cf. (25a-b)), thus supporting the findings of our corpus analysis (see Table 1). In (25a) the relativized constituent *dé fonm anglé* ‘two English women’ is the subject of the RC, while in (25b) *létshi mir* ‘ripe lychees’ is the object of *manzé* ‘eat’.

- (25) a. *Na dé fonm anglé i koz in ta.*
 have two women English FIN talk a lot
 ‘There are two English women who talk a lot.’
 b. *Dan la kour na létshi mir nou pé manzé aswar.*
 in the courtyard have lychees ripe we can eat tonight
 ‘In the courtyard there are ripe lychees that we can eat tonight.’

We take these examples to be existential constructions because (25a) was selected as the answer to the question *Kisa nana pou pasé le tan èk mwin* ‘Who is there to spend the time with me?’.¹⁶ As for (25b), it was accepted by all the participants in the context of the question *Kosa nana* ‘What is there?’.

The comparative observation of (25a-b) and of the alternatives listed in (26), which were separate questionnaire entries and were accepted unanimously in the context of *kosa nana?* ‘what’s there?’, indicates that the RC of the existential construction can – but need not – be marked by the relativizer *k(e)*.

- (26) *Dopi août 2008, dann la komine Bras Panon, na/ nana*
 since August 2008 in DET commune Bras Panon have have
in zoli lékol i /k’ i apèl “Ma Pensée”.
 INDF pretty school FIN REL FIN call *Ma Pensée*
 ‘Since August 2008, in the commune Bras Panon, there is a pretty school called *Ma Pensée*’

The interviews did not allow us to detect any definiteness restrictions in the existential construction. Indeed, example (27) was accepted by all the participants, in the context of *kosa nana* ‘What is there?’.

- (27) *Na Elise èk Zoe dan la kour!*
 have Elise and Zoe in DET courtyard
 ‘Elise and Zoe are in the courtyard!’

To be sure, this would seem to be an inverse locative construction, i.e. a construction with a topical locative predicate, whose argument is in focus (Cruschina 2012). Yet, the locative phrase *dan la kour* ‘in the courtyard’ was not given in the question, and there is no agreement in the literature on whether inverse locatives should be subsumed within

existential sentences (see Cruschina 2012; Koch 2012; Creissels 2014, 2023; Carlier & Lahousse 2023).

We also did not detect any restrictions on the negation of existentials, exception being made for the combination *la pa*, which was deemed incompatible with the sentences in (24c) and (26).¹⁷ One of the informants suggested that *la pa* indicates that there is an alternative for the negated constituent (e.g. there are no ripe lychees, but there is something else in the courtyard). It is thus possible that these judgements were triggered by an analysis of *la pa* as a free variant of *lé pa*, *lé* being a copula of specificational *it*-clefts, where the clefted constituent should be in narrow focus (McLellan 2023, 2024). The pivot was not in narrow focus in (24c) or (26).

Lastly, our informants categorically rejected the questionnaire entries with adjectival pivots, which were also not attested in the corpus. For completeness one such entry is given here.

- (28) **Nana parfimé dan la kour!*
have perfumed in DET courtyard

In sum, the findings of the interviews confirmed that KR existentials are formed with NANA, which can figure as the reduced form *na*, inflects for tense, and can be negated. A RC is not a requirement of KR existentials, but a subject or object RC can figure in the coda, whether or not marked by the relativizer *k(e)*. A ban on adjectival pivots but no tangible definiteness restrictions were detected.

Turning now to presentationals, we start with the observation that there were instances of the same photo or video being described as a cleft presentational by one participant but not the others. Consider (29a-b), which describe a photo of a little boy who has fallen while walking or running.

- (29) a. *Na in ti garson la tombé dan shemin.*
have INDF little boy PRF fall in road
'A little boy has fallen on the road.' (Participant 1, 17/01/2025)
b. *Lo marmay la bat a tèr.*
DET child PRF hit on floor
'The child has fallen down.' (Participant 2, 25/01/2025)

In (29a), the scene is described with a cleft presentational, formed with *na*, a clefted noun phrase, and a verb marked for perfect. In (29b), the same scene is described with an SV clause.

A similar contrast is found in (30a-b), which describe a photo of a woman opening a door to a man, the two appearing to be greeting each other.

- (30) a. *Na in boug èk in fanm po kozé*

- have INDF guy and INDF woman PROG talk
 ‘A guy and a woman are talking.’ (Participant 2, 25/01/2025)
- b. *In madam i rouv lo port pou son garson*
 INDF lady FIN open DET door for POSS son
 ‘A lady opens the door for her son.’ (Participant 1, 17/01/2025)

Although the interview is not an authentic speech act situation, these examples would seem to suggest that a new event can – but need not – be introduced with a cleft presentational in KR. SV order is another viable alternative.

As for the acceptability judgement task, the past tense of NANA was accepted as an alternative to the present in this example.

- (31) *Na/ nana/ navé un num privé la tel amwin su mon orange.*
 have have have.PST INDF number private PRF phone me on POSS orange
 ‘A private number phoned me on my Orange.’

This structure lends itself to a cleft presentational construal because it can be declifted. In fact, all participants chose *kosa i spas?* ‘what happens?’ as its most appropriate context. Apart from (31), there was little agreement on the acceptability of forms of NANA other than the present.

Negation was rejected almost categorically by two of the participants, as can be seen in (32), though *la pa* may have been rejected because of the broad focus interpretation conveyed by the question (see above).

- (32) *Kosa i spas?*
 what FIN happen
*Nana / *na pa / *la pa un num privé la tel amwin su mon orange.*
 have have NEG have NEG INDF number private PRF phone me on POSS orange
 ‘What is happening? A private number phoned me on my Orange.’

Overall, only 17 of 48 judgements on negated entries were acceptances.¹⁸ We can thus conclude that negation is problematic with cleft presentationals, although this result is not as clear-cut as the corresponding finding from the corpus analysis (see Table 1). Object CRCs were not as problematic, as only one of the informants rejected these structures, providing alternatives with subject CRCs.

A pattern which emerged clearly from the interviews is that declifting of cleft presentationals is possible. When *kosa i spas* ‘what’s happening?’ was chosen over *kosa nana* ‘what’s there?’, at least two of the three informants accepted the declifted variant of the given entry. Overall, 18 of 21 relevant judgements were acceptances. For example, in (33a-b), declifting was accepted unanimously.

- (33) a. *Lorélie la fé bwar amwin et ma parti dansé et na in ga la*
 Lorélie PRF make drink me and I=PRF go dance and have INDF guy PRF

- gard* *amwin.*
look me
- b. *Lorélie la fé bwar amwin et ma parti dansé et in ga la*
Lorélie PRF make drink me and I=PRF go dance and INDF guy PRF
gard amwin.
look me
'Lorélie made me drink and I went dancing and a guy looked at me.'

The omission of the CRC of a cleft presentational was ruled out in 11 of 15 relevant cases. Thus, all participants rejected (33a), in the absence of *la gard amwin* 'looked at me', and (34), in the absence of *la gard son kamarad...* 'looked at his/her friend...'

- (34) *Kosa i spas? Na inn *(la gard son kamarad, la di « anon, anon».)*
what FIN happen have one PRF look POSS friend PRF say let's.go
'What is happening? There is one (looked at their friend, said: Let's go).'

The definiteness of the clefted constituent did not affect the acceptability of cleft presentationals. To give but two examples, all participants accepted alternatives of (33a) and (34) where the indefinite noun phrase following NANA had been replaced by a proper name.

To conclude, the interviews confirmed the decliftability of cleft presentationals, the obligatoriness of the CRC, and the absence of definiteness restrictions on the clefted noun phrase. Although the other results were not as clear-cut, negation turned out to be problematic for two informants, object CRCs for one, and the forms of NANA other than the present proved problematic in most cases.

5. Analysis

5.1 Is NANA a focus marker?

By way of introduction of our analysis, we return to the hypothesis that (*il*) *y a* is a focus marking strategy in French existentials and cleft presentationals (Karssenbergh 2017, among others). This idea is not only supported by the observation that the postcopular noun phrase is consistently in focus in these constructions, but also readily accommodated within the grammar of French. This language is known to be characterized by a tendency to avoid clause-initial focus and only to allow VS order under specific syntactic and stylistic conditions (Lambrecht 2010; Lahousse & Lamiroy 2012; Leonetti 2017). Focus marking with (*il*) *y a* is thus a strategy to circumvent the violation of these language-specific constraints on focus and word order.¹⁹

Other Romance languages with comparable existential and cleft presentational patterns have flexible word order, however. To give but one example, Italian allows bare broad focus VS order with specific verbs classes, for example verbs of inherently directed motion.

- (35) Italian
È arrivato il pacco.
 be.3SG arrive.PTCP.M.SG the parcel.M.SG
 ‘The parcel has arrived.’ (authors’ example)

Benincà (1988) noted that the deixis of such bare broad focus VS structures is speaker-centred: in the absence of evidence to the contrary, (35) means ‘the parcel has arrived HERE’. It is thus possible that *c’è* clefting occurs in Italian when a deictic or speaker-centred reading would not be conveyed by verb semantics and VS order alone (see Bentley *et al.* 2015: 158). Consider (36).

- (36) Italian
C’è il bambino che ha la febbre.
 PF be.3SG the baby REL have.3SG the temperature
 ‘The baby has got a temperature.’

In contrast with its unmarked SV counterpart (*Il bambino ha la febbre* ‘The baby has got a temperature’), the cleft construction in (36) explicitly suggests that the matter at hand is of interest in the here-and-now to the speech act participants.

Turning now to KR, this language has fairly rigid SVO order and does not ban clause-initial focus, as is clearly suggested by the results of both the elicitation task and the acceptability judgement task (§4.3), as well as McLellan’s (2023: 245-248) study. To illustrate, the following question-answer pair testifies to the grammaticality of clause-initial focus in KR.

- (37) *Kisa i sava Boukan Kanot?*
 who FIN go Boucan Canot
Noémie i sava Boukan Kanot.
 Noémie FIN go Boucan Canot
 ‘Who’s going to Boucan Canot? Noémie is going to Boucan Canot.’ (McLellan 2023: 245)

In light of these facts, analysing NANA as a focus marker seems unjustified. Moreover, this analysis raises the question of how NANA contrasts with *sÉ*, a copula of specificational clefts in KR (McLellan 2023: 238-244), where the clefted constituent is also focal. In 5.3, we propose, instead, that NANA, the copula of a construction which is by definition context-dependent, the existential construction, can figure in

cleft presentationals to encode the anchoring of a new event to the discourse context.

5.2 *Parallel architecture*

Before we proceed to the analysis, we briefly introduce our framework. Our account is couched in Role and Reference Grammar (henceforth **RRG**), which, in Jackendoff's (2002: 125-130) terms, is a 'parallel architecture' framework for linguistic analysis. Discourse-pragmatics, lexical semantics and syntax are separate levels of representation, in this framework, and linguistic explanation is sought in the interplay of the three dimensions. A bidirectional algorithm governs the mapping, or 'linking', of lexical semantics and syntax (Van Valin 2023: 116-125). Language universals pertain to the semantic phase of the linking, whereas the morphosyntactic phase encompasses broad crosslinguistic variation. More fine-grained variation, including that between comparable constructions of cognate languages, is normally captured by means of Constructional Schemas. These are language- and construction-specific sets of instructions, which list the properties of a construction that do not follow from general linking principles.

Discourse-pragmatics can intervene at any stage in the linking and its grammatical encoding is also characterized by much cross-linguistic variation (Bentley 2023). As part of discourse-pragmatics, RRG includes a representation of the Immediate Common Ground (ICG, Berio *et al.* 2017, see Krifka & Musan 2012), i.e. the context in which a sentence is uttered and interpreted: the referents and propositions that have been introduced prior to the utterance, and the social and physical environment in which the speech act occurs. Following Balogh *et al.* (2026), the ICG is represented as a Dowtyan semantic representation of the predicates and their arguments, enriched by indices, which mark the ever-evolving discourse status of such predicates and arguments. This contextualized semantic representation includes by default a representation of the deictic coordinates of the discourse context of the utterance: <s(pace), t(ime), d(iscourse) p(articipant)>. While these can be understood as the here-and-now, speaker-centred, coordinates of a speech act, they can also be construed as the deictic coordinates that are given at each given point in discourse or in a text. In the next section, we propose an RRG account of KR existentials and cleft presentationals that captures their shared marking in terms of facets of the linking of semantic representation with the ICG.

5.3 KR existentials and presentationals at the interfaces

KR existentials and cleft presentationals turned out to have distinct properties (§§4.2, 4.3). NANA is only obligatory in existentials, where it behaves as a verb: it inflects for tense and can be negated. Instead, in presentationals, neither tense inflection nor negation are as well attested, if at all, and were often deemed problematic. The reduced form *na* was attested and accepted in both constructions, but, in presentationals, it occurs more frequently than the full forms of NANA. A subject, object or oblique RC can – but need not – occur in the coda of existentials, optionally exhibiting the relativizer *k(e)*. A CRC is an obligatory component of cleft presentationals. While the interviews provided some limited evidence of acceptability of the relativizer *k(e)* and an object CRC, neither pattern was found in the corpus data. Lastly, cleft presentationals can be declifted. These results support our expectations on KR (cf. (22i-iii)) and illustrate the contrasts in (9iii-v), which emerged from theoretical and typological research. In contrast, we have no evidence in support of (9i-ii). We now propose an account of the linking in the two constructions, constraining the discussion, for brevity, to the linking from semantics to syntax.

5.3.1 The linking in KR existentials

Different languages avail themselves of locative, possessive, comitative, ascriptive predicates to describe existence and presence. Crosslinguistically, the common denominator of existential constructions that bear special marking is that regardless of the predicate featured by a given language the existential construction is context-dependent (Francez 2007, 2010): the locative, possessive, etc., relation of containment that it expresses is a property of a context (§2).²⁰ KR avails itself of a possessive predicate, spelled out by NANA, and encodes the existential pivot as the possessee (see Creissels' 2023 notion of 'have-Inverse Locative Predication'; for a comparable analysis of possessive existential structures in Salento and Southern Calabria – Italy –, see De Angelis & Bucci 2022). This is clear from the comparison of existentials (cf. (23-26)) with possessives (cf. (19)) and with the existential examples where a subject pronoun precedes NANA (cf. (21)). Exception being made for these examples, the context of the containment relation, i.e., in KR, the possessor, remains unexpressed in the existential construction (see Francez's 2007, 2010 notion of implicit argument) and is construed in light of the information present in the ICG. This information may include specific spatio-temporal coordinates provided in the preceding text, but it may also be implicit and coincide with the here-and-now or

there-and-then coordinates that are present at each given point in discourse.

Below we represent the linking in (38) (cf. (26)). In Figure 1a we include the locative phrase *dann la komine Bras Panon* ‘in the commune Bras Panon’, while in Figure 1b we leave it out. If a location is introduced with the existential construction, this is a modifier of the possessive predication, which describes the context of the containment relation. It is not the expression of the context itself, as suggested by the fact that the locative phrase is optional.

- (38) ...(*dann la komine Bras Panon,*) *na/ nana in zoli lékol.*
 in DET commune Bras Panon have have INDF pretty school
 ‘In the commune Bras Panon, there is a pretty school.’

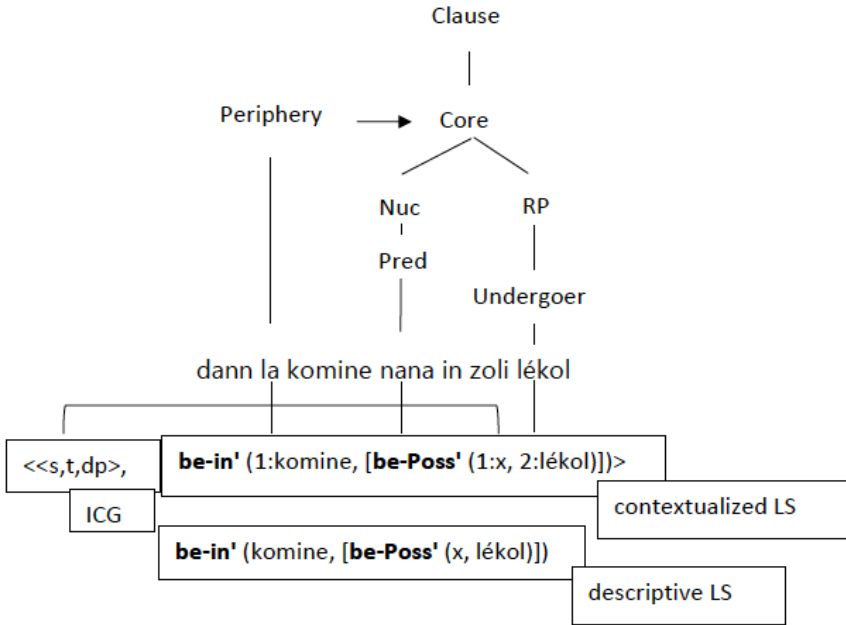


Figure 1a. Linking in (38), with locative phrase.

The line at the bottom of Figure 1a is the lexical semantic representation – or Logical Structure (LS) – of (38), which is formed by retrieving from the lexicon the possessive LS of NANA and the locative

LS of the preposition *dann*, and combining them in such a way that the latter modifies the former, because the locative phrase describes the location of the state of affairs expressed by *NANA*. The argument positions in these LSs are filled by argument descriptions and then enriched, in the contextualized LS, with indices that represent the status of the arguments at each given moment in discourse (§5.2). Given that (38) is a new statement, there are no previously introduced arguments in the Immediate Common Ground, and the indices in the contextualized LS start from 1. The first position in the possessive LS is the position of the possessor, which remains unspecified in the descriptive LS because this is a defining property of existentials (see above). In the contextualized LS, this position is by default linked to the bundle of deictic coordinates $\langle s,t,dp \rangle$ in the ICG (§5.2), a point which we develop below. However, since in this case a location has been introduced together with the existential construction, we assume that the position of the possessor is also co-indexed with this location. This means that the implicit context of the containment relation expressed by the possessive LS is understood with reference to the location in the locative LS.

The next step in the linking is the assignment of the macrorole Undergoer to the only referential argument of the possessive predicate, *un zoli lékol* ‘a pretty school’ (see Van Valin & LaPolla 1997: 147-158 for the notion of macrorole, or generalized semantic relation, and the macrorole assignment principles). In other languages, macrorole assignment would be a prerequisite for the control of person and number agreement on the verb, but this is irrelevant to KR. Then, the referential expression *un zoli lékol* ‘a pretty school’ links to a referential phrase (RP) position in the Core, the syntactic locus of the predicate and its arguments, and *nana*, the expression of the possessive predicate, links to the Nucleus, the syntactic locus of the predicate. The locative phrase *dann la komine...* ‘in the commune’ links to a periphery of the Core, i.e. the syntactic position of adjuncts that modify the Core. The possessor position cannot link to syntax because it is not referential.

If there is no locative phrase, the unexpressed possessor is construed solely with reference to the bundle of deictic coordinates in the ICG (see Figure 1b). Following Erteschik-Shir (1997: 7-32), $\langle s,t,dp \rangle$ can be thought of as the ‘stage topic’ of the predication: the proposition in the utterance is interpreted and evaluated with reference to this stage topic. It is this step in the linking that establishes the containment relation expressed by the existential predicate as a property of a context. This facet of the linking is construction specific and must be assumed to be overtly listed in the Constructional Schema of existential constructions.

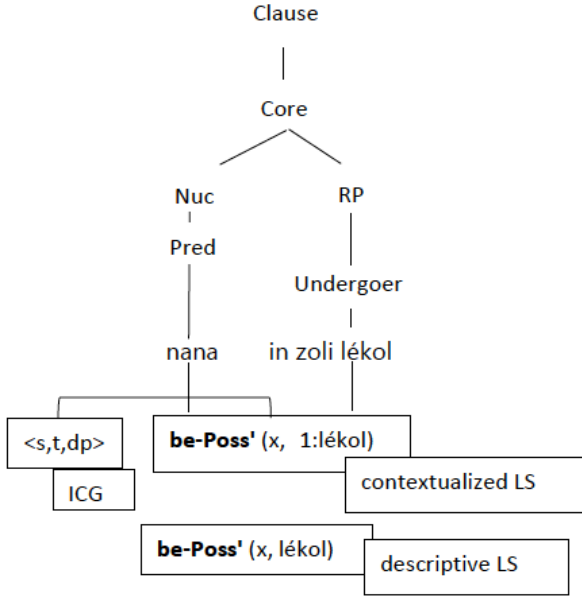


Figure 1b. Linking in (38), no locative phrase.

Supporting evidence for the analysis represented in Figures 1a-b is provided by the corpus examples with a subject pronoun preceding NANA (cf. (21)). We argued in section 4.2 that the subject pronoun *ou* could be left out of (21) (*après (ou) na lé vyé d’avan* ‘then you have / there are the old people from before’) with no repercussions on the truth conditional meaning of this statement. In fact, this is not a statement about the readers or interlocutors possessing the old people from before. Instead, it is a statement about the existence of older people, who do not speak like the young, and the pronoun expresses that this statement is of interest to the discourse participants. While the overt pronoun would figure in the LS and link to syntax in the representation of (21), because it is referential, following the constructional instructions, it would also link to the deictic coordinates in the ICG because these include the participants in the discourse situation. The difference between canonical existential constructions like (38) and possessive ones like (21) thus reduces to the exceptional overt expression of the context.

A RC in the existential coda need not be marked with the relativizer *k(e)*: this is true of relative clauses more broadly, especially subject ones, in KR (McLellan 2019). The fact that this relativizer was nonethe-

less found in the corpus examples, and accepted in the acceptability judgement task, combined with the optionality of the RC, supports a biclausal analysis of existentials with a RC in the coda. As is standard in RRG for restrictive relative clauses, the RC should be represented syntactically as a modifier of the referential Nucleus of the pivot RP (McLellan 2023: 137; París 2023). This is shown in Figure 2, where we represent the syntax of the RP *in zoli lékol i /k'i apèl* ‘*Ma Pensée*’ ‘a pretty school which is called...’ (cf. (26)). The relativizer of a relative clause can be a pronoun in the Pre-Core Slot, the syntactic site of relative pronouns and *wh*-words, or a clause linkage marker (CLM). Following McLellan (2023), we represent *k(e)* as a CLM in Figure 2 because it behaves as a complementizer and not as a pronoun.

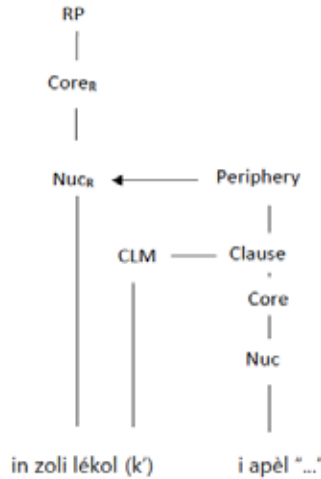


Figure 2. Syntax of RC in (26).

The key point here is that the RC in the periphery of the Nucleus of the pivot RP is not the same clause as that in which this RP is a constituent. Otherwise said, if there is a RC in the coda, the existential construction is biclausal.

5.3.2 The linking in KR cleft presentationals

The principal clues of biclausality in cleft presentationals were the relativizer *k(e)* and temporal marking on NANA. The significance of the relativizer *k(e)* needs no explanation. As for inflection, not only does it

testify to NANA behaving as a finite verb, alongside the finite verb in the CRC, but the possibility of temporal discrepancy between NANA and the verb in the CRC indicates that the two belong to different clauses, since the grammatical category tense has scope over the clause (Van Valin & LaPolla 1997: 40-52). Although admittedly these clues were very inconspicuous in corpus and elicited tokens of cleft presentationals, examples bearing these features were deemed acceptable in some cases. Negation of NANA was problematic for two informants, but again the fact that the third informant accepted it suggests that NANA can behave as a verb in cleft presentationals. We can thus conclude, following McLellan (2024) (§4.1), that KR cleft presentationals can be biclausal or monoclausal. In this section we discuss the linking in biclausal and monoclausal cleft presentationals, proposing an account of the reanalysis of the former structure into the latter and of the borrowing of existential marking into presentationals.

Consider example (39), which was produced by an informant to describe the video of a man sitting down next to a table, on which there is a phone.

- (39) [*Le boug lé in pti pé trakasé et*] *néna in pé de tan li atan lo kou de fil.*
have INDF little of time he wait DET call
‘[The guy is a little bit worried and] time goes by... he waits for the phone call’
(Participant 3, 12/02/2025)

In the second conjunct there is no argument sharing and no evidence of a syntactic linkage between *néna in pé de tan* ‘there is a little time’ and *li atan lo kou de fil* ‘he waits for the phone call’. Therefore, this sequence can be analysed as the succession of two asyndetically coordinated clauses, the one introducing the passing of time in the context of the video, the other predicating of the man in the video that he is waiting for a phone call. This analysis is represented in Figure 3, where the first conjunct links as an existential construction and the second as a separate transitive clause.

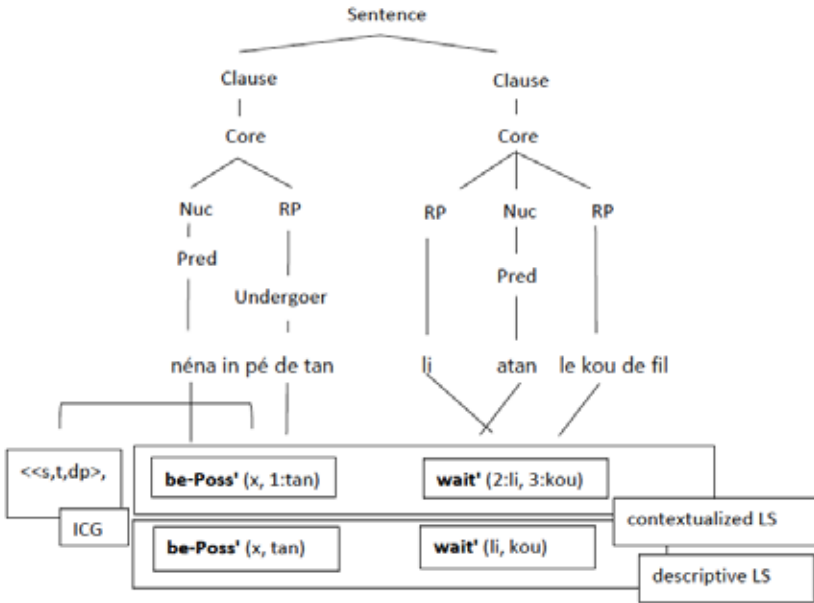


Figure 3. Linking in (39).

It is not clear that this clausal coordination is a presentational construction because the two clauses are simply juxtaposed. However, this kind of coordination can develop into a more cohesive structure, in which the two clausal nodes are joined under a single clausal node. In RRG this is called a clausal co-subordination, and its principal diagnostic is the sharing of grammatical categories that have clausal scope: tense, epistemic modality, and illocutionary force. A clue that this clausal co-subordination is found in KR is provided by the fact that the only questionnaire entry with NANA not in present tense that was accepted unanimously exhibited past tense *navé* and a past tense verb in the CRC (cf. (31), abridged in (40), and Figure 4).

- (40) *Navé un num privé la tel amwin su mon orange.*
 have.PST INDF number private PRF phone me on POSS orange
 'A private number phoned me on my Orange.'

The fact that tense is marked twice suggests that there are two clauses, but the sharing of the temporal value, which is preferred if not required by the native speakers, indicates that the two clauses are joined together under a superordinate clausal node. The two clauses

also share an argument, a feature of clausal co-subordination which, in other languages, is flagged with the same-argument marker of a switch reference system (Van Valin & LaPolla 1997: 450). In KR there is no such marking.²¹

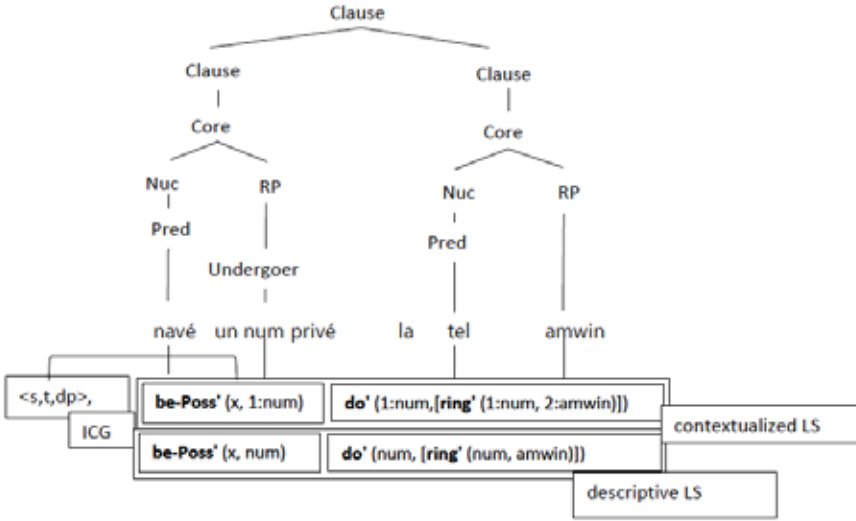


Figure 4. Linking in (40) (biclausal construction).

The structure in Figure 4 introduces a new referent into a discourse context and predicates something about it, in accordance with existing definitions of presentationals and existentials (see section 2 and Lena & Sarda 2023: 15). The main assertion, however, is clearly contained in the CRC, as is unmistakably suggested by the deleftability of (40) and comparable examples. This means that the first LS (**be-Poss'** (x, num)) can be backgrounded or omitted altogether, whereas the second (**do'** (num, [**ring'** (num, amwin)])) cannot. In addition, the sharing of tense and of one argument offer the conditions for the biclausal structure in Figure 4 to be reanalysed as a single clause. Our findings suggest that this reanalysis has occurred and the monoclausal counterpart of Figure 4 is a structure of KR (§§4.1, 4.3). We illustrate the monoclausal cleft presentational in Figure 5. This pattern does not include a possessive predicate and simply introduces a phone-ringing event into the universe of discourse. A key question that we set out to address in this study is why this monoclausal pattern is marked with NANA.

NANA is not required, as SV order alone can introduce a new event in KR. Nonetheless, NANA does occur, especially in its reduced form *na*. Building on McLellan (2024) and on Bentley & Ciconte’s (2024) analysis of presentationals in Turinese (Gallo-Italian, Italo-Romance), we claim that the reanalysis of the biclausal structure into a monoclausal one is accompanied by the grammaticalization of NANA, first, into a copula which occurs in a non-predicating Nucleus and, then, into an invariant marker of the same deictic coordinates in the ICG which are key to the establishment of the context-dependence of an existential LS. NANA thus anchors the presentational construction to the ICG, within which the new event is of interest and is interpreted.²²

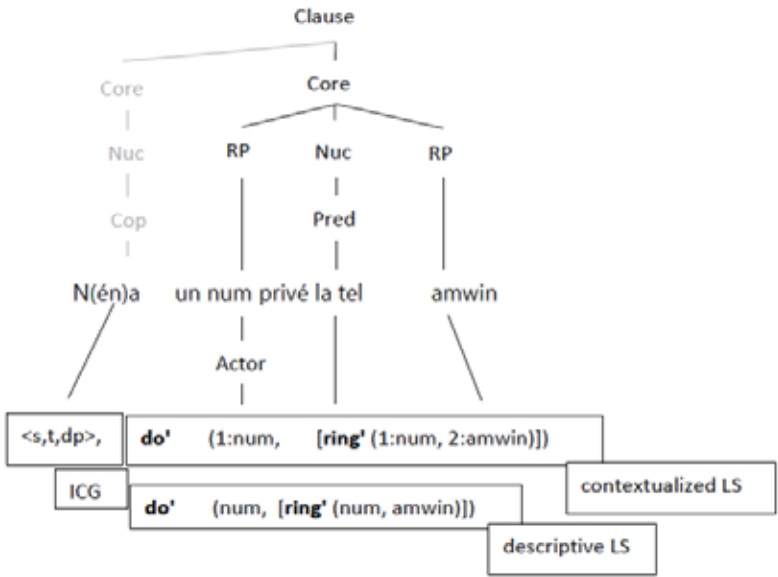


Figure 5. Linking in monoclausal construction (see 10).

Our account of cleft presentationals does not in and by itself capture the conflicting speaker judgements on negation. The low acceptability of negation is likely to be a consequence of the primary function of presentationals, which is to introduce a new event into the here-and-now of discourse.²³ Similar restrictions do not apply to existentials, because these structures express propositions about existence and presence, which can be negated.

6. Conclusion

In this study we have discussed the intersection of existential and cleft presentational constructions. Analysing primary evidence from Kréol Rényoné, we have brought to light unmistakable evidence that existentials and cleft presentationals are different constructions. We have proposed an explicit analysis that disentangles the two constructions, while also explaining how cleft presentationals draw on existentials diachronically and synchronically. In our account, existentials express relations of containment in a context. We have analysed the context-dependence of existentials in terms of a pattern of mapping from semantic representation to the deictic coordinates in the Immediate Common Ground. We have discussed how this mapping can enter cleft presentationals through an existential predicate and evolve into the marking of the deictic coordinates within which the new event being introduced is also interpreted.

Abbreviations

Non-standard gloss abbreviations: FIN = finiteness marker; PF = existential or presentational marker (proform). Further abbreviations: CRC = cleft relative clause; ICG = Immediate Common Ground; KR = Kréol Rényoné, i.e. Reunion Island Creole; NANA = verb 'have' in Kréol Rényoné (*nana, néna, na, etc.*); RC = relative clause; RP = referential phrase; RRG = Role and Reference Grammar; <s,t,dp> = <space, time, discourse participant>.

Notes

¹ Existential sentences are thus different from other statements which are interpreted with reference to a context (e.g. *it is raining*), because such statements do not include an implicit argument or context in their semantic representation.

² The coda consists of a verbal participle in 'eventive existentials' (e.g. *There was a man shot*). We do not discuss these separately because they fall within our definition of existential sentence, and they are also not exemplified in our dataset. We refer to McNally (1997: 152) and Villalba (2013) for relevant discussion.

³ In the glosses we use the Leipzig abbreviations, with some additions – see the list of abbreviations at the end of the paper.

⁴ We note that a nominal construal of *luardu* in (5a) ('dirtiness' instead of 'dirty'), which is in principle a possibility in Romance, would not make this pivot referential. The pivot would still describe a property and the construction would still stand in a minimal pair relationship with the ascriptive sentence in (5b).

⁵ For the possibility of declefting as a hallmark of cleft sentences see Lambrecht (2001) and Dufter (2009).

⁶ As noted by an anonymous reviewer, it is possible to cleft the existential pivot

contrastively (e.g. French *C'est en Afrique qu'il y a des lion (pas ici)* 'It is in Africa that there are lions (not here)'), whereas a similar manipulation is not possible with presentational sentences like *Il y a des lions qui ont attaqué le troupeau* 'Some lions have attacked the herd'. In addition to the matters that we investigate in the present work, this is an additional reason for distinguishing existentials from presentationals.

⁷ *Ki* is the univerbation of the relativizer *ke* and the finiteness marker *i*.

⁸ Relevant examples only included existential and presentational NANA; we excluded possessive NANA, auxiliary forms of NANA, narrow focus NANA clefts (see McLellan 2023, 2024) and temporal expressions with NANA.

⁹ The SMS author's original spelling is preserved. Text shortcuts such as *danC* for *dansé* (INF) are common in the corpus, likely because the data was collected before predictive text became prevalent.

¹⁰ This differs from McLellan (2024), where decleftability was the deciding criterion to include examples as presentationals.

¹¹ This percentage is calculated as a proportion of existentials that had a RC, i.e. 85, rather than all existentials.

¹² Of the 50 definite pivots, 26 were specific, 18 generic and 6 were universally quantified. In addition, 9 of the 50 examples were not typical existential constructions in that the pivot preceded the copula, either because it was focalized with fronting, or because it was the head of a relative clause.

¹³ Note that *la* can also occur as a variant of NANA (see McLellan 2023: 52). However, in 181 *la* examples analysed from the corpus, none were instances of an existential or cleft presentational, although there is a great deal of noise when searching for *la* in the corpus, as it is also a determiner, a demonstrative, a perfective marker, a variant of the copula *lé* (BE), and an adverb.

¹⁴ Interviews with three native speaker participants were conducted in January and February 2025. Ethical clearance for the interviews was granted by the Proportionate University Research Ethics Committee of the University of Manchester on 4 December 2024 (ref. 2024-21442-38361). The questionnaire is available on the University of Manchester *Figshare* website as a contribution to fieldwork assisted syntactic research (see Bentley & McLellan 2025).

¹⁵ Note that *la* is another present-tense form of NANA (see note 13), which typically occurs with negation. The negative form *na pwin* can thus alternatively appear as *la pwin* (McLellan 2023: 265).

¹⁶ One of the participants selected (25a) as the answer to the above question, while the others chose the alternative without an RC *Na dé fonm anglé* 'there are two English women'.

¹⁷ When including *la pa*, (26) was rejected by two participants and (24c) by all.

¹⁸ The question *kosa i spas* 'what's happening?' was either given or chosen in the context of 41 of the 48 tokens.

¹⁹ There are, of course, other constructions associated with different focus-structure articulations (e.g. *c'est* clefts). An anonymous reviewer has also pointed out to us that clause initial focus is possible in spoken French, where focus is marked through prosody.

²⁰ Our account follows Bentley *et al.* (2025: 146-152) in assuming that existential constructions predicate existence or presence in relation to a contextual, unexpressed, argument but departs from that analysis in assuming that the existential predicate can be possessive (or locative, comitative, etc., depending on the language) synchronically and not merely diachronically.

²¹ In Figure 4 we follow McLellan (2024) in analysing biclausal cleft presentationals as clausal co-subordinations, but we depart from that account in representing the first clause as an existential construction. The reader should note that the markers of grammatical categories (e.g. tense) link to a separate projection in RRG, but for sim-

plicity we leave this projection out of Figure 4.

²² Bentley & Ciconte (2024) analysed the marker *je* of Turinese presentationals as an ‘index’ of the deictic coordinates of the discourse situation. Here we do not call NANA an index because, unlike *je*, NANA is not locative synchronically.

²³ The absolute unacceptability of negation could be represented as an instruction in the Constructional Schema of cleft presentationals.

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Printed in February 2026
by Industrie Grafiche Pacini Editore Srl
Via A. Gherardesca • 56121 Ospedaletto • Pisa • Italy
Tel. +39 050 313011 • Fax +39 050 3130300
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