

## How are polar interrogatives in Mauritian Creole formed?

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**Abstract.** Mauritian Creole is known to form polar questions in two ways: by using the utterance-initial particle *eski*, derived from French *est-ce que* ‘is it the case that’, or by applying a rising intonation to the declarative sentence. This paper asks the question whether both question forms are syntactically interrogative sentences or instead have different underlying structures. The question is relevant if we consider that a number of languages use declarative sentences to ask (biased) polar questions, a question type known as “declarative questions” in the literature (also: “rising declaratives” in English). We evaluate the possibility of intonation questions being the equivalents of declarative questions. Using a battery of tests originally designed for European French, we present native speaker judgments from the third author of the paper. While we found that not all our tests point to the conclusion that intonation questions are declarative sentences, the test results provide significantly more support to intonation questions being declarative questions rather than syntactic interrogatives.

**Keywords.** Mauritian Creole; French; interrogatives; non-canonical questions; declarative questions; biased questions

**1. Introduction.** Mauritian Creole is a French-lexifier Creole language spoken in Mauritius, an island in the Indian Ocean. Mauritian Creole developed from contact between French and a variety of language families, such as Austronesian, Bantu, Dravidian, Indo-Aryan, and Niger-Congo (Rajah-Carrim 2007; van der Wal & Veenstra 2015). While the official language of Mauritius is English, the vast majority (approximately 70%) of the population speaks Mauritian Creole as a first language (Tse-Chi-Shum 2022). Around twelve languages are spoken in Mauritius, including Bhojpur, Hakka, and French, the last being spoken by a majority of the population (Rajah-Carrim 2007; Tse-Chi-Shum 2022). The language of instruction at schools has been primarily English and French: school children are addressed in French, classroom materials and exam questions are written in English, but students use both French and Mauritian Creole to communicate with peers (Rajah-Carrim 2007). However, in the last twenty years, Mauritian Creole has been introduced in primary schools, as well as in advertising and the media. Overall, the prestige associated with Mauritian Creole is lower than the prestige associated with its lexifier language, French, or with the national language, English.

In this paper, we investigate polar questions in Mauritian Creole with data provided by the third author, a native speaker of Mauritian Creole from Port Louis.

**2. Polar questions in Mauritian Creole.** Mauritian Creole has two ways of forming polar questions: by the question particle *eski*, derived from French *est-ce que* ‘is it the case that’ (1a), or by using intonation (1b).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Syea (2013) also reports on questions with the final particle *no*, as in *Lapli pe tonbe no?*. This question, based on its form and meaning, seems to be a tag question, which obligatorily expresses speaker bias, and as such, its English

- (1) a. Eski lapli pe tonbe?  
 ESKI rain ASP fall  
 ‘Is it raining?’  
 b. Lapli pe tonbe?  
 rain ASP fall  
 ‘Is it raining?’ (Syea 2013:265–266)

In this paper, we entertain the thought that the two polar questions are not equivalent in terms of their meaning and sentence type. We assume, following Huddleston (1994), Ginzburg & Sag (2000) and Abeillé et al. (2014), that speech act is not uniquely determined by sentence type. Polar questions constitute a speech act type, and they typically or canonically are conveyed through syntactically interrogative sentences. Assertions, too, are canonically associated with declarative sentences. However, it is possible for a certain sentence to convey a speech act other than the one canonically associated with it. An example of this is the utterance type known as declarative questions.

2.1. DECLARATIVE QUESTIONS. Declarative questions are declarative sentences used for the purpose of asking a question (Gunlogson 2003). This utterance type is well-studied in English and some related languages, but far less is known about non-Indo-European languages (see Kiss et al. 2024 on declarative questions in Chinese languages). An example of an English declarative question (also known as a “rising declarative”) is shown in (2c).

- (2) a. It’s raining. (declarative sentence conveying assertion)  
 b. Is it raining? (interrogative sentence conveying a question)  
 c. It’s raining? (declarative sentence conveying a question) (Gunlogson 2003:5)

Declarative questions are quite similar to canonical polar questions, but differ from them in their syntax and are subject to a set of discourse restrictions that do not apply to polar questions. As for its syntax, the English declarative question in (2c) has declarative word order, like the assertion in (2a). The question in (2b) is an interrogative sentence, which in English is seen from the inversion of the copula and the subject. While both the interrogative and declarative questions can be used interchangeably in many contexts, they do not convey the exact same meaning.

Declarative questions obligatorily convey bias while polar interrogatives may convey unbiased (i.e., genuine) or biased questions. Gunlogson (2003) notes that in a neutral context where the speaker is impartial, only interrogatives are used felicitously. This is why Robin’s declarative question in (3b) is infelicitous, together with assertions (3c):

- (3) Robin is sitting in a windowless computer room with no information about current weather conditions when another person enters. Robin says to the newcomer:  
 a. Is it raining?  
 b. #It’s raining?  
 c. #It’s raining. (Gunlogson 2003:60–61)

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translation would be ‘It’s raining, isn’t it?’, rather than ‘Is it raining?’. In this paper, we do not examine questions with *no*.

On the other hand, in a context like (4), one can ask both a polar interrogative or a declarative question.

- (4) Robin is sitting, as before, in a windowless computer room when another person enters. The newcomer is wearing a wet raincoat and boots. Robin says:
- a. Is it raining?
  - b. It's raining?
  - c. (I see that/So) It's raining. (Gunlogson 2003:61)

Robin's utterance in (4a) is felicitous because polar interrogatives in English can be used as biased questions; (4b) is felicitous because declarative questions are good in biasing contexts; and (4c) is felicitous because there is enough contextual evidence to make a statement.

Thus while both declarative questions and polar interrogatives can convey biased questions, only polar interrogatives are acceptable if the speaker is not biased, declarative questions must convey bias and are ruled out in a neutral context.

2.2. INTERROGATIVE VS DECLARATIVE QUESTIONS IN MAURITIAN CREOLE. We now turn to our research question. While both *eski*-questions and intonation questions embody the speech act of questioning, both of them may not be interrogative sentences.

**Could intonation questions be interrogatives?** The answer to this question is not obvious. Languages across the world do use intonation as one of their strategies, or the sole strategy to mark interrogatives: The latter is the case for 173 languages in a sample of 955 languages in the World Atlas of Linguistic Structures (Dryer 2013). In addition, it is also not uncommon among the languages of the world to have multiple ways of marking interrogative sentences (see Hölzl 2018). European French, which also happens to be the lexifier language of Mauritian Creole, can use inversion and clefting to form interrogatives, as shown later in this section.

In European French, declarative questions happen to be marked by intonation alone (Abeillé et al. 2014). However, this in itself does not entail that Mauritian Creole intonation questions are declarative questions, too. Though the labels of creole languages often include the name of the lexifier languages, the grammar of a creole language receives significantly more influence from the substrate languages, which in the case of Mauritian Creole would be Malagasy, Wolof, and Makhuwa-Enahara (van der Wal & Veenstra 2015), rather than from the superstratum language, in this case, European French (see Lefebvre 2004 and the references therein). Therefore, based solely on the fact that French declarative questions are formed by intonation alone, we cannot assume that intonation questions convey declarative questions in Mauritian Creole (neither can we exclude the possibility).

Furthermore, some scholars claim that intonation is the primary means of marking interrogatives in Creole languages (Bickerton 2016; Bakker 2015):

“[N]o creole shows any difference in syntactic structure between questions and statements. Question-particles, where they occur, are sentence-final and optional.” (Bickerton 2016:65)

For these reasons, the hypothesis that Mauritian Creole intonation questions are interrogatives remains plausible.

**Could intonation questions be declarative questions?** The answer to this question is not obvious either. First, contrarily to Bickerton’s (2016) claim mentioned above, intonation does not seem to be the only means to form interrogatives in Creole languages, and in Mauritian Creole either. Based on the information currently available at the Atlas of Pidgin and Creole Language Structures (Haspelmath & the APiCS Consortium 2013), Creole languages frequently use question particles, both sentence-initial and sentence-final ones, a tendency also seen in the sample of Velupillai (2021). This fact opens up the possibility that Mauritian Creole uses intonation questions without question particles for a purpose other than to encode polar canonical questions, which may be conveyed instead by *eski*-questions.

Another argument why we may suspect that Mauritian Creole intonation questions are declarative questions is tied to their form: an intonation question has the same segmental content as a declarative sentence, differing only in its suprasegmental content. As such, they could well be instantiations of declarative sentences used as questions: there are Germanic languages that are known to mark declarative questions this way (Gunlogson 2003; Poschmann 2008); Chinese languages that have “intonation questions” besides polar questions marked by question particles (Zeng et al. 2004; Ma et al. 2011); and Sadock (1984) also reports that confirmation-seeking questions in Kalaallisut (West Greenlandic) are formulated this way.<sup>2</sup>

Lastly, it would be a luxury for a language to maintain two structures for the very same speech act type, and so it is very likely that despite their similarities, *eski*-questions and intonation questions diverge in at least certain contexts.

**Our research question.** The question we address in this paper is thus the following: Are both *eski*-questions and intonation questions polar interrogative sentences in Mauritian Creole?

As mentioned before, European French, which happens to be the lexifier of Mauritian Creole and also a superstrate language in Mauritius, has multiple ways of forming polar questions, shown in (5): they can be formed by cleft constructions (5a), by inversion (5b), and by intonation (5c), which we call intonation questions. A minimal triple is shown in (5).

- (5) a. Est-ce que Paul sera là?  
       ‘Will Paul be there?’  
       b. Paul sera-t-il là?  
       c. Paul sera là? (Abeillé et al. 2014:130)

Abeillé et al. (2014) and Gyuris (2019) applied syntactic and semantic tests to these utterance types and concluded that only *est-ce que* and inverted questions are syntactically interrogative sentences; intonation questions are declarative sentences used as questions, in other words: declarative questions. In what follows, we apply the same tests to Mauritian Creole.

**3. Declarative and interrogative sentences in Mauritian Creole.** Abeillé et al. (2014) found a number of features that show an asymmetry between interrogatives and declaratives in French, that is, either they are allowed in (*est-ce que* and inverted) interrogatives but not in declaratives, or the other way round. In the overwhelming majority of these tests, they found that intonation

<sup>2</sup> Though Sadock (1984) does not call them declarative questions, the morphological form of the utterance type makes it clear that the sentence is in the indicative mood, and so it is considered a declarative sentence, and the description of the meaning of the utterance type (“questions that simultaneously put the speaker on record as holding a certain belief and that request confirmation of that belief”) makes it clear that it is a biased question.

questions pattern with declaratives, and not with interrogatives. The results of their tests lead the authors to conclude that the constructions in (5a) and (5b) are interrogative sentences, while intonation questions like (5c) are not. Instead, (5c) is a declarative question comparable to (2c).

Though Abeillé et al.'s (2014) battery of tests was designed for French, some of them may be useful to distinguish interrogatives from declaratives in other languages as well (see Gyuris 2019 for Hungarian, Munteanu & Kiss 2025 for Russian, and Kiss et al. 2024 for Shanghainese and Cantonese).

As a preliminary, we note that just because Mauritian Creole is a French-lexifier Creole language, it does not entail that the tests give the same results as in European French. As mentioned earlier, Lefebvre (2004) argues that the grammars of Creole languages receive less of an influence from the superstrate language and are more similar to the grammars of the substrate languages. Due to the significantly different grammars, not all of the tests may be applicable to Mauritian Creole. On the other hand, we may find similarities, given that French is spoken by a large proportion of the population and that it is associated with high social value (Corne 1999; Tse-Chi-Shum 2022). Thus even though present day European French and Mauritian Creole may not be close genetically, there may be similarities after all, due to sociolinguistic factors.

In the next section, we apply the tests of Abeillé et al. (2014) and one test offered by Gyuris (2019). We present the test results of Abeillé et al. (2014) for European French together with the corresponding tests on Mauritian Creole. The evaluation of the tests on Mauritian Creole is based on the introspective judgments of the third author, who is a native speaker of the language.

3.1. DISCOURSE PROPERTIES. Declarative questions are not felicitous in an unbiased context. As for French polar questions, *est-ce que*-questions and inverted questions are both ruled out in a biased context, while intonation questions are felicitous, which suggests that intonation questions are declarative sentences. Abeillé et al. (2014) give an example in which the speaker sees their soaking wet coworker entering. In such a scenario, it would be inappropriate to use any of the two interrogatives in (6a), because the context provides clear evidence to one of the answers, namely the positive one. Only the intonation question is felicitous, see (6b).

(6) S1's addressee enters the room with his jacket soaking wet

- a. #Est-ce que tu es mouillé? / #Es-tu mouillé?  
'Are you wet?'
- b. Tu es mouillé?  
'You are wet?'

(Abeillé et al. 2014:141)

As for Mauritian Creole, we find a similar distribution between the two question types. In a context like the one in (6), *eski*-questions were judged unnatural, because they make the speaker sound like they assign the same probability to both possibilities, while the context is such that it provides evidence for the positive answer. This would thus suggest that *eski*-questions are interrogatives, which can convey unbiased information-seeking questions in a neutral context. Intonation questions, on the other hand, were judged as natural in the same context, which suggests that intonation questions are biased.

- (7) a. Eski lapli pe tonbe?  
       Q rain ASP fall  
       ‘Is it raining?’  
       b. %Lapli pe tonbe?  
           rain ASP fall  
       ‘Is it raining?’

However, if we test the two utterance types in a neutral context, the same asymmetry no longer holds as robustly. If the speaker calls the addressee on the phone, and has no contextually available evidence to any of the answers to the question of whether there it is raining there, an interrogative is expected to be acceptable and a declarative question should be ruled out. And *eski*-questions indeed are acceptable, which, again, suggests that they are true interrogatives. However, we found that intonation questions were accepted here.<sup>3</sup>

Declarative questions are licensed by some contextually accessible piece of evidence for the truth of the propositional content of the question Gunlogson (2003), which in the above contexts would be the speaker’s perception of the addressee as someone who has encountered rain. This contextual evidence can be treated various ways by the speaker of the declarative question: they can elicit confirmation, convey mirativity, or incredulity (Kiss 2024). Mauritian Creole intonation questions exhibit all these flavors. However, since polar interrogatives are not excluded in principle from conveying bias, this fact cannot in itself be taken as evidence for the hypothesis that intonation questions are declarative questions. In what follows, we perform syntactic and semantic tests on Mauritian Creole questions.

3.2. THE FUNDAMENTAL QUESTION. In French, when introducing or referring to a question, it apparently has to have the form of an interrogative, which is why (8a) and (8b) are well-formed in this context, but not (8c).

- (8) a. Mais la question fondamentale est: est-ce qu’on peut faire des lections libres aujourd’hui, accessibles à tout le monde?  
       ‘But the fundamental question is, is it possible to organize free elections nowadays, open to everybody?’  
       b. La question fondamentale est: peut-on faire des lections libres aujourd’hui?  
       c. #La question fondamentale est: on peut faire des lections libres aujourd’hui?  
       (Abeillé et al. 2014:133)

Abeillé et al. (2014) explain this pattern by sentence type: when a question is introduced, only interrogatives can follow, and since intonation questions are declaratives, they give rise to oddness in (8c). As for Mauritian Creole, it shows the same pattern as French. That is, the *eski*-question can be introduced as ‘the most important question’, but not the intonation question.

- (9) Kestyon ki pli importan la se:  
       question COMP most important DEF it.is  
       ‘The most important question is’:

<sup>3</sup> We are aware, however, that not all speakers accept (7b), thanks to Fabiola Henri (p.c.).

- a. Eski nu kav fer bann eleksyon lib azordi?  
Q we can make PL election free today  
'Can we organize free elections nowadays?'
- b. #Nu kav fer bann eleksyon lib azordi?  
we can make PL election free today  
'We can organize free elections nowadays?'

This test suggests that *eski*-questions like (9a) are interrogatives but intonation questions like (9b) are not.

3.3. COORDINATION. Abeillé et al. (2014) observe that in French, only interrogatives can be coordinated with other interrogatives by *et* 'and', but not with declaratives. Interrogatives, whether formed by inversion or by clefting (*est-ce que*), can be coordinated by *et* 'and' with each other and even with *wh*-interrogatives. The examples in (10a) and (10b) show that *est-ce que* and inversion questions can be coordinated with each other, but (10c) shows that intonation questions cannot be coordinated with any of them, only with another intonation question, as shown in (10d).

- (10) a. **Est-ce que** tu es prêt et **est-ce qu'**on peut encore arriver à l'heure?  
'Are you ready and can we still make it on time?'
- b. **Est-ce que** tu es prêt et **peut-on** encore arriver à l'heure?
- c. #**{Est-ce que** tu es prêt/*Es-tu prêt*} et **on peut** encore arriver à l'heure?  
'Are you ready and you think we can still make it on time?'
- d. Tu n'es pas prêt et tu penses qu'on peut encore arriver à l'heure?  
'You're not ready and you think we can still make it on time?' (Abeillé et al. 2014:134)

In Mauritian Creole, coordinating two *eski*-questions is possible, and coordinating an intonation question with an *eski*-question is not, just like in French.

- (11) a. **Eski** to 'nn pare ek **eski** nu ankor kapav ariv dan ler?  
Q you ASP ready and Q we still able arrive in hour  
'Are you ready and can we arrive in time?'
- b. #To 'nn pare ek **eski** nu ankor kapav ariv dan ler?  
you ASP ready and Q we still able arrive in hour  
Intended: 'You're ready and can we arrive in time?'

However, not all combinations behave the way they do in French. The coordination in (12a) is illicit in French yet acceptable in Mauritian Creole; and the coordination in (12b) should be acceptable in Mauritian Creole, by the assumption of this test, which is that sentences of the same clause type should always be grammatical when coordinated, yet it is not.

- (12) a. **Eski** to 'nn pare ek nu ankor kapav ariv dan ler?  
Q you ASP prepare and we still able arrive in hour  
Intended: 'Are you ready and we can still arrive in time?'
- b. #To 'nn pare ek nu ankor kapav ariv dan ler?  
you ASP prepare and we still able arrive in hour  
Intended: 'Are you ready and can we arrive in time?'

Apparently, the coordination of two questions is licensed if and only if the first conjunct is an *eski*-question. Whatever the conditions of coordinating questions is in Mauritian Creole, it seems that it is not sentence type but the first C head that plays a role in it.

3.4. POLARITY SUBJUNCTIVE. According to Abeillé et al. (2014), the clausal complement of some French verbs of communication and propositional attitude verbs appears in the subjunctive mood in certain “non-positive environments”, which include interrogatives. The example in (13) shows that the main verb (*croyez*, the conjugated form of *croire* ‘believe’) licenses the subjunctive mood in the embedded verb (*craigne*, from *craindre* ‘be afraid’).

- (13) a. Et moi, croyez-vous que je craigne<sub>subj</sub> votre jugement?  
           ‘Do you think that I am afraid of your appraisal?’  
       b. \*Et moi, vous croyez que je craigne<sub>subj</sub> votre jugement? (Abeillé et al. 2014:134)

While the authors note that alternations are possible between the subjunctive and indicative forms (*craigne* and *crains*, respectively), it is far less likely in intonation questions.

This test is not applicable to Mauritian Creole, which does not have the subjunctive mood as shown in the Mauritian Creole equivalents of Abeillé et al.’s (2014) French examples shown in (14).

- (14) a. Eski zot     pense (ki)    mo per zot     zizman?  
           Q    you.PL think COMP I    fear your.PL judgment  
           ‘Do you think I fear your judgment?’  
       b. Zot     pense (ki)    mo per zot     zizman?  
           you.PL think COMP I    fear your.PL judgment  
           ‘You think I fear your judgment?’

Testing the availability of the subjunctive mood in Mauritian Creole – which does not have it – cannot lead us closer to deciding whether *eski*-questions and intonation questions are of the same clause type.

3.5. EPISTEMIC ADVERBS. Epistemic adverbs adorn declaratives with the speaker’s epistemic stance: by adding *perhaps*, *apparently*, or *indubitably*, the assertion gets anchored to the speaker’s viewpoint and doxastic state. It has been already pointed out by Huddleston (1994) and Gunlogson (2003) that only declarative questions can host such adverbs.

- (15) a. They no doubt misunderstood her intentions?  
       b. You’re surely not going to agree? (Huddleston 1994:429)
- (16) a. #Has the manager been *of course* informed?  
       b. The manager has *of course* been informed?  
       c. The manager has *of course* been informed. (Gunlogson 2003:18)

Of special interest are those epistemic adverbs that are acceptable in declarative sentences but not in interrogative ones, such as *peut-être* ‘perhaps’ and *apparemment* ‘apparently’, as shown in (17).



- (17) a. #Est-ce que Paul a peut-être / apparemment découvert le virus?  
 b. #Paul a-t-il peut-être / apparemment découvert le virus?  
 ‘Has Paul perhaps / apparently discovered the virus?’ (Abeillé et al. 2014:135)

Crucially, these two epistemic adverbs are felicitous in intonation questions, as shown in (18), which further corroborates that this utterance type is conveyed not by interrogative but by declarative sentences.

- (18) a. Et Paul, il a apparemment / peut-être / découvert le virus?  
 ‘And Paul, he has apparently discovered / he may have discovered the virus?’ (Abeillé et al. 2014:135)

In Mauritian Creole, the epistemic adverbs *kav* ‘maybe’ and *aparaman* ‘apparently’, which appear naturally in a declarative sentence, see (19a) and (20a), cannot appear in an *eski*-question, see (19b) and (20b), but can appear in an intonation question, see (19c) and (20c).<sup>4</sup>

- (19) a. Kav Paul inn dekuver enn virus.  
 maybe Paul ASP discover a virus  
 ‘Maybe Paul has discovered a virus.’  
 b. #Eski kav Paul inn dekuver enn virus?  
 Q maybe Paul ASP discover a virus  
 #‘Has Paul maybe discovered a virus?’  
 c. Kav Paul inn dekuver enn virus?  
 maybe Paul ASP discover a virus  
 ‘Paul has maybe discovered a virus?’
- (20) a. Aparaman Paul inn dekuver enn virus.  
 apparently Paul ASP discover a virus  
 ‘Apparently, Paul has discovered a virus.’  
 b. #Aparaman eski Paul inn dekuver enn virus?  
 apparently Q Paul ASP discover a virus  
 #‘Has Paul apparently discovered a virus?’  
 c. Aparaman Paul inn dekuver enn virus?  
 apparently Paul ASP discover a virus  
 ‘Paul has apparently discovered a virus?’

The fact that *kav* ‘maybe’ and *aparaman* ‘apparently’ are felicitous in intonation questions suggests that they are syntactically declarative sentences used as questions, while *eski*-questions are true interrogatives.

<sup>4</sup> The context that licenses intonation questions with epistemic stance adverbs are ones where the speaker thinks, based on contextual evidence, that the answer to the question is likely positive. For example, (20c) is felicitous in a context where the speaker and the addressee both know that Paul has been working on identifying new viruses, and one day they see that Paul has made it to the front page of several newspapers. Seeing Paul’s image and the headline ‘New virus discovered’, the speaker, who has not read the article yet, can consider it likely that the news is that Paul has discovered a virus.

3.6. NEGATIVE POLARITY ITEMS AND INDEFINITE EXPRESSIONS. Abeillé et al. (2014) propose that the distribution of negative polarity items (NPIs) can also shed light on whether the questioning utterance is syntactically interrogative or declarative. Huddleston (1994) and Gunlogson (2003) observe that while interrogatives license English NPIs like *any* and *ever*, declarative questions do not.

- (21) a. Have you ever considered emigrating?  
 b. \*You have ever considered emigrating? (Huddleston 1994:429)

- (22) a. Is anybody home?  
 b. #Anybody's home?  
 c. #Anybody's home. (Gunlogson 2003:19)

As for European French, Abeillé et al. (2014) show a similar pattern for the NPIs *jamais* 'ever', *quiconque* 'whoever', or *qui que ce soit* 'whoever it may be'; an example for the latter is shown in (23).

- (23) a. Est-ce qu'il y aurait **qui que ce soit** pour nous aider?  
 'Would there be anyone to help us?'  
 b. Y aurait-il **qui que ce soit** pour nous aider?  
 c. # Il y aurait **qui que ce soit** pour nous aider?  
 d. # Il y aurait **qui que ce soit** pour nous aider. (Abeillé et al. 2014:136)

The Mauritian Creole translation of (23) would involve the expressions *enn kikenn* and *enn dimunn*, both translatable as 'someone' or 'anyone' in English. Both of them can occur in both kinds of interrogatives, as shown in (24a) and (24b); however, declarative sentences favor *enn dimunn*.

- (24) a. Eski ti pu ena enn kikenn / enn dimunn pu ed nu?  
 Q PST MOD there.is one someone one someone to help us  
 'Can someone help us?'  
 b. Ti pu ena enn kikenn / enn dimunn pu ed nu?  
 PST MOD there.is one someone one someone to help us  
 'Can someone help us?'  
 c. Ti pu ena ?enn kikenn / enn dimunn pu ed nu.  
 PST MOD there.is one someone one someone to help us  
 'Someone can help us.'

A test related to negative polarity items is offered by Gyuris (2019) who observes that in Hungarian, the indefinite pronoun *valaki* 'someone' in an interrogative can be interpreted both within the scope of negation (i.e., as 'anyone') and as taking scope over negation (i.e., as 'someone specific'), but in declaratives, only the 'someone specific' reading is available. The relevant example adapted from Gyuris (2019) is shown in (25). Interrogatives in Hungarian are marked by a single rise-fall contour over an intonational phrase, which is marked by / \.

- (25) a. János nem hívott fel tegnap valakit/\?. (interrogative)  
 János NEG called VM yesterday somebody  
 ✓ ‘Did John not call someone (specific) yesterday?’  $\exists > \text{NEG}$   
 ✓ ‘Did John not call anyone yesterday?’  $\text{NEG} > \exists$
- b. János nem hívott fel tegnap valakit. (declarative sentence)  
 János NEG called VM yesterday somebody  
 ✓ ‘János did not call someone (specific) yesterday’  $\exists > \text{NEG}$   
 \* ‘János did not call anyone yesterday’  $\text{NEG} > \exists$

Hungarian questions may also contain multiple rise-fall contours; however, as Gyuris (2019) convincingly argues, these are declarative questions. One of the author’s arguments for this claim is that the indefinite pronoun *valaki* is interpreted as ‘someone (specific)’ in such utterances, as they are in declarative sentences conveying assertions (26a).

- (26) a. /\János /\nem hívott fel /\tegnap /\valakit? (declarative question)  
 János NEG called VM yesterday somebody  
 ✓ ‘Did John not call someone (specific) yesterday?’  $\exists > \text{NEG}$   
 \* ‘Did John not call anyone yesterday?’  $\text{NEG} > \exists$

(Gyuris 2019:252)

This test, when applied to Mauritian Creole *enn dimunn* ‘someone’, yields different results, yet at the level of preferences shows the same tendency as in Hungarian. While *enn dimunn* is acceptable in *eski*-questions, intonation questions, and declarative sentences conveying assertions, these interpretations are not reported to be equally natural across the three utterance types. Namely, declarative sentences like the one in (27a) favor the interpretation in which *enn dimunn* indicates someone specific who remains unidentified, while in *eski*-questions like (27b), both interpretations are equally natural: the one asking whether someone specific was not called by Zan, and the one asking to check whether it is true that Zan has not called anyone.

- (27) a. Zan pa ’nn sonn enn dimunn yer.  
 Zan NEG ASP call a someone yesterday  
 ✓ ‘Zan hasn’t called someone (specific) yesterday’  $\exists > \text{NEG}$   
 % ‘Zan hasn’t called anybody yesterday’  $\text{NEG} > \exists$
- b. Eski Zan pa ’nn sonn enn dimunn yer?  
 Q Zan NEG ASP call a someone yesterday  
 ✓ ‘Has Zan not called someone specific yesterday?’  $\exists > \text{NEG}$   
 ✓ ‘Has Zan not called anyone yesterday?’  $\text{NEG} > \exists$

To say that Zan has not called anyone, it is more natural to use the negative concord item *personn* ‘nobody’ (from French *personne* ‘nobody’). However, if we keep *enn dimounn* constant for the sake of comparison, we find that an intonation question with *enn dimounn* is more naturally interpreted as a question about Zan having called a specific individual, similarly to declaratives.

- (28) a. Zan pa 'nn sonn enn dimunn yer?  
 Zan NEG ASP call a someone yesterday  
 ✓ 'Zan hasn't called someone (specific) yesterday?'  $\exists > \text{NEG}$   
 % 'Zan hasn't called anybody yesterday?'  $\text{NEG} > \exists$

This test is thus not decisive, but it weakly supports the distinction proposed here, showing that *eski*-questions are interrogatives, and intonation questions are declaratives.

It has to be noted that negative polarity items do not behave in a uniform way across languages, and their behavior may not be fully understood even within the same language. Abeillé et al. (2014) note that in European French, all NPIs do not behave the same way. Minimizers like English *lift a finger* or French *avoir le rapport le plus lointain* 'have the slightest connection', which indicate the minimal grade on an abstract scale, seem to be licensed in all three kinds of questions, but not in declaratives.

- (29) a. Est-ce que vous voyez **le rapport le plus lointain** entre les deux hypothèses?  
 'Do you see the remotest connection between the two hypotheses?'  
 b. Vous voyez **le rapport le plus lointain** entre les deux hypothèses?  
 'You see the remotest connection between the two hypotheses?'  
 c. #Les deux hypothèses **ont le rapport le plus lointain**.  
 'The two hypotheses have the remotest connection.' (Abeillé et al. 2014:137)

In this respect, Mauritian Creole happens to behave similarly to French in that both *eski*-questions and intonation questions license the minimizer *buz en ledwa* 'lift a finger', which is only licenced in declarative sentences under negation.

- (30) a. Eski li' nn buz enn ledwa pu ed nu?  
 Q s/he ASP move a finger to help us  
 'Has s/he lifted a finger to help us?'  
 b. Li' nn buz enn ledwa pu ed nu?  
 s/he ASP move a finger to help us  
 'Has s/he lifted a finger to help us?'  
 c. \*Li' nn buz enn ledwa pu ed nu.  
 s/he ASP move a finger to help us  
 Intended: 'S/he lifted a finger to help us'

In this section, we merely scratched the surface by looking at how certain NPIs behave in certain environments. NPIs and their licensing conditions in any language is a huge topic; we leave it for future work.

**4. Discussion and conclusion.** This paper looked at Mauritian Creole polar questions: the ones formed with the question particle *eski* and intonation questions. We hypothesized that both may not be syntactically interrogative, namely that only *eski*-questions would be interrogative sentences, and intonation questions would be declarative questions. Based on their discourse properties discussed in section 3.1, we found support for our hypothesis, though not a conclusive one. To test our hypothesis, we applied diagnostic tests of clause type that were originally designed by

Abeillé et al. (2014) for French, and a test from Gyuris (2019) that was used to identify interrogative and declarative sentences in Hungarian. Out of the six tests (reference to the utterance as a ‘question’; coordination; the availability of the subjunctive mood; the distribution of epistemic stance adverbs; the distribution of negative polarity items; and the interpretation of indefinite expressions) we could only apply five for Mauritian Creole. Among those five, two gave conclusive results: whether the utterance can be referred to as a ‘question’ (see section 3.2), and the test involving epistemic stance adverbs (see section 3.5). Two other tests gave non-conclusive results which can nevertheless be considered as a support of the hypothesis that *eski*-questions are interrogatives and intonation questions are declaratives: the distribution of negative polarity items and the interpretation of indefinite expressions (see section 3.6). Finally, one test gave mixed results which cannot be taken as a support of this hypothesis, namely the test of coordination (see section 3.3).

Even though we cannot conclude with full certainty that *eski*-questions are interrogatives and intonation questions are declarative sentences, we find more support for this hypothesis than the alternative, where both of these utterance types are interrogatives.

This paper has left many questions open, all of which could potentially lead to a more definitive answer. Looking at earlier sources may shed light at the evolution of the two polar question types. Given Bickerton’s generalization (in section 2.2), we may hypothesize that intonation questions used to be true interrogatives in the past, and if so, we should find intonation questions more frequently in older sources. In the collection of texts of Baissac (1880/1976), intonation questions are indeed found to be more abundant compared to *eski*-questions. An example of the latter is shown in (31).

- (31) a. Esqui vous napas là?  
           ‘N’est vous pas là?’  
           ‘Aren’t you there?’ (Baissac 1880/1976:46)

Collecting data systematically, especially data coming from a demographically representative sample of native speakers of Mauritian Creole, would have the potential of leading us closer to solving the puzzles we were left with after certain tests. Crucially, the sample should contain multilingual participants of a variety of ages who additionally speak one of the widely used substrate languages such as Bhojpuri or Hakka (Corne 1999) and who may come from different regions within Mauritius where “lighter” and “deeper” varieties of Mauritian Creole are used.

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