

Common ground management in *wh*-questions: The case of Martinican Creole LA-marked *wh*-questions

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Abstract

This paper investigates the syntax and pragmatics of a peculiar type of *wh*-questions found in Martinican Creole and characterized by the presence of the clausal determiner LA in sentence-final position. Regular and LA-marked *wh*-questions do not differ as far as their internal and external syntax is concerned. Pragmatically, however, LA-marked *wh*-questions stand out in the two following ways: (a) they cannot be uttered out of the blue, and (b) they do not tolerate *nothing*-type answers. I attribute these properties to the presence of LA, which I argue is the spell-out of a [+familiar] feature. Accordingly, a LA-marked *wh*-question will refer to a familiar QUD introduced through the prior addition of an existential proposition to the common ground. On the basis of the interpretational properties of LA-marked *wh*-questions, as well as the distribution of LA, I propose that LA is merged in the Grounding layer proposed by Wiltschko (2021). This is consistent with the fact that it plays a role in the management of the common ground. Beyond Martinican Creole, this analysis lends support to the assumption that certain pragmatic functions are encoded in the grammar.

Keywords: Martinican Creole, *wh*-questions, syntax-pragmatics interface, common ground, multifunctionality.

1. Introduction

As observed in Térosier (2024), Martinican Creole distinguishes between two types of *wh*-questions depending on the presence in sentence-final position of a clausal determiner which I shall refer to as LA henceforth. This is illustrated in (1).¹

- (1) a. Kisa ki fet?²
 what COMP do.PASS
 ‘What happened?’
 b. Kisa ki fet **la**?
 what COMP do.PASS LA
 ‘What happened (given our shared knowledge that something happened)?’

As reflected in the above translations, LA-marked *wh*-questions also differ from their regular counterparts in the fact that they trigger a hard existential presupposition (Abusch 2010).³ Accordingly, unlike (1a), (1b) does not tolerate *nothing* as an answer and cannot be uttered out of the blue. I attribute these two properties to the clausal determiner, LA.

Interestingly, this clausal determiner shares its morphological realization with the definite article and is in fact subject to the same phonologically conditioned allomorphy. I propose, therefore, that LA is the spell-out of a [+familiar] feature whose category is dictated by its merge position. When merged in the extended projection of a noun, LA may be described as a definite article; it is then used to refer to a familiar or previously mentioned referent. Similarly, when it is merged in the upper portion of the left periphery, LA may be described as a clausal determiner whose function is to indicate that the *wh*-question is familiar, in the sense that its “referent” is a previously introduced question under discussion (QUD) (Roberts 1996, 2004). This referent is added to the metaphorical stack of QUDs through the prior addition of an existential proposition to the common ground (Stalnaker 1978, 2002). Therefore, when the Speaker uses a LA-marked *wh*-question, rather than a regular one, she indicates that: (i) it is time for the conversation participants to solve the relevant QUD; and (ii) that the presupposition it triggers cannot be denied, as this would result in an inconsistent common ground and, by way of consequence, a conversational crisis (Farkas & Bruce 2010).

As regards its syntax, I (2024) have argued elsewhere that LA has been argued to occupy a position above CP. Building upon this analysis, I posit that, given its distribution, selectional properties and pragmatic effects, this position can be circumscribed to Wiltschko’s (2021) Grounding layer. This is corroborated by the fact that it scopes over speaker-oriented adverbs. Further evidence can be adduced from the fact LA qua clausal determiner is restricted to *wh*-questions, which I take to mean that it selects a C head bearing a [wh] feature. The role which LA plays in the

¹ In all relevant examples, LA is typeset in bold.

² I use the following glosses: 1= first person; 2 = second person; 3= third person; ANT = anterior; CD = clausal determiner; COMP = complementizer; DEF = definite; IPFV = imperfective; IRR = irrealis; NEG = negation; PASS = passive; PL = plural; PROSP = prospective; Q = interrogative particle; SG = singular; WH = *wh*-word.

³ Elsewhere, this type of presupposition has also been described as extra-strong (see, e.g., Abrusán 2016, Glasbergen-Plas 2021).

management of the common ground is also congruent with its posited merge position in the Grounding layer.

The paper is organized as follows. Section 2 offers some background information on Martinican Creole. Section 3 describes the properties of LA-marked *wh*-questions, in particular their licensing conditions. Section 4 attributes these properties to LA and the [+familiar] feature that it bears. Finally, section 5 concludes the paper.

2. Martinican Creole: A brief overview

Martinican Creole (MC) (Glottocode: mart1259) is one of the dialects of Lesser Antillean Creole.⁴ As such, it belongs to the class of French-lexifier creoles, which has led Bernabé & Confiat (2002) to classify it as a neo-Romance language.⁵ However, in contradistinction with its lexicon, MC's grammar is best viewed as hybrid – a property which must be attributed to its origins.

In 1635, Martinique was colonized by French settlers who spoke various French dialects. Very shortly thereafter, the advent of the sugarcane industry resulted in the massive influx of enslaved Africans, most of whom spoke Kwa (especially Gbe) languages (Singler 1996), although the contribution of Bantu speakers should not be overlooked. At any rate, it is the contact between these European and African populations which led to the emergence of MC grammar through the recombination of the various features contributed by the languages in presence (Mufwene 2001, 2008, Aboh 2015, Aboh & DeGraff 2016).

The hybridity of MC grammar is, for instance, reflected in the fact that, like French, it is an SVO language. However, unlike French, it has limited bound inflectional morphology. This set of properties is exemplified in (2).

- (2) Jan té ka gadé dé film an menm tan
 John ANT IPFV watch two movie in same time
 'John was watching two movies at the same time.'

As shown in this example, MC patterns with Gbe languages with respect to the fact that tense-aspect-mood distinctions are marked through preverbal particles (*té* and *ka* in this example). French, on the other hand, marks these distinctions on the verb through inflectional suffixes, which are in fact also the exponents of person and gender features. In contrast, neither person nor gender features are marked on the MC verbal complex.

A detailed exploration of MC grammar is beyond the scope of this paper. For more information on the language, the interested reader may turn to grammatical sketches offered by Bernabé (1983, 2003), Gadelii (1997), Damoiseau (1999, 2012), Syea (2017), and Zribi-Hertz & Jean-Louis (2024) among others. In this paper, I shall concentrate my attention on MC *wh*-questions, in particular their LA-marked variety.

⁴ Other dialects include Dominican Creole, Guadeloupean Creole and Saint-Lucian Creole.

⁵ In doing so, Bernabé & Confiat (2002) follow Faine (1937), who argues that Haitian Creole should be classified as a neo-Romance language.

3. The defining properties of MC LA-marked *wh*-questions⁶

The present section is organized as follows. Section 3.1 offers a description of two classes of MC *wh*-questions whose main difference lies in the presence/absence in sentence-final position of LA, a multifunctional item also found in definite descriptions. Section 3.2 investigates the internal and external syntax of these two types of *wh*-questions, while their pragmatics is analyzed in Section 3.3. An interim summary is provided in Section 3.4.

3.1. Two types of *wh*-questions

As shown by the minimal pair in (3), MC possesses two types of *wh*-questions which differ from one another in the presence/absence in sentence-final position of what I shall refer to as a clausal determiner, LA.

- (3) a. Kisa ou ped?
 what 2SG lose
 ‘What did you lose?’
 b. Kisa ou ped **la**?
 what 2SG lose LA
 ‘What did you lose (given our shared knowledge that you lost something)?’

Interestingly, this clausal determiner happens to share its morphological realization with the definite article. Their similarity even extends to the fact that they are both subject to the same phonologically conditioned allomorphy. Their realization thus depends on the quality of the immediately preceding segment. To be more specific, LA is realized as *la* after an oral consonant, *lan* after a nasal consonant, *a* after an oral vowel and *an* after a nasal vowel. These configurations are exemplified in (4)–(7).

- (4) *After an oral consonant*
 a. chat **la**
 cat LA
 ‘the cat’
 b. Ki moun ou bat **la**?
 WH person 2SG beat LA
 ‘Who did you beat (given our shared knowledge that you beat someone)?’
- (5) *After a nasal consonant*
 a. sann **lan**
 ash LA
 ‘the ash’

⁶ The data presented in this paper is based on my own intuitions as a native speaker, as well as those of my consultants. The latter’s acceptability judgments were collected through the means of an online questionnaire and, for a subset of them, in-person or online interviews. Overall, the panel of consultants included of nine speakers, ranging in age from 25 to 72 years old at the time the study was conducted.

- b. Kisa ou tann **lan**?
 what 2SG hear LA
 ‘What did you hear (given our shared knowledge that you heard something)?’
- (6) *After an oral vowel*
 a. fizi **a**
 rifle LA
 ‘the rifle’
 b. Kisa i di **a**?
 what 3SG say LA
 ‘What did s/he say (given our shared knowledge that s/he said something)?’
- (7) *After a nasal vowel*
 a. chien **an**
 dog LA
 ‘the dog’
 b. Ki moun i penyen **an**?
 WH person 3SG comb LA
 ‘Who did s/he comb (given our shared knowledge that s/he combed someone)?’

The similarity in the morphological realization of the clausal determiner and the definite article is not exclusive to Martinican Creole. The same observation can be made about, e.g., Haitian Creole and Fongbe (Lefebvre 1992, 1998b, a, Larson 2003), as well as Ga (Renans 2016, 2021). In all these languages, the difference between the definite article and the clausal/event determiner reduces to the category of its complement. In its guise as a definite article, the complement is some extended projection of an NP. When it has the role of a clausal/event determiner, the complement can be one of several projections along the clausal spine (e.g. *vP*, *AspP*, *TP*, *CP*), even in a single language. This raises the question of whether there should be distinct lexical entries depending on the category of the complement. Multiplying entries would obviously be rather uneconomical. I shall therefore adopt the alternative hypothesis that there is a unique acategorical item whose function is determined by its syntactic environment. On that view, no theoretical value should be attached to the terms *definite article* or *clausal determiner*. They are only used for descriptive fashion. This approach relies critically on the assumption that the semantic contribution of this multifunctional item is constant across its various syntactic instantiations, an issue I shall return to in Section 4.2.

The key takeaway of the present section, then, is that MC possesses a type of *wh*-questions whose defining characteristic is the presence of LA, a multifunctional item also found in definite descriptions.

3.2. The internal and external syntax of MC *wh*-questions

One may rightly wonder whether the presence/absence of multifunctional LA is correlated with any contrast in the internal and external syntax of a *wh*-question. Let us then consider if regular and LA-marked *wh*-questions diverge with respect to the

category and base position of the *wh*-constituent, their sensitivity to islandhood effects and their distribution.

3.2.1. Category and base position of the *wh*-constituent

Regular and LA-marked *wh*-questions are identical with respect to the base position of the *wh*-constituent. In both types of questions, the *wh*-constituent can be extracted from any argumental position. This is illustrated in the minimal pairs below, where the (a) and (b) examples contain regular and LA-marked *wh*-questions, respectively.

As shown in (8), the *wh*-constituent may originate from the subject position.

- (8) a. Ki moun ki ___ fè sa?
 WH person COMP do it
 ‘Who did this?’
 b. Ki moun ki ___ fè sa a?
 WH person COMP do it LA
 ‘Who did this (given our shared knowledge that someone did this)?’

The same goes for internal arguments in general. They can be raised to Spec,CP in both types of *wh*-questions. This is exemplified in (9) and (10), where it is shown that any of the two internal arguments of *ba* ‘donner’ can undergo *wh*-movement.

- (9) a. Kisa ou ba yo ___?
 what 2SG give 3PL
 ‘What did you give them?’
 b. Kisa ou ba yo ___ a?
 what 2SG give 3PL LA
 ‘What did you give them (given our shared knowledge that you gave them something)?’
- (10) a. Ki moun ou ba ___ bwè?
 WH person 2SG give drink
 ‘Who did you give a drink?’
 b. Ki moun ou ba ___ bwè a?
 WH person 2SG give drink LA
 ‘Who did you give a drink (given our shared knowledge that you gave someone a drink)?’

The above examples suggest that, in both regular and LA-marked *wh*-questions, the *wh*-constituent may originate from any argumental position, be it internal or external.

There is also no difference between these two types of *wh*-questions when it comes to the extraction of adjuncts. As can be seen in (11), adjuncts can undergo *wh*-movement in both regular and LA-marked *wh*-questions.

- (11) a. Ki koté sa fet ___?
 WH place it do.PASS
 ‘Where did this happen?’

b. Ki koté sa fet ___ **la**?

WH place it do.PASS LA

‘Where did this happen (given our shared knowledge that this happened somewhere)?’

The above data leads us to conclude more generally that, another as far as the base position of the *wh*-constituent is concerned, the two types of *wh*-questions are identical.

Moreover, regular and LA-marked *wh*-questions are also identical as regards their sensitivity to islandhood effects. Neither allows the *wh*-constituent to be raised from a *wh*-island, as in (12), a complex DP, as in (13), a subject-internal position, as in (14), or an adjunct island, as in (15).

(12) *Sensitivity to a wh-island*a. *Kisaj i pa ka sonjé ki moun_i Jan ba t_i t_j?

what 3SG NEG IPFV remember WH person John give

‘For which *x*, *x* a thing, and for which *y*, *y* a person, does s/he remember that John gave *x* to *y*?’b. *Kisaj i pa ka sonjé ki moun_i Jan ba t_i t_j **a**?

what 3SG NEG IPFV remember WH person John give LA

‘For which *x*, *x* a thing, and for which *y*, *y* a person, does s/he remember that John gave *x* to *y* (given our shared knowledge that there is at least a thing *x* and there is at least a person *y* such John gave *x* to *y*)?’(13) *Sensitivity to the complex DP condition*

a. *Ki koté ou konnet an moun ki ka rété ___?

WH place 2SG know a person COMP IPFV stay

‘For which *x*, *x* a place, do you know a person who lives at *x*?’b. *Ki koté ou konnet an moun ki ka rété ___ **a**?

WH place 2SG know a person COMP IPFV stay LA

‘For which *x*, *x* a place, do you know a person who lives at *x* (given our shared knowledge that there is at least a place *x* such that you know a person who lives at *x*)?’(14) *Sensitivity to the subject condition*

a. *Ki moun yich ___ ka travay lizin?

WH person child IPFV work factory

‘For which *x*, *x* a person, does the child of *x* work at the factory?’b. *Ki moun yich ___ ka travay lizin **lan**?

WH person child IPFV work factory LA

‘For which *x*, *x* a person, does the child of *x* work at the factory (given our shared knowledge that there is at least a person *x* such that the child of *x* works at the factory)?’(15) *Sensitivity to the adjunct condition*

a. *Kisa Jan séré lè i wè ___?

what John hide when 3SG see

‘For which *x*, *x* a thing, did John hide when he saw *x*?’

- b. *Kisa Jan séré lè i wè __ a?
 what John hide when 3SG see LA
 ‘For which x , x a thing, did John hide when he saw x (given our shared knowledge that there is at least a thing x such that John hid when he saw x)?’

Unfortunately, for reasons of space, an exhaustive exploration of the internal syntax of MC *wh*-questions cannot be undertaken here. However, I take the above facts as robust evidence for the view that there is no major difference in the internal syntax of regular and LA-marked questions. Let us now consider whether the same can be said about their external syntax.

3.2.2. The external syntax of MC *wh*-questions

In all the grammatical examples presented so far, the *wh*-constituent was extracted from the main clause. However, it can also be first-merged inside an embedded clause, and, as shown in (16), this holds for both regular and LA-marked *wh*-questions.

- (16) a. Ki moun Jan di Mari ka sonjé __?
 WH person John say Mary IPFV remember
 ‘Who did John say that Mary remembers?’
 b. Ki moun Jan di Mari ka sonjé __ a?
 WH person John say Mary IPFV remember LA
 ‘Who did John say that May remembers (given our shared knowledge that there is a person x such that John said that Mary remembers x)?’

In fact, as exemplified in (17), *wh*-movement is unbounded in both regular and LA-marked *wh*-questions.

- (17) a. Ki tan Jan konprann [ki Mari di [i té ké vini __]]]?
 WH time J. understand COMP M. say 3SG ANT IRR come
 ‘When did John believe that Mary had said that she would come?’
 b. Ki tan Jan konprann [ki Mari di [i té ké vini __]]] a?
 WH time J. understand COMP M. say 3G ANT IRR come LA
 ‘When did John believe that Mary had said that she would come (given our shared knowledge that John believed that Mary had said that she would come at some time t)?’

This is in line with the observation made in Section 3.2.2 that there is no difference between regular and LA-marked when it comes to the base position of the *wh*-phrase.

As regards the distribution of these two types of *wh*-questions, all the examples we have seen so far provided instances of direct questions, but indirect *wh*-questions are available in both regular and LA-marked flavors. By way of illustration, consider (18), where the *wh*-question is embedded under *sav* ‘know’.

- (18) a. Man pa sav [ki koté yo alé __].
 1SG NEG know WH place 3PL go
 ‘I don’t know where they went.’

- b. Man pa sav [ki koté yo alé __ a].
 1SG NEG know WH place 3PL go LA
 ‘I don’t know where they went (given our shared knowledge that they went somewhere).’

These facts suggest that the two types of *wh*-questions under investigation are also identical as regards their distribution and, more generally, their external syntax.

In sum, the data in Section 3.2 suggests that regular and LA-marked questions are identical in terms of both their internal and external syntax. It has been thus established that they do not differ in either the base position or argumental/adjunct status of the *wh*-phrase. They have also been shown to be identically sensitive to islandhood effects. As regards their external syntax, we have observed that their distribution is identical and that *wh*-movement is unbounded in both. However, as we shall see below, the pragmatic properties of these two types of *wh*-questions are quite different.

3.3. The pragmatics and licensing conditions of LA-marked *wh*-questions

3.3.1. The dependence of LA-marked *wh*-questions on the input context

As noted in Térosier (2024), a distinctive property of LA-marked questions is that they cannot be uttered out of the blue. Regular *wh*-questions, on the other hand, are perfectly acceptable as conversation starters. Hence, the contrast in (19).

- (19) Context: After an exchange of salutations...
- a. Kisa ou fè yè oswè?
 what 2SG do yesterday at.night
 ‘What did you do last night?’
- b. *Kisa ou fè yè oswè a?
 what 2SG do yesterday at.night LA
 ‘What did you do last night (given our shared knowledge that you did something last night)?’

It is certainly odd to start with a conversation with a question such as (19a), but this does not rise to a level of a grammatical error. On the other hand, I would argue that not only is (19b) odd for the very same reasons as (19a), but that, in fact, it also amounts to a grammatical error (hence the notation). The observation that LA-marked *wh*-questions cannot be uttered out of the blue has further implications.

The licensing of LA-marked *wh*-questions depends on the preceding context (Térosier 2024). To determine what type of context is necessary to meet the licensing conditions of these *wh*-questions, let us first consider the context in (20), which licenses both a regular *wh*-question (20Ba) and a LA-marked *wh*-question (20Bb).

- (20) A: I went out last night.
 B. a. Ki koté ou alé?
 WH place 2SG go
 ‘Where did you go?’

- b. Ki koté ou alé a?
 WH place 2SG go LA
 ‘Where did you go (given our shared knowledge that you went somewhere)?’

This example confirms that LA-marked *wh*-questions cannot be uttered out of the blue, but it does not allow us to define their exact licensing conditions. To do so, we need to compare the context in (20) with the one in (21). The latter shows that prior conversation in itself will not suffice to license a LA-marked *wh*-question. The context in (20) must therefore possess some property which the one in (21) lacks.

- (21) A: I watched a movie last night.
 B. a. Ki koté ou alé?
 WH place 2SG go
 ‘Where did you go?’
 b. *Ki koté ou alé a?
 WH place 2SG go LA
 ‘Where did you go (given our shared knowledge that you went somewhere)?’

Reprising the analysis I developed in Térosier (2024), I hold that the key difference between these two contexts lies in their respective entailments. The context in (20) entails that there is at least a place x such that A went to x , whereas the one in (21) does not. We are thus led to the conclusion that the licensing of LA-marked *wh*-questions depends on the prior introduction of an existential proposition in the common ground. Crucially, this proposition must share its restriction and nuclear scope with the *wh*-question. This is captured in (22).

- (22) *Licensing conditions of LA-marked wh-questions*
 LA-marked *wh*-questions are felicitous if there is an existential proposition p such that:
 i. $p \subseteq \text{cg}_i$, where cg_i is the input common ground, and
 ii. p shares its restriction and nuclear scope with the LA-marked *wh*-question.

The licensing existential proposition can be introduced into the common ground in several ways.

The context in (20) has already shown that LA-marked *wh*-questions can be licensed by the entailments of a prior utterance. More generally, they can be licensed by any type of inference which satisfies the requirements in (22). Consider, then, (23), which contains a weak definite, viz. *the market*. According to Carlson et al. (2006), weak definites are defined by semantic enrichment. That is, (23A) does not simply mean that A went to the market. It usually also carries the inference that there is at least a thing x such that A bought x at the market. This inference thus satisfies the licensing of the LA-marked *wh*-questions in (23Bb).

- (23) A: I went to the market this morning.
 B. a. Kisa ou achté?
 what 2SG buy
 ‘What did you buy?’

- b. Kisa ou achté **a**?
 what 2SG buy LA
 ‘What did you buy (given our shared knowledge that you bought something)?’

In light of the above examples, we can safely claim that LA-marked *wh*-questions can be licensed by any type of inference, provided it satisfies the requirements laid out in (22).

Of course, the licensing existential proposition may simply be part of the proffered content of a prior utterance, as evidenced in (24).

- (24) A: I bought something this morning.
 B: a. Kisa ou achté?
 what 2SG buy
 ‘What did you buy?’
 b. Kisa ou achté **a**?
 what 2SG buy LA
 ‘What did you buy (given our shared knowledge that you bought something)?’

Extralinguistic events, too, may contribute an existential proposition that licenses a LA-marked question. Take, for instance, (25), where the noise of glass breaking, combined with the lone presence of A in the kitchen, introduces into the common ground the proposition that there is at least a thing *x* such that A broke *x*. Hence, the felicitous LA-marked *wh*-question in (25Bb).

- (25) Context: A is alone in the kitchen, while B is in the living room. Hearing the sound of breaking glass coming from the kitchen, B rushes to the kitchen.
 B: a. Kisa ou krazé?
 what 2SG break
 ‘What did you break?’
 b. Kisa ou krazé **a**?
 what 2SG break LA
 ‘What did you break (given our shared knowledge that you broke something)?’

An exhaustive exploration of the ways in which a licensing existential proposition can be added to the common ground would take us too far afield. The above data does, however, attest to the variety of ways in which a LA-marked *wh*-question may be licensed. The next step for us is to investigate the consequences of the licensing conditions laid out in (22).

3.3.2. LA-marked *wh*-questions trigger hard presuppositions

A defining characteristic of LA-marked *wh*-questions is that they do not tolerate negative answers that would contradict the existential proposition by which they are licensed. This is a critical difference with regular *wh*-questions. This, however, should not surprise us. As stipulated in (22), the licensing conditions of LA-marked *wh*-questions impose that the common ground include a proposition which shares its

restriction and nuclear scope with the *wh*-question. If the Addressee were, then, to contradict the licensing proposition, the common ground would include both the licensing existential proposition and its complement. As a result, the common ground would be inconsistent, thus causing a conversational crisis (Farkas & Bruce 2010).

Consider again (23), repeated below as (26). As stated previously, the weak definite in (26A) generally leads to the inference that A bought something, which accounts for the felicity of (26Bb). However, this inference does not rise to the level of an entailment and can therefore be easily denied. That is, in uttering (26A), A could plausibly simply be referring to an event of her going to the market in the morning even though she did not buy anything. In other words, (26A) is somewhat ambiguous as regards the inclusion of an existential inference in the common ground.

- (26) A: I went to the market this morning.
 B: a. Kisa ou achte?
 what 2SG buy
 ‘What did you buy?’
 b. Kisa ou achte a?
 what 2SG buy LA
 ‘What did you buy (given our shared knowledge that you bought something)?’

If B assumes that the inference associated with (26A) is indeed included in the common ground, B may then use the LA-marked *wh*-question in (26Bb). In doing so, he makes it clear that, based on this assumption, he will not tolerate *nothing* as an answer. If, on the other hand, B uses the regular *wh*-question in (26Ba), he indicates that he does not assume that the existential inference is included in the common ground, which allows the possibility for A to reply *nothing* to B’s inquiry. There is a sense, then, that LA-marked *wh*-questions are pragmatically marked. It seems that they are used by the Speaker to make it explicit to the Addressee that she assumes that the common ground includes an existential proposition that cannot be denied without running the risk of a conversational crisis.

The pragmatic markedness of LA-marked *wh*-questions is evidenced in the fact that they may, for instance, be used in the context of a dispute. In (27), both A and B know that A said something. This suffices to license the LA-marked *wh*-question in (27B). However, note also that B has not heard A’s exact words. The question in (27B) is therefore a genuine information-seeking question.

- (27) Context: During a dispute between him and B, A mutters something. While B has not heard the content of A’s utterance, both A and B are aware that A said something.
 B: Kisa ou di a?
 what 2SG say LA
 ‘What did you say (given our shared knowledge that you said something)?’

What makes B’s LA-marked *wh*-question particularly appropriate to the context in (27) is that he will not accept *nothing* as an answer. Generalizing beyond (27), it does indeed appear that LA-marked *wh*-questions are usually associated with some emotive content and/or express that an answer which contradicts the licensing

existential proposition will not be tolerated. This is admittedly a conjecture which requires further investigation.⁷

Beside their markedness, LA-marked *wh*-questions are also interesting in what they tell us about regular *wh*-questions. As a matter of fact, regular *wh*-questions are at the center of an ongoing debate on whether they are genuine presupposition triggers. The claim that they are has been made by some scholars (e.g., Katz 1972, Lyons 1977, Gawron 2001, Karttunen 2016), but refuted by others who formulate the alternative view that the apparent existential presupposition of *wh*-questions should be attributed to some other mechanism (e.g., Abusch 2010, Schwarz & Simonenko 2017). A key issue in this debate is the fact that regular *wh*-questions are compatible with negative answers that contradict the hypothesized presupposition. Abusch (2010) adduces this as evidence to support her claim that *wh*-questions do not qualify as “hard” presupposition triggers. Genuine hard presupposition triggers, such as clefts, do not allow their “hard” presupposition to be canceled without a conversational crisis ensuing. Abusch argues, therefore, that the apparent presupposition of a *wh*-question is in fact the result of a default cognitive mechanism in virtue of which a disjunction of alternatives is interpreted as true by default. Given Hamblin’s (1973) analysis of questions, the disjunction of alternative propositions denoted by a *wh*-question will be interpreted as true by default. This would then be mistakenly conflated with an existential presupposition. Crucially, this default mechanism can be overridden, which accounts for the fact a regular *wh*-question will generally tolerate a negative answer. In contrast, LA-marked *wh*-questions appear not to allow this hypothetical mechanism to be overridden.

None of this should come as a surprise if we adopt a dynamic approach of presuppositions *à la* Heim (1983). On this view, utterances are functions from context to context, and presuppositions are the definedness conditions of these functions. A definite description such as *the king* will, therefore, be felicitous if and only if the input context includes its presupposition, i.e. the proposition that there is a king. A parallel can be made with LA-marked *wh*-questions. As established in Section 3.3.1, their felicity depends on the prior introduction of a licensing existential proposition into the common ground. We may then simply regard this proposition as the presupposition of a LA-marked *wh*-question, and the fact that it cannot be contradicted qualifies it as a hard presupposition.

This analysis of LA-marked *wh*-questions also entails that they could be viewed as biased questions. They share with other biased questions the characteristic that they favor a subset of their possible answers to the possible extent that the remaining answers are ruled out altogether. In the case of LA-marked *wh*-questions, the bias favors all possible answers over the ruled out negative answer. Other biased questions include the notable case of polar questions, which are claimed to display a certain bias toward one of their possible answers depending on their form (Ladd 1981, van Rooy & Šafářová 2003, Farkas & Bruce 2010, Goodhue 2018, Romero 2024). More relevant to the present paper, though, is the fact *wh*-questions, too, can display a bias toward a subset of their possible answers.

⁷ Unfortunately, there is not at the time of writing any sufficiently large accessible corpus of MC which would allow us to observe the use of LA-marked *wh*-questions in spontaneous conversations.

Self-addressed or rhetorical *wh*-questions, for instance, display a bias towards one of their possible answers on the ground that this answer already belongs to the background knowledge shared by the conversation participants (Kiss 2019). Their reliance on background knowledge is reminiscent of LA-marked *wh*-questions, but the latter are genuine information-seeking questions. It is, therefore, more interesting to compare them with other instances of biased information-seeking *wh*-questions. This is notably the case of those of French in-situ *wh*-questions. Much like MC LA-marked *wh*-questions, they have been analyzed as triggers of hard existential presuppositions (Chang 1997, Cheng & Rooryck 2000, Faure & Palasis 2021, Glasbergen-Plas 2021).⁸ Similar claims have been made about English and Brazilian Portuguese in-situ *wh*-questions (Pires & Taylor 2007). Word order may, then, be used to signal a hard existential presupposition.^{9,10} Languages of the world may then recruit various grammatical means to encode apparently similar properties. More research is clearly needed to determine these superficial differences are not in fact correlated with deeper, more significant differences.

To sum up, this section has established that, unlike their regular counterparts, LA-marked *wh*-questions trigger authentic hard presuppositions, viz. the existential propositions by which they are licensed. They may be described as biased insofar as they do not tolerate negative answers. They are, therefore, markedly different from regular *wh*-questions, since the presupposition that the latter seem to trigger is probably best accounted by some other mechanism.

3.4. Interim summary

In this section we have established that MC possesses a peculiar type of *wh*-questions characterized superficially by the presence of LA in sentence-final position. Yet, despite this conspicuous property, LA-marked *wh*-questions do not appear to differ from regular ones in either their internal or external syntax. The two types of *wh*-questions are identical with respect to: (i) the category and base position of the *wh*-phrase; (ii) the unboundedness of *wh*-movement; and (iii) their possible appearance in either root or embedded clauses. Their pragmatics, on the other hand, is strikingly different.

Contrary to regular *wh*-questions, LA-marked *wh*-questions cannot be uttered out of the blue and do not tolerate *nothing*-type answers. This follows from their licensing conditions. The licensing of LA-marked *wh*-question depends on the inclusion in the common ground of an existential proposition with which it shares its restriction and nuclear scope. Another distinctive property of LA-marked *wh*-questions is their pragmatic markedness. They seem to express some emotive content related to the fact that the Speaker will not accept a negative answer to her question. In the next section, I will identify the source of the hard presupposition associated with LA-marked *wh*-questions.

⁸ It should be noted that the phenomenon seems to be subject to dialectal and idiolectal variation (see Mathieu 2004 for the description of such a dialect).

⁹ I leave out the admittedly non-trivial question of whether these in-situ *wh*-questions involve covert *wh*-movement.

¹⁰ Cleft *wh*-questions also evidence hard presuppositions. However, this is a property which is more likely to derive from clefting than from the *wh*-question in itself. In fact, Abusch (2010) uses clefts as the most reliable example of a hard presupposition trigger.

4. The role of the “clausal determiner” in LA-marked *wh*-questions

The null hypothesis that LA is responsible for the pragmatic properties of LA-marked *wh*-questions is explored in the present section. Section 4.1 takes a closer look at LA in its use as a definite article. Section 4.2 investigates the commonalities between the two uses of LA. Finally, Section 4.3 offers an analysis of LA in LA-marked *wh*-questions which links its position in the structure with their pragmatic properties.

4.1. A closer look at LA qua definite article

Several papers have been dedicated to the study of LA in its use as a definite article (Bernabé 1983, Damoiseau 1999, Bernabé 2003, Déprez 2007, Gadelii 2007, Damoiseau 2012, Zribi-Hertz & Jean-Louis 2014, Térosier 2021). In these studies, the consensus is that the source of LA qua definite article is the French deictic reinforcer *là* ‘there’ found in demonstrative DPs such as (28).

- (28) cet homme **là**
 this man there
 ‘this man’

According to several of the studies cited above, the MC definite article has retained some of the semantics of its source. It is in fact often described as a marker of specificity (e.g., Damoiseau 1999, 2012, Zribi-Hertz & Jean-Louis 2014). Zribi-Hertz & Jean-Louis (2014), in particular, argue that LA is a marker of pragmatic definiteness (Löbner 1985, 2011). They thus propose that the felicitous use of LA-marked DPs “crucially depends either on deixis (the referent is in sight of the speaker/hearer) or on the discourse context” (Zribi-Hertz & Jean-Louis 2014: 274). They attribute these restrictions to a requirement of locative anchoring retained from the French deictic reinforcer.

I would like to suggest a slight departure from their proposal. That is, rather than postulating a locative feature, I shall assume that LA spells out a [+familiar] feature. This ties LA to Heim’s (1982) Novelty-Familiarity Condition and to the more general view that the felicitous use of definite DPs depends on the familiarity of their referents (Christophersen 1939). Evidence for this analysis can be adduced from examples such as (29).

- (29) An nonm ek an fanm antré. Fanm **lan** té ka pale fransé.
 a man and a woman get.in woman LA ANT IPFV speak French
 ‘A man and a woman got in. The woman was speaking French.’

The use of the definite DP *fanm lan* ‘the woman’ in the second sentence is licensed by the prior introduction of its referent through the antecedent indefinite DP *an fanm* ‘a woman’ in the previous sentence. Such facts lend support to the view I develop here that LA spells out a [+familiar] feature. The question, then, is whether this view can be extended to LA in its use as a “clausal determiner” in LA-marked *wh*-questions.

4.2. LA and familiarity in LA-marked *wh*-questions

When it appears in a definite DP, LA signals that the DP's referent was previously introduced. We would therefore expect LA to have a similar function in the case of LA-marked *wh*-questions. We may further hypothesize that the referent of the LA-marked *wh*-question should be introduced through an antecedent of the same semantic type. This assumption rules out the hypothesis that the antecedent of a LA-marked *wh*-question is its licensing proposition. After all, a *wh*-question denotes a set of propositions, rather a proposition (Hamblin 1973). We must therefore look elsewhere.

I would argue that, despite its inability to serve as an antecedent, the licensing existential proposition plays a critical role. Indeed, I assume that the addition of an existential proposition to the common ground has as its critical consequence the concomitant introduction of a new question under discussion (QUD) (Roberts 1996, 2004). That is, I assume that an existential proposition creates an issue that the conversation participants must collaborate to solve: the variable in the existential proposition must be assigned a value. By way of illustration, consider the existential proposition *p* in (30b), entailed by (30a). I hold that this proposition also introduces the QUD *q* in (30c).

- (30) a. John went out last night.
 b. $\llbracket p \rrbracket = \exists x. \text{place}(x): \text{John went to } x \text{ last night.}$
 c. $\llbracket q \rrbracket = \lambda x. \text{place}(x): \text{John to } x \text{ last night}$

This QUD crucially shares its restriction and nuclear scope with the existential proposition. It is then identical with the LA-marked *wh*-question that *p* could have licensed. This leads to propose that the QUD is in fact the referent of the LA-marked *wh*-question. This would make the LA-marked *wh*-question familiar, in the same way that the referent of a definite DP is familiar. Thus, when she uses a LA-marked *wh*-question, the Speaker makes it unequivocally known to the other conversation participants that the *wh*-question matches an identical previously introduced QUD. With the utterance of the LA-marked *wh*-question, the Speaker now proposes that the corresponding QUD be moved to the top of the QUD stack (Farkas & Bruce 2010). Familiarity, expressed through the means of LA, is therefore relevant to both LA-marked DPs and LA-marked *wh*-questions.¹¹

¹¹ This proposal, admittedly, does not account for the hard presupposition triggered by LA-marked *wh*-questions. The fact that they refer to previously introduced QUDs does not in itself account for their incompatibility with *nothing*-type answers. This may be derived in the somewhat stipulative requirement that the QUD be introduced through a licensing existential presupposition. This proposal, though, is open to the criticism that there does not seem to be anything inherent to LA that would impose that its antecedent QUD should be incompatible with a *nothing*-type answer.

If we adopted instead an approach whereby LA triggers an existential presupposition, we would fail to capture the relevance of familiarity across the different uses of LA. When used as a definite article, LA does indeed appear to involve familiarity. It would be surprising that familiarity plays no role whatsoever in the case of LA-marked *wh*-questions.

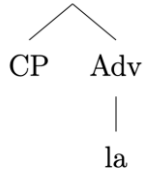
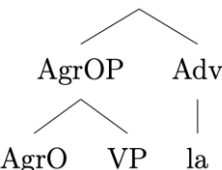
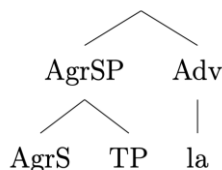
In the end, I opt for the first approach, notably on the basis of the syntactic arguments presented in section 4.3, as they would establish that the identity between the LA-marked *wh*-question and the QUD is both semantic and syntactic.

This reinforces my earlier claim that we should not read too much into we should not read too much into the terms *definite article* and *clausal determiner*. They only serve as a shortcut to describe the syntactic environment of LA. We should therefore regard LA as a multifunctional item (Wiltschko 2021). Under a lexicalist approach, the lexical entry of LA would be underspecified as regards its category. Under a late-insertion approach to morphology, LA would simply be the spell-out of a [+familiar] feature that can be merged in several positions. This, of course, begs the question of whether there are restrictions on where this feature can be merged, but this must be left for further research. For now, the key takeaway is that, across its several uses, LA encodes familiarity. In the specific case of LA-marked *wh*-questions, the notion of familiarity relates to the QUD raised through the prior introduction of an existential proposition into the common ground. Given LA's status as a multifunctional item, it is critical that we now try to determine its merge position, since it should be predictive of its function.

4.3. The merge position of LA in LA-marked *wh*-questions

The literature on clausal/event determiners is consistent in the correlation it makes between their merge position and their presupposition (Lefebvre 1992, 1998b, Larson 2003, Renans 2016, 2021). It is generally argued that there is a direct relationship between the content of the presupposition and the category of the complement of the clausal/event determiner. For instance, building on Lefebvre (1992, 1998a), Larson (2003) proposes that the three interpretations of (31) vary with the merge position of the clausal determiner.¹² The structural representations of Readings 1, 2 and 3 are offered in (32a), (32b) and (32c), respectively.

- (31) Haitian Creole, Lefebvre (1998a: 95)
 Moun nan detwi machin nan **an**
 man DEF destroy car DEF CD
 a. 'Actually, the man destroyed the car.' (Reading 1)
 b. 'The man destroyed the car, as we knew that the car would be destroyed.'
 (Reading 2)
 c. 'The man destroyed the car, as we knew that the man would destroy the car.'
 (Reading 3)

- (32) a.  b.  c. 

In (32a), the clausal/event determiner scopes over the whole CP and, accordingly, the presupposition is the entire proposition denoted by that CP. In (32b), it scopes over the verb and its internal object and the presupposition is thus limited to

¹² Larson (2003) treats the clausal/event determiner as an adverb, but this is inconsequential to the analysis.

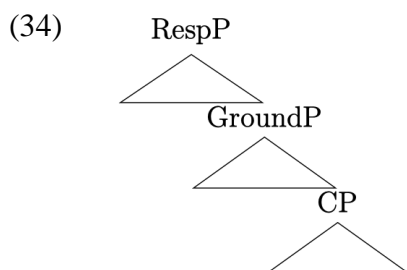
the sub-event denoted by AgrOP. In (32c), it scopes over the subject and the TP and the presupposition thus corresponds to the whole event. What, then, of LA in MC LA-marked *wh*-questions?

As we have seen thus far, LA seemingly scopes over the CP and the entire set of propositions denoted by the *wh*-question. To test out this hypothesis, let us study the distribution of LA with respect to the speaker-oriented adverbials found at the top of Cinque's (1999, 2006) functional hierarchy. Consider first (33), which features the speaker-oriented adverb *érezman* 'fortunately', merged in Spec,Mood_{evaluative}P according to Cinque. As shown in (33a), the adverb *érezman* can appear in either the initial or final position of the sentence, but nowhere else. As illustrated in (33b), I assume that the occurrence of *érezman* in sentence-final position results from the internal merger of a projection containing the subject, the verb and the object.

- (33) a. (Érezman) Jan (*érezman) kay vini talè (érezman)
 fortunately John fortunately PROSP come later fortunately
 'Fortunately, John is coming later.'
 b. [FP [XP Jan kay vini talè] [Mood_{evaluative}P érezman ... t_{XP}]]

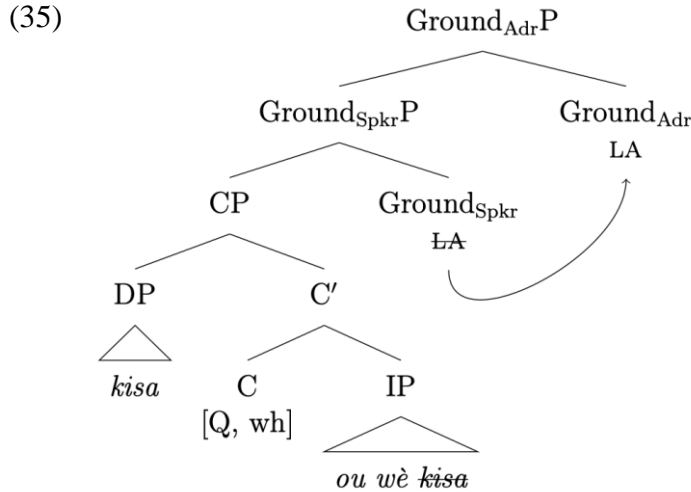
Now, consider (34), which features *érezman* in a LA-marked *wh*-question. As can be seen in this example, LA necessarily occurs to the right of the adverb. I take this to mean that it is merged in a position from which it scopes over Mood_{evaluative}P. In fact, given the interpretational properties of LA in LA-marked *wh*-questions, we may reasonably assume that it sits above the proposition-denoting CP.

To determine with greater accuracy LA's position, consider Wiltschko's (2021) proposal that there is a subordinate structure above the CP, and that this structure encodes two significant aspects of interactional language, viz. common ground management and turn-taking. Each of these interactional functions is associated with a syntactic domain. This is schematized in (34), where the RespP domain is associated with the turn-taking function and the GroundP domain with the management of the common ground.



Given the pragmatics of LA-marked *wh*-questions, I propose that LA is merged in the GroundP domain. To determine with greater precision the merge position of LA, we should take into consideration Wiltschko's remark that the common ground is not a primitive notion (see also Farkas & Bruce 2010). It should rather be construed as the intersection of the Speaker's and the Addressee's grounds. Wiltschko thus decomposes GroundP into two corresponding functional projections: the topmost Ground_{Adr}P and the lowermost Ground_{Spkr}P. Let us now see how this applies to LA-marked *wh*-questions.

We have established that LA is used to refer to a QUD that is familiar to both the Speaker and the Addressee(s). Accordingly, I propose that LA is first-merged in $\text{Ground}_{\text{Spkr}}^0$ and then internally merged in $\text{Ground}_{\text{Adr}}^0$. This is captured in (35), which represents a schematized derivation of the LA-marked *wh*-question *kisa ou wè a?* ‘what did you see (given our shared knowledge that you saw something)?’.



Note that this representation has the additional benefit of accounting for the fact that LA is restricted to *wh*-questions. As shown in (36), it cannot appear in either declaratives or polar questions. It thus stands in contrast with its Haitian Creole counterpart (see (31), where the latter appears in a declarative sentence).

- (36) a. *Jan vini a
 John come CD
 ‘(Intended) John came, as we knew that he would.’
 b. *Es Jan vini a?
 Q John come CD
 ‘(Intended) Did John come, as we know that he would?’

This restriction on LA’s distribution finds a straightforward explanation if we assume that, given its first-merge position, it selects for a C head endowed with a [wh] feature. It is one more reason to analyze LA as the spell-out of a [+familiar] feature merged in the Ground layer postulated by Wiltschko (2021).

The analysis I propose here has yet another advantage. Wiltschko (2021) argues that the Ground and Resp layers are only projected when the utterance constitutes a departure from the normal course of a conversation. This observation readily applies to LA-marked *wh*-questions. As we have seen, in most cases they can be replaced with a regular *wh*-question. This has led me to suggest that LA-marked *wh*-questions are pragmatically marked in the sense that they are used by the Speaker to make it clear that she refers to a familiar QUD and that a *nothing*-type answer will not be tolerated. Presumably, the explicit reference to a previously introduced QUD is not necessary in normal conversation, which preserves the possibility that the Addressee offers a *nothing*-type answer to the question. These various facts find a straightforward explanation under the proposed analysis.

Overall, MC LA-marked *wh*-questions provide evidence in support of the existence of a superordinate structure above the CP which is responsible for common ground management.¹³ They also suggest that this structure may be the host of clausal determiners. However, as we saw in Section 3.3.2, other languages seem to derive similar meanings through other linguistic means (e.g., word order). Whether these meanings are identical or merely similar must be left for further research.

In summary, Section 4 has established that MC possesses an acategorical morpheme LA, which spells out a [+familiar] feature in both definite DPs and LA-marked *wh*-questions. In the latter case, LA is used to refer to a familiar QUD which was previously introduced through the addition of an existential proposition to the common ground. This property is a direct consequence of LA's syntax. Specifically, I have argued that LA is merged in the Ground layer, which accounts for the role it plays in common ground management. Under this analysis, it also becomes very clear why LA is restricted to *wh*-questions. Finally, the pragmatic markedness of LA-marked *wh*-question is consistent with the proposal that the Ground layer is only projected when the utterance qua conversational move deviates from the normal course of conversation.

5. Conclusion

This paper investigates the syntactic and pragmatic properties of a particular type of *wh*-question found in MC. The most obvious difference between these questions, which I have referred to as LA-marked *wh*-questions, and their regular counterparts is the presence of LA in sentence-final position. Yet, despite this conspicuous contrast, there does not seem to be any difference in the internal and external syntax of regular

¹³ An anonymous reviewer is curious about the implications of the fact that LA-marked *wh*-questions can appear in embedded contexts. While the initial study did not address this issue, I would like to venture some conjectures based on my own intuitions.

To start off, I would like to point out that my analysis relies critically on the postulate that LA occupies the Ground layer, rather than the superordinate Response layer. Not only is this proposal useful to reflect the pragmatic function of LA, but it is also congruent with the fact that LA-marked *wh*-questions can appear in embedded contexts (see Section 3.2.2). Wiltschko (2021: 223-224) explores the possibility that GroundP, unlike ResP, may be projected in embedded clauses with the result being that the relevant grounds are no longer necessarily those of the Speaker and/or the Addressee, but instead those of the subject and/or indirect object of the embedding predicate. It does indeed appear that this is what obtains in embedded LA-marked *wh*-questions. By way of illustration, consider (i).

(i) Jan mandé Pol kisa i achté a
 John ask Paul what 3SG buy CD
 'John asked Paul what he bought (given their shared knowledge that Paul thought something).'

As illustrated in the translation, my intuition is that the relevant grounds are those of John and Paul. The Speaker's and the Addressee's grounds do not affect the acceptability of LA in the embedded clause. That is, (37) is acceptable in my idiolect even if, for instance, the Speaker knows that Paul did not buy anything. These intuitions need to be confirmed with other speakers, but this must unfortunately be left for a follow-up study.

and LA-marked *wh*-questions. Acceptable base positions for the *wh*-phrase are the same for the two types of *wh*-questions. Likewise, *wh*-movement is equally sensitive to islandhood effects in both types of *wh*-questions. Furthermore, both regular and LA-marked *wh*-questions can occur in either matrix or embedded clauses. Their similarity, however, does not encompass their pragmatics.

In contrast with regular *wh*-questions, LA-marked *wh*-questions can be neither uttered out of the blue nor answered with a *nothing*-type answer. This follows from the fact that they are subject to distinctive licensing conditions. That is, their licensing depends on the prior introduction of an existential proposition into the common ground. This licensing proposition must additionally share its restriction and nuclear scope with the *wh*-question. Moreover, LA-marked *wh*-questions may be described as pragmatically marked on the grounds that they tend to also convey an emotive content, which may be closely linked to the fact that they do not tolerate *nothing*-type answers.

To account for these properties, I have suggested that LA is the spell-out of a [+familiar] feature. It is therefore a multifunctional item which can appear in both definite noun phrases and LA-marked *wh*-questions. In the latter case, I have argued that it is used to refer to a familiar QUD whose introduction is a consequence of the earlier addition of the licensing existential proposition to the common ground. These characteristics, as well as the distribution of LA, suggest that it is merged in the Ground layer proposed by Wiltschko (2021). This is consistent with the function which she associates with this layer, viz. the management of the common ground.

Abstracting away from MC LA-marked *wh*-questions, this study lends support to the neo-performative hypothesis insofar as it provides evidence for the postulate that certain aspects of pragmatics are part of the grammatical component. This study further calls for a cross-linguistic comparison of the linguistic means which may be employed to manage the common ground in questions in general, and *wh*-questions in particular.

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