



A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF THE MORPHOSYNTAX OF ARTICLES IN NEMBE AND FRENCH: PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

NUMONYO OLALI KALIAI

Department of French, Isaac Jasper Boro College of Education,
Sagbama, Bayelsa state, Nigeria
olanumok@ijbcoe.edu.ng
+2348032691680

JULIE DEGESI

Department of French, Isaac Jasper Boro College of Education,
Sagbama, Bayelsa state, Nigeria
+2347067463437

Abstract

This study presents a comparative morphosyntactic analysis of the article systems of Nembe, a Niger-Congo language spoken in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria, and French, a Romance language with a well-documented grammatical gender system. The study investigated the animacy and natural gender structure in the Nembe determiner system and contrasts this with the largely arbitrary and lexically fixed grammatical gender distinctions found in French. It argues that Nembe language encodes a cognitively transparent and semantically motivated hierarchy that privileges human and animate referents directly within morphology, while French language treats grammatical gender as largely arbitrary and not semantically motivated, and relies primarily on conventional grammatical assignment. Drawing on illustrative examples from both languages, this paper demonstrates that Nembe language employs post-nominal articles that are morphologically bound to the noun and function as agreement morphemes rather than as only independent determiners. These enclitic articles encode distinctions such as masculine, feminine and neuter, with a strong alignment between grammatical marking and real-world referential properties such as humanness and animacy. In contrast, French articles are pre-nominal, phonologically independent and obligatorily required, but their gender marking often bears little relationship to natural gender, particularly in the case of inanimate nouns. Beyond structural description, the paper explores the pedagogical implications of these typological differences for the teaching and learning of French in Nembe-speaking contexts. It argues that learners' prior knowledge of a semantically transparent article system may influence their acquisition of French gender agreement, potentially leading to transfer effects and learning difficulties. The study therefore advocates contrastive, typology-informed instructional strategies that explicitly address differences in determiner position, agreement mechanisms and gender assignment, thereby facilitating more effective second language instruction.

Keywords: Nembe Language, French Articles, Animacy Hierarchy, Natural Vs Grammatical Gender, Contrastive Linguistics

Introduction

Articles constitute a central component of nominal determination across languages, yet their morphosyntactic realisation varies considerably in form, function and distribution (Lyons, 1999; Dryer, 2013). As functional elements, articles play a crucial role in encoding definiteness, specificity, number and, in many languages, gender distinctions. While French represents a prototypical pre-nominal article system in which determiners obligatorily precede the noun and encode grammatical gender and number (Grevisse



& Goosse, 2016), Nembe, a Niger-Congo language spoken in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria, exhibits a post-nominal article system in which determiners are morphologically bound to nouns and realised as enclitic elements (Williamson & Blench, 2000). In Nembe language, articles are sensitive not only to number but also to animacy and natural gender, particularly with human referents; reflecting a semantically motivated and cognitively transparent system of nominal classification (Croft, 2003; Corbett, 2013). By contrast, French grammatical gender is largely arbitrary and lexically assigned, especially in the domain of inanimate nouns, with limited correspondence to natural gender (Hockett, 1958; Corbett, 1991). These typological differences raise important questions about how determiner systems encode meaning and how grammatical categories relate to semantic features across languages.

This study undertakes a comparative morphosyntactic analysis of article systems in Nembe and French, focusing specifically on gender marking, syntactic position and number agreement. Beyond theoretical description, the paper also examines the pedagogical consequences of these contrasts for Nembe-speaking learners of French. Drawing on insights from contrastive analysis and second language acquisition research, it argues that structural differences between first and target languages can significantly shape learning outcomes (Odlin, 1989; Ellis, 2008). The study therefore highlights the importance of typology-informed and contrastive instructional approaches in multilingual educational contexts.

Post-Nominal Articles in Nembe and Pre-Nominal Articles in French

Nembe language exhibits a post-nominal article system in which articles occur immediately after the noun and are phonologically and morphologically bound to it. This is illustrated by forms such as *togu bei* (the boy) *togu ma* (the girl) and *togu mi* (the child), where the article follows the noun and functions as an enclitic determiner. In Nembe language, articles attach directly to the noun stem and encode crucial grammatical information relating to gender, animacy and number, thereby contributing to the semantic interpretation of the noun phrase (Greenberg, 1963; Williamson & Blench, 2000). Unlike French, where articles obligatorily precede nouns; as in *le garçon*, *la fille* and *les enfants*; Nembe language articles do not only operate as independent syntactic words, they also function as agreement morphemes within the noun phrase, forming a tightly integrated morphological unit with the noun.

This typological characteristic aligns Nembe language with several Niger-Congo languages that express noun-determiner agreement through post-nominal markers rather than through pre-nominal free morphemes. Such systems reflect broader areal and genealogical patterns within the Niger-Congo language family, where nominal determination is frequently realised via suffixes or enclitics (Heine & Nurse, 2000; Dryer, 2013). French articles, by contrast, are syntactically autonomous elements occupying the determiner position within the noun phrase. They exhibit properties such as contraction and fusion with prepositions, for example *à + le* becoming *au*, a feature that is characteristic of Romance determiner systems (Lyons, 1999; Grevisse & Goosse, 2016). These structural contrasts underscore fundamental differences in the morphosyntactic organisation of nominal determination in Nembe and French, particularly in the interaction between morphology, syntax and semantics.

Gender and Semantic Classification

Nembe language articles encode semantic gender distinctions, particularly among human nouns, reflecting a system in which biological sex, animacy, and social salience play a central role in article selection (Corbett, 1991; Croft, 2003). This system aligns with natural gender principles, whereby grammatical marking closely mirrors real-world distinctions. The article *bei* is used with masculine human and nonhuman nouns, as illustrated by *togu bei* (“the boy”) and *ololo bei* (“the bottle”). The extension of *bei* to certain nonhuman nouns suggests that animacy and default classificatory patterns interact with gender marking in Nembe language, rather than biological sex alone (Williamson & Blench, 2000). In contrast, the article *ma* marks feminine human nouns, as in *togu ma* (“the girl”) and *iyorobo ma* (“the woman”), directly encoding natural gender distinctions among humans. The article *mi* is associated with neuter nouns, such as *sambi mi* (“the key”), *aru mi* (“the boat”), and *togu mi* (“the child”).



This post-nominal article system provides a cognitively transparent classification strategy in which semantic features such as animacy, humanness and gender guide nominal categorisation, making gender assignment largely predictable (Croft, 2003; Corbett, 2013). In contrast, French gender is predominantly grammatical rather than semantic. Masculine and feminine distinctions apply to all nouns irrespective of animacy or biological sex, as seen in *le livre* (“the book”) and *la table* (“the table”) (Hockett, 1958; Harris, 1991). Moreover, French gender marking does not consistently reflect natural gender even among human referents, relying instead on arbitrary lexical assignment. Consequently, Nembe language prioritises semantic motivation and cognitive salience in its gender system, whereas French depends primarily on formal grammatical conventions, illustrating a clear typological divergence in how languages encode gender and animacy within the nominal domain (Corbett, 2013).

Syntactic Position of Articles in Both Languages

Syntactically, Nembe language articles occupy a fixed post-nominal position, occurring immediately after the noun they determine. Clear illustrations include *togu bei* (“the boy”), showing masculine gender; *togu ma* (“the girl”), depicting feminine gender; and *togu mi* (“the child”), showing neuter reference. This rigid noun–article (N + ART) order reflects a morphosyntactic pattern in which articles are not independent syntactic words but dependent grammatical morphemes tightly bound to the noun. As enclitic elements, Nembe language articles simultaneously encode number, animacy, and gender distinctions, thereby integrating multiple semantic features within a single morphological unit (Williamson & Blench, 2000; Givón, 2001). Such post-nominal positioning is characteristic of many Niger-Congo languages, where determiners, agreement markers, and noun-class indicators typically follow the noun stem in a fixed and predictable sequence (Heine & Nurse, 2000; Croft, 2003). This structure underscores the close interaction between morphology and syntax in Nembe nominal constructions.

In contrast, French articles occupy a strictly pre-nominal position, as seen in *le garçon* and *la fille*, and function as autonomous syntactic units rather than bound morphemes. French determiners may contract and combine with prepositions, for example *à + le* becoming *au*, a process that further confirms their status as free morphemes within the determiner phrase (DP) (Abney, 1987; Grevisse & Goosse, 2016). The French determiner–noun (ART + N) order highlights a syntactic configuration in which agreement and definiteness are expressed externally to the noun. Overall, these typological contrasts demonstrate that syntactic position plays a crucial role in shaping article dependency, agreement marking and the distribution of semantic features across nominal structures in Nembe and French languages.

Plurality and Number Marking

Plurality in Nembe language is expressed through two distinct strategies that are strongly conditioned by animacy, reflecting a hierarchically organised nominal system. For human nouns, plural formation often involves both lexical replacement and article change, a process that aligns with suppletive number marking cross-linguistically associated with high animacy and semantic prominence (Dixon, 1979; Corbett, 2013). For example, *iyorobō ma* (“the woman”) becomes *erema mein* (“the women”), *oweibō bei* (“the man”) becomes *owei-ongu mein* (“the men”) and *togu mi* (“the child”) becomes *owōma mein* (“the children”). These alternations show that plurality in Nembe language is not marked by simple affixation but rather by structurally complex morphosyntactic changes. Such patterns underscore the privileged grammatical status of human referents within the animacy hierarchy, where number distinctions are encoded more elaborately (Williamson & Blench, 2000; Corbett, 2000).

In contrast, nonhuman nouns typically express plurality through article alternation alone, with little or no modification to the noun stem itself. For instance, *sambī mi* (“the key”) becomes *sambī ma* (“the keys”), while *ololo bei* (“the bottle”) becomes *ololo ma* (“the bottles”). This strategy indicates a reduced morphological investment in number marking for inanimate entities, consistent with typological observations that lower-animacy nouns tend to exhibit simpler inflectional behaviour (Heine & Nurse,



2000; Croft, 2003). The Nembe language system therefore demonstrates that plurality is semantically motivated rather than uniformly grammatical.

French, by comparison, marks plurality morphologically on both the article and noun, regardless of animacy, as in *la bouteille* becoming *les bouteilles*. This reflects a more homogeneous grammatical approach to number marking, with limited sensitivity to semantic hierarchy (Grevisse & Goosse, 2016; Lyons, 1999). These contrasts highlight the interaction between animacy, semantic salience and morphological complexity in typologically distinct number systems.

Morphological Disposition of Articles in both Languages

Morphologically, Nembe language articles function primarily as number-sensitive agreement morphemes, reflecting a close integration of gender, animacy and number within the nominal system (Williamson & Blench, 2000; Corbett, 2013). In many cases, plurality is signaled solely through article change, while the noun stem remains unchanged. For example, *fulọ mi* (“the soup”) becomes *fulọ ma* (“the soups”) and *ololo bei* (“the bottle”) becomes *ololo ma* (“the bottles”). This demonstrates that articles in Nembe language are not merely determiners but carry essential grammatical information that interacts with noun semantics. With human nouns, pluralisation often entails simultaneous modification of both the noun and the article, producing a suppletive pattern that reflects the semantic prominence of human referents in the language. Examples include *toḡu bei* (“the boy”) becoming *asawọ mein* (“the boys”), *toḡu ma* (“the girl”) becoming *erewọ mein* (“the girls”), and *toḡu mi* (“the child”) becoming *owoma mein* (“the children”) (Dixon, 1979; Croft, 2003).

This dual marking of plurality highlights the interaction of morphosyntactic and semantic factors in Nembe language and illustrates the sensitivity to animacy and natural gender in the agreement system of the language. By contrast, French pluralisation operates uniformly across all noun classes, marking plurality on both the article and the noun regardless of animacy or semantic salience, as seen in forms such as *la table* becoming *les tables*, *le garçon* becoming *les garçons* (Lyons, 1999; Grevisse & Goosse, 2016). The French system lacks the semantic-driven differentiation evident in Nembe language, exemplifying a more arbitrary and morphologically consistent approach to number marking across the nominal domain.

Pedagogical Implications

The sharp morphosyntactic contrasts between Nembe and French have significant pedagogical implications for second language instruction. Nembe-speaking learners of French may encounter difficulties in internalising the use of pre-nominal articles, grammatical gender assignment and plural marking that is detached from semantic motivation (Odlin, 1989; Ellis, 2008). In Nembe language, articles are post-nominal, morphologically bound and semantically transparent, encoding natural gender, animacy and number, as in *toḡu bei* (“the boy”), *toḡu ma* (“the girl”) or *toḡu mi* (“the child”) (Williamson & Blench, 2000). By contrast, French articles, such as *le garçon* and *la fille*, precede the noun, function as independent syntactic units and rely on arbitrary lexical assignment for gender (Grevisse & Goosse, 2016; Lyons, 1999). Negative transfer may occur if learners attempt to map the semantically motivated Nembe language system directly onto French, leading to errors in article placement, gender agreement and pluralisation (Odlin, 1989). For example, a learner might overgeneralise the semantic logic of Nembe language to assign gender in French, despite French nouns like *le livre* (“the book”) or *la table* (“the table”) having arbitrary gender distinctions (Harris, 1991; Corbett, 2013).

To address these challenges, teaching strategies should adopt a contrastive, typology-informed approach. Instruction should emphasise that French gender must be memorised lexically and that plural marking applies uniformly across noun classes, regardless of animacy or natural gender (Grevisse & Goosse, 2016). Visual aids, explicit comparisons and practice exercises highlighting article position, gender patterns and



number agreement can facilitate learner awareness, reduce errors and promote more accurate production in French as a second language.

Conclusion

The comparative analysis of Nembe and French article systems demonstrates the profound ways in which morphology, syntax and semantics interact to structure nominal expressions in human languages. In Nembe language, articles are post-nominal, morphologically bound and semantically transparent, encoding distinctions of gender, number and animacy directly onto the noun. For example, *togu bei* (“the boy”), *togu ma* (“the girl”), and *togu mi* (“the child”) exemplify how semantic features such as human versus nonhuman status guide article selection and pluralisation, as seen in *erema mein* (“the women”) and *owoma mein* (“the children”) (Williamson & Blench, 2000; Corbett, 2013). In contrast, French articles are pre-nominal, syntactically independent, and governed by grammatical gender and number, with relatively arbitrary assignment of masculine and feminine categories, as in *le garçon* and *la table* (Lyons, 1999; Grevisse & Goosse, 2016). Plural marking in French applies uniformly across noun classes, without reference to animacy, demonstrating a more abstract and morphologically consistent system.

These contrasts indicate that Nembe language articles are not merely determiners but integral components of the noun phrase, central to both meaning construction and grammatical agreement. Understanding these structural and semantic divergences has implications not only for linguistic theory and typology but also for the teaching of French to Nembe-speaking learners, highlighting the value of contrastive and typology-informed pedagogical approaches (Odlin, 1989).

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