



## HOW TO EXPRESS POSSESSION IN ENGLISH AND FRENCH

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### Abstract

This study aimed to explore how to express ownership or possession in English and French. The study was motivated by the need to identify the similarities and differences in how to express ownership in the two languages in question. To achieve this aim, some grammar textbooks on English and French were used to collect data for the study. The method adopted was the descriptive analysis. With this method, the following findings were made. First, it was found that English speakers use possessive adjectives and pronouns, proper name followed by apostrophe and 's', and the preposition 'for' followed by proper noun or pronoun while French speakers use possessive adjectives and pronouns, the prepositions à (to) and de (of), to express ownership. Both languages also use the verbs 'to have' and 'to belong' for the same purpose. Based on the findings, the study concluded that French has more strategies than English for the expression of ownership or possession.

**Keywords:** Expression, ownership, languages, English, French.

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### Introduction

Possession is the state of having or owning something or something that one has or owns at a particular time. It also means belongings generally. The lexical item "possessive" is both a noun and adjective. As a noun, it means an adjective or pronoun that expresses that something belongs to somebody or something else. An adjective, being possessive means demanding total control of someone, not wanting them to be independent (Hornby, 2010:29).

In the various languages of the world, the expression of possession is done using case, possessive adjectives and possessive pronouns. Case is defined as that form of an adjective, a



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noun or pronoun that shows its relationship to another word (Hornby, 2010). Nnamdi-Eruchalu (2012) defines it as a change in the form of a noun or pronoun to show the relationship between them and other words in the sentence. Again, Murthy (2007) sees case as a word which indicates whether a noun or pronoun is used as a subject, object or an indirect object. This means that any word which is used to address a person or indicate ownership or possession is known as case.

In English one can express possession or ownership using possessive adjectives, possessive pronouns and the preposition "for" followed by a noun or indirect object pronoun (me, you, him/her/it, us, you, them). It is also done by placing an apostrophe followed by "s" after a proper noun e.g John's house, Mary's car, Ngozi's mother.

The French language uses more ways than English for the expression of possession or ownership. These are the possessive adjectives and pronouns, the preposition "a" and the preposition « de » meaning "to" and "of" respectively.

This paper seeks to provide an objective description of ownership expression in both English and French. The data for this study are from English and French textbooks namely

Malcolm Oford's *A student Grammar of French*, D.C. Chima's *Cours de Grammaire Francaise*. Faculty French Reader. J.D. Murthy's *Contemporary English Language and Geraldine Nnamdi - Eruchalu's An Introduction to General Linguistics (Second Edition)*. The descriptive analysis was adopted in this study.

## **Literature Review**

### **1. History of English Language**

According to Jowitt (2015), in Kamalu and Tamunobelem (2018), "the history of English is conventionally divided into three periods: Old, middle, and modern; however, many scholars divide the Modern period into two parts. Early Modern and Late Modern (which includes today's English). "This gives four periods in all".

Old English was originally spoken in Northwest Germany by the Anglo-Saxons who sailed from the North Sea and invaded the Southern and Eastern parts of Britain around 500AD. Before then Britain was part of the Roman Empire. For the Second time, the Anglo-Saxons were attacked by the Northmen from Scandinavia and they founded England.

Christianity spread to the region and the Anglo - Saxons became Christians. They were the only people who could read and write in Old English. Books were written by hand because printing had not yet been introduced at that time. The Old English alphabet was created.

Its alphabet lacked /j/, /k/, /q/, /v/, /x/, /z/ as found in today's Modern English. The phonology was simpler than today's own with 15 consonants only. The grammar was inflected, especially nouns and pronouns, which number and ease had inflections. Verbs were inflected for person, number, tense and mood. They were grouped into strong and weak verbs. A

declarative sentence was transformed into interrogative by inversion of the SVO pattern, and negated with the particle 'ne' preceding the verb. The definite article and adjectives were also inflected for number, case, and gender. It also had a limited vocabulary.

Middle English (c.1150 - 1500AD) was introduced by the Normans who invaded England in 1066AD. The Norman ruling class then used the language to prevail over French through inter-marriage. This was around the 14th Century. The middle English is seen in the poetry of Geoffrey Chaucer and other 14th and 15th Century writers. The consonants /q/ and /v/ were introduced from French into the English alphabet. Vowel diagraphs such as /ou/, /ow/, /ol/ or /oy/ also appeared in Middle English. The new diphthong /ai/, /au/ and /ɔi/ became distinct phonemes. The same thing occurred with /e/ and /ɛ/ which became separate phonemes. The vocabulary also expanded due to loan words from Latin and Greek.

Early Modern English started in 1500 and ended 1750 AD. It is a period of lost inflexions. It was rich in vocabulary because of borrowings from Latin, French, Greek and Scandinavia. There were also borrowings for Spanish, Italian and Portuguese. There was again the disappearance of post-vocalic /r/ and the creation of new diphthongs such as /iə/, /eə/, /ə/, /ɔə/, and /ɛ:/ and the emergence of /ʌ/ and /ə:/. The continuation of thou, thee, thy and thine and the associated 'st' verbal suffix remain as in saith, speakest, doth, etc, found in King James Version of the Bible.

Late Modern English (1750 - present day) witness the globalization of the language. The Americans retained English as their national language. There has been a decline in regional dialects. Its grammar now has the use of passive and perfect forms. The English lexicon has now been highly enriched.

## **2. History of the French Language**

French, like Italian, Spanish, Portuguese and Roman is a Romance Language. It has its origin from Vulgar Latin which spread in the world from the 11th to 14th centuries. At that time Old French evolved and it was regionalized in some parts of Europe (Grevisse and Goosse, 1980). From 1150 – 1300 Old English was borrowed from French. Francien, the language of Paris evolved leading to an extensive borrowing from French into English. This was called Middle French. From 1475 to 1650, classical French evolved with the writings of Descartes, Corneille, Racine, Moliere, etc. During the Enlightenment era (18th Century), Early Modern French came up and French became the official language for law, diplomacy and international relations. In the 19th Century, there was the growth of standard vocabulary in science and technology.

## **3. Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework adopted for this study is interactionism. Some second - language acquisition theorists believe that much language learning occurs through social interaction since interlocutors adjust their speech to make it more accessible to learners (Spada

&Lightbownin Schmitt, 2020). Social interaction theory is a sociolinguistic approach borrowed from the sociological symbolic interactionism.

It is argued that when native speakers engage in a conversation with L2 learners, they also adjust their language in ways intended to make it more comprehensible to the learner. Again, when L2 learners interact with each other or with native speakers they use a variety of interactions and adjustments in their efforts to negotiate meaning using the phonology, vocabulary, syntax and discourse of the language. Long (1985) hypothesized that understandable input is a prerequisite for interlanguage development. This involves paraphrasing, repeating and clarifying the speech of the L2 speaker to ensure the successful grasping of meaning. These adjustments improve comprehension which itself enhances acquisition of the L2 (second language). A typical research to support this theory was carried out by Mackey (2007) to investigate the effects of interaction on second language development.

This theory was considered appropriate to this study because both English and French are foreign to us in Nigeria. The former is a second language while the latter is foreign, and they are both learnt in our schools.

#### 4. **The expression of ownership in English**

As earlier said in the section on introduction, the English speakers use case, possessive adjectives, possessive pronouns and the preposition 'For' followed by a noun or pronoun to express ownership. A number of English grammar authors have written on the subject of possession but for this study, we shall take our examples from J.D.Murthy's Contemporary English Grammar (2007) and Geraldine Nnamdi - Eruchalu's Introduction to General Linguistics (2012).

Murphy (2007, p30) has provided seven ways by which we can form the possessive case in English. He outlines them as follows:

1. The possessive of a singular noun is formed by adding the apostrophe and 's' as in Pamela's handbag and Bayo's house. However 's' is omitted when there is a hissing sound as in for goodness sake, for justice sake and for conscience sake.
2. The possessive of plural nouns ending with 's' is formed by adding only an apostrophe as in Girls' school. Boys' dormitory and horses' tail.
3. The possessive of plural nouns not ending with 's' is formed by adding apostrophe and 's' as in men's club, children's Ministry and Women's club.
4. Compound nouns have their possessive attached to the last word as in The Governor of Rivers State's birthday, the Nigerian senate's disagreement and the Nigeria Bar Association's Chairman.
5. The possessive of appositive nouns is put on the second noun as in 1. Here is Chike, the teacher's favourite student, 2. Is that Bunmi, my son's classmate? 3. We live in Port Harcourt, Rivers State's capital.
6. For joint ownership, the possessive is placed on the second name as in Eze and Son's Library, Chidi and Mary's Estate and Adele and Adele's Bookshop

7. For separate ownership, the two different proper nouns each takes the possessive case as in: Pamela's and Victoria's books. Achebe's and Soyinka's styles, America's and Nigeria's armies, (Murthy 2007:30)
- (i) Use of the possessive case to express ownership Murthy (2007, p31) gave the following examples of the possessive case as used for ownership or possession:
  - (1) President's car (car belonging to president)
  - (2) Nigeria's leader (leader belonging to Nigeria)
  - (3) She was married at St Paul's (marriage held at that church)
  - (4) Keat's poetry (poetry written by Keat)
  - (5) For Mercy's Sake (Idiom)
  - (6) A day's work (to show duration)

From the above examples supplied by Murthy (2007).we can say that the possessive case is used for living things, personified objects, space /time/weight, names of buildings, idiomatic phrases and authorship/origin of something.

(ii) **Use of possessive adjectives to express ownership**

In English the following possessive adjectives correspond to the subject personal pronouns:my, your, his/her/its/our and their. In English, the possessive adjective remains unchanged no matter the number of the noun possessed. Examples of its usage include:

1. My mother is a teacher (mother belongs to me)
2. Your father is a doctor (father belongs to me)
3. Our country is Nigeria (Nigeria belongs to us)
4. All their daughters were married last year (Daughters belong to them) (Murthy, 2007:35)

(iii) **Use of possessive pronouns to express ownership**

Both Murthy (2007) and Nnamdi-Eruchalu (2012) provide the following possessive pronouns in English:

- Mine – first person singular, common gender
- Yours-second person singular, common gender
- His-third person singular, masculine gender
- Hers-third person singular, feminine gender
- Its-third person singular, neuter gender
- Ours-third person plural, common gender
- Yours-second person plural, common gender
- Theirs – third person plural, common gender

From Nnamdi-Enuchalu (2012:144), we have the following examples for the expression of ownership:

- (1) This dog is ours (It belongs to us)
- (2) These houses are theirs (They belong to them)

- (3) The book is his (It belongs to them)
- (4) The shoes are hers (They belong to her)

It can be observed from our examples above that in expressing ownership with possessive pronouns in English, what is possessed takes the initial position in the sentence while the possessor is at the final position. This implies that what is possessed precedes the possessor. They are linked by the copular verbs "to be".

**(iv) Use of the preposition ‘for’ to express ownership**

The formula: This is/that is/these are/those are etc is used as introducers while using ‘for to express possession or ownership as in the following examples:

- 1. This book is for me. (It is mine)
- 2. Those cars are for Emeka. (They are his)
- 3. That pen is for our teacher. (It is his)
- 4. The television is for my neighbour. (It is hers)

**(v) The expression of ownership in French**

The French speakers use about five ways to express ownership or possession. These are the possessive adjectives, possessive pronouns, prepositions ‘a’ (to) and ‘de’ (of) and appartenir (to belong)

**Use of possessive adjectives to express ownership**

In French, the possessive adjectives are used to express ownership or possession and they agree in gender and number with the object owned but in English they agree with the owner (Akakuru et al, 2010). Both Offord (2006) and Akakuru et al (2010) agree that the following possessive adjectives exist in French.

Person	Singular Masculine	Feminine	Plural masculine	Feminine
First	Mon	ma	mes	mes (my)
second	Ton	ta	tes	tes (your)
Third	Son	sa	ses	ses (his/her/its)
First	Notre	notre	nos	nos (our)
second	Votre	votre	vos	vos (your)
Third	Leur	leur	leur	Leur (their)

So, in French 'my' is translated as mon, ma, mes; 'your' as ton, ta, tes; his/her/its as son, sa, ses; 'ours' as notre, nos, your & plural (pi) as votre, vos, 'their' as leur and leurs. (Akakuru et al 2010:58). This is based on the number and gender of the object owned. In the Faculty French Reader, Akakuru et al (2010:58) provide the following examples of the use of possessive adjectives to show possession:

Mon                  sac                  (my bag)

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Ma	table	(my table)
Mes	sacs	(our bags)
Notre	sac	(our table)
Vos	copains	(your boyfriends)
Ses	parents	(his/her parents)
Mon	amie	(my girlfriend)
Ton	école	(your school)
Son	humour	(his/her humour)

From the table and examples given above, one can see that 'mon' precedes a masculine singular noun; ton for masculine singular noun; is for a feminine singular noun; ton for both masculine and feminine singular nouns; ta for a feminine singular noun; 'notre' both masculine and feminine singular nouns; 'Vos' for their plurals, 'votre' for both genders of nouns, 'vos' for their plurals; where 'leur' and 'leurs' serve for masculine and feminine singular nouns and their plurals respectively. It should be noted that 'mon', ton and son precede also feminine nouns that start with a vowel or mute 'h' as in the following examples:

mon	amie	-	my	girlfriend
mon	orange	-	my	orange
ton	idée	-	your	idea
mon	oreille	-	my	ear
mon	équipe	-	my	team

It is relevant to note that possessive adjectives are not usually used with parts of the body; instead definite article or an indirect object pronoun is used to indicate the possessor (Ogunleke et al, 2005).

Examples of usage include:

1. Je me brosse les dents -I brush my teeth.
2. Je ferme les yeux - I close my eyes.
3. Pierre lève la main - Pierre raises his hand.
4. J'ai mal à la tête - I have headache.

However, when body part is subject of the verb, the possessive adjective is usually used as in the following examples:

1. Entrentrentans nous avons grandi, nos jambes se sont allongées (In thirty years, we have got bigger, our legs have grown longer).
2. Mes cheveux ne sont plus aussi bruns qu'il y a cinq ans (My hair is no longer as brown as it was five years ago) (Offord, 2006:p202)

Again, the possessive adjective may be used in the following situations:

- (i) Croisez vos bras – foldyourarms
- (ii) Si votregenouestarthrosique - If your knee is arthritic

### Useof possessive pronouns to express ownership

The second method for expressing ownership in French is the use of possessive pronouns. They correspond to possessive adjectives in gender and number. The following pronouns exist in French

Person	Singular Maculine	Singular Feminine	Plural Masculine	Plural Feminine
First	le mien	la mienne	les miens	les miennes
Second	le tien	la tienne	les tiens	les tiennes
Third	le sien	la sienne	les siens	les siennes
First	le nôtre	la nôtre	les nôtres	les nôtres
Second	le votre	la vôtre	les vôtres	les vôtres
Third	le leur	la leur	les leurs	les leurs

So,in French ‘mine’ istranslated as le mien, la mienne, les miens and les miennes; yours as le tien, la tienne, les tiens and les tiennes ; his/hers/its as le sien, la sienne, les siens et les siennes: ours as in notre, la nôtre and les notres , yours (plural) as le vôtre, la vôtre and les vôtres, theirs as in les leurs (for both masculine and feminine plural, just as les notres et les vôtres). They agree in number and gender with the object owned (Chima, 2006). Here are some examples:

1. MonsieurIfeanyià une voiture → c’est la sienne (Chima, 2006)  
Mr. Ifeanyi has a car → it is his.
2. Mademoiselle Chidinmaà un livre →c’est le sien (Chima, 2006)  
Miss Chidinma has a book → it is hers
3. Sa famille habite en Italie, la mienne en Roumanie (Offord,2006)  
His family lives in Italy, mine in Romania

It can be observed that in French, the first, second and third person plural do not change with gender, hence we have examples like les notres, les vôtres et les leurs for ours, yours and theirs referring to plural objects.

### Use of the preposition ‘à’ to express ownership



The preposition 'à' following the verb 'être' can equally be used to indicate ownership. The copular verb 'être' must be conjugated to agree with the subject before adding the possessor. The examples are:

1. Le livre est à Timi  
The book belongs to Timi.
2. Le chien est à Paul  
The dog belongs to Paul.
3. La Chemise est au professeur  
The shirt belongs to the teacher
4. Le chapeau est au chauffeur  
The hat belongs to the driver (Ogunleke et al, 2005)

### **Use of the preposition 'de' to indicate ownership**

When the preposition 'de' is placed after a noun phrase and followed by a proper noun or another noun phrase, it implies ownership.

The examples are as follows:

1. Le stylo de Timi (Timi's pen)
2. Le chapeau de Ngozi (Ngozi's hat)
3. Le sac du garçon (the boy's bag)
4. L'anniversaire d'Okafor (Okafor's birthday)
5. Les livres des enfants (the children's books) Ogunleke et al, 2005)

### **Use of the verb appartenir (to belong) to show ownership**

The last way of expressing ownership in French is to use the verb appartenir (to belong) as in the following examples:

- (1) Le livre appartient à Paul  
The book belongs to Paul
- (2) La jupe appartient à Marie.  
The skirt belongs to Marie.
- (3) Cet avion appartient à l'église  
This aeroplane belongs to the church.
- (4) Ces régies appartiennent aux filles.  
These rulers belong to the girls.

### **Conclusion**

In this study, we explored the various ways of expressing ownership or possession in both English and French using examples of selected grammar texts in both languages. The descriptive analysis method was adopted for the study. In this communication, we left out the verb to have (avoir in French) since it is well known. Rather, we chose to study other means of expressing ownership. It was shown in the study that English speakers use the verbs to have, to belong, possessive case, possessive adjectives, pronouns and the preposition 'for' while French language uses possessive adjectives, pronouns, and prepositions de (of) and à (to). The French preposition de (of) is equivalent to the English apostrophe followed by S. The French possessive adjectives agree in number. Again, the French possessive pronouns

agree in number and gender with what is possessed while their plurals in the third person are invariable for both masculine and feminine forms. Further, the study indicated that French has more ways of expressing possession than English. Furthermore, the French possessive pronouns are preceded by the definite articles *le*, *la* and *les* based on gender and number criteria.

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