Formal Rigor and Functional Orientation——An Analysis of Syntactic Differences in English and French Possessive Expression Systems

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Abstract: This study compares English and French possessive systems from typological and contrastive perspectives. English possessive pronouns, eight invariant forms, exhibit marked analyticity. French, inheriting from Latin, features fifteen inflectional variants where possessive adjectives obligatorily agree with the noun in gender and number, integrating socio-pragmatic norms and the individual/collective distinction. Addressing three typical errors among English-speaking learners, it proposes a 'three-step' decisional model to operate the cognitive shift from possessor to properties of the possessed, and explores effective transfer pathways.

Keywords: English grammar; French grammar; possessive adjectives; gender and number agreement; language transfer

DOI:10.12417/3029-2328.26.03.019

1.Introduction: Background and Core Issues in English-French Grammatical Comparison

English and French both originate from the Indo-European language family, yet they belong respectively to the Germanic and Romance branches, and their grammatical gender systems have evolved along divergent paths. During the Old English period, English possessed a fully fledged three-gender system (Seth Lerer, 2008). However, following the Norman Conquest, its morphological system gradually simplified. Grammatical gender underwent a gender shift in the mid-twelfth century (Anne Curzan, 2003) and subsequently disappeared entirely, leaving only traces of grammatical gender in a few word classes in Modern English. In contrast, French, as a direct descendant of Latin (James Clackson, 2007), fully inherited the Proto-Indo-European principle of gender and number agreement, established its binary gender system through morphological inflection and overt marking (Sun Jiaxin, Ding Ning, 2025), and has largely preserved its inflectional features (Martin Maiden et al., 2011). Thus, French's adherence to gender and number agreement and English's flexibility reflect two divergent evolutionary paths within the Indo-European language family.

Consequently, English-speaking learners of French must pay close attention to the essential differences between the grammatical systems of the two languages, especially the fundamental requirement in French that adjectives, articles, past participles, and other related elements must agree in grammatical gender and number. This study takes the possessive expression systems of English and French as its object of analysis. By examining the similarities and differences at the morphological, syntactic, and pragmatic levels, it aims to reveal the inherent logic behind French's formal rigor and to explore pathways for effective transfer for English-speaking learners of French.

2.Contrastive Rules: English's 'Fixed Form' vs. French's 'Gender and Number Agreement'

English has only eight fixed forms of adjectival possessive pronouns, which do not vary in form according to the gender or number of the possessed noun. By contrast, French has as many as fifteen forms of possessive adjectives (as shown in Table 1) and must strictly adhere to the principle of gender and number agreement. French possessive adjectives must fully match the gender (masculine or feminine) and number (singular or plural) of the noun they modify, irrespective of the gender or number of the possessor.

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Table 1: Comparison of English and French Possessive Expressions

<table>
<tr><td rowspan="2">English</td><td colspan="3">French</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">Singular</td><td rowspan="2">Plural</td></tr>
<tr><td>Masculine</td><td>Feminine</td></tr>
<tr><td>my</td><td>mon</td><td>ma</td><td>mes</td></tr>
<tr><td>your</td><td>ton</td><td>ta</td><td>tes</td></tr>
<tr><td>his</td><td rowspan="3">son</td><td rowspan="3">sa</td><td rowspan="3">ses</td></tr>
<tr><td>her</td></tr>
<tr><td>its</td></tr>
<tr><td>our</td><td colspan="2">notre</td><td>nos</td></tr>
<tr><td>your</td><td colspan="2">votre</td><td>vos</td></tr>
<tr><td>their</td><td colspan="2">leur</td><td>leurs</td></tr>
</table>

2.1 Gender of the Modified Noun

English possessive pronouns do not vary according to the grammatical gender of the noun (e.g., my bag, my suitcase). In French, however, possessive adjectives must agree with the gender of the following noun (e.g., *mon sac* [*sac* is masculine], *ma valise* [*valise* is feminine]). If a feminine singular noun modified by a French possessive adjective begins with a vowel or a mute '*h*', '*ma*' is replaced by '*mon*'(e.g., *mon école* [*école* is feminine]). This reflects French's stringent requirement for formal agreement.

2.2 Number of the Modified Noun

English possessive adjectives remain unchanged in form when the noun changes from singular to plural (e.g., my cat, my cats). In French, possessive adjectives are obligatorily marked for number agreement (e.g., *mon chat*, *mes chats*[*mes* is plural]). This further highlights French's strict requirement for formal agreement.

2.3 Third-Person Possessors

English uses 'his/her/its' based on the natural gender of the noun possessor to express ownership (e.g., his bed, her bed, its bed). French uses the possessive adjectives '*son/sa/ses*', whose form is determined entirely by the grammatical gender and number of the noun they modify (e.g., *son lit* [*lit* is masculine], meaning 'his/her/its bed'). Thus, English focuses on the natural gender of the possessor, whereas French focuses on the grammatical gender and number of the possessed noun.

2.4 Plural Possessors

When the possessor is plural, the form of the English possessive pronoun is unaffected by the number of the noun (e.g., your park, your pencils). In French, it is affected by the number of the modified noun (e.g., *votre parc*, *vos stylos*). It should be noted that French plural possessive adjectives (*notre/nos*, *votre/vos, leur/leurs*) do not distinguish gender, they only vary according to the number of the noun.

3.Pragmatic Logic: English's "Neutral and Uniform" vs. French's "Social and Collective" Expression

The English possessive determiner 'your' is entirely neutral in pragmatic terms. Its form carries no social deixis and merely indicates a possessive relationship. This pragmatic simplification allows 'your' to be used without issue in any communicative context, whether addressing a close friend or a superior, with the form remaining constant. In French, however, the pragmatic complexity of possessive adjectives extends beyond merely maintaining gender and number agreement to also require maintaining 'social agreement'. This complexity is most evident in the second-person forms, where the corresponding pronoun '*vous*' itself integrates the dual socio-pragmatic functions of

plural reference (you all) and singular polite address (you formal). This means that when using '*votre crayon*'(your pen), two encoding operations are performed simultaneously. One marking *crayon* as masculine singular, and the other marking the social status of the listener. By deeply grammaticalizing such social rules, French enables this expression to automatically convey social information about the intimacy or hierarchical relationship between interlocutors in specific contexts. This constitutes another core aspect of the rigor of the French grammatical system and represents a social pragmatic feature absent from the corresponding English expression system.

When expressing the relationship between plural possessors and possessed objects, English typically does not distinguish whether the possessed objects belong to the group collectively or to individuals within it. English's fixed plural form is economical and efficient but poses a subtle obstacle for learners of French. For instance, when several students each submit their own exercise book, the English sentence 'They hand in their exercise books.' suffices for all scenarios. French, however, requires the speaker to make an explicit semantic distinction between *leur cahier d'exercices* (implying one each) and *leurs cahiers d'exercices* (emphasizing the books as a collective whole). This distinction also applies to abstract nouns. For example, when expressing 'work', one can distinguish based on the grammatical property of the noun [±countable]: *leur travail* (uncountable, emphasizing individual work content) vs. *leurs emplois* (countable, plural, emphasizing a collection of specific jobs). This subtle morphological difference in French encodes semantic information about the mode of ownership, reflecting the precision of French grammar in everyday expression.

This study finds that French possessive adjectives are subject to at least three interacting factors. Firstly, the grammatical features of the noun [±countable, ±abstract] constitute the foundational layer. Secondly, the logical valency of the possessive relationship (e.g., each individually or group collectively) forms the semantic layer. And thirdly, the speaker's cognitive stance (individual perspective or holistic perspective) forms the pragmatic layer. These three layers do not operate in isolation but interact in specific contexts to jointly determine the final morphological form. This typological difference forces learners to shift from the holistic perspective typical of English to the nuanced, distinguishing perspective required by French, making this one of the most challenging aspects of the English-French possessive expression systems in teaching.

4.Transfer and Interference: Analysis of Common Errors by English-Speaking Learners

Based on the contrastive rules of the English and French possessive expression systems, English-speaking learners of French often produce systematic errors due to negative transfer from their native language and English habits.

4.1 Gender Agreement Errors: Neglect of Feminine Nouns and Overgeneralization

After initially learning the rules for modifying masculine nouns, learners tend to mechanically apply them to feminine nouns, resulting in gender agreement errors. For example, after correctly learning *mon livre* (my book, *livre* is masculine), learners often erroneously produce '**mon table*' (my table), while the correct form is '*ma table*' (*table* is feminine). The root cause of such errors is that learners do not internalize grammatical gender as an inherent attribute of the noun during the acquisition process. This reveals, at a cognitive level, that when learning French nouns, grammatical gender must be memorized and retrieved as an integral feature of the noun.

4.2 Person-Gender Confusion Errors: Cognitive Conflict between Natural and Grammatical Gender

The English 'his/her' tends to create a fixed mindset in learners, leading to misunderstandings of the French possessive adjective system. Learners often mistakenly believe that '*son/sa*' directly corresponds to 'his/her' and attempt to use '*son*' or '*sa*' to indicate the gender of the possessor. For example, when expressing her dog(chien is masculine), the correct form is '*son chien*', but learners may incorrectly use '**sa chien*' or, even if they correctly use '*son chien*', they may be confused about the gender of the possessor it refers to. Instructors should try to clarify for learners that the morphological logic of French possessive adjectives is such that the initial consonant (*m-/t-/s-*)

indicates the person, while the ending (*-on/-a/-es*) indicates the grammatical gender and number of the modified noun, as well as its phonetic characteristics. Correcting this type of confusion is a key step in facilitating learners' cognitive shift from the English focus on the possessor to the French focus on the attributes of the possessed.

4.3 Errors in Acquiring Plural Possessive Adjectives: Lack of Sensitivity to the Number of the Possessed Object

Our research indicates that due to negative transfer from English, after mastering singular possessive adjectives in French, learners tend to avoid using plural forms (*notre/nos, votre/vos, leur/leurs*). English plural possessive pronouns (our/your/their) have fixed forms and do not vary with the number of the noun, leading learners to mistakenly assume that French plural possessive adjectives are similarly invariant. For instance, after learning to correctly say '*notre maison*' (our house), learners might produce '**notre amis*' instead of '*nos amis* for 'our friends'. The reason for this error is the influence of English, where the plural possessive pronoun is determined by the number of possessors, causing learners to overlook the underlying logic that French plural possessive adjectives depend entirely on the number of the noun they modify. Therefore, cultivating learners' syntactic sensitivity to the number of the possessed object is crucial in teaching to overcome this type of transfer interference.

5.Learning Strategies: Constructing a Structured Decision-Making Process

Based on the analysis of common errors above, mastering positive transfer strategies is essential for learners. To this end, this paper constructs a clear 'three-step decision-making model'(as shown in Figure 1) to replace vague linguistic intuition.

Step 1: Identify the 'Possessor'. Clarify the possessing entity, 'I, you, he/she/it' or 'we, you (formal/plural), they' to determine the person category of the possessive.

Step 2: Determine the 'Number' of the Possessed Object. Identify whether the noun being modified is singular or plural, narrowing the choice of form to the singular or plural set under that person.

Step 3: Determine the 'Gender' of the Possessed Object. Identify the grammatical gender (masculine/feminine) of the noun. If the noun is singular, the final form can be directly selected. If it is plural, the plural form is generally used directly, with attention to special cases where distinct plural forms exist (e.g., *notre/nos*, etc.).

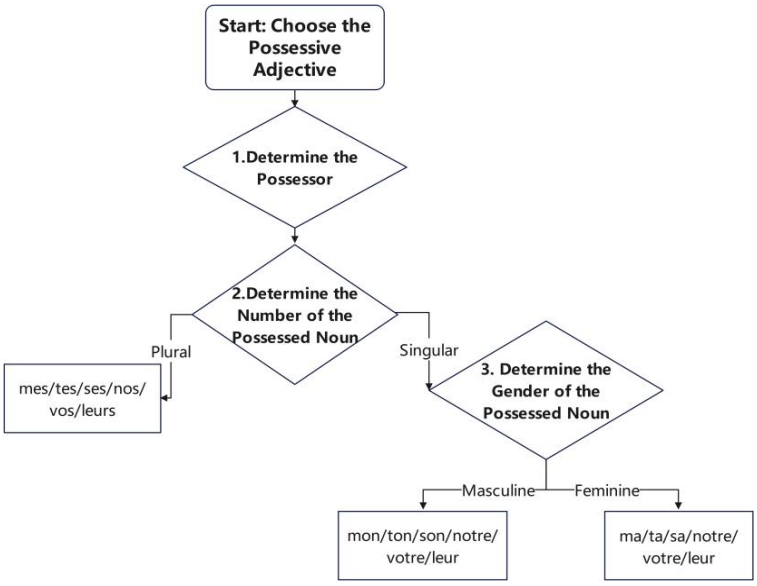

Figure 1: Decision-Making Flowchart for the 'Three-Step Method' for French Possessive Adjectives

From the perspective of lexical categories in linguistics, English classifies possessive expressions within the determiner system. Their core function is to indicate the referential relationship of the noun rather than to describe its attributes. Determiners lack the grammatical conditions for inflectional morphological change. Hence, English possessive pronouns remain invariant in form and do not undergo morphological adjustments according to the gender,

number, or other grammatical categories of the noun they modify. In contrast, French categorizes possessive expressions within the adjective system, granting them the grammatical function of modifying noun attributes, and they must undergo systematic morphological changes according to the gender and number of the noun they modify. From a linguistic typology perspective, English underwent profound grammatical simplification over its long evolution, ultimately functionalizing possessive expressions as fixed, invariant grammatical markers. French, however, inherited the historical tradition within the Indo-European language family of adjectives requiring morphological agreement.

These two perspectives explain the question learners often have when comparing the two languages: why do English possessive determiners have corresponding forms that are almost invariant, whereas French possessive adjectives have multiple variant forms? In teaching practice, when learners understand the historical origins of the two languages—that French possessive adjectives are essentially still ‘adjectives’ while their English counterparts have grammaticalized into ‘labels’—their acceptance of the rules governing morphological change significantly increases, and the memory burden is correspondingly reduced.

6.Conclusion

In summary, English emphasizes functional efficiency, while French emphasizes formal regularity. The distinct typological characteristics of the two languages lead to differences in gender and number agreement between English possessive pronouns and French possessive adjectives. As an analytic language, English has grammaticalized its possessive words into functionally fixed, formally invariant determiners, prioritizing economy of expression. French, continuing the tradition of inflectional languages, incorporates possessive words into the adjective system, achieving syntactic rigor through systematic morphological variation. Therefore, for English-speaking learners to master the logic of the French form, they must complete a cognitive shift in focus: from the center of the possessor to the center of the attributes of the possessed.

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