
RESEARCH ARTICLE

Embosi Definiteness: A Semantic Account

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ABSTRACT

The contribution broaches the semantic analysis of definite description in Embosi, a Bantu language spoken in the Republic of Congo. The work is carried out through the meaning theories of reference and sense, and it also aims at providing promotion and documentation of this Bantu language. The analysis demonstrates that demonstratives are the primary means of expressing Embosi definite descriptions, aside from proper nouns and possessives. The study reveals that Embosi definiteness, semantically, encodes uniqueness with the existence of one and only one entity meeting the noun phrase description and inclusiveness with the totality of entities concerned with the depiction. The analysis also shows that the context-independent approach of the Embosi definite description does not provide a successful meaning for a felicitous communication; the context of use should be taken into account.

KEYWORDS

Embosi, definiteness, sense, reference, uniqueness, inclusiveness, context.

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1. Introduction

Embosi is a Bantu language of the Republic of Congo, spoken in the northern part of the country. The Guthrie classification of Bantu languages ranged it in the C20 group, and it is classified as the C25 language. Embosi distinguishes five varieties, among which *Embosi strictly speaking* on which this study is based. The study is prompted by the promotion and documentation of the language under discussion, which lacks a written form. The work focuses on two research questions: (i) What linguistic aspects do Embosi speakers encode by means of definiteness? (ii) Does the semantic meaning of definiteness guarantee successful communication in Embosi? Based on the theories of reference and sense, this study deals with the theoretical background and the definiteness expression. Data are specifically taken from Kiba Ngapoula (2020).

2. Background information

2.1. Embosi language

Bantu languages are classified according to Guthrie's (1948) work. Embosi consists of five dialects: Akwa, *Embosi strictly speaking*, Koyo, Mboko, and Ngare. The work is based on the *Embosi strictly speaking* dialect, more particularly the *Olée* subdialect spoken in the Plateaux department.

Though it is important to specify that all researchers in the Embosi language do not agree on the distinction between Embosi C25 and its dialects. Indeed, following Guthrie, Ollassa (1969), Kouarata (2001), Apondza Ngombe (2003), and others claim that Akwa, *Embosi strictly speaking*, Koyo, Mboko, and Ngare are not Embosi dialects, but rather different languages belonging to the same group. However, Obenga (1976), Ndongo Ibara (2000), Itoua (2007), Kiba Ngapoula (2019) and others assert that Akwa, *Embosi strictly speaking*, Koyo, Mboko, and Ngare are not different languages, but rather dialects. According to them, speakers of all those dialects do not require interpreters to speak to each other. However, this contribution deals with definiteness in Embosi; let us focus on its morphosyntactic aspects.

2.2. Morphosyntactic features of the Embosi definite description

Talking about the rules of syntax, Fromkin, Rodman, and Hymes (2011,118) claim that the rules specify the correct word order for a language. Indeed, Embosi is a Subject-Verb-Object language. Since morphology, according to Kracht (2008,79), is intimately related to syntax, word formation in this language follows the prefix-root-suffix structure. The singular or plural of the nouns is expressed by the prefix depending on the different noun classes.

However, the noun phrase naturally plays either the role of subject or object. It may be placed either at the beginning of the sentence or at its end. This is exemplified below:

(1) Mwánà àdzúé ndáí
Child he-go house
"The child went home."

(2) Bási bà wénà òlábà béà
Wives they- cook food
"The wives are cooking the food."

In other instances, the position of the definite description is examined according to the place occupied by the determiners or/and modifiers. Indeed, in Embosi noun phrases, as Kiba Ngapoula (2016,32) claims, determiners and modifiers are generally post-nominal, implying the use of associative morphemes. This aspect is well illustrated in the following examples:

(3) Mwási yà ngà yà éβóà àbùrù kɔ
wife of me of silly she-go back forest
"My silly wife went back to the forest."

(4) Éβóà ngà yà mwási èbùrù kɔ
silly me of wife she-go back forest
"My silly wife went back to the forest."

Indeed, the determiner yà ngà "my" is post-nominal in (3) and pre-nominal in (4), when associated with a modifier. The modifier éβóà "silly" is post-nominal in (3) and pre-nominal in (4).

Yet, it is important to specify that the position of the definite description in relation to the place occupied by the determiners or modifiers may affect its interpretation. In (3), the speaker lays stress on the definite description mwási yà ngà "my wife" whereas in (4), he emphasises the qualification of the definite description éβóà "silly".

Accordingly, Ndongo Ibara (2012,29) thinks that the word order in Embosi noun phrase is pre and post nominal. When a determiner is pre nominal, it does not show agreement with the noun whilst a post nominal determiner must agree with its head. This may be illustrated with the same example above without modifier:

(5) Mwási yà ngà àbùrù kɔ
wife of me she-go back forest
"My wife went back to the forest."

(6) Yà ngà mwási àbùrù kɔ
of me wife she-go back forest
"My wife went back to the forest."

Indeed, it is clear that in (5), with the definite description mwási yà ngà "my wife", the determiner yà ngà "my" is post nominal, whereas in (6), with the definite description yà ngà mwási "my wife", the same determiner yà ngà "my" is pre nominal. The only difference in the interpretation is that where the determiner yà ngà "my" is pre nominal, the speaker emphasises the possession; while when it is post nominal, the speaker emphasises on the head mwási "wife". However, the use of the Embosi definite description is guided by certain circumstances.

2.3. The use of Embosi definite description

In Embosi, the definite description is used in the following main cases:

Indeed, the definite description is used in a second mention situation when the referent has already been introduced in the discourse, under the indefinite status. In this case, it is used with an associative marker, which specifies that this referent has previously been mentioned in the communication. This is highlighted in the following example:

- (7) ìbàà ìpòò ìyéé òtá dà, ìbàà dàmé ìdì ìlá.
 Man one he-come see daddy, man that he-be tall
 "A man came to see daddy, that man is tall"

The definite description ìbàà dàmé "that man" is used with the demonstrative dàmé "that" to specify that the speaker is talking about the same referent ìbàà "man" introduced in the first part of the utterance under the indefinite status ìbàà ìpòò "a man".

Moreover, the definite description is also used in Embosi to indicate a generic function when the general meaning of the noun is referred to.

- (8) Mbwàndé àdì nyàmà yà mbyéngùì
 Dog it-be animal of hunt
 "The dog is a hunting animal"

- (9) ìbàà àdì òkóndzì yà mbóà
 Man he-be chief of village
 "The man is the chief of the village."

Indeed, mbwàndé "dog" and ìbàà "man" are used in their general meaning. The dog or man here does not refer to a specific dog or a specific individual, but rather it plays a generic role.

In addition, a noun in Embosi can be definite when it is associated with a clause or sometimes with a modifier. This is exemplified below:

- (10) òyírì yà èyàà òkóβà mwánà ìmbyéngùì àdì là ìlɔngɔ
 Woman of she-come take child tomorrow she-be of beauty
 "The woman who will come to take the child tomorrow is beautiful."

- (11) Mwánà yà àyèlì
 Child of intelligence
 "The intelligent child"

In (10), it is observed that the fact for the noun phrase to be associated with a clause makes it definite. The subordinate clause yà èyàà òkóβà mwánà ìmbyéngùì "who will come to take the child tomorrow" provides information about the noun òyírì "the woman", which makes it specific. Similarly, the presence of the modifier yà àyèlì "intelligent" in (11) adds additional information that particularises this child and makes this description therefore definite.

Otherwise, the presence of a preposition can make a noun definite, mainly when it precedes a noun. The examples below highlight this argumentation:

- (12) Tsà ndài
 In house
 "In the house"

- (13) òbósó à tàì
 In front of father
 "In front of the father"

- (14) ìkwé là ndzùngú
 Up of cooking pot
 "On the cooking pot"

Definiteness is expressed in Embosi when a proper noun, used with an associative marker, is employed to differentiate an individual from another having the same proper noun.

(15) Kìbá àyéé ɔtà nɔ βà
Kiba he-come see you here
"Kiba came here to see you"

Kìbá yà pé?
Kiba of where?
"Which Kiba?"

Kìbá ya Akyélé
Kiba of Akiélé
"The Kiba from Akiélé".

(16) Ngóó yà nɔ àwénà òwòlà lá Òyóm̀bì à Mbò̀β̀ò
Mother of you she-speak to Òyóm̀bì of Mbò̀β̀ò
"Your mother is speaking to the Òyóm̀bì from Mbò̀β̀ò".

Finally, in Embosi, definite description is used in plural and in agreement with the noun classes to talk about communities, and in singular, to talk about languages.

(17) Ambosi
The mbochi people or community

(18) engwéngwél àdì dzúé là Àngóngólò
engwéngwél is language of Ngangulu people
"engwéngwél is the language of Ngangulu people"

However, this work focuses on the semantic analysis of Embosi definiteness. This analysis is carried out through the theories of reference and sense.

2.4. Reference and sense theories

2.4.1. Reference

The question of understanding the meaning of a word has not been widely perceived among philosophers and linguists for several years. The meaning of a word or an expression generally refers to its reference, that is, its link with the object it refers to. Reference is then the relationship between the word or the linguistic sign and the object in the world to which that word is applicable. At that time, the referred object is regarded as the referent. In this perspective, Cruse (2000,21) claims that the thing or things in the world referred to by a particular expression is its referent(s).

In fact, the meaning of a proper name like Mouelenga is its reference. This means that there is an association between the word Mouelenga and the individual called Mouelenga, who is therefore its referent. The proper names are considered noun phrases and can be replaced in any noun phrase position in a phrase or a sentence without affecting the grammaticality of that sentence. So, noun phrases such as my mother, a good Embosi teacher, or a nice woman can be references to the noun phrase Mouelenga on condition that you have seen Mouelenga teaching Embosi for example. Thus, it is clear that in all different instances, the reference of the NP is part of the meaning of that NP.

However, it is important to specify that all NPs do not refer to physical entities in the real world. The following example illustrates it:

(19) Nobody is tired here.

It is easy to notice the presence of one NP in that sentence: nobody. But our linguistic background knowledge enables us to realise that this NP has no reference in the real world. The fact that there is no a reference in the world does not nevertheless mean that this NP is meaningless; rather, it has sense.

2.4.2. Sense

If reference alone could explain the meaning of a word or an expression, then this meaning would be its association with the object in the world to which it is applicable. However, this theory has limitations. Indeed, many words or expressions in the world, such

as happiness, vacation, freedom, and joy, have no references in the real world. Yet the meanings in those words are known. The element of meaning of these words is called sense, a meaning that has a connection with a given word.

It is through sense that we understand functional words such as articles (the, a, an), demonstratives (this, that, these, those), or conjunctions (but, and, or, so). All these words are described via the word meaning theory of sense. In a dictionary, the meaning of the word son, for example, is very clear. But is it possible to have a single reference to this word? The reference I have for my son is certainly different from others because each son carries a different set of qualities.

Therefore, the distinction between reference and sense is that the referent of a word is a thing or an individual in the world, while the sense of a word is not an object; it is a part of the meaning of a word that is lacking when reference cannot explain it alone. The sense of an expression is an abstraction, but it is helpful to note that it is an abstraction that can be entertained in the mind of a speaker. When a person fully understands what is said to him, it is reasonable to say that he grasps the sense of the expression he hears. So, Reimer (2010,17) asserts that the notion of sense can be made more explicit through the contrast with the category of the referent. The conclusion can then be given with the following rule: *Every expression that has meaning has sense, but not every expression has reference*. Thus, taking into account both theories, let us analyse the Embosi definite descriptions.

3. Embosi definiteness and the encoded meaning

3.1. Embosi definiteness

Some world languages, like French, Spanish, or English, attest to the article system; others, however, do not. This is the case of Bantu languages, among which Embosi. This means that the definiteness of a language does not depend on the existence of the article system alone. For the case of Embosi, with no articles, definiteness is encoded in the noun phrases. As a matter of fact, in that language, noun phrases are qualified as definite descriptions depending on the context in which they occur.

Thus, the definite description, or rather, the definiteness, is defined as a grammatical marker expressing the relationship between the speaker, the hearer, and their background knowledge about the referred entity. For Kiba Ngapoula (2023,165), definiteness is based on presuppositional information. It is then understood as the central referential property of the nominal expression. This term is mostly assimilated with the expression definite description. Alan Cruse (2006,42-43) claims that this term usually denotes a noun phrase which refers to a definite entity or group of entities, and which contains descriptive information necessary to identify the entity. It is therefore admitted that the descriptive information is contained in the head of the noun phrase, like in *ibáá dì "this man"*. It is also contained, in part, by the modifier associated with the head of the noun phrase, like in *òyírì yà ìlongo wó "this beautiful woman"*.

As a matter of fact, the definiteness in Embosi is generally expressed by the use of the demonstratives. Accordingly, Ndongo Ibara (2012,29) claims that it is the demonstrative that determines the definiteness of a noun. However, since the definiteness in Embosi is mainly expressed through demonstratives, it is important to understand the Embosi demonstrative system. The first thing to know about Embosi demonstratives is that they are generally post-nominal, that is, they are placed after the nouns they determine.

The understanding of this system depends on demonstrative classification, which itself depends on the different noun classes. Kiba Ngapoula (2019:42) highlights that Embosi demonstrative system is complex, not only due to their noun classes and their singular and plural, but also due to the contrast between the proximity and distance. What is meant by this assertion is that Embosi demonstrative system implies the noun classes, the number aspect, as well as the distal, and proximal features. The author distinguishes four types of demonstratives: the simple proximal, the very proximal, the simple distal and the very distal (Kiba Ngapoula, 2019).

In fact, the presence of a demonstrative in a noun phrase makes it definite; that is, the demonstrative carries the content that establishes the shared knowledge of the referred entity with the participants in a communication act. Let us illustrate with the following examples:

(20) Ndzo àbèí mwánà yà ngà
snake it-bite child of me
"A snake bit my child."

(21) Ndzo wó àbèí mwánà yà ngà
snake this it- bite child of me
"This snake bit my child"

In (20), the noun phrase *ndzo "a snake"* is not specific; it refers to a snake in its general meaning of being a reptile with or without venom. In (21) however, the presence of the demonstrative *wó "this"* in the noun phrase makes it definite. *Ndzo wó "this snake"* refers to a particular or specific snake, familiar to the participants since it is part of their common knowledge.

Moreover, even if demonstratives in Embosì take a crucial place in the expression of definiteness, they are not the only determiners to act so. Indeed, definiteness is also tackled when a NP is associated with a possessive. The illustration is provided by the examples below:

(22) Ngóó yà bá àdzùé òtsósá ibáá
Mother of they she-go insult man
"Their mother went to insult a man."

(23) Ngóó yà bisí àdzùé òtsósá báá dínjí
Mother of we she- go insult man that
"Our mother went to insult that man."

Indeed, the presence of *yà bá "their"* in (22) and *yà bisí "our"* makes the noun phrase definite. In addition, the function of a NP associated with a demonstrative does not affect the definiteness of that NP. It may be a subject as in (22) or an object as in (23), but the expression of definiteness remains constant.

However, how is meaning encoded through definiteness in Embosì?

3.2. The encoded meaning

In general, meaning is encoded linguistically, through spoken or written symbols. (Winkler 2012,199). The linguistic features encoded in Embosì definiteness are better examined under the notions of uniqueness and inclusiveness.

3.2.1. Uniqueness

The notion of uniqueness, as developed by Russell (1905), indicates that for definite description to be unique, the condition is the existence of one and only one entity that meets the content of the noun phrase. This is what establishes the distinction between the definite and indefinite descriptions. Let us illustrate it with the following examples:

(24) òlèngé yà òyírì yènyúà mà
Young of girl she-drink water
"A young girl drinks water."

(25) òlèngé yà òyírì yé yènyúà mà
Young of girl this she-drink water
"This young girl drinks water."

The difference between both sentences is that in (24), the entity is indefinite. *òlèngé yà òyírì "a young girl"* may refer to any girl that meets the description of drinking water. As far as (25) is concerned, the entity *òlèngé yà òyírì yé "this young girl"* is definite. In this sentence, the entity refers to a unique and specific individual known to the speaker and the hearer in this discourse. So, there is one *òlèngé yà òyírì "young girl"* and only one that meets the description of drinking water. Let us now consider the following examples:

(26) Ngàpóró àdzàà ombiàlé yà Ekòlò
Ngapora he-be notable of Ekolo
"Ngapora was the notable of Ekolo"

(27) Kùmà yà pòò àsèrì wàré móró yà èkwéà ko pàà àdì kò
Chief of village he-say that person of go into forest today is not
"The Chief of the village said that nobody should go into the forest today".

As far as (26) is concerned, the noun phrase *ombiàlé "the notable"* is a definite description, despite the fact that it is not associated with a demonstrative. In a village, it is not possible to have more than one *ombiàlé "notable"*. The fact of associating the noun phrase *ombiàlé "notable"* with the village Ekolo makes it definite.

Thus, since there is one and only one ombiàlé “notable” in Ekòlò village, the uniqueness of this definite description is well established. It is uniquely identifiable that ombiàlé “notable” of Ekòlò village is Ngaporo. There is nobody else who can meet such a description apart from the only Ngaporo.

Similarly, concerning (27), the noun phrase Kùmà yà pòò “the chief of the village” is of course definite. The relationship between the speaker, the hearer, and the referred entity is well established. This means that both participants know which Kùmà yà pòò “the Chief of the village” is being referred to. (Kiba Ngapoula 2020,209).

Indeed, it is known that in a village, there is one and only one individual that plays the function of chief; the referent of this definite description is therefore unique. If the notion of uniqueness indicates the existence of one and only one entity that describes the definiteness, it is not, nevertheless, the only or unique notion to interpret definite descriptions in Embosi. It can also be grasped through the concept of inclusiveness.

3.2.2. Inclusiveness

One of the distinctions between uniqueness and inclusiveness is that uniqueness is mainly concerned the singular definite descriptions, whereas inclusiveness deals with plural definite descriptions. Taking into account the argument of exhaustiveness, Hawkins (1978) thinks that plural definite descriptions can be understood under the notion of inclusiveness. It is concerned with the totality of the entities, or all the entities meeting that description. Let us illustrate with the following examples:

(28) Ànyosì àdí là àsà
birds they-have of feathers
“The birds have feathers.”

(29) Kàà yà ìbàà àmpé ngà àswé bà àbìsì bàpé
grandparent of man me-give fishes of fresh those
“Grandfather gave me those fresh water fish”

Indeed, in (28), the speaker may refer to a specific group of ànyosì “birds”. He can talk about a group of ten sparrows, or five ravens, or twenty doves or even six owls. The hearer, on his behalf, understands that the speaker is referring to a band of warm-blooded egg-laying vertebrate animals distinguished by the possession of feathers, wings, a beak, and typically by being able to fly. So, the hearer does not exclude any kind of bird. (Kiba Ngapoula 2020, 211).

Accordingly, Hawkins (1978,161) claims that inclusiveness is intended to capture the fact that the reference is all inclusive, that is to say all the objects in the shared set satisfying the descriptive predicate are being referred to, and none are being excluded. It emerges from this quotation that inclusiveness includes the entirety of the entities that meet the description. That is why this notion refers to the concept of totality and is compared with the universal quantifier “all”, avoiding the exclusion of any kind of entity being referred to.

Likewise, when analysing (29), the definite description àswé bà àbìsì bàpé “those freshwater fishes” may refer, according to the speaker, to five carps, or four catfishes, or two eels. The hearer, by this definite description, can understand that all freshwater fish that can be found in the participants environmental area meet the depiction. Put differently, it means that the hearer understands that the referred entity may be all types of fish spending all their lives in their (speaker and hearer) rivers or lakes. (Kiba Ngapoula 2020,212).

However, the understanding of the semantics of definiteness in Embosi does not only depend on the notions of uniqueness and inclusiveness, which show some limitations. The sentence below illustrates it:

(30) Kólóbóngò yà La Coupole èsì béβà
Way of La Coupole it-be damaged
“The way to La Coupole is damaged”.

Indeed, the notion of uniqueness cannot be used to explain the definite description kólóbóngò yà La Coupole “the way to La Coupole” since there is more than one way to go to La Coupole. So, the reference cannot uniquely be identifiable unless the hearer engages in negotiation with the speaker by asking, for example, kólóbóngò yà pé? “Which way?” in order to identify the damaged way. Let us put the sentence in the plural in order to analyse it through inclusiveness.

(31) Àkólóbóngò bà La Coupole àsì béβà

Ways of La Coupole they-be damaged
"The ways to La Coupole are damaged"

It is difficult to understand the definite description àkólóbóngò bà La Coupole "The ways to La Coupole" through inclusiveness because the speaker may refer to two, or three, or even five ways that lead to La Coupole, but not all the six ways. The hearer does not also understand from this definite description that the speaker is referring to ways to La Coupole. So, if the speaker does not indicate that he is referring to all ways, by saying: àkólóbóngò àtsɔ̀ bà La Coupole àsi béβà "all the ways to La Coupole are damaged", the notion of inclusiveness will collapse in the explanation of this definite description.

Thus, taking into account the theories of word meaning, reference, and sense, along with the notions of uniqueness and inclusiveness, we realise that semantics cannot satisfactorily provide a successful meaning of the Embosi definite description. Griffiths (2006,1) says that language is for communication about the world outside the language. Indeed, the context-independent aspects of definiteness have shown their limitations in the understanding of the meaning provided. For efficient communication, the context, be it inside or outside, in which the definite description occurs must be taken into account. The literal meaning is not enough to reach the content of the Embosi definiteness.

4. Conclusion

This study has broached the semantic analysis of definiteness in the Embosi language. It has been shown that, apart from proper nouns and possessives, definite descriptions in that language are essentially expressed by demonstratives. The work has proved that despite the lack of an article system, definite descriptions are encoded in noun phrases, which themselves depend on noun classes. The work has revealed that Embosi speakers, through definiteness, encode uniqueness with the existence of one and only one entity that meets the descriptive content of the noun phrase. It also expresses inclusiveness, with the entirety of the entities meeting the depiction.

4.1. Study limitations and future research

The analysis has also shown the limitations of semantic meaning for efficient communication. For Kiba Ngapoula (2023:43), the understanding of human communication does not depend on decoding alone; pragmatics demonstrates that people require inference to reach the meaning of what is said. Future research on definiteness in that language will consider not only the literal meaning of definite descriptions, but also, and more importantly, the context-dependent aspect of their use for felicitous communication.

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