

A Contrastive Analysis of the French and EmbóSÍ Prepositions: The Case Study of ‘Dans’ and ‘Tsá’

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This contribution focuses on the comparison of the syntactic and semantic analysis of the preposition with particular emphasis on the French preposition ‘dans’ and the EmbóSÍ ‘tsá’. It comes out from the discussion that the French preposition ‘dans’ substantiates the three semantic properties of preposition namely spatial, time and abstract features. EmbóSÍ ‘tsá’ on the contrary, instances two properties only notably spatial and time references. This analysis demonstrates that these two prepositions under discussion share the same syntactic distributions regarding their spatial and temporal properties. What distinguishes the two prepositions is the abstract and discursive property of ‘dans’ together with its collocations with number which is not attested in EmbóSÍ.

Key Words: French, EmbóSÍ, preposition, contrastive analysis, temporality, spatiality, abstract distribution, collocation

Introduction

The objective of this contribution is to carry out a contrastive analysis of prepositions based on an Indo-European language (French) and a Bantu language (EmbóSÍ). This article broadens my previous works (2006, 2011) which compares English and French prepositions as well as linguistic interference between French and EmbóSÍ. The paper addresses the following questions: (i) How does French or EmbóSÍ use prepositions to locate something in the space? (ii) What are the different usages of the prepositions ‘dans’ and ‘tsá’ in the languages under scrutiny? What are the similar and dissimilar points between the two prepositions under discussion?

I- General features on prepositions

Before embarking on the scrutiny on the contrastive analysis of the prepositions ‘dans’ and ‘tsá’, it is worth elaborating on the theoretical background on preposition. This analysis has twofold objectives. Firstly, we will be concerned with the semantics of preposition and finally on its syntactic aspects. As Catherine Chauvin (2011, p.2) writes

Most ‘words’, taken here in the broadest of senses, have at least several uses, and, perhaps, several meanings as well. It is the case of prepositions, and perhaps even more dramatically than in other domains, as prepositions have many uses which often turn out to be particularly difficult to deal with, classify, and ultimately, analyse.

As things stand, it comes out that prepositions are very polysemous. This polysemy is reinforced by the different lexical items that command

preposition. In addition to subadjacency, we should consider the context in which the word -preposition- is used. That is to say, the meaning of words is generally context-based. To quote Catherine Chauvin again (2011, p.3),

Within the enonciativist framework, prepositions are not thought to be spatial or temporal or “something else” (see below) in nature; they may have more “spatial”, “temporal”, or “other” uses but these are always strictly context-based and are not to be thought to be intrinsically linked to the preposition.

It appears that what is more striking in deciding on the nature of the meaning of prepositions is more the context than the preposition itself. Putting things in quite a similar way, the meaning of the preposition is immediately encoded in the co-text which covers the context and the distributional environment in which we find this preposition. This is to defend that the polysemy approach on words is one of the good ways to account for word meaning because monosemy is too restricted. In the words of Tyler and Evans (2003, p.7)

The question of how best to model the distinct meanings associated with a single lexical form has been approached from three perspectives. These are homonymy, monosemy and polysemy. [...] The position we advocate is that of polysemy. A polysemy approach suggests that the meanings associated with a spatial particle such as over are related in some fashion. [...] Our account of polysemy holds that a linguistic form is paired at the conceptual level, not only with a single meaning, but rather with a network of distinct but related meanings. Hence, the meanings associated with a particular form constitute a semantic network.

In addition, it looks as though the preposition behaves a bit differently in comparison with other lexical items during its phase generation. In fact, if we agree that the noun enters in the phase process with its properties (\pm Human, abstract, Count, etc.), the preposition on the contrary is neutral, i.e. (-X) where the variable X can refer to spatial, time, abstract or something else in the discourse analysis. This hypothesis is upheld by the fact that preposition meaning is constantly changing. Consider the following for illustration.

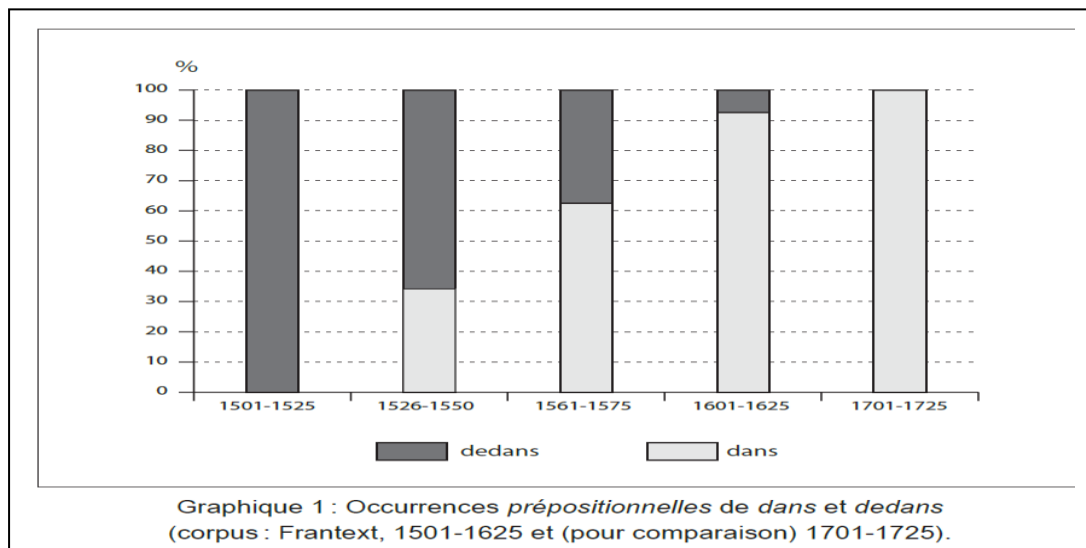
- (1) a- Le livre est **sur** la natte.
The book is on the mat.
- b- Il est arrivé **sur** le coup de midi.
He arrives by midday.
- c- Régner **sur** un pays.
To reign over a country.
- d- Il a bu, coup **sur** coup, deux verres de bonganda.
He drank two glasses of local alcohol successively.

The examples in (1) prove that it is not easy to decide on the nature of the meaning of the French preposition 'sur'. We have to consider the link between the landmark and the trajectory that is triggered by this preposition. In this regard, the relationship between *livre* and *natte* in (1a) is about spatial property, whereas that of *arrivé* and *midi* concerns temporal feature. However, the use of the

French preposition *sur* in (1c) and (1d) is more abstract, let us say functional values of the preposition. Ndongo Ibara (2007, p.47) concludes that *la préposition prise seule, sans complément ni gouverneur (élément syntaxique qui la domine), est tout au plus dépourvue de sens. A cet effet, il faut la mettre dans une structure afin qu'elle puisse retrouver ses propriétés sémantiques.*

This quotation reads as preposition has no basic content without a context defining this meaning basing on what precedes and follows that preposition.

Moreover, consistent with the above argumentation, it is obvious that claiming the priority of spatiality on other uses of preposition seems to be pointless. We argue against the idea that language production has to be examined in terms of percentage. The percentage is good for showing the evolution in the use of the lexis by the native speakers, but it does not advocate for the irrelevance or the non-use of the term that is less used in the language. As Benjamin Fagard et Laure Sarda (2009, p.223) demonstrate it driving data from the diachronic analysis of the French preposition 'dans', the percentage clarifies the evolution of the usage of the prepositions '*dedans*' and '*dans*'.



This chart demonstrates the historical usage of the prepositions '*dans*' and '*dedans*' in French. If we consider the 1526-1550 and 1561-1575 periods we realize that the percentage allocated to the two prepositions changes according to time. This observation holds its truth only in regard with the data that enable that study. As everyone knows, the data represents only a portion even the least part of the language and they marred with the investigators

intentions. Gleason's assertion on the corpus is more illustrious as he writes:

The corpus usually has very little intrinsic value. It is too fraught with the personal peculiarities of the informants and the investigator. ... A corpus consists of a few thousand sentences. A language might be considered as consisting of a very large number of sentences-all those-, either already spoken or not yet used, which

would be accepted by native speaker as 'belonging' to that language. Even the largest corpus can be only an infinitesimal portion of the language (Gleason, 1961, pp.95, 97)

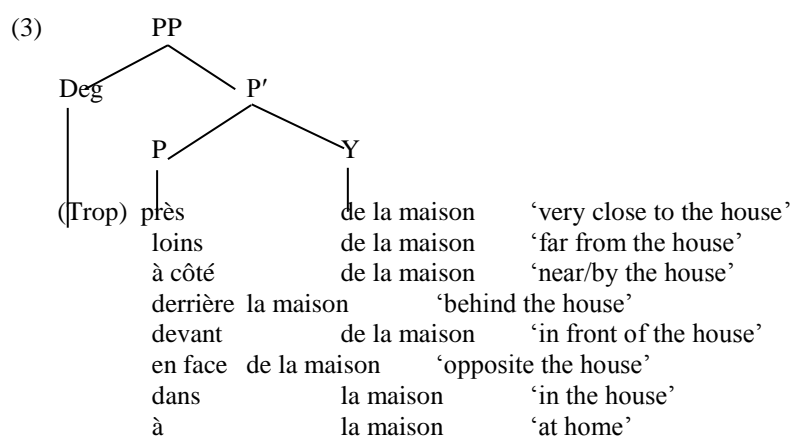
What I want to defend here is the fact that although data has its value on language study, it must not be taken as the language itself.

The syntactic distribution of the prepositional phrase is primarily characterized by the exocentric feature of the head P. This means that the prepositional phrase cannot be replaced or substituted by one word assuming its function in the sentence. This syntactic feature of the PP is justified by the fact that the preposition acts like a connector in a structure. It shows the link between

two points X... Y...Z where the variable Y refers to the preposition where Z to the land site and finally X the initial point of the trajectory. Accordingly, Fidèle Diedhiou (2011, p.74) concludes that prepositions show logico-semantic relationship between two points in the discourse, he writes

'Les prépositions peuvent être définies comme des éléments « transprédicatifs » (Buridant, 2000) exprimant une relation sémantico-logique entre deux éléments supports qui peuvent concurrencer l'emploi direct.'

Adopting the generative framework layout of the grammatical category, the PP can have the following representation.



It is obvious that all languages do not attest the same collocation implying the occurrence of the prepositional phrase. Accordingly, the nature of Y is language-specific as well as context-based. Y represents all the potential lexical categories that a preposition can c-command. It can be a noun, a verb, an adjective, or an S'. Yet, it must also be signaled out that even the syntax of a single preposition shows discrepancies on syntactic grounds. The examples in (3) are illustrious.

II- Dans

In this section, our interest is not to provide a diachronic study of the French preposition 'dans' but rather to focus on its synchronic study (readers can find useful information on the diachronic study some French prepositions in Benjamin Fagard et Laure Sarda, 2009, 'Étude diachronique de la préposition dans' and Fidèle Diedhiou, 2011, 'La Grammaticalisation des prépositions: le cas de au-dessus'). The main objective of this analysis is to highlight the semantic and syntactic aspects of the French preposition 'dans'.

In fact, the semantic analysis of the French preposition 'dans' gives rise to three basic notions namely locative, temporal and abstract properties of the preposition. In this connection, the locative

feature of the preposition is about its spatial characteristics. This is illustrated as follows:

(4) a- Les parents sont **dans** la maison.

Parents are in the house

b- Le colis est enveloppé **dans** l'emballage.

The parcel is wrapped in the package

c- La nourriture est **dans** la marmite.

The food is in the pot

d- **Dans** son regard transparait la colère.

Anger comes out of his look.

From the above examples it appears that the French preposition 'dans' implies the notion of interiority. However, this interiority property must be relativized in connection with the notion of space involved by this preposition. This means that the meaning of 'dans' depends on both the word that represents the space (location) and the verb that is used to locate the NP. In this regard, the example (4a) can mean that the NP 'parents' is located in a space that surrounds it all over, whereas the examples (4b) and (4d) the space is differently approached. In (4b), the NP l'emballage 'package' is about the extension of the space wherein the NP is confused with its location. Yet, in (4d), the NP 'son regard' is considered as a mirror, a gate, an instrument which enables the perception of the location. As things stand, the space indicated by the

French preposition ‘dans’ is viewed differently according to the localizer. This space is neither divided nor different; it is homogeneous with the NP that is located. To quote Franckel and Paillard (2007, pp.150-151)

Le propre de dans est de marquer que cette zone est indistincte relativement à Y. On a donc affaire à une structure paradoxale du domaine associé à Y: celui-ci devient indifférencié, ou pourrait-on dire homogène. [...] une telle caractérisation va à l'encontre d'une représentation de la relation entre X et Y en terme d'intériorité. L'idée générale est au contraire que la relation entre X et Y bloque toute différenciation et en particulier toute frontière.

Putting things slightly in the same way, the French preposition ‘dans’ does not always refer to the ‘inside’ environment, but it cannot also denote a so called virtual ‘inside’ space. That is to say, the inside reference does not subsume a movement from external to internal side, but rather a kind of figurative interior as a movement through something. In other word, the inside reading of this preposition can be compared to a kind of inference reference.

The temporal properties of the French preposition ‘dans’ are summarized in the following examples:

(5) a- L'enfant arrive **dans** une heure.

The child comes in one hour

b- Il finit son travail **dans** un mois.

He finishes his work in one month

c- Ils se sont mariés **dans** les deux années qui ont la naissance de leur enfant.

They get married two years after the birth of their child.

d- Ça doit durer **dans** les 3 heures.

It shall take about three hours. It must be said that if in the examples in (5) the French preposition ‘dans’ indicates a time which has to be considered a duration, a measure, a scale of time that can never be overpassed. In other words, the preposition ‘dans’ in these examples can stand as a size that cannot be less or more. In this regard, ‘dans’ means no more or less than one hour (5a), one month (5b), two months (5c) and three hours (5d).

If we use mathematical algorithm, the preposition ‘dans’ can be represented as follows: [...X...]. Considering the example (5a) for example, this looks something like 59min [1hr] 1min. This explanation has also been put forward by Franckel and Paillard (2007, p.164) when they claim that the preposition *dans* refers to

‘...une quantité, une mesure quantifiée, entrant dans une discontinuité. L'homogénéité de Y est donnée par rien autour, ni plus, ni moins [...] Ce n'est pas un intervalle, ni une continuité par rapport à un repère temporel donné.’

This means that the time reference inferred to or required by ‘dans’ expresses a static point in the

time scale. This static status is due to the fact that this point is nor extensible neither reducible. This is best represented in the above while discussing (5a) example, we concluded that this time reference is nor 59 minutes neither one hour and one minute, but rather and only one hour.

The other semantics of ‘dans’ is termed ‘abstract’, figurative or notional (Fidèle Diedhiou, 2011:75, Fagard et Laure Sarda, 2009: 224). It is worth emphasizing that this usage of preposition is more confusing as it is related to different readings. Putting things quite in a different fashion, the abstract property of preposition reflects a kind of melting pot aspects. That is to say, it is not easy to find out an agreement on all these aspects. Consider the following examples as illustration.

(6) a- être **dans** l'erreur.

b- **dans** un premier temps.

c- Joyce étudie **dans** le calme.

d- les chars arrivent **dans** un grand fracas de ferraille (D. Leeman, Franckel et Paillard, 2007, p.157)

As one can observe from the examples in (6), each of them has its specific sense which has nothing to do with the other. This justifies better why some authors have previously used the adjective ‘abstract’ to qualify this semantic aspect of prepositions. By abstract, we have to understand that it is nor spatial nor temporal, but it can be notional, figurative or discursive. As things stand, it can be assumed that the abstract property of preposition represents a kind of holdall, melting pot or a crossroad where all the semantic aspects of preposition that we cannot define are stored or saved.

In fact, one this abstract feature is related to the adverbial usage of prepositions in French. This adverbial characteristic of French prepositions derives from their historical origin which highlights some crossing points between adverbs and prepositions in French.

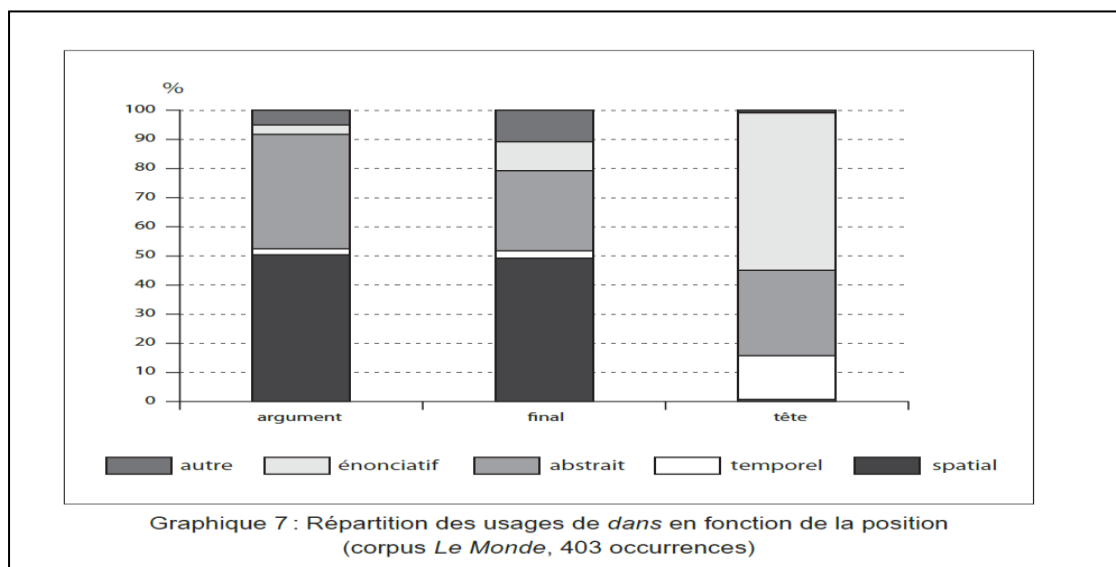
To quote Fidèle Diedhiou (2011, p.82) ‘*La plupart des prépositions sont d'anciens adverbes, employés pour préciser le sens d'un accusatif ou d'un ablatif et ne s'emploient jamais devant un infinitif.*

Diedhiou's assertion confirms the adverb-preposition connection diachronically. According to Fagard and Laure (2009, p.230) this abstractedness of preposition can be accounted of syntactically as this is related to the topic position. They admit that the abstract or notional meaning of preposition is generally activated or triggered by the initial position of the preposition in the sentence. They write

Une fois « arrivés » dans les zones périphériques de la phrase, les SP introduits par dans acquièrent une fonction adverbiale et la capacité de jouer un rôle structurel dans l'organisation du discours.

In addition, Fagard and Laure (2009) provide historical account on this semantic abstract (7)

property preposition summarized in the following chart.



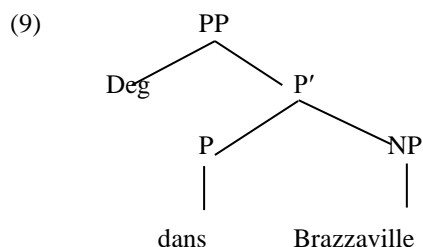
To conclude on the semantic property of the French preposition ‘dans’ we borrow Fagard and Sarda (2009)’s argument stating the predominance of abstract meaning of that preposition in either position. They write ‘*Toutes positions confondues, les usages de dans se répartissent comme suit : 42% abstrait, 41% spatial, 12% énonciatif, 3% temporel et 2% autre.*’ (2009, p.228)

The syntactic distribution and lexical selection properties of the French preposition ‘dans’ are remarkable as they generally constraint the selection of noun phrase as its complement.

- (8) a- dans Brazzaville
- *b- dans Congo
- c- dans 10 ans
- d- dans le village, pays
- *e- très dans ce cas
- f- dans bon nombre
- g- dans conduire
- h- là dans

The examples in (8) confirms that the P ‘dans’ mainly selects NP. In fact, even if there are possibilities allowing the occurrence of verbs, the latter are considered as nominal predicates. In this respect, these predicates are more taken as standing for the ‘word...’ rather than denoting an action or expressing their natural meaning.

There are remarks worth of attention concerning (8a) and (8b). Although Brazzaville and Congo refer to the names of a city and a country, locality, their syntactic merger with the preposition ‘dans’ is particularly sensitive to the nature of these nouns. Accordingly, nouns referring to countries will rather fit with the preposition ‘au’ than ‘dans’. This is the reason why (8b) is ungrammatical. In addition, it appears that the preposition is seldom modified by another preposition showing some degree.



The chart in (10) summarises the different linguistic features of the French prepositions ‘dans’.

(10)

Preposition	Constructions	Property		
dans	Dans+ déterminant + Nom	Spatial	location	inclusiveness
	Dans+ Nombre + Nom	Temporal	Time	No less no more deadline
	Dans+ déterminant + Nom	Abstract	discursive	

III- Tsà

In this section, our concern is to point out the different syntactic aspects of the Embósi preposition 'tsá'. To make things clear and more meaningful, we are going to deal with 'tsá' in

connection with the semantic properties concerning spatial, temporal and abstract features of prepositions. The first examples (11) concern the locative property of the preposition 'tsá'.

- (11) a- ibóró ó-d-í tsá ndái
 Parents they-be- VF in house
 'Parents are in the house'
- b- ngóó à-dzw-é tsá kò
 mother she-go-VF in forest
 'Mother goes in the forest'
- c- bánà b́-sààn-à tsá lèkólì
 children they-play-VF in school
 'Children are playing in the school yard'
- d- bèà ì-d- í tsá ndzùngù
 food it-be-VF in pot
 'Food is in the pot'
- e- wà à-kàn-á àkwé tsá mà
 him/her s/he-put-VF feet in water
 'S/he puts his/her feet in the water'

The examples in (11) show the Embósi preposition 'tsá' indicating the location where the NPs following are. It appears that these NPs are very global locations. Accordingly, *tsá ndái* 'in the house' (11a) for example does not indicate whether the subject NP 'parents' is in the bedroom, the sitting room or the rest room. The following examples deal with the temporal property of the prepositions.

- (12) a- mwanà à-yà-à tsà iko myami
 Child s/he-come-VF in days these
 Child will come in these days
- b- ngoo à-dzw-é tsà oyélé otso
 mother she-go-VF in morning early
 Mother left early in the morning
- c- bana ba-dzém-àà tsa asabili, li bà bà-pur-à obomà moro tsa Congo
 children they-live-VF in Brazzaville, but them they-want-VF kill person in Congo
 Children live in Brazzaville, but they want to kill a person in Congo
- d- Tomi a-dzw-à mboà tsa swéngé wo
 brother s/he-go-VF village in month this
 Brother goes to the village in this month
- *e- mwanà à-yà-à tsà ikò ibà
 Child s/he-come-VF in days two
 Child arrives in two days

It transpires that the Embósi preposition 'tsà' can be used with names of city and country (12c). The examples in (12) demonstrate that in Embósi the preposition 'tsà' has some syntactic selection rules. Accordingly, the most striking feature of this preposition is its impossibility to merger with a number. That is to say, the Embósi preposition 'tsà' cannot combine with a noun followed by a number as illustrated in (12e). The question that

immediately crops up is to know whether this oddness can stand as incapacity to say '*dans + Number + Noun*' in Embósi. In this respect, it must be signaled out that if the sentence (12e) is ungrammatical with the preposition 'tsà'; it could be meaningful once the preposition 'tsà' is substituted by another preposition which also means 'in' namely 'mà'. Consider the following examples as illustration.

- (13) a- mwanà à-yà-à ware mà iko mwambi
 Child s/he-come-VF here in days eight
 Child will come here in eight days
 b- ngoo à-dzà mboà mà iyèngà isari
 mother she-go-VF village in weeks three
 Mother goes to the village in three weeks
 c- Tomi a-dzw-à poro mà aswéngé ànà
 brother s/he-go-VF Europe in months four
 Brother goes to Europe in four month
 *d- mwanà à-d-i mà ndai
 Child s/he-come-VF in house
 Child is in the house

It appears that once the noun is followed by a cardinal number there is a kind of preposition substitution in Embósí. Putting things in a similar way, in Embósí, when we are concerned with the combination of a noun within the structure **Preposition (dans)+ Noun+ Number**, the preposition that must be selected is ‘*mà*’ rather than ‘*tsà*’.

However, when the preposition ‘in’ is followed by a noun without a number; the choice of ‘*mà*’

leads to ungrammaticality as shown in the examples (12d). That is to say the Embósí preposition ‘*mà*’ refers to the French preposition ‘dans’ when dealing with temporal expressions using number; elsewhere, it generates deviant construals. Everything considered, it is impossible to use the Embósí preposition ‘*tsà*’ with quantifiers. The chart in (14) summarises the different linguistic features that characterize the Embósí preposition ‘*tsà*’.

(14)

Preposition	Constructions	Property		
Tsà	tsà+ déterminant + Nom	Spatial	location	inclusiveness
	tsa+ déterminant + Nom mà+ Nombre+ Nom	Temporal	Time	No less no more deadline

IV- Contrastive analysis

When examining the syntactic distribution and property of the French and Embósí preposition with a particular emphasis on ‘dans’ and ‘tsà’ respectively, we come the following conclusions. Firstly, the two aforementioned prepositions are real prototype of spatial prepositions. Accordingly, the two prepositions can be used to locate a noun in environment which has interiority characteristics. It should be born in mind that the notion of interiority stands for inclusiveness. That is to say, when an entity is ‘in’, it means that it is located within an environment that covers all that entity.

Secondly, the prepositions ‘tsà’ and ‘dans’ can also be used with noun expressions referring to temporal fact. Of interest is the fact that temporality implies some selection restrictions. In this respect, the French preposition ‘dans’ can

merger with a noun followed by a number. In Embósí, on the contrary, to avoid ungrammaticality, number is substituted by a demonstrative pronoun. As a matter of fact, ‘dans un mois’ ‘in one month’ will be translated in Embósí by ‘tsa swéngé yéyaàà’ ‘in next month’. But, if we can replace ‘tsà’ by ‘mà’ so we can say ‘mà swéngé oβòò’.

Finally, when French use the preposition ‘dans’ in many discursive contexts with abstract meanings, dans ce contexte ‘wàà ndéngé yingi ‘dans ce contexte’, dans un premier temps ‘iboso’ ‘avant’, Embósí language makes use of different stylistic features. As things stand, it is not attested in Embósí cases where ‘tsà’ is used in an abstract way. The following chart summarizes the scrutiny of the prepositions *tsà* and *dans*.

(15)

Preposition	Constructions	Property		
Dans/Tsà	Prep+ déterminant + Nom	Spatial	location	inclusiveness
	Prep + déterminant + Nom Dans + Nombre+ Nom	Temporal	Time	No less no more deadline
	Dans+ déterminant + Nom	Abstract	discursive	

Conclusion

The contrastive analysis of the French preposition 'dans' and the Embósi 'tsà' has revealed that the syntax of prepositions is more alike cross linguistically than any other grammatical categories. Accordingly, the French and Embósi prepositions behave syntactically in the same way. They select noun phrases whose meaning is about inclusiveness and interiority. Regarding its temporal interpretations, it has been proved that the prepositions dans/tsà depict the scale of time that represents a very fixed deadline. This deadline subsumes a period that is equal to the number that modifies the noun. However, in Embósi, the preposition 'tsà' cannot be combined with a noun being modified by a number. This construction is only possible with another preposition 'mà'. Finally, while French language has developed a very rich instantiation of 'dans' in discourse, this abstract usage is improper in Embósi which has another to represent this discursive feature of the preposition 'dans'.

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