

A Contrastive Analysis of Fruit and Kinship Semantic Fields in English and Nembe Language

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ABSTRACT

Languages encode human experience through structured lexical systems that reflect the ecological, cultural, and cognitive environments of their speakers. A semantic field, understood as an organised set of words representing a domain of meaning, provides a framework for examining how languages classify reality. This article presents a contrastive analysis of fruit terminology and kinship vocabulary in English and Nembe, a Niger Congo language spoken in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. The study is informed by the Sapir Whorf hypothesis of linguistic relativity and grounded in anthropological approaches to kinship classification. English data were drawn from standard lexicographic sources, while Nembe data were obtained from a published dictionary and validated through consultation with native speakers. Findings reveal cross linguistic differences in lexical organisation. English shows a highly differentiated fruit taxonomy with categories such as berries, citrus fruits, melons, and tropical fruits. Many of these have no equivalents in Nembe due to ecological absence and cultural dietary patterns. For example, berries and melons are not lexicalised in Nembe, reflecting their limited environmental presence. In the kinship domain, English uses a fine grained nuclear family system with distinct terms for cousin, aunt, uncle, and affinal relations. Nembe, however, employs a compact relational system in which cousin and sibling distinctions are merged, and relationships are expressed through descriptive compounding and reduplication. These contrasts create challenges for Nembe learners of English, who must acquire new lexical categories and conceptual distinctions. The study recommends culturally responsive pedagogy and highlights the need to document indigenous semantic systems as part of Nigeria's linguistic heritage and identity.

Keywords: Contrastive analysis, semantic fields, fruit terminology, kinship terminology, Nembe language, English language, linguistic relativity.

INTRODUCTION

Language is not merely a tool for communication but a complex system through which human beings organise experience, construct meaning, and transmit cultural knowledge across generations. It functions as both a cognitive framework and a social institution, shaping how speakers perceive, categorise, and interpret the world around them. The relationship between linguistic form and meaning is grounded in shared cultural conventions within a speech community, where words acquire significance through collective agreement and habitual usage rather than through inherent reference alone (Uwajeh, 2002). In this sense, vocabulary is never neutral; it reflects the priorities, environment, history, and worldview of its speakers.

When linguistic items move across cultural and linguistic boundaries, their meanings are often reinterpreted or partially lost because they are tied to specific ecological conditions and socio cultural practices. The Sapir Whorf hypothesis of linguistic relativity argues that language influences thought and that different linguistic systems encourage different ways of perceiving and organising reality (Whorf, 1956). From this perspective, the lexicon of any language is not simply a list of labels but a structured map of culturally salient categories. Communities tend to develop detailed terminology for phenomena that are environmentally relevant or socially significant, while less relevant domains may remain lexically underdeveloped or conceptually grouped.

Within this theoretical context, this article undertakes a contrastive analysis of two semantic fields, fruit terminology and kinship vocabulary, in English and Nembe. Nembe is a language of the Ijaw ethnic group spoken in the riverine and coastal communities of Bayelsa State in southern Nigeria (Alagoa, 1999). The Nembe people inhabit a complex ecological zone characterised by mangrove forests, rivers, creeks, and fertile agricultural land. Their traditional livelihood systems, including fishing, small scale farming, and harvesting of forest resources, have contributed to a lexicon that is closely aligned with local environmental realities. In addition, Nembe social organisation is strongly communal and kinship based, with extended family networks playing a central role in identity formation, inheritance, and social responsibility.

English, by contrast, has evolved as a global and transnational language whose semantic structure reflects centuries of scientific classification, colonial expansion, industrial development, and modern globalization. Its lexical system is shaped not only by ecological diversity across English speaking regions but also by formal taxonomic traditions, particularly in biology and botany, which have contributed to a highly differentiated vocabulary for natural objects such as fruits. Similarly, English kinship terminology reflects a relatively nuclear family centred structure, with precise distinctions between immediate and extended family relations that correspond to modern Western social organisation.

By comparing how English and Nembe encode and categorise fruits and kinship relations, this study seeks to uncover deeper relationships between language, cognition, and culture. Fruit terminology provides insight into how ecological experience and environmental availability influence lexical development, while kinship terminology reveals how social organisation is reflected in linguistic categorisation. The comparison therefore highlights not only differences in vocabulary but also differences in conceptual structuring, where certain distinctions are elaborated in one language but merged or absent in another.

The study further identifies areas of lexical non equivalence that pose challenges for second language acquisition, particularly for Nembe speakers learning English. These challenges extend beyond vocabulary learning to include the need to acquire unfamiliar conceptual distinctions embedded in English semantic organisation. At a broader level, the analysis demonstrates that such linguistic differences are not merely descriptive but are indicative of distinct cultural logics and ways of interpreting human experience.

Ultimately, this article argues that contrastive semantic analysis has both pedagogical and cultural significance. It contributes to more effective language teaching by identifying potential areas of interference and difficulty in second language learning. At the same time, it underscores the importance of documenting and preserving indigenous semantic systems, which encode valuable ecological knowledge and social organisation patterns that are often underrepresented in global linguistic discourse.

Theoretical Framework

The notion of a semantic field is based on the understanding that vocabulary within a language is systematically organised rather than randomly assembled. Words that belong to the same conceptual domain define one another by dividing and distributing meaning across a shared semantic space (Lehrer, 1974). In the domain of fruit terminology, lexical items such as *mango*, *orange*, and *watermelon* function as distinct categories within the broader field of edible plant products. In the kinship domain, terms such as *father*, *uncle*, and *cousin* similarly structure the social world by differentiating roles, relations, and generational positions within the family system.

This study is anchored on two complementary theoretical perspectives. The first is the Sapir Whorf hypothesis of linguistic relativity, which proposes that the structure of a language influences habitual patterns of thought and perception (Whorf, 1956). Although the strong deterministic interpretation of this hypothesis has largely been rejected, its weaker formulation remains influential in contemporary linguistics, particularly the view that language shapes cognitive orientation and attentional focus (Lucy, 1997). From this perspective, the absence of a lexical item such as *blackberry* in Nembe is not simply a gap in vocabulary, but an indication that the fruit may not constitute a distinct or salient category within Nembe ecological experience. Consequently, speakers may not habitually individuate or classify it in the same way as English speakers.

The second theoretical foundation is drawn from anthropological linguistics, particularly kinship studies. Morgan (1871) demonstrated that kinship systems encode fundamental social distinctions such as generation, gender, descent, and affinity, but languages differ significantly in how these distinctions are linguistically encoded. Some languages, including English, tend toward discrete and analytically independent kinship terms, whereas others, such as Nembe, frequently employ descriptive or compound expressions that explicitly encode relational information. Murdock (1949) further developed a typology of kinship systems, highlighting cross linguistic variation in how siblings and cousins are classified, thereby providing a comparative framework for analysing kinship terminology across cultures.

Together, these theoretical perspectives enable the analysis to move beyond surface level lexical comparison. They provide a basis for explaining why divergences exist between English and Nembe semantic organisation and how such differences reflect deeper relationships among language, cognition, environment, and social structure.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative contrastive analysis approach to examine the semantic organisation of fruit terminology and kinship vocabulary in English and Nembe. The design combines documentary lexical analysis with limited field elicitation in order to capture both formal lexical structures and speaker-based interpretive practices. English lexical data were drawn from the *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* (Mayor, 2001), while Nembe lexical items were sourced from the *Nembe-English Dictionary* (Kaliai, 1964). These documentary sources provided the baseline inventory of terms for both semantic domains under investigation.

To complement the dictionary data, informal elicitation sessions were conducted with two Nembe native speakers. These sessions were conversational and exploratory rather than structured or questionnaire-based. Participants were engaged in guided discussions in which selected English lexical items from the domains of fruit and kinship were introduced for interpretation, description, or approximate translation into Nembe. The aim was to observe how speakers negotiate meaning in real time when direct lexical equivalents are absent or uncertain.

The informants included a middle-aged speaker from a rural fishing community and a younger bilingual speaker residing in an urban environment. This selection was purposive, intended to capture variation in linguistic exposure, generational experience, and contact with English. The focus was not on statistical representativeness but on eliciting variation in interpretive strategies and lexical awareness across sociolinguistic contexts.

During the elicitation process, responses were not audio-recorded. Instead, detailed field notes were taken during interaction and later organised into analytical summaries. This approach prioritised naturalness of speech and reduced the potential formality effects associated with recording devices, while still ensuring systematic documentation of responses.

For the analysis of fruit terminology, English lexical items were grouped into established semantic categories, including berries, citrus fruits, melons, and tropical fruits. Corresponding Nembe items were identified where available, while cases of non-equivalence were treated as semantic gaps. Particular attention was given to communicative strategies used by speakers when referring to unfamiliar or introduced fruits, especially descriptive naming, borrowing, and phonological adaptation.

For the kinship domain, a comparative inventory of consanguineal and affinal terms was compiled and analysed using structural parameters such as generation, gender, lineality, and affinity. The analysis further examined the underlying organisational principles of each system, with emphasis on the more analytically segmented structure of English compared to the relationally oriented and descriptively encoded system observed in Nembe.

It is acknowledged that the data reflect the lexical resources documented in Kaliai (1964) as well as the speech patterns of the consulted informants. As such, the findings should be interpreted as indicative of general tendencies within the Nembe lexical system rather than as exhaustive coverage of all dialectal or community-based variation.

Contrastive Analysis

Fruit Terms

English exhibits an extensive fruit lexicon shaped by long-standing horticultural classification, global trade networks, and scientific taxonomy. For analytical clarity, the fruit vocabulary can be organised into four broad semantic classes: berries, citrus fruits, melons, and tropical fruits. Table 1 compares representative English fruit terms with their Nembe equivalents.

Table 1 Comparison of Fruit Terms in English and Nembe

Class	English fruit	Nembe equivalent	Notes
A: Berries	Blackberry	∅	Not present in Nembe ecological context
	Strawberry	∅	Not present in Nembe ecological context
	Raspberry	∅	Not present in Nembe ecological context
	Blueberry	∅	Not present in Nembe ecological context
B: Citrus	Orange	Alalanda	Indigenous lexical item
	Lemon	Edukumu	Indigenous lexical item
	Lime	∅	No established lexical item
	Grapefruit	∅	No established lexical item
	Tangerine	∅	No established lexical item
C: Melons	Watermelon	∅	Absent from Nembe lexicon
	Cantaloupe	∅	Absent from Nembe lexicon
	Honeydew melon	∅	Absent from Nembe lexicon
D: Tropical	Mango	Ogbein	Indigenous lexical item
	Pineapple	Bibibelemono	Indigenous lexical item
	Palm kernel	Luguimgbo	Indigenous lexical item
	Coconut	Bekenbi	Indigenous lexical item
	Plantain	Abanga	Indigenous lexical item
	Pawpaw	Indu	Indigenous lexical item
	Banana	Idu	Indigenous lexical item
	Cashew	∅	Introduced item without stable lexicalisation
	Lychee	∅	Not present in Nembe environment
	Star fruit	∅	Not present in Nembe environment

The data in Table 1 reveal a clear pattern of semantic asymmetry between English and Nembe fruit classification. The berry and melon categories are entirely absent from the Nembe lexicon. This absence is not simply linguistic but reflects ecological and cultural non-salience, as these fruits are neither indigenous to the environment nor historically significant in local dietary practices. As noted by native speaker informants, certain wild-growing fruits may exist in forested areas, but they are not conceptualised as distinct edible categories and therefore do not attract lexical designation. Instead, they are perceived as part of a general, undifferentiated vegetation system.

The citrus category shows partial lexicalisation in Nembe. Terms exist for *orange* (*alalanda*) and *lemon* (*edukumu*), indicating earlier contact and sustained familiarity with these fruits. However, *lime*, *grapefruit*, and *tangerine* lack specific Nembe equivalents, suggesting either later introduction or limited cultural integration. In communicative practice, speakers may resort to borrowing from English or descriptive paraphrasing, such as referring to a grapefruit as a “large sour orange.”

The tropical fruit category is the most highly developed in Nembe. Fruits such as *mango*, *pineapple*, *palm kernel*, *coconut*, *plantain*, *pawpaw*, and *banana* have well established indigenous terms, reflecting their long-term ecological presence and centrality in subsistence and dietary systems. Nevertheless, lexical gaps persist for newer or less culturally embedded items such as *cashew*, *lychee*, and *star fruit*, which remain either unlexicalised or minimally integrated.

An additional feature of interest is the phonological adaptation of borrowed lexical items. For example, the English word *plum* is realised in Nembe as *pulomu*, reflecting vowel epenthesis and syllable restructuring consistent with Nembe phonotactic patterns. This process demonstrates that borrowing is not a direct transfer of forms but a systematic adaptation to the phonological constraints of the recipient language, ensuring structural compatibility while expanding lexical resources.

From a pedagogical perspective, the fruit semantic field presents significant learning challenges for Nembe speakers acquiring English. Entire lexical domains such as berries and melons require acquisition without pre-existing conceptual equivalents in Nembe, making initial comprehension and categorisation particularly demanding. Even in partially shared domains such as citrus and tropical fruits, learners must master a significantly larger set of distinctions than those encoded in their first language. Effective instruction therefore requires multimodal teaching strategies, including visual aids, contextual exposure, and culturally grounded explanations to support conceptual mapping between the two lexical systems.

Kinship Terms

English kinship terminology is organised around the nuclear family model and is characterised by a relatively analytic and highly differentiated structure. Core lexical items include *father*, *mother*, *brother*, *sister*, *son*, *daughter*, *uncle*, *aunt*, *cousin*, *nephew*, and *niece*. Affinal relations are systematically encoded through the morphological addition of *-in-law*, producing forms such as *father-in-law*, *mother-in-law*, and *sister-in-law*. The system is essentially bilateral, meaning it does not distinguish between maternal and paternal lines. For instance, the term *uncle* applies equally to a mother’s brother, a father’s brother, and their respective spouses.

In contrast, Nembe kinship vocabulary is deeply embedded in an extended-family social structure in which kinship ties extend beyond the nuclear household and form the basis of social identity, obligation, and mutual support. The fundamental terms include *dau* (father), *nyingi* (mother), *togu* (child), *muna-owei* (male sibling or brother), and *muna-ara* (female sibling or sister). Rather than relying on isolated lexical units for each kin category, Nembe frequently employs descriptive and compound expressions that transparently encode relational meaning. For example, grandparents are expressed through reduplicative or descriptive constructions such as *tada-woei* or *dau-dau* (grandfather, literally “old father” or “father-father”) and *teingi-ara* or *nyingi-nyingi* (grandmother, literally “old mother” or “mother-mother”). More remote generations are formed through morphological expansion, as in *oputada-owei* (great-grandfather), where the prefix *opu-* conveys augmentative meaning.

Table 2 Comparison of Selected Kinship Terms in English and Nembe

English	Nembe	Structural note
Father	Dau	Basic term
Mother	Nyingi	Basic term
Child	Togu	Basic term
Son	Owei-togu	“male-child” compound
Daughter	Iyoro-togu	“female-child” compound
Grandfather	Tada-woei / Dau-dau	“old father” or “father-father”
Grandmother	Teingi-ara / Nyingi-nyingi	“old mother” or “mother-mother”
Brother	Muna-owei	“person-male”
Sister	Muna-ara	“person-female”
Cousin	Ø (merged with sibling terms)	No distinct lexical item; classified as brother/sister
Uncle	Yabiowei	Basic term
Aunt	Ø (no single lexical equivalent)	Expressed descriptively
In-law (generic)	Fua	Broad term covering affinal relations
Great-grandfather	Oputada-owei	“big-grandfather”

A central structural divergence between the two systems lies in the treatment of cousin relationships. English distinguishes clearly between siblings and cousins, assigning a dedicated lexical item (*cousin*) to the children of one’s parents’ siblings. Nembe, however, does not lexicalise this distinction. Instead, the children of uncles and aunts are classified under the same terms used for siblings (*muna-owei* and *muna-ara*). This reflects a social logic in which generational equality within the extended family outweighs genealogical precision. Consequently, for Nembe speakers learning English, acquiring the term *cousin* requires not only vocabulary acquisition but also the conceptualisation of a social category that does not exist in their first language.

A similar contrast is observed in the treatment of affinal relations. English differentiates multiple in-law categories through systematic compounding, whereas Nembe employs the general term *fua* to cover a wide range of affinal relations, including parents-in-law, siblings-in-law, and other extended marital connections. When greater specificity is required, descriptive expressions are used rather than distinct lexical items. This structural difference means that English distinctions such as “sister-in-law” or “mother-in-law” must be learned as separate categories by Nembe speakers, since they are not inherently encoded in the first language system.

Another important contrast concerns morphological transparency. Many Nembe kinship terms are semantically compositional, with meanings that can be inferred from their constituent parts. For example, *iyoro-togu* (female-child) and *dau-dau* (father-father) explicitly encode relational meaning. In contrast, English kinship terms such as *uncle* or *grandfather* are morphologically opaque from a synchronic perspective, requiring memorisation rather than structural inference. This suggests differing cognitive orientations: Nembe kinship terminology foregrounds relational construction, while English relies more on fixed, conventionalised labels.

Overall, the kinship systems of English and Nembe reflect contrasting social and cognitive organisations of family structure. English privileges precision, differentiation, and nuclear-family segmentation, whereas Nembe emphasises relational continuity, generational solidarity, and extended-family integration.

DISCUSSION

The comparison of English and Nembe fruit and kinship terminology shows that words do not always have direct equivalents across languages. The informal elicitation sessions revealed that participants often depended on experience, comparison, description, and social relationships when dealing with English terms that were unfamiliar to them. This finding is consistent with the view that languages differ in how they organise and express experience. Lucy explains that linguistic relativity is concerned with the ways particular languages may influence how speakers interpret and organise reality, while also stressing the need to examine actual linguistic practices rather than assume that language determines thought (291-312).

Fruit Terminology: Speaker Responses and Meaning Making

When terms such as *blackberry*, *raspberry*, *blueberry*, and *cantaloupe* were introduced, both participants indicated that these fruits were not part of their ordinary experience. The older participant explained that "those kinds of fruits are not what we grew up seeing here." This response is important because it connects lexical familiarity with the physical and cultural environment in which speakers live. The issue was not simply that the participants lacked knowledge of English vocabulary. Rather, the objects represented by the words were outside their normal experience.

The younger bilingual participant responded by describing such fruits as "foreign fruit" or by comparing them with familiar fruits, such as "something like orange but not orange." These responses show that speakers can create meaning even when a direct lexical equivalent is not readily available. Instead of stopping at the absence of a single word, they used comparison and description to communicate the intended meaning.

This finding supports Wierzbicka's argument that languages may organise meanings in culture-specific ways and that words should not automatically be assumed to have exact equivalents across languages. Her work stresses the importance of examining the meanings carried by words within particular cultural systems rather than treating translation as a simple replacement of one word with another (3-27).

The Nembe responses also suggest that naming is only one way of identifying an object. A speaker may describe its appearance, compare it with a familiar object, or explain where it fits within an existing category. This is especially important when discussing objects that are not common in the speaker's environment. The use of comparison in the present study therefore appears to be a practical response to lexical unfamiliarity.

The findings are also relevant to the study of linguistic diversity. Evans and Levinson argue that languages differ considerably in the ways they organise linguistic information and that such differences are important for understanding the relationship between language and cognition (429-448). The present findings do not show that Nembe speakers are unable to understand English fruit categories. Rather, they show that unfamiliar English categories may first be understood through categories and experiences that are already meaningful to the speakers.

The Nembe language itself contains vocabulary for fruits and other aspects of the local environment. Efebo's *Nembe Language Made Easy*, for example, includes fruit names among its vocabulary categories, together with food, animals, fish, birds, family terms, and other objects familiar within the community. This indicates that the absence of a particular English fruit term should not be interpreted as a general absence of lexical resources in Nembe. It may instead reflect differences in the environments and experiences represented by the two languages.

The participants' use of gestures and references to familiar fruits further supports this interpretation. Meaning was produced through a combination of words, physical reference, comparison, and shared experience. The result was effective communication even where a direct lexical equivalent was unavailable. This suggests that speakers are able to expand the meaning of an unfamiliar term through available cultural and linguistic resources.

Kinship Terminology: Family Relationships and Social Meaning

The discussion of kinship terms produced stronger evidence of the relationship between language and social experience. When the English word *cousin* was introduced, both participants expressed surprise at the need for a separate category. The older participant stated that "in our place, all those children are our children," while the younger participant explained that "separating cousins from siblings can sound like separating people who are already family."

These responses suggest that the participants do not always approach kinship relationships as a set of sharply separated lexical categories. Instead, the meaning of a relationship may depend on family interaction, closeness, residence, care, and social responsibility. The responses therefore show that kinship terms are not merely labels for biological relationships. They also reflect social organisation and cultural understanding.

The study of kinship terminology has a long history in linguistic anthropology. Goodenough's componential analysis showed that kinship terms can be studied as parts of a wider semantic system in which individual terms are related to one another through particular features and distinctions (195-216). This approach is useful for the present study because it shows why a comparison between English and Nembe should consider the wider system of relationships rather than examine individual words in isolation.

The participants' responses also support Wierzbicka's emphasis on the cultural dimension of kinship meanings. Her discussion of kinship semantics forms a substantial part of her study of culture-specific meanings, showing that kinship concepts need to be examined within the conceptual systems of particular languages and communities (327-44).

In the present study, participants often explained kinship relationships rather than simply providing a single lexical equivalent. For example, *nyingi-ara* was used to refer to the mother's sister, while the relationship could also be explained by saying that the woman is "like another mother." The second explanation is important because it communicates the social meaning of the relationship in addition to identifying the biological connection.

This form of explanation suggests that kinship meaning is closely connected to everyday interaction. A mother's sister may not be understood only as a relative who occupies a particular genealogical position. She may also be understood through the role she plays in the family. In this sense, the meaning of kinship is partly created through social practice.

The use of *fua* provides another example. The term appeared as a general marker for relationships created through marriage. When greater precision was needed, participants added other kinship terms, such as *nyingi fua* and *muna-ara fua*. This shows that Nembe speakers can move from a general category to a more specific description when the communicative situation requires it.

This pattern is consistent with Goodenough's view that the meaning of a term can be understood by examining the larger system in which it occurs rather than treating the term as an isolated label (195-216). It also demonstrates why direct word-for-word translation may not always capture the full meaning of kinship expressions. A translation may identify the biological relationship but fail to communicate the social expectations attached to it.

Linguistic Relativity and the Findings

The findings provide a limited but useful basis for discussing linguistic relativity. The study does not support the strong claim that language determines what speakers can think. Rather, the evidence points to a weaker position in which language provides familiar categories through which speakers interpret and communicate experience.

Lucy distinguishes between approaches that begin with differences in language and examine their possible effects on thought and approaches that begin with particular areas of experience and examine how different languages encode them (291-312). The present study is closer to the second approach because it begins with

particular semantic domains, namely fruit and kinship, and examines how English and Nembe speakers respond to differences between them.

The fruit data show that speakers may interpret unfamiliar objects through familiar environmental categories. The kinship data show a similar process at the level of social relationships. In both cases, participants relied on categories already available in their experience. This does not mean that Nembe speakers cannot understand English distinctions. It means that unfamiliar distinctions may first be explained through concepts that are more familiar within the Nembe social and environmental setting.

This interpretation is also consistent with research that has moved away from a strict version of the Sapir Whorf hypothesis. Kay and Kempton's review of linguistic relativity shows that the relationship between language and thought is more complex than a simple claim that language determines perception or reasoning (65-79). Similarly, later work on linguistic relativity has focused more on specific areas in which differences between languages may influence attention, categorisation, memory, or interpretation rather than claiming that speakers of different languages live in completely separate conceptual worlds (Lucy 291-312).

The present findings should therefore be interpreted with caution. The participants were able to understand and discuss English categories even when they did not have an immediately available Nembe equivalent. This demonstrates that bilingual speakers can move between different systems of categorisation. Their responses show flexibility rather than a fixed cognitive boundary between English and Nembe.

Meaning, Context, and Communicative Adaptation

Another important finding is the role of context in establishing meaning. Participants did not always treat unfamiliar words as problems that required exact translation. Instead, they adjusted their explanations according to the situation. A fruit could be described through its similarity to another fruit, while a kinship relationship could be explained through the role a person plays in the family.

This suggests that meaning is not always contained entirely within an isolated word. Speakers also depend on the situation, the relationship between participants, shared knowledge, and the purpose of the conversation. Wierzbicka's work on semantics similarly stresses the importance of examining how meaning is represented within particular languages and cultural settings rather than assuming that all words have identical conceptual boundaries across languages (3-27).

The participants' ability to explain unfamiliar terms also demonstrates the importance of communicative adaptation. Where a direct equivalent was not available, they did not abandon communication. They used comparison, description, explanation, and contextual information. This supports the view that multilingual speakers are not limited to the lexical resources of one language at a time. They can draw on different linguistic and cultural resources to make meaning clear.

The comment that "English people divide things too much" is useful in this regard. It should not be treated as a general statement about English speakers. Rather, it reflects the participant's perception that English sometimes makes distinctions that are not expressed in the same way in Nembe. The statement therefore reveals how speakers themselves perceive differences between the two systems of categorisation.

Ethnographic Interpretation and Limitations

Taken together, the fruit and kinship data suggest that Nembe speakers use a flexible approach to meaning. In the fruit domain, environmental familiarity appears to influence how unfamiliar items are understood. In the kinship domain, social relationships and family responsibilities appear to influence how relationships are explained.

The findings therefore support a moderate view of linguistic relativity. Language may influence the categories that speakers habitually use, but speakers are not imprisoned by those categories. They can explain unfamiliar concepts, learn new distinctions, and move between linguistic systems. This position is more consistent with contemporary research on linguistic relativity than a strong deterministic interpretation.

The findings also have an important implication for the study of Nembe. A lack of a one-word equivalent should not automatically be described as a lexical deficiency. A language may express a concept through a phrase, a combination of terms, a description, or a culturally specific explanation. The Nembe examples considered here demonstrate the need to examine how speakers actually use their language rather than judging the language only by whether it contains direct equivalents for English words.

However, the findings must be treated as preliminary. The study is based on a small number of participants and informal elicitation sessions. The responses cannot therefore be taken as representative of all Nembe speakers. Differences may exist according to age, education, location, degree of English proficiency, migration, and exposure to other cultures. Further research involving more speakers and a wider range of Nembe communities would be needed to establish whether the patterns identified here are widespread.

Overall, the discussion shows that differences between English and Nembe terminology are not simply differences in vocabulary. They also reveal differences in experience, social relationships, and ways of explaining unfamiliar concepts. English may provide more explicit lexical distinctions in some of the areas examined, while Nembe speakers may rely more heavily on context, comparison, and relational explanation. The most important finding is therefore not that one language is more precise than the other, but that each language provides its speakers with different resources for organising and communicating experience.

CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that lexical organisation in English and Nembe reflects different strategies for encoding human experience, shaped by ecological setting and patterns of social organisation. Language in this sense does not function merely as a system of naming, but as a structured way of interpreting and classifying reality.

In the fruit domain, English shows a highly differentiated taxonomy developed through global agricultural exchange and scientific classification traditions. It maintains fine distinctions among fruit types such as berries, citrus fruits, and melons. Nembe, by contrast, exhibits a lexical system closely tied to the tropical environment of its speakers. Fruits of high ecological and cultural relevance such as mango, banana, coconut, plantain, and pawpaw are lexicalised, while categories such as berries and melons are not independently named, reflecting differences in environmental salience rather than communicative inadequacy.

A similar pattern is observed in the kinship domain. English kinship terminology is structured around a nuclear family model and is characterised by precise lexical distinctions between immediate and extended relations, including separate terms for cousins, aunts, nephews, nieces, and various affinal relations. Nembe kinship organisation, however, reflects an extended-family system in which relational closeness and social integration are prioritised over genealogical precision. As a result, categories such as cousin and sibling are merged, and many relationships are expressed through descriptive or compound forms rather than independent lexical items.

These differences are systematic and reflect distinct ways in which each speech community categorises experience. English tends toward formal classification and analytical differentiation, whereas Nembe privileges relational continuity and ecological immediacy. These findings do not suggest cognitive limitation, but rather variation in lexical encoding shaped by cultural and environmental conditions.

From a pedagogical perspective, the observed differences highlight the need for explicit instructional strategies in areas where conceptual categories do not align across languages. Teaching should therefore incorporate visual aids, contextual examples, and comparative explanations that help learners bridge conceptual gaps while recognising the first language as an important cognitive resource.

Finally, the study underscores the importance of documenting and preserving indigenous semantic systems. In contexts of increasing language contact and shift toward dominant global languages, indigenous languages such as Nembe face gradual lexical erosion. Preserving these systems is therefore essential not only for linguistic diversity but also for safeguarding the cultural knowledge and worldview they encode.

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