

## THE ARTICLE AS A LINGUISTIC VARIABLE IN “IVORIAN FRENCH”

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### INTRODUCTION

The linguistic variable, the descriptive unit of language variation, has been massively investigated starting with W. Labov's surveys on American sociolects (1966, 1966a, 1969, 1972a). A great many other studies were to follow concentrating either on the perspective of language change (S. Poplack 1989; P. Thibault 1989; W. Wolfram 1991), or on how social factors influence micro idiosyncratic variations (P. Trudgill 1977; J. K. Chambers & P. Trudgill 1991; P. Eckert 1989a; N. Haeri 1987; M. B. Horvath 1985).

This paper focuses on the use of the article as a variable and takes as target language a variant of standard French spoken in Cote d'Ivoire known as “*français ivoirien*” (Ivorian French). We assume that omitting the article is not a random speech habit and the stakes here are to determine whether the variable depends on usual sociolinguistics factors such as style, gender, level of education or purely linguistic constraints. Additionally, we will see whether the deletion of the article is a case of negative transfer from African native languages.

The analysis covers four sections: the first section reviews the sociolinguistic status of the Ivorian French; the second section discusses the methodology, showing how the data were collected and processed, and the third section focuses on their interpretation. Based on the data interpretation, we will suggest possible explanations why the article is being deleted so frequently.

## 1. The Ivorian speech community and Ivorian French

**The multilingual landscape of Cote d'Ivoire** is rich with some 60 languages/dialects, not to mention the other speech forms brought in by settlers from the West African region. All these speech forms remain still vivid, though at varying degrees. Daily interactions are dominated by the use of Djula, the local Mandingo variety and French, the foreign colonial language; French is also used as the medium of instruction in the formal education system.

But due to poor schooling coverage, the French language is not learnt by all in proper conditions, so much so that it is not always used in its original form. The remarkable structural readjustments over time have brought about the emergence of several sub-varieties of French. According to J. Kouadio (2006), French and its derived varieties line up in a dialect continuum format: *Standard French* -> *Local Ivorian French* -> *Nuchi* -> *Ivorian Popular French*. Kouadio's typology has its own merit but we wonder if there exists an *Ivorian Popular French*, a sub-variety that would be different from the Local Ivorian French and Nuchi. Can we imagine a sub-variety more distant on the continuum that would be more distant from standard French than Nuchi? Does that sub-variety correspond to what Hattiger (1983) named long ago "*Abidjanese Popular French*" while the Nuchi was still unheard of<sup>1</sup>? In any case, we agree that next to standard French, Kouadio's "*Français local ivoirien*" does correspond to the local sociolinguistic reality that will hereafter be referred to as

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<sup>1</sup> J-L. Hittiger had described the Abidjanese Popular French as a pidginizing language; is not Nuchi the final result of this pidginization process?

"Ivorian French".

**The Ivorian French** can be considered as a French variant in its own rights just like Canadian, Belgium or Luxembourgian French (Silué 1993). Fresh comers to Cote d'Ivoire who hear Ivorian French would not reject it as totally different from standard French; however, they always confess being impressed by the metaphorical and the peculiar syntactic rearrangements it displays. Likewise, Ivorians talking to other French-speaking nationals readily realize that they speak a rather special variant. Quite often indeed, they feel obliged to reword their utterances to get their messages across. Still, the most outstanding feature of Ivorian French remains undisputedly the recurring omissions of the article, leading other Francophones to refer to Ivorians as "*those who swallow the article*".

**The article variable** acknowledges two variants: the "favored" variant is when the article occurs as grammatically required like in (1) "il a pris le/un car pour Bouaké" (*He has taken the coach to Bouaké*); the second the deviating one is when the article is elided as in (2) "il a pris Ø car pour Bouaké (same meaning). Instances where the article is overused as in *il a mis la balle à terre*" for "*il a mis Ø balle à terre*" (He is more conciliating attitude) are ignored here.

## **2. Methodology: informants, data collection and processing**

**The informants** were selected in both genders and according to levels of education: Higher Education teachers (H-Ed), Middle and Low administration workers (M/L-Adm), Students (Stud), Manual workers (M-Wk) and Kindergarten kids aged between three and

five. The Middle/low Administration category includes secretaries, accountants and a librarian; they have attended higher education but not beyond the Licence or BTS degrees. Manual workers are cleaners (both sexes), male security personnel on the University campus, and mechanics in neighboring garages in Cocody; informants of this category have hardly been beyond primary school. Kids of the kindergarten are from Ste Thérèse d'Avila, a private school in II Plateaux, a high standard residential district in Abidjan. Table 1 summarizes the grouping of informants:

***Table 1: The grouping of the informants***

	H-Ed	L/M Adm	Stud	M- Wk	K- Gn	<b>Total</b>
Males	5	4	4	4	3	20
Females	4	4	4	4	3	19
<b>TOTAL</b>	9	8	8	8	6	39

**Style elicitation** required the tape-recorder procedure because the Ivorian French is oral: moreover some informants can hardly read and write. Understandably, the corpus cannot be dissected into discrete points like “Passage Reading Style (*PRS*), “World List Style” (*WLS*). Therefore the stylistic continuum is restricted to formal and casual styles. To elicit formal style, the interviewer would make the tape-recorder apparent and pretend taking notes thus creating a formality-oriented atmosphere. For the elicitation of casual style, the interviewer would dissimulate<sup>2</sup> the tape-

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<sup>2</sup> *The dissimulation of the tape-recorder raises ethical issues as recordings are realized without the informants being informed*

recorder and engage an ice-breaking conversation first; next he would ask the informant to relate an event where he has experienced a vivid emotion; this trick creates a casual conversation ambiance.

**Data are processed** by the counting of all noun phrases; next cases of deletion are also numbered and rounded up into percentages, as shown in Table 2:

***Table 2: General scores***

		<b>Categories of speakers</b> <i>(scores in %)</i>				
<b>GENDERS</b>	<i>Styles</i>	H-Ed	M/L- Adm	Stud	M- wk	K-dn
<b>Males</b>	<i>Formal</i>	8,2	13,0	17,1	82,3	6,6
	<i>Casal</i>	19,2	20,3	44,0	85,2	13,3
<b>Females</b>	<i>Formal</i>	1,3	5,0	16,3	86,2	1,9
	<i>Casal</i>	3,8	15,3	23,7	86,7	10,7

### **3. Discussions and interpretations**

**The deletion of the article is style-sensitive** as can be seen in Table 2. When speakers monitor their speech and so concentrate on the language form, the deletion rates decrease; by contrast, when speakers are being more spontaneous and then feel more concerned with maintaining their speech flow, rates are on the increase. This would suggest that there is a tacit awareness among speakers of Ivorian French that gliding over this particle is a deviation away from the standard norm. Table 3 summarizes the scores according

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*beforehand. Still, as a way of mitigating those ethical concerns, the texts dealing with sensitive topics were removed from the corpus.*

to style:

***Table 3: The deletion of the article and style***

STYLE	Categories of speakers (scores in %)					Average
	H-Ed	M/L-Adm	Stud	M-Wk	K-dn	
<i>Formal</i>	4,6	9,1	16,7	<b>84,3</b>	4,4	27,6
<i>Casual</i>	11,5	17,8	36,3	<b>86</b>	11,9	35,8

The figures indicate that deletion rates nearly double from formal to casual style and this for all categories of speakers except Manual workers. For this category, the difference between formal style (84.5%) and casual style (86) is negligible. This would suggest that Manual workers hardly perceive the deletion of the article as a serious deviation. One is justified to consider that the speech Manual workers is almost mono-styled, a key feature of pidginizing languages.

**The fact that the level of instruction** correlates with the deletion rates is not real cause of a surprise since this speaking habit is implicitly admitted as a linguistic deviation. However, there is something odd with students deleting the article more than Middle/low administration informants while the two categories have roughly the same education level.

This observation suggests that the education level might not be the absolute and unique determining factor. It should be recalled that the education level is nothing but a conventional measurement based on academic degrees and that it may not accurately reflect actual language practice. It would seem that due to their professional duties, Middle/Low administration informants are bound to use language in more permanent formal circumstances. Their daily interactions are either with their bosses (i.e. the University officials) or with external partners. In a way, the professional environment of Middle/Low administration agents strongly requires the use of "fine language" in which non-standard speech is hardly tolerated. As for students, they are expected to adjust their speech to the rigorous academic settings, in theory. In actual practice however, interactions among students are much reduced in the strictly monitored learning settings (i.e. classrooms and amphitheatres); rather, students will interact more frequently in the courtyard or common rooms where casualness and spontaneity prevail. In short, the non formal environment where students regularly interact has come to reinforce their propensity for casual speech.

Even more intriguing is the case of kindergarten kids as regards formal style in that they appear to delete the article in proportions almost close to those of the most educated informants (i.e. higher education teachers)! The fact is that, even though spoken nation-wide, the Ivorian

French remains “*the language of the street*” in the perception of most Middle Class Ivorians. Understandably Middle Class show some resentment to this non standard speech form and would ascertain their kids acquire a language cleared of distorted speaking habits like gliding over the article. However, one can predict that when those kids grow older, they will certainly adopt the national Ivorian speaking fashion as a way of adjusting their linguistic habits to the prevailing speech standards. In a way, in the course of socialization, the propensity of kids to glide over the article will be on the increase<sup>3</sup>, unless an overtly normative form of education restrains it.

**The gender** factor is one of the key independent variables to influence the use of the article in the Ivorian speech community. If omitting the article is deviating away from the norm, then the figures displayed in Table 4 confirm the well-shared sociolinguistic assumption that “women [...] produce on average linguistic forms which more closely approach those of the standard language” (Trudgill 1983: 161), a view point echoed by Labov (1990: 205) who observes that “[I]n stable sociolinguistic stratification men use a higher frequency of non-standard forms than women”.

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*3 It should be recalled that the kids selected for the survey are all from middle class background. In lower standard residential areas where French is not systematically spoken at home, kids of the same age group might acquire the Ivorian speech style earlier from their older siblings or older peers in the street.*



**Table 4:** Aggregated scores for styles and gender (in %)

GENDERS	Categories of speakers (scores in %)				
	H-Ed	M/L-Adm	Stud	M-Wk	K-dn
<i>Males</i>	14,7	17,1	32,7	83,9	9,8
<i>Females</i>	2,7	10,8	19,5	86,5	6,6

The Manual workers category displays another curiosity: when scores are aggregated for both styles, female speakers appear to delete the article more than their male counterparts. This oddity is not enough to challenge the assumption that women are more norm-conscious. The random use of the variants has been underlined earlier and the fact is that during the survey it proved sometimes difficult to single out the two styles when Manual workers were being tested.

The general permissiveness observed in the Ivorian speech community regarding the use of the article leads to legitimate inquiries: what is the linguistic significance of this grammatical deviation and why do Ivorians spare the article so frequently?

#### 4. Why do Ivorians delete the article?

The **negative language transfer hypothesis** is regularly called forth to account for the deletion of the article by Ivorians. The argument goes that in most African languages the nominal markers are agglutinated to the lexical stem of the noun to form a single word and allegedly, Ivorians transfer this morpho-syntactic structure from their native languages to French. Another explanation holds that less educated people strategically refrain from using the article at all because of the

unpredictability of noun gender inherent to the nominal system in Latin languages.

The negative transfer argument is problematic not only because highly educated Ivorians (i.e. Higher Education teachers) drop the article now and then, but also because a large proportion of urban young Ivorians do not speak any native language.

The omission of the article was analyzed in languages far distant from African ones. In reviewing the use of the article in the context of English language education, P. Rastal (1993) has observed that even English native speakers are increasingly "sparing" the article! Our hypothesis is that the deletion of the article must be considered in the general context of forms contraction or ellipsis.

**Languages have a general tendency to economy or simplification** and most morphological and structural changes over time (in diachrony) come under the aspects of forms reduction or ellipsis. The propensity of human languages to simplification (over diachronic) time is the manifestation of the "least effort principle" in synchrony. Speakers give in to this principle and glide over linguistic units as long as an elision is not critical to meaning integrity. In a study on compounds in English, Silué (1989) observed that speakers take to "*the least effort principle*" and elide the prepositions in complex noun phrases and they do so with the object relative pronoun in English (e.g. 'the man Ø he saw'). Such a form reduction has been reported in (Canadian) French by Cedergren and G. Sankoff (1974) who noticed that the subordinate conjunction 'que' as in 'je crois Ø il est parti' for 'je crois **qu'il** est parti' (I think Ø he has left) was being increasingly dropped by speakers of lower classes. But human languages are very logical systems: the "least effort principle" is also constrained by a "*meaning preserving rule*"

**The meaning preserving principle** suggests that speakers can afford to ignore linguistic units as long as there is no risk of information loss that could undermine the interpretation of meaning. Lexical elements will hardly ever be contracted due to their still sound semantic content. Quite on the contrary, function words that basically lack any semantic load are much likely to be contracted or elided more frequently provided that situational or contextual information efficiently gap the lexical meaning embodied in missing the forms that are dropped out. The article is precisely one such function word but this morpheme in French language embodies pertinent grammatical information, namely the number category. The number category can be critically pertinent for the construction of noun phrases as core syntactic constituents.

Regarding the grammatical number our hypothesis is that the singular category is morphologically and conceptually close to lexical notions, while the plural category bears more critical information. The singular category would be neutral by opposition to the plural that would be its marked variant and it is well known that in any area of linguistic systems marked units will hardly ever be elided. Therefore, in deleting the article with plural noun phrases, the speaker runs the risk of losing potentially critical information likely to create ambiguity; as a matter of fact, in doing so, he would be violating the "*meaning preserving principle*".

The scores in Table 5 give evidence that deletion rates are higher when the noun phrase is singular and less automatic when the noun is

plural. In other words, speakers do avoid sparing the article when the noun is plural and presumably sense that they can afford gliding over it when the noun is singular:

***Table 5: Article deletion and number constraint***

Grammatical number	Categories of speakers (scores in %)				
	H-Ed	M/L-Adm	Stud	M-Wk	K-Gdn
<i>Singular</i>	3,5	4,9	6,6	19,9	5,7
<i>Plural</i>	0	1,6	1,4	11,2	2,0

## CONCLUSION

The analysis confirms the fact that the deletion of the article in Ivorian French is determined by usual sociolinguistic factors that determine ranging from style, gender to education level. The correlation between the rates of deletion and the level of education gives evidence that Ivorian French speakers sense that deleting the article is a verbal deviation; less educated speakers however, use the two variants of the variable almost at random.

The negative transfer hypothesis has proved inaccurate: the deletion of the article is in fact the manifestation of form reduction or ellipsis. Sparing the article is not determined by sociolinguistic factors only; some purely linguistic factors such as the number constraint are at work too.

A cross-examination of strictly linguistic variables such as the resort to simple descriptive statistics to make sense of language variation around the distribution of the article variable might cover other valuable information. It

could be worth cross-examining the impact of variables of a strictly linguistic kind such as the syntactic function of nouns (subject, object or complement), their grammatical gender (masculine or feminine), their morphological structure of nouns (monosyllabic or polysyllabic) or even the phonological structure (nouns with a vowel or a consonant in front position), etc. might provide other insights on this issue. This alternative approach requires more robust statistical procedure such as the *variable rule* technique, a procedure empowered by the VARBRUL software program (D. Sankoff and S. Laberge 1978) that might help uncover more subtleties on the deletion of the article.

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