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Review Article

An Ecolinguistic Description of Time Frame in the Grassfields

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Abstract

After the COVID-19 pandemic, the world has faced a severe economic crisis followed by an acute environmental degradation. To alleviate the latter, ecology and natural science alone seem insufficient. Temptative solutions from language can be worth exploring. This paper sets out to explore the role of language solving or at least reducing the current global environmental crisis, within a local community in Cameroon, namely the grassfields where one of the dominant languages is Ghomala. In other words, the study aims at unveiling how linguistic elements can be used as a tool to raise consciousness and make people to be attuned back to their environment. To achieve it, the study uses an eclectic approach, combining the ideology approach to ecolinguistics so as to describe the concepts used in the grassfield community to refer to the months of the year and the days of the week, and finally explains how these linguistic concepts are related to activities to be carried out at specific periods in order to preserve the environmental balance. The results show that the days and months carry a semantic and metalinguistic meaning which implicitly orientate the members of the community investigated to carry out activities in congruence with natural balance and nature protection. These findings thus confirm that the languages spoken in certain local communities contain words denoting nature preservation and balance, which can be reactivated in current practices to promote not only metalinguistic awareness, but also green socio-economical practices.

Keywords

Ecolinguistics, Ecology, Linguistic Concepts, Metalinguistic

1. Introduction

The relentless quest for wealth by all means has driven the whole world into a circle of decadence: moral depravation, economic aggressiveness and environmental destruction. People at the global scale have changed their ancient habits, abandoned their traditions and are now disconnected with their natural environment. In the meantime, the Cartesians seek to have total control and dominion over the environment for the sake of modernism. However, a look over the folk organisation of indigenous communities reveals interesting correlations between the organisation of time, words used to coin each period of time as well and nature preservation. Taking the example of the Grassfields community in Cameroon, we are going first to describe the said community, and then present the distribution of time in the said community, and how the lexicon used in that time distribution plays a vital role in nature protection and ecologic balance, to confirm Haugen's assertion that "Languages do have life, purpose, and form, each of which can be studied and analysed as soon as we strip them of their metaphorical or

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mystical content and look upon them as aspects of human behaviour.[4]

2. The Grassfields Area in Cameroon

It is established from official sources [6][1] that there are four main cultural groups in Cameroon, including the Fang-Beti, the Sudano-Sahelian, the Sawa and the Grassfields. Geographically speaking, the Grassfield area spreads from the western region to the north-west. Though different tribes are found there, they share some core values and principles which make them to be considered as a single cultural area. For instance the dressing style. Traditional outfits are made from dried and dyed raffia leaves called 'Ndop' in some villages and 'Toghu' in other villages. More so, the cool climate, the vegetation (it is dominantly the savannah with a few spots of sacred forest in each kingdom) and the mountainous relief imposes to these people, common socioeconomic practices. We allude to farming, breeding, building, trading, etc.

Concerning the linguistic map, there are various languages spoken across the area and one of the dominant languages is Ghomala'. It is spoken across three administrative divisions in Cameroon, namely the Koung-khi, the Mifi and the Upper Plateau division. Thus, the transcription symbols used are those homologated by the language committees in Domche et al. [1, 10]. A gloss is provided before a temptative standard translation into English.

3. Presentation and Analysis of the Data

In this section, the data collected have been subdivided into two categories: the months of the year and the days of the week.

3.1. Distribution of Months

In the Grassfields area, there are two dominant activities, somehow related: farming and trade. People farm a lot, and on market day (s), they sell their crops and eventually buy some basic commodity products needed in their households. As life is driven by agricultural activities, many aspects of customs and practices are planned and designed such that the ecosystem remains preserved and balanced.

The months of the year are twelve and each of them translate a specific activity to be carried out at that specific moment to align with nature, not against it. The term month is coined ŋwə "month". In the area, traditionally, a month starts when the moon appears in the sky and ends when the moon disappears from the sky.

Khəm mghe/January

Clear herbs

"Cutting the grass"

This is the first month of the year. It often happens during the dry season. It is at that period that farms are cleaned up across the grasslands. All the farmers are expected to take advantage of the climate condition to easily clear the pieces of land meant for farming activities.

Sɔ gwiŋ/February

Split yam

"Slicing the yam"

This second month falls within February. The main activity to be carried out is slicing a particular specie of yam. As a matter of fact, during the process of clearing the farms, yam is removed from the earth and the best way to conserve it is to cook first, then slice and dry it under the sun. After the drying process, the stuff can be stored for a long period. Such food items are customarily cooked in hard times and are therefore considered as signs of food shortage or economic crisis, be it in a household or a whole community.

Dzə tsə/March

sow things

"Sowing"

In the grassfields, rain is generally expected by mid-April. So once the farms have been previously prepared, here comes the moment for sowing. Various crops are sowed at that moment as it is a habit in the area to sow different products on the same piece of land. However, there is a preference for cereals when the rain is just beginning.

Dzə biyέŋ/April

Sow peanuts

"Sowing peanuts"

This month is also dedicated to sowing, especially the peanuts. In other villages of the area, preference is instead given to sowing cocoyam at this period of the year. For those who are late in sowing, this month can represent a catch-up period for sowing cereals.

Sû ne/May

Weed furrow

"To weed"

It is assumed that after two months of rain, grass has grown everywhere. Thus, to allow a good, safe and healthy growth of products, it is important to weed the farms. From dust to dawn, all the farmers scrupulously submit themselves to these activities. At times, to make their chore less strenuous, they organise themselves in groups and schedule a work plan that will enable them to go to every group member's farm day after day.

Dzʉh gu/June

cultivate sweet potato

"cultivate sweet potatoes"

Sweet potato is a farm product which is not generally mixed with other products. So there are either spare lands or specific space prepared to grow it. A whole month is dedicated to its culture with regard to its value in the eating habit of the population within the community.

Fəfə/July

[1] The Prime Minister's Office website: www.spm.gov.cm

Dew

"Dewy rain"

This is a month during which dewy rains abound in the area. So this month is named after the weather prevailing at the moment, unlike the other months which denote specific agricultural activities. It is widely believed in the grassfields that the dew contributes to get the corn dry in good conditions.

Shwâ gəfa/August

Reap maize

"Reaping maize"

Maize is not reaped for direct consumption in the grassfields. It is reaped to be kept in a dry place for later consumption. For this reason, after the dew in July, maize is believed to be dry enough for harvesting. Mothers and children go to the farms to harvest in teams and store the product in dry places.

Khəm biyέŋ/September

Clear groundnut

"Harvest groundnuts"

Throughout this whole month, groundnuts are harvested across the land. Those who did not sow groundnuts go about other activities or keep on harvesting maize or any other product on their farms. It is the harvest season.

Dzʉh mko/October

Cultivate beans

"Growing beans"

After maize and groundnuts have been harvested, beans are sowed. There is no room for vacancy. The lands as well as people are busy. It should be noted that this over exploitation of the soil has fastened its sterility in such a way that fertilisers are nowadays used to expect better products and good harvests.

Fə nam/November

Apparition sun

"Sunshine"

After several months of cool and cold weather, the sun begins to shine. In other words, it is the beginning of the dry season. As a result, this new season announces new activities to be carried out later on. It is worth mentioning that this is the second month named after the weather condition prevailing at that moment.

Thəŋ gudɔm/December

Dig sweet potato

"Harvesting potato"

This last month indicates the period to harvest potatoes which was sowed since June.

3.2. The days of the week

Besides the months of the year that highlight the main activities to be done during a certain period of time, the days of the week go deeper to organise and specify what to do, and when to do it exactly.

Unlike the Western calendar wherein a week is made up of seven days, the Ghomala' calendar instead has eight days for a week. Those days are:

1) Thâmgwə
2) Liə'pfə
3) Shanku'
4) Dzədzə
5) Thâmdzə
6) Khwô'gwə
7) Gôsʉe
8) Mâmtɔ

3.2.1. The Market Days

Among the eight days of the week, there are specific market days. The greatest market day is *Dzədzə*. On that day, farmers bring their products to the market to sell. Those who have nothing to sell just go to the market either to buy or to meet friends and peers. People are so busy on farming days that they have no extra time to look for friends. When someone is missing on the market day, it is assumed that the person is either sick or out of the village. Market places and days are moments and arenas for socialising and exchanging with people.

Beside the greatest market day, there is a little one called *Mâmtɔ*. It is considered little because trade is done on some spots within the village, in contrast with the greatest market which takes place on a unique spot, that is, the boulevard of the kingdom generally located around the main entrance of the palace. The little market stands as a catch-up for those who could not make it earlier on the great day. After these market days, people go about their regular activities.

3.2.2. Public Holidays

The most important public holiday is *Khwô'gwə.* Everybody stays at home on that day. There is no farming nor trading. It is forbidden according to the cultural beliefs, to leave the house on that day, except for health reasons. According to the customs of the area, powerful and mystical secret societies parade across the village on that day, and end up with a meeting at the palace. Bumping into such mystical persons, results in bad luck. Furthermore, it is believed that breaking the prohibition to work will bring misfortune to the norm-breaker. No cultural ritual is also performed on that day. It is a kind of sabbatical day.

Another public holiday is *Mâmtɔ.* It is forbidden to farm nor trade on that day. Yet, cultural practices like funerals and sacrifices are permitted. Finally, we have *Thâmdzə and Shənku'*, days where the only prohibition is organising funeral activities.

So, the society is strongly organised such that there is a time during the week for every kind of activity recognised in the area. This organisation enables to preserve a certain harmony among the population but also with the biodiversity and environment in general. When it is time for farming, everyone farms. When it is time for trading, nobody stays behind to farm while others are trading. And when it is a public holiday, everybody stops for a while and stays home.

4. Interpretation

The data reveal that the days of the week and the months of the year are linguistically represented in the Cameroonian grassfield area by words referring to the weather, the activities or holidays. These words bear a metalinguistic weight [5], suggesting implicitly to every native speaker what is supposed to be done at a given period of time. More so, unlike the reference to holidays is pregnant in meaning. It refers to a stop in every common activity: farming, crafting, hunting, logging, except trading which is not common. All the other activities in relation with environment are on standby, thus allowing Mother Nature to reconstruct and regenerate itself. Life therefore follows a routine known by everyone, except those people who are contaminated by the Western economic model of excess at all levels. Can there be a more positive "role of language in the current ecological and environmental crisis [2]".

As for those words referring to the weather, they suggest how aware the local people are, of the interwoven relationship between human activities and the climate. One of the weaknesses of this generation is to believe that man is above everything. In contrast, the grassfield community being fundamentally animist claims a divine manifestation in every natural element: they praise the sunshine, they appreciate the rain fall and they often perform rituals to have better weather conditions in situations of prolonged drought or unusual heavy rainfall. So, the words suggest activities and beliefs, resulting in fashioning people's behavior and consciousness. The case presented above highlights a positive aspect of that.

5. Endword

This paper aimed at demonstrating how traditional ways of life in societies in general and time distribution in particular could help preserve our environment [3]. Taking the example with the Ghomala' community in the grassfields area in Cameroon, semantic evidence above has shown that the year is organised into twelve months. Each month has a linguistic concept which signifies a specific activity to carry out at that moment. Only two months out of twelve are related to weather. In that cycle of activities, nobody must be left behind; every member of the community has to follow the trend. As for the days of the week, there are eight of them, of which are public holidays to rest and other holidays to perform specific cults and rituals within the community. In such a primitive society, there is no room for disturbing the natural cycle nor imposing one's will to nature to the detriment of the living beings. These findings strongly contrast with the Western languages whose metaphors and discourses play a destructive role against the environment [8]. Rehashing similar phenomena in other linguistico-cultural communities could enable to raise more awareness on going back to roots and bringing to the limelight "an old linguistic wine freshly housed in new ecologically focused bottles [7, 9]."

Author Contributions

Jean Paul Gaindjoung: Conceptualization, Investigation, Writing – review & editing, Formal analysis

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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