

Ethnobiological Inventories

Significance of Multilingualism and Lexical Variation in Rural Cameroon

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Abstract

This thesis provides a description and analysis of multilingual ethnobiological lexicons in a rural, linguistically diverse village in Cameroon where people depend daily on plants and animals, making the ethnobiological lexicon extensive. It focuses on the significance of multilingualism and the distribution and nature of lexical variation in ethnobiological inventories. The analysis explores the dynamicity of small-scale multilingualism and describes how multilingualism and lexical variation expand choices and knowledge. It assesses the multivariate social and linguistic factors contributing to variation and the vitality of multilingualism. Quantitative and qualitative methods combine to holistically describe multilingual linguistic repertoires. This thesis views language as social practice and languages as socioculturally constructed. Ethnobiological lexicons are also viewed as constructions of how people perceive and organise the natural world. Much of the data derives from an ethnobiology stimuli set designed to elicit plant and animal names in five common languages spoken in the village: Vute, Gbaya, Fulfulde, Mbum, and French. Elicitations were conducted in language mode, an unnatural elicitation task that serves analytical purposes to understand how participants conceptualise languages and language boundaries. Responses were analysed with a set of heuristics defining response categories. These categories reveal the asymmetry of multilingualism and the ways speakers navigate language boundaries, some being more porous than others. Many of the responses exhibit patterns, identifying individuality and groups, some that form communities of practice, explainable through qualitative analysis that transcends the traditional variables of age and gender. The concept of scale is applied throughout this thesis for its explanatory power. Additionally, incorporating cognitive research that views languages as a system informs the interactions of languages and lexical choices made by speakers. The complexity of multilingual practices calls for further understanding of the social factors and linguistic ecologies that maintain language vitality, linguistic diversity, and ethnobiological knowledge.