

Language Decline and Ethnobotanical Knowledge in a Multilingual Setting in Cameroon

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Abstract

The fields of ethnobotany and language endangerment have received increasing attention over the past several decades and the inextricable link of biological, cultural and linguistic diversity is now well recognized. There is a rich body of knowledge assessing the factors involved in the loss of ethnobotanical knowledge and language. However, few studies critically examine the relationship between the two, and it is generally assumed that language loss equates to a loss in traditional ecological knowledge.

This dissertation explores that relationship by focusing on a dialect of Wawa, an endangered language spoken in a rural, multilingual village in Cameroon and is based on nine weeks of fieldwork. It assesses whether factors that drive the loss of the language also influence ethnobotanical knowledge. The Wawa people are shifting to another local language, Vute and ultimately to the regional lingua franca, Fulfulde. The many contributing factors are discussed in an assessment of Wawa language endangerment. Botanical nomenclature and classification are presented as a way of showing the richness of Wawa ethnobotanical knowledge and used as a springboard for exploring how language loss affects Wawa ethnobotanical knowledge. Both quantitative and qualitative methods are used. A freelisting test administered at the local school and a plant identification survey are used to determine the extent of language shift. Other data were obtained through informal interviews with key informants. The research reveals that ethnobotanical knowledge is not necessarily lost when speakers shift to another local language. Language loss is mainly driven by increased contact with the dominant group, whereas ethnobotanical knowledge loss is less evident and driven by increasing access to market goods.

This dissertation helps to inform our knowledge of the relationship between language loss and ethnobotanical knowledge. Situated in an ethnobotanically and linguistically understudied region, the data will help our understanding of the Mambiloid language group and highlight the rich ethnobotanical knowledge of the region. Placed within the broader realm of biocultural diversity, the dissertation underscores the need for thorough documentation and maintenance of endangered languages and knowledges, as well as the relationship of these languages to other aspects of culture.