

Environmental Degradation Is Degradation in Language and Culture

Eric Dzeayele Maiwong*

Department of English, E.N.S., P. O. Box 47 Yaounde, University of Yaounde 1, Yaounde, Cameroon ,

Telephone Number : (+237) 675 332 661, WhatsApp : 675 332 661.

Email: maiwonge@yahoo.co.uk

Abstract

This paper investigates the impact of **environmental degradation** on the communicative capacity of language. Basing its analysis on **Lămno's idioms**, the paper establishes with a lot of scientific rigour, that the **extra-linguistic** and sociological variables found in the data under consideration, contribute to the process of **signifying** or generating meaning in language. It principally reveals that degradation in geographical environment reduces the communicative potential of language both at the **denotative** and **connotative** levels. In addition, adducing very fresh and dependable evidence, it establishes that language is intrinsically linked to environment and culture. Its very exciting contributions lie in its stress on this hitherto neglected aspect of linguistic studies – that is, the relevance of geographical environment to the generation of meaning and effective communication in language and, in its revelation that game reserves and forest reserves should not only be used as touristic sites, but also as language, and cultural laboratories.

Keywords: Environmental; Lămno's; Idioms; Extra-linguistic; Signifying; Denotative; Connotative.

Linguists have long been interested in “ecolinguistics,” the kind of language we tend to use to frame environmental issues. Our ecolinguistics reveal our beliefs [1]. Linguist Halliday argues that inherent in the very anthropocentric grammar of our languages is the ideology that humans are special beings quite apart from the rest of the natural world, and that unlimited growth and human exploitation of natural resources are normal and remarkable [2, 3]. We also argue that our language may show how separate we are from nature, but the relationship between the natural world and natural language is far deeper than we realize. It is a kind of tragedy, slowly unfolding, with their uncertain futures intertwined.

Researchers have equally found a strong correlation between biodiversity and linguistic diversity [4]. We are losing biological diversity, and we are losing linguistic and cultural diversity. This correlation suggests that the natural world is central to the human experience.

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* Corresponding author.

Yet, many of us choose to live apart from nature. Anthropologist Brent Berlin and others found that there are universal patterns in how humans name the biological species in their environment. All languages and cultures classify names for plants in a similarly organized, not arbitrary way: Lexicons of botanical names increase from generic categories and varieties as people develop a growing awareness of certain plants around them [5, 6, 7]. When nature has an abundance of unique species and habitats to describe, what we find in these linguistically diverse indigenous communities is a rich folk taxonomy and traditional knowledge of the surrounding environment [8, 9].

The way our language shapes our view of the world has far more effect on the environment than we might think, and not just when it comes to warning of climate emergencies.

Environmental degradation, far from having only physical, economic and biological consequences, also has a devastating linguistic aftermath. This negative outcome is twofold: first, on the effectiveness of communication, and second, on culture – that is, the expression and promotion of a given society's chosen values.

In view of the above, this paper highlights the linguistic and then the cultural problems, which arise from environmental degradation to bring to focus this hitherto neglected aspect of linguistic studies.

The paper contends that when an idiom is used over the years, and particularly, when the concrete things to which it refers no longer exist in the language user's environment, the relationship between statement and meaning originally refer to becomes arbitrary and clouded. Thus, the idiom loses the original values thereby make the approval of certain values and disapproval of some attitudes and practices.

The paper also operates on the premises that when the connotative meaning of an idiom is lost, this results not only in the trite treatment of social value, but also in the mistaken assumption that an idiom is just another way of stating its denotative meaning. Thus, if these were the case, there would be no need for embroidery, for there is no evidence that these idioms were created to promote the fallacy of art for art's sake.

In order to achieve its aim as well as attain clarity, the paper chooses for its corpus Lămnsó' colloquialisms. Lămnsó' is a language spoken by the Nso' people in Bui Division, North West Region of Cameroon. The choice of this aspect of language is doubly motivated: communication wise, colloquialisms poignantly affect the transmission of messages through their concrete language or images and, in terms of human values; they contain and express the experiences and convictions of a people over the years.

The colloquialisms shall be grouped and translated so as to enable non-Lămnsó' speakers to follow the discussion and read it into their various languages.

The table on the next page contains the idioms, their denotative and connotative meanings and the values and attitudes implied, in the order in which they are discussed. In the discussion of their nature, one cannot aim at exhaustiveness. Rather, a reasonable number of idioms are examined to convincingly test the proposed hypotheses. Thus, the table contains thirty- two idioms for the analysis.

1.1. Literature review

Almost every eminent linguist, semiologist and semantist has tackled the key issue of the extra-linguistic and sociological variables in language. For reasons of brevity, we can only mention a few in this paper.

Barthes [10, 11] for instance, argues that when signs move to the second order of signification, they carry cultural meanings as well as representational ones. This is the sense in which they become connotative agents and tend to connote values, emotions and attitudes. Fairclough [12] points out that a meaningful study of language use has to be closely related to social and cultural practices. Accordingly, a close study has to delve into the hidden motivations behind a text. Wodak & Meyer [13]; Fairclough, [12]; and Kristeva, [14] on their part emphasize the important of historical and social knowledge in the understanding of language and these ties in with the view of Widdowson [15] that a critical study of language has to be interested in “the uncovering of implicit ideologies in texts”. Wodak, & Meyer, [13]; Fairclough, [12]; and Kristeva, [14] also stress on the intertextual and interdiscursive relationship between utterances, texts, genres and discourses. Finally, to take just a few, Lobner [16] points out that connotative meaning is made possible by cultural knowledge, and that is in this sense that the word ‘pig’ for instance connotes ‘dirty’, even though clean pigs do exist. This paper’s originality lies in the type and extent of the data used, and in its emphasis on the relevance of geographical environment to the generation of meaning in language.

1.2. Methodology

The paper anchored on the theoretical paradigms. Firstly, Structural linguistics is used to analyse the lexical or denotative meanings of the idioms that make up the data. Structural linguistics sees language as the construction of meaning out of shared systems of signification [17]. This means that, for every act of communication, there is a system of underlying laws that govern it and it is these same systems that govern all possible relations between signifiers and signified. Acts of communication are, therefore, mere examples or demonstrations of these underlying laws or structures. Secondly, Semiology and Critical Discourse Analysis come in to assist in the examination of the extra linguistic and sociological variables in the data. Semiology stresses that there is no communication without motivation and that this is where language is intrinsically linked to culture [10]. Barthes consequently argues that when signs become connotative agents, they become signifiers of cultural meanings and thus, signify values, emotions and attitudes. To the Semiologist, therefore, no message is to be taken at face value. Finally, Critical Discourse Analysis views linguistic communication as something that largely goes beyond a sentence and that it is a product of culture. It enables an understanding of the conditions and motivations that make the production of certain forms of discourse possible, thus, enabling us to study the text from a vantage position, since it gives us a comprehensive view of discourse as a communicative act [13, 14, 12]. Seen in this light, discourse is, therefore, not only the transmission of knowledge in a present communicative act but also, culturally, the transmission of societal knowledge store throughout time [16].

The idioms that constitute the data in the analysis were collected mostly from elderly Lämnsö’ speakers, when they made speeches during serious occasions and during rituals.

1.3. Findings and discussion

The following table contains the idioms, their denotative and connotative meanings and the values and attitudes implied, in the order in which they shall be discussed. Obviously, in a discussion of this nature, one cannot aim at exhaustiveness. Rather, a reasonable number of idioms will be examined to convincingly test the proposed hypotheses. Thus, the table contains thirty- two idioms from Lámnsò', which is the language spoken by Nso' people in Bui Division, North West Region of Cameroon, to permit an in-depth analysis.

Table 1: of idioms.

| S/N | IDIOM | DENOTATIVE MEANING | CONNOTATIVE MEANING | HUMAN VALUE OR NEGATIVE ATTITUDE |
|-----|----------------------------------|--|--|----------------------------------|
| 1. | fóo a rà̀m moo bó' | to creep like pumpkin | to flourish greatly | Progress |
| 2. | fóo a tǎ' moo ndzǎ̀ | to flourish like foliage | to flourish very much | |
| 3. | fóo kfǎ̀r nyam a shǎ' lǒ̀j | to eat an animal and laugh at the horns | to make a mockery of your former benefactor | Ingratitude |
| 4. | fóo tin virùj vé e dzǎ̀ | to cut your yams when you have not dug deep enough | to foolishly deprive yourself of what you were still to gain by misbehaving | Ingratitude / Lack of manners |
| 5. | fóo mà' à̀y sǎ̀j e koo mvǎ̀y | to throw away the millet and keep the chaffs | to throw away the essential and keep what is not important | Lack of discernment |
| 6. | fóo sho' kidzǎ̀m e tǒn sǎ̀m | to substitute fig wood with wood from another smoky tree called "Sǎ̀m" | to replace a bad ruler with another bad ruler | |
| 7. | fóo té' já̀j e koo ɲǒ̀' | to ignore the feaces and catch the termites | To persevere in order to achieve a thing /to stoop in order to conquer | Perseverance |
| 8. | fóo bǒ̀j e kóm e shò'óy kiban | nice –looking saucer which allows fufu to stick onto it | Someone who has physical beauty but lacks moral beauty | Need for functional beauty |
| 9. | fóo a dzǎ shinya' sheé shùu dzee | to be the good garden egg plant by the roadside | to be good in public but bad at home | |
| 10. | fóo kur bà̀rà' mè̀ntsɪ̀ŋgìy | to dress like a beetle | to dress flamboyantly but haphazardly | Pride |
| 11. | fóo kaɲ bà̀rà' mè̀ntsɪ̀ŋgìy | to fry beetles as if it were a rich stew | to be an impostor | |
| 12. | fóo a yò̀r moo nǎ̀' | to chatter like weaver birds | to be too talkative | Lack of caution in speech |
| 13. | fóo a jì̀rì moo kintsìy | to screech like a cricket | to talk too much for others' comfort | |
| 14. | fóo kù̀m kǒ' e kfǎ̀n shǒ̀j | to set a trap and be considered a thief when it catches an animal. | to be deprived of what rightly belongs to you by the more powerful | Misuse of power |
| 15. | fóo koo baá áa yǒ̀j jì kishò̀v | to kill a leopard and it is termed a civet cat | to be deprived of the honour and benefits of one's achievement by refusing to recognize it | |
| 16. | fóo a koo yó fo bii e wóo | to attempt to catch a snake from its hole with your hands | to be rash or go dare-deviling | Adventurism foolhardiness |
| 17. | fóo a sǎ' yúu | to tease or provoke bees | to be adventurous | |
| 18. | fóo a sǎ̀j mè̀tò̀j | to be as wily as the sunbird | to be crafty or greedy | Greed |

| | | | | |
|-----|--------------------------------------|--|--|------------------------------|
| 19. | fóo a tenín moo mbáyítí | to kick like a brown grasshopper | to be difficult to control / to be heady | Headiness |
| 20. | fóo a tenin moo kimèm | to kick like yellow grasshopper | to be uncontrollable /to be heady | |
| 21. | fóo a ñayìr moo kɪŋgɔŋgoón e shùù | to wriggle like an earthworm in the sun | to feel very uncomfortable as a result of alienation | Alienation |
| 22. | fóo a bu' moo bóy | to be as restless as a tadpole (out of water) | to feel great discomfort due to estrangement | |
| 23. | fóo a dzə shighaà | to be a swallow or harbinger | to be lonely because of your foresight or because you are ahead of your time | intellectualism and deviance |
| 24. | fóo a dzə kiyà ke ŋgo' | to be a harbinger termite | to be lonely because of your foresight or because you are ahead of you time | |
| 25. | fóo a dzə kiyà ke ngùmí | to be a harbinger locust | to be lonely because of your foresight or because you are ahead of you time | |
| 26. | fóo a dzə kimbóv | to be a clock bird | to be lonely because of your skepticism and foresight | |
| 27. | fóo shiŋka' shi bgu e ŋgaà ñjam e si | for a dry tree to fall in front of a good hewer | for an opportunity to present itself to one who can use it | Competence |
| 28. | fóo ŋgi' si koóm à mbùu sòn | for egusi to do well in the farms of the toothless | for an opportunity to present itself to one who cannot use it | |
| 29. | fóo a bvəy moo mbvənjàn | to fly without a sense of direction like a group of butterfly. | to lack a sense of focus or direction | need for goals |
| 30. | fóo a fəy moo ŋgo' yeé jàn | to be like termites on a mound of faeces | to constitute useless abundance | taboo abundance |
| 31. | fóo bùr ŋgi' e ndəə | to break and open a pumpkin with the knee | to perform a feat | Courage |
| 32. | fóo tsəm nyar e tíyí | to kill a buffalo with a stone | to perform a feat | |

The Nso' people value progress both at the individual and collective level. They do not see why any form of obstacle should be placed on their way. That is why their images of progress are plants that bloom – pumpkin and foliage. It is worth noting that these images are often used in the subjunctive, which reflects the innermost longings of those speaking “May he flourish like pumpkin”, “May they flourish like foliage.” Yet, the poignancy of these deep wishes only becomes obvious to those who often see pumpkin and foliage in their environment and have come to internalize, perhaps unconsciously, some information about the nature and behaviour of these plants. For the listener who does not have this information, she/he is little or less affected by the idiom. Thus, the language loses some of its communication potential and possibilities for people of this second category. Worse still, since they are not moved by the images they were intended to see, they continue to trifle with progress on whose capital importance the idiom harps.

As regards the third and the fourth idioms, which deal with ingratitude, they clearly mirror, not only the inadmissibility, but also, the foolishness of such attitudes. In fact, to eat an animal and laugh at the horns means one does not realize that these horns are offshoots of the flesh, which put together, give the symmetry, which constitutes beauty.

The fifth and sixth idioms castigate the absence of a sense of discernment in some supposedly mature people who cannot distinguish between basics and trivialities. The idioms compare such a mentally blind person to a

man who, during the process of winnowing, throws away the grain and retains the chaffs or to the blind society that cannot see the similarity between fig wood and “Sem” wood, that is, between bad ruler and his/her cohort. This ties with Barthes [10, 11] in the third level of analysis where cultural signifiers connotes ideology.

Furthermore, Nso’ culture cherishes perseverance as a positive quality of human character that can enable a person to achieve much. The Nso’ society, therefore, does not promote the kind of rash action that often causes people to lose much. Thus, idiom seven compares the patient man to the wise man who ignores the feaces nearby in order to catch his termites. This ties in with the English culture which intimations that “the patient dog eats the fattest bone”. This echoes the same thought in other African societies, which also cherish patient as a social value in a manner that recalls what Wodak and associates call intertextuality [13, 14, 12]. However, one needs to have termites in one’s environment to get the full import of this idiom.

Idioms eight and nine stress the need for functional beauty. Charity begins at home, they say. Nso’ culture condemns the person who cannot effectively play his role in his society, yet pretends that he can be useful elsewhere. For the person who knows nothing about garden eggs and the fact that the garden eggplants by the roadside often feed passers-by and more than the owner of the farm, in a culture that permits hungry passers-by to harvest at will, cannot fully grasp the meaning of this idiom. Again, in a culture where female beauty lies in fertility and not in physical appearance, one who knows what the traditional saucers made out of a calabash looks like and how it is supposed to serve fufu^a, stands better chances of fully understanding the eighth idiom. Therefore, language as Wodak and associates argue is intrinsically links to culture ([13, 14, 15, 12].

Idioms ten and eleven condemn unnecessary pride that causes people to become impostors. Yet, someone who has never seen a beetle to appreciate the position of its wings and the various colours on its body will not fully grasp this idea of unnecessary flamboyance. The Nso’ culture’s condemnation of this vice is thus lost to such a person; for the language has lost some of its communication potential due to the absence of beetles from his environment.

Further still, Nso’ people condemn lack of caution in speech and often frowns at it as a sought of nuisance. To show its condemnation of such behaviour, Nso’ culture compares them to weaverbirds and crickets as seen in idiom twelve. One needs to know how these birds and insects manifest in one’s environment in order to fully understand the people’s thought. Knowing the behaviour of the weaverbirds or crickets is having enough knowledge about the signifiers to understand the conventional meaning link to them [17].

The Nso’ person who knows the difference between leopards and civet cats and who knows something about traditional trapping listens to idioms fourteen and fifteen with a lot of emotion. They come to him with the force of history. They both condemn the misuse of power, whereby legitimizing institutions refuse to award prizes to deserving persons because they come from unwanted families, clannish or political backgrounds. This is a terrible practice that is psychologically shocking and jars meaning for the victimized who ends up wondering, which animal is really a leopard, and which one a civet cat or who really owns a trap; the one who sets it or the one who comes from noble birth and is considered worthy of brave deeds.

^a **Fufu** is a dish made of corn flour.

Adventurism and foolhardiness are vices fully condemned by the Nso' society. Idioms sixteen and seventeen mirror these well when they compare these to attempting to catch a snake from its hole with bare hands or teasing bees. However, one needs to know the behaviour of snakes and bees in order to understand these idioms.

Idiom eighteen condemns greed by looking at the sunbird from the point of view of a hunter who wants to shoot it. This bird displays a lot of cleverness, but always ends up being shot. Idioms nineteen and twenty condemn headiness by referring to the behaviour of grasshoppers and one needs to have these insects in one's environment in order to fully understand the two idioms.

Furthermore, alienation is a trying condition that every human being dreads and the Nso' society has two powerful idioms that convey this desperate condition. The idioms compare the alienated person to an earthworm wriggling in the sun or a tadpole twisting and turning outside water. One needs to have seen earthworm and tadpoles in these conditions in order to fully grasp the impact of idioms twenty-one and twenty-two.

The next four idioms (twenty-three, twenty-four, twenty-five and twenty-six) harp on the condition of the intellectual who is often lonely because he lives ahead of his time or because he is a deviant from the mainstream modes of thought. Often, he is compared to the clock bird, which in Nso' folklore, is the only bird that successfully escaped the deadly snare of the trickster anteater (*wànyétó*). These idioms vividly convey the condition of the intellectual in society, and only to those who have an in-depth knowledge about this bird can fully comprehend these idioms. This also recalls Kristeva; Wodak and associates who stress on importance of intertextuality in communication [14, 13, 12].

Idioms twenty-seven and twenty-eight show that one of the important values that Nso' culture promotes is competence. Indeed, it is as good for a dry tree to fall in front of a good hewer as it is bad for *egusi*^b to do well in the farm of the toothless. Therefore, competence is lauded and incompetence condemned for those language speakers who are versed with this environmental menu. This helps to convey social values at level three of connotation [10, 11]. Idioms twenty-nine and thirty stress the need for goals in life and condemn taboo abundance respectively. Indeed, given the beauty of butterflies, for them to fly without any sense of direction is tragic. This is often the situation of people in their teens, especially the female in Nso'. It becomes doubly tragic when it is a whole society with a lot of human potential that lacks a sense of direction. One needs to see butterflies in this confused display to understand the idiom.

For termites to abound on a mound of feces is equally sad indeed. For these are riches that according to the Nso' society cannot be put into use – this is taboo abundance. This kind of reference to a group of prostitutes or to wealth from evil sources are very telling indeed to those whose environment can elucidate the content of the idiom.

The last two idioms commend outstanding courage that enables individuals in society to perform positive feats like the legendary suitor who broke a pod of pumpkin with his knee or the courageous hunter who killed a

^b **Egusi** is the name for the protein-rich seeds of certain cucurbitaceous plants (squash, melon, gourd), which after being dried and ground are used as a major ingredient in West African cuisine.

buffalo with a stone – that is, with little means. This implicitly condemns the despair of those who think that they cannot forge on in society simply because they have little means. These implications can only be obvious to those whose natural environments are still intact.

1.4. Summary findings and contributions

1.4.1. Summary findings

From the above analysis, we arrive at the following findings:

1. That degradation in environment reduces the communication potential of language both at the denotative and connotative levels.
2. That geographical environment is an important extra-linguistic variable in linguistic studies.
3. That language is intrinsically linked to culture and, at certain levels of signifying, cannot be separated from it.

1.4.2. Contributions

By way to contribution to knowledge, this paper stresses on this hitherto neglected aspect of linguistic studies – that is, the relevance of geographical environment in the generation of meaning and effective communication in language.

It also points out the possibility of game and forest reserves acting not only as touristic sites but also as language laboratories.

1.5. Conclusion

In sum, it would be necessary to re-iterate two things. First, that inasmuch as environmental degradation has negative geographical implications, it also has Linguistics and cultural effects. Thus, game reserves and forest reserves should not only be used as touristic sites, but also as language, and cultural laboratories.

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