

3L International Summer School 2009 - SOAS London

Documenting “special” vocabulary

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Course outline

A. Lecturers

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B. Subject aims and objectives

The lexical stock of a language can be subdivided into semantic domains, each of these being closely related to one or more sociocultural practices. Research on special vocabularies (SV), such as those denoting flora, fauna, kinship, illness, colours, topography and technology, is particularly useful for linguists and anthropologists, and for historians as well. It often reveals many aspects of the cultural heritage shared by the members of a linguistic community and inevitably raises a number of important theoretical issues related e.g. to the “nature-nurture” and the “linguistic determinism” debates. For historical linguists, the study of SV offers interesting perspectives for differentiating between inherited (ancient) traits and innovations, but also for detecting traces of contact between communities and elaborating theories about migration patterns and primitive homelands. For both practical and theoretical lexicographers, a thorough knowledge of the SVs of a language is essential both for compiling, writing and editing of a dictionary of the language, and for analyzing and describing the semantic, syntagmatic and paradigmatic, relationships within its lexical stock.

Furthermore, the documentation of SV in its cultural context is an important aspect of the documentation of a language. SV reflects the ongoing interaction between a group of people and its natural and sociocultural environment and contains precious information about the cultural knowledge and skills the group has acquired over time (i.a. perception, conceptualization, folk categorization), most of which will disappear when its language dies.

The aim of this course on SV is (1) to give several examples of a contextualized descriptive and comparative approach to the documentation of SVs (in particular ethnobiology, games (cricket!), technology) taken from languages spoken in different parts of the world, (2) to discuss important methodological and theoretical issues, and (3) to present a variety of applications, with documentaries as teaching support.

C. Textbooks

No specific textbook will be used for this course. Handouts and short excerpts of certain textbooks (in pdf form) will be made available during the course. Nevertheless, it is strongly recommended to have a copy of Wierzbicka (1996) as the lecturer will be frequently referring to it (also see hereafter; Preliminary Reading and Syllabus).

D. Preliminary reading

Appadurai, D. A. (1996). *Modernity at large, Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. University of Minnesota Press. [In particular, chapter IV.]

Cruse, D. A. (1986). *Lexical Semantics*. Cambridge Textbooks in Linguistics. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Foley, William A. (1997). *Anthropological Linguistics, an Introduction*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers. [In particular, chapters 5, 6 and 7 (search for innate cognitive constraints).]

Haudricourt, André G. (1986). *La technologie, une science humaine*. Paris: EHESS Press.

Wierzbicka, Anna (1996). *Semantics, Primes and Universals*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. [In particular, section II of the book: Lexical Semantics (chapters 8-12), but also chapter 4 (Prototypes and Invariants).]

Lévi-Strauss, Claude (1962). *La pensée sauvage*. Paris: Plon. [In particular, chapters V and VII about categorizing and naming people, flora and fauna.]

E. Syllabus

Class	Topic	Reading
1	What is SV and why should we document it? (Pr. Van der Veen)	Handout 1; also Wierzbicka (1996): chapter 12 (<i>Ethnobiology</i>)
2	Methodological and theoretical issues (Pr. Van der Veen)	Handout 2; also Wierzbicka (1996): chapter 8 (<i>Definitions</i>) and Cruse: chapter 1 (<i>Contextual approach</i>)
3	Applications 1: Cultural lexicon of games in different contexts (Pr. Mayer)	Documentary 1: <i>Cricket in context - Wallis Island, Trobriand Islands, India and England</i>
4	Applications 2: Cultural lexicon of technologies (clothing) (Pr. Mayer)	Documentary 2: <i>Tapa at Wallis Island and barkcloth in Gabon</i>

1. Preliminaries

1.1 Instructors and their assistants

- Who is who?
- Who is doing what?
 - Pr. Mayer has a position as cultural anthropologist at the “Université Omar Bongo” of Libreville (Gabon). He also teaches courses at the University of Lyon, on a regular basis.
 - Author of an important book on kinship relations in the Gabonese context: *La famille gabonaise*.
 - Pr. Van der Veen has a position at the University of Lyon (Lyon 2) as a linguist working on the Bantu language of Gabon (language description, language documentation, synchronic classification, historical and comparative linguistics, “special” vocabulary, lexicography).
 - Scientific coordinator of a multidisciplinary project on the vocabulary of physical and mental disorders from several Bantu languages of west-central Africa.
 - Scientific coordinator of multidisciplinary research on two other types of special lexicon: medical plants (pharmacopea) and animal names as used in proverbial expressions.
 - Co-author of a Geviya-French dictionary comprising over 6,000 entries. [Geviya is a severely endangered Bantu language (B301) spoken in Gabon (only 10 fluent speakers left?).] This dictionary, which was published in 2002, is based on a 1,300 pages manuscript elaborated by one of the members of this speech community.

- Pascale Paulin is a PhD student who currently prepares her PhD defence under Pr. Van der Veen's supervision (December 2009). She is working on the language and the culture of the Baka people of Gabon.
- Brigitte Meuyo is, among many other things, data base manager, at the UOB.

1.2 Aims and objectives

- Not a course on Lexicography, even if the subject is very closely related to this discipline. [Neither Pr. Mayer nor Pr. Van der Veen are specialists of theoretical lexicography.]
- Not a course on Lexical Semantics either, even if this discipline is essential for the study of the lexicon, its use and its internal structure as an essential part of a language.
- Much more a presentation of methodological, theoretical and practical aspects of the documentation of special vocabulary (SV). In a nutshell: WHY document SV and HOW to do it (or how NOT to do it!).
- As a consequence, this subject will be examined from the perspective of the researcher involved in language documentation, giving priority to pragmatic considerations, but without neglecting theoretical issues. Both Pr. Mayer, as a cultural anthropologist, and Pr. Van der Veen, as a descriptive linguist, quite extensively draw on their field experience and their practical, methodological experience. While doing so, they hope they may help the student avoiding the mistakes they may have made in previous studies.

1.3 Textbook, preliminary and additional readings

- The readings indicated in the course outline are no easy readings. It's fairly "tough stuff", in most cases, necessitating considerable effort.
- A quick look at the list of these readings and some comments.
- Add Wierzbicka (1997): *Understanding cultures through their key words. English, Russian, Polish, German, and Japanese*, New York/Oxford: OUP. [Chapters 1 (= Introduction) and 5 are online available on the Blackboard facility.]
 - A title that characterizes one of the major aspects we will be interested in.
- Also available on the Blackboard facility: Ungerer and Schmid (1996: chap. 2) and Wierzbicka (1996: chap. 12). These excerpts are useful complements to the first part of this course.
- Other useful textbook: Croft W. and Cruse D. A. (2004), *Cognitive Linguistics*, Cambridge Textbooks in Linguistics Series, Cambridge, CUP. [In particular, Part II Cognitive approaches to lexical semantics: Chapter 5-8.]
- Readings suggested by Pr. Mayer, some of which are available online.

1.4 Syllabus: two complementary parts

- First part (Pr. Van der Veen, Pascale Paulin): introductory questions, followed by methodological and theoretical issues. Discussion.
- Second part (Pr. Mayer, Brigitte Meugo): applications; two extensive, comprehensive examples (case studies): (1) games and (2) clothing. Discussion.

1.5 Students participating in the course

- Who is who? And from where?
- Why interested in the documentation of special vocabulary?
- Any experience(s)? Of what kind? Related to which languages?
- Place for questions, remarks and discussion!

2. Introductory questions

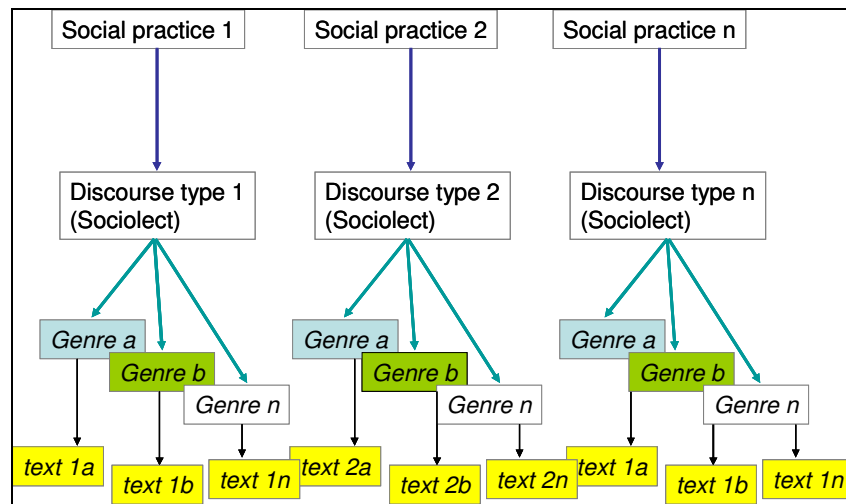
2.1 What is special vocabulary (SV)?

Is there such a thing as SV? Although important, this is far from being an easy question. How do we define 'special'? What makes special 'special'?

- ✓ Are 'special' the things we do not know. Are 'special' things by which we are impressed, startled. Are 'special' the things we are interested in as researchers. Are 'special' the things that are not ordinary.
- ✓ And, here we are, back to square one: how do we define 'ordinary'? ☺

Theoretically, from a strict structuralist point of view, *ALL vocabulary is special*. We should always stay aware of this. According to François Rastier, a French scholar and specialist of both Lexical Semantics and Artificial Intelligence, the meaning of lexical units is determined, to a considerable extent, by the genre and the discourse type in which these units occur. [The uniqueness of each individual system. The differential paradigm.]

- ✓ A *genre* is part of a discourse type, which, in its turn, belongs to a specific sociocultural practice of a particular speech community. Specific lexical traits may contribute to the definition of specific linguistic genres, in addition to structural and other elements, of course.



The OVERALL/GLOBAL determining the LOCAL.

(Several encompassing spheres, linguistic and non linguistic.)

Examples of discourse: *medical, political, economic, religious, judicial*, etc.

Example: Participating in a scientific conference > academic discourse > plenary conference or paper or poster, etc.

Some examples of contextually, situation determined meanings:

- (1) “Canard” = ‘duck’. Colloquial talk in French bistros (or comparable situations): *‘(faire) un canard’* = ‘to dunk a sugar lump into liqueur or coffee’; as opposed to (2) Ordinary (colloquial) conversation: *‘canard’* = ‘newspaper’ with a pejorative sense (following the semantic path ‘shrill sound’/‘false note’ > ‘false rumour spread in the press’). Cf. The *“Canard enchaîné”* (a well-known satirical weekly in France).
- French *‘honorable’*: (1) Positive sense in many discourse types: “faire amende honorable”, economic discourse (highest ranking) (cf. ‘He’s the most honorable man I know!’); whereas (2) Negative sense: “Mention honorable” in the French academic discourse (the worst thing that can happen to a candidate at the end of his/her PhD defense: the lowest ranking or distinction one can get). [Two different **taxemes**.]
- French *‘méchante cravate’*: (1) Present-day high school student: a meliorative sense; whereas (2) Novel by Balzac: a pejorative sense.
- French *‘fort’*: ‘un homme fort’ ☞ /power/, /performance/, /emotional state/; whereas ‘une femme forte’ ☞ /size/. [The context activates certain features.]

A frequently-made distinction such as the one between “**core**” (also “**basic**”) and “**non-core**” (also “**special**”) vocabulary is quite misleading, especially when “core” is taken as synonymous with “culturally neutral”. This is a fallacy. One may well consider, with Wierzbicka and others, that there are conceptual/semantic primitives (i.e. universal

concepts), but, generally speaking, vocabulary is never culturally neutral. All vocabulary, even the most “basic one”, is more or less culturally marked.

- Example: **word lists** such as the ones used for elicitation in the field, e.g. the well-known *Swadesh* list(s). These lists are supposed to be composed of basic vocabulary, supposedly not culture-specific and therefore more resistant to borrowing.

What about “**frequency of use**”? Is ‘special’ synonymous with ‘less frequent’ or ‘rare’? This is not a valid criterion either. Hunter-gatherers, for instance, will be talking a lot about animals and plants, using a considerable amount of “technical” terms, while people who do not practise hunter-gathering will not. The same holds, for example, for doctors, in a medical context, as opposed to people who are not familiar with medicine and its special lexicon, or even as opposed to doctors in, let’s say, their family.

Similar remarks can be made if we define ‘special’ in terms of ‘**not everyday**’.

Special vocabulary is often associated with technological specialization, with specific practices or with groups of specialists, and thus becomes synonymous with **jargon**. These connections may certainly be useful and, in many, many cases, relevant. However, they are based on a certain perception of the world around us (depend on one’s point of view), based on who one is, on what one’s position is within his/her community, and on what kind or kinds of linguistic interactions one is frequently involved in.

- Example 1: **hunter-gatherers** are familiar with the surrounding flora and fauna. As a matter of fact, the vocabulary related to these domains is very rich in such groups, which reflects the extensive, long-standing interaction between these populations with their environment. Nobody would really hesitate to call this vocabulary special, except for the hunter-gatherers themselves most probably.
- Example 2 (extreme, idiosyncratic): “Me, speaking to my dog”. Mixture of French and Dutch, breaking all rules of grammatical consistency of both languages. Incomprehensible for any outsider, but completely normal for me (and my dog!). ☺

In some cases, however, everybody would agree to talk about SV. For example, in the case of the specific, often secret, language varieties used by initiates.



What makes vocabulary (form and meaning) “special” are the SEMANTIC DOMAINS to which its items belong; domains which, in their turn, rely on specific sociocultural practices (or routines). Each member of a speech community can be involved in many different practices (switching roles), and is supposed to have sufficient mastery, passive and/or active, of

the vocabulary which is associated with them. *Specific lexical items may have or may not have a privileged relationship with a given domain.*

As a matter of fact, ALL types of lexicon can be qualified as “special” and present a particular interest for language study and language documentation. And, as a consequence, the title of the present course could simply be “Documenting vocabulary”!



Now, if we want to study SV **in a principled manner**, we need to be constantly aware of this link between vocabulary and specific practices and, as a consequence, should try to get the best possible picture of these cultural practices and the conceptual domains that result from them. This means making an inventory of linguistic genres and discourse types, which is a rather time-consuming activity, in most cases.

Of course, one may prefer a less sophisticated approach. One may want to study, for example, animal names, or a subset of this lexical domain, by a list in combination with pictures and other stimuli. Such a basic “list approach” will yield results, and these results may in many cases be sufficient to the extent that they match a specific scientific objective: e.g. a comparison between languages in order to identify possible loans or to determine shared lexical heritage or to work out reconstructions.

- Major shortcoming: it conceals most of the cultural reality.
- Examples: the initial stage of the project on the vocabulary of illnesses and disease, or Mougiamama-Daouda’s study of fish and bird names in the languages of Gabon¹.

We should keep in mind that when we are documenting lesser-known or unknown languages, this approach is the **only realistic one**, possibly with some minor adjustments, refinements, as indicated hereafter.

As a matter of fact this very basic “list approach” can be enhanced by collecting more detailed **cultural information** about the entities examined: the way they are locally conceived of and/or categorized. Similar studies can produce interesting results, as they introduce a cultural dimension.

- Examples: in-depth enquiries about the perception of disease and illness, Mougiamama-Daouda’s enquiries among Bantu-speaking hunters, Van der Veen’s study (forthcoming) of mammal names in Geviya proverbs (features highlighted, especially through the collocations).

¹ Patrick Mougiamama-Daouda is a Gabonese linguist working on the lexicon of flora and fauna in various languages of Gabon.



However, if we want to achieve a better understanding of the numerous cultural specificities of a given speech community, we need to adopt a **much more thorough approach**, and study vocabulary from within (an ‘emic approach’) by collecting lots of text material (i.e. vocabulary in context). The assistance of cultural anthropologists can be most useful and valuable here, as they usually have good knowledge of the cultural practices of the groups among which they have been working.

- ✓ If no anthropologists are available, an initial survey is necessary in order to estimate as accurately as possible the importance (extent, scope) of each practice within the specific ethnolinguistic community.
- ✓ **What is culture?** *Culture consists of the things people do to communicate in ongoing transgenerational histories of social interaction. Through its inculcation in the habitus it becomes embodied in the self and reproduces itself in future action. In this sense a human being is a thoroughly encultured being; culture makes itself visible in all aspects of existence.* (Definition taken from Foley 1997).

In conclusion, note that the first type of approach (“list approach”) is **exogenous** and **non-situated**: less complex, less expensive, less time-consuming, but necessarily imposing an exterior grid; whereas the second type of approach is **endogenous** and **situated**: much more complex, much more expensive and time-consuming and necessitating sufficient knowledge of both the language and the culture.

To my opinion, “**sociocultural practice**” is THE key expression here, encompassing all others notions.

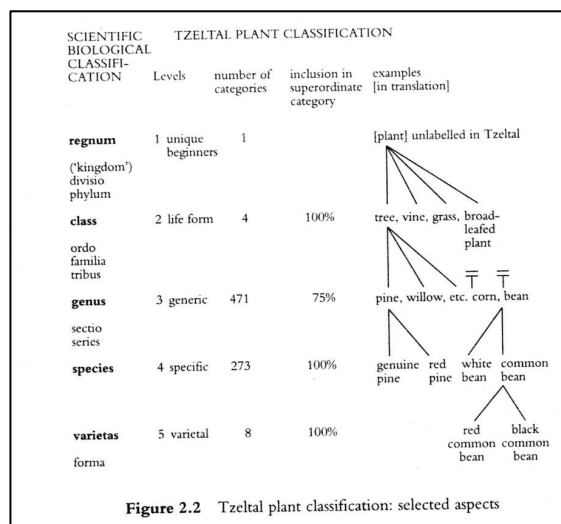
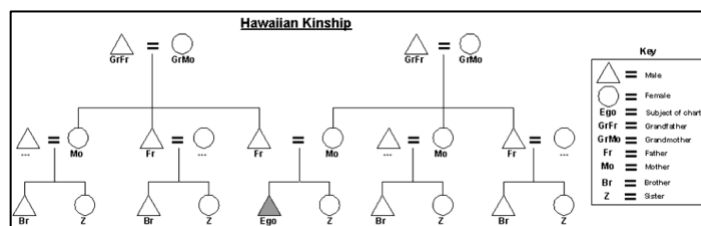
- ✓ Some practices are frequently performed within a society, others less.
- ✓ Some practices may be performed by all members, others by just a few of them having special status (‘specialists’, ‘professionals’, ‘experts’ or ‘initiates’).
- ✓ Some practices are performed on certain occasions only, others at any time, without restriction.



2.2 Best studied terminologies

Among the most frequently (and perhaps also best) studied terminologies, one finds kinship terminology (N.B. a study that founded the field of cultural anthropology, cf. Godelier 2004²), colour terminology, ethnobiological terminology (animals and plants; natural kinds), terminology of space and time distinctions, furniture terminology.

² Godelier M. (2004). *Métamorphoses de la parenté*. Paris : Fayard.



Excerpt from Ungerer *et al.* (1996): page 64 (section 2.1.2).

Figure established on the basis of Berlin, Breedlove and Raven (1973).

For comparison: the scientific classification of plants attests 13 major level of categorization.

Numerous studies concern the realm of **living kinds**. This certainly is part of culture, but there are so many other domains! Generally the domain(s) is/are chosen by the researcher. Anthropologists have done a considerable amount of work on specific domains less visible from the outside, e.g. initiation, healing sessions, games. However, in-depth linguistic studies are necessary!

2.3 Why document special vocabulary?

Some answers to this important question have already emerged in what has been said previously. What follows here, is a comprehensive overview of **reasons and objectives** that may motivate or justify our research and documentation activities. Bruce Cole’s³ claim (2008) may summarize the essential issue, be it in a very schematic way: “*Language is the DNA of a culture.*”

- **The documentation of endangered languages and cultures...**
 - Threatened cultural knowledge (environment, medicine, technology, etc.).
 - Linguistic knowledge and encyclopaedic knowledge. (Only the first kind is *lexically* encoded.)

³ Bruce Cole is chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH, USA). See, for instance: www.kumeyaay.com/2008/05/save-a-language-and-save-a-culture/.

- ‘*A library that burns...*’ (A well-known African adage, dictum.)
- Revitalisation activities, in particular the creation of new terminology in line with the resources of the language (lexicon, morphology, etc.) and the culture.
- **An array of possible APPLIED linguistic and anthropological studies...**
 - **Anthropological linguistics**
 - Language as an expression of sociocultural organization, of being-in-the-world; cultural references. [Linguistic culturology.]
 - Cf. Wierzbicka (1997): *Understanding cultures through their key words*.
 - **E. Sapir (1949):** “*Language [is] a symbolic guide to culture. Vocabulary is a very sensitive index of the culture of a people. [L]inguistics is of strategic importance for the methodology of social science.*”
 - Vocabulary is closely linked (via genre and discourse type) to socio-cultural practices (Rastier 1991, 1994).
 - Lexicon and the interaction of a community with its natural and/or sociocultural environment.
 - E.g. Pascale’s study of Baka physical disorders, flora and fauna.
 - Study of **interculturality**. Cf. The example of Wierzbicka (1997). Also Wierzbicka (1996).
 - **Cognitive linguistics and cognitive anthropology:** disciplines aiming at a better understanding of human conceptualization and categorization (organizing principles, universals, influence of cultural frames, etc.). Language can allow us –better than anything else– to discover how knowledge is represented and organized in the human mind.
 - Knowledge is open-ended. Is it necessary to draw a distinction between “**linguistic knowledge**” and “**non-linguistic knowledge**” (“dictionary” vs. “encyclopaedia” (U. Eco); “meaning” vs. “knowledge”)? Cf. Wierzbicka (1996: chap. 11).
 - **Perception and conceptualization** (also see *Lexical semantics* hereafter): are there universal concepts, in addition to culturally-specific concepts? What is the impact of culture? Culturally-determined worldviews = folk theories about the world (extent of overlap, extent of variation, extent of specificity).

- **Categorization** (also see *Lexical semantics* hereafter): always hierarchical classifications? Thorough linguistic evidence for such classifications? Relationship between categorization tests and the criteria used to carry out the task. (The fallacy of the one-and-only true and once-for-all categorization.)
- More or less substantial contributions to the complex ongoing ‘**Linguistic Determination**’ debate!
 - Does our language determine the way we think (conceptualization, categorization)? If so, to what extent?⁴ [Cf. The phonology (sounds structures) of our own language influences our perception of sounds of other languages (phonological filter). Language acquisition influences sound perception, so why not semantic perception?]
 - N.B. Relativity concerns “CONCEPTS” (form of thought) as opposed to “**THINKING**” (a neurological, dynamic, universal process, with inferential mechanisms).
- **Lexical semantics (LS):**
 - It should be noted that there is a considerable amount of **overlap** between Cognitive linguistics (approach to LS) and LS: topics related to conceptualization and categorization, to translatability, etc.
 - Nature of meaning: discrete or vague (‘fuzzy boundaries’)?
 - Semantic features: nature, function, status, typology (inherent, affe-
rent).
 - Role of ‘prototype’ and ‘family resemblance’⁵ (cf. Ungerer *et al.* 1996; Wierzbicka 1996 for a critical approach).
 - Semantic relations among lexical units (hierarchical, non hierarchical).
 - Semantic domains and their internal organization.
 - Naming principles: principles governing the creation of lexical units.
 - Example: study of Eviya plants used for medical purposes. Confirmation of strong tendency: morphologically simple forms for basic level terms vs. compounds at the subordinate level.

⁴ Foley (1997: 179): “If we live out our lives largely in mutual linguistic coupling, the systems within language must be powerfully compelling for our understanding.”

⁵ Wittgenstein’s doctrine of “family resemblances” does not encourage large-scale studies of the lexicon. It assumes that meanings have no clear boundaries and that they are mutually related by vague and elusive family resemblances. No precise definitions are possible. (Wierzbicka 1996: chap. 8).

- The role of models and metaphors in construing sensible experience (conceptualizations by means of metaphors drawn from embodied practices). [See Foley (1997), chap. 9.]
 - Overall, the lexical semantics of minor languages has been much less extensively studied than the LS of major languages. Much remains to be studied and, as a consequence, discovered.
- **Lexicography:** a good dictionary incorporates, in addition to the definitions of the words of the language, relevant information about the **semantic domains** and the **discourse types** in which the words may occur (issue of *polysemy*).
- **Historical and comparative linguistics:**
- Retrieving information from and about the past.
 - **Linguistic palaeontology** (theory of “Words and Things”⁶): working out hypotheses about proto-cultures (= shared cultural heritage).
 - Interesting perspective if used with the necessary caution.
 - Some delicate methodological problems: how to determine the primitive meaning (and/or polysemy) of a reconstructed term? No unambiguous rules for semantic change, as opposed to sound change.
 - Example 1: Cultural environment (habitat) and identity of the speakers of Proto-Bantu.
 - Habitat: heavy rainfall, rainforest and savannah, words for ‘elephant’, ‘hippopotamus’ and other mammals.
 - Lifestyle: rudimentary form of agriculture (words for ‘palm tree’, ‘yam’, ‘marrow’, ‘cultivate’, ‘plantation’, etc.), fishing (words for ‘hook’, ‘net’), hunting (words for ‘spear’, ‘arrow’, etc.), collecting (words for ‘fruit’, ‘mushroom’, etc.), some domesticated animals (words for ‘goat’, etc.), making of pottery (words for moulding).
 - Social and political organization: words for ‘chief’, ‘chief’s plot (of land)’, ‘clan’, ‘village’.
 - No words for iron metallurgy. [Introduced while the Bantu expansion was ongoing.]

⁶ In German: “Wörter und Sachen”.

- Example 2: Mouguiama-Daouda's work on the peopling of the Gabon area⁷.
 - Methodology for identifying loans (by means of virtual reconstruction, using regular and irregular sound correspondences).
- Indications about **migration paths, kinds of spread** (demic, cultural), etc.
- Indexes of **contact** (and diffusion) between languages and cultures (borrowing; substratum, adstratum, superstratum).
 - Examples of (perfectly integrated lexical items) from Geviya: /ʔe-pele/ 'plate', /ʔe-lasi/ 'glass', /bɔlu/ 'bowl', /sɔnɔ/ 'Sunday' (loans from English, impact of English trade and missionary activity during the 19th c. AD); also some loans from Portuguese (e.g. /pɔtɔ/ 'chicken pox' litt. 'Portuguese').

3. Methodological issues



The **ecological approach** to language is the **major framework for both methodology and analysis**: it is situated, dynamic, holistic and interactive. [Cf. Garner (2005): Language Ecology as Linguistic Theory. *"From an ecological perspective, language is not a rule-governed system, but a form of patterned behaviour arising from the needs of human sociality: communication, culture, and community."*]

Major goal here: **documentation**, not analysis (LS, lexicography), although it is virtually impossible to separate the two. The researcher(s) in charge of the documentation activities should be aware of the major theoretical issues and debates.

3.1 Before leaving for the field (or before starting to work with your consultant(s) wherever you are)

Once you made your choice, as for the kind of SV you want to document, extensive preparation and the creation of a solid network of collaborators from as many disciplines as possible are the main issues here.

- Thorough, careful **preparation**.
 - Get (at least some) specific theoretical and practical hands-on training.
 - Read as much as possible about the topic (publications about the kind of SV you are interested in, concerning as many language as possible).

⁷ Mouguiama-Daouda, P., (2005). Phonological Irregularities, Reconstruction and Cultural Vocabulary. The names of fish in the Bantu languages of the North-West (Gabon), *Diachronica*, 22:1, pp. 111-159.

- Get in touch with specialists, and talk and work with them. Ask them for advice (information about the culture, about the type of referents the vocabulary denotes).
- Learn how to make good-quality audio/video recordings or hire a professional.
- Etc.
- Teamwork: multidisciplinary research. Before going off to the field and, if possible, also in the field, for technical or scholarly assistance.
 - E.g. Study of ethno-botany or pharmacopaea (*materia medica*):
 - Linguist.
 - Cultural anthropologist.
 - (Ethno-)botanist.
 - Professional photographer or video-director (if necessary and if allowed). A good ethno-botanist will also be capable of doing this.

3.2 Choosing your consultants (if possible)

It will not always be possible to choose your consultants. In case it is possible, one should try to apply the most rigorous criteria. The choice of the consultants heavily relies on the kind of approach you privilege (exogenous “list” approach or more sophisticated, endogenous approach). Of course, consultants should also be chosen on the basis of availability and motivation.

- Choose local “experts” (not only in the technical or technological sense!).
 - People that are locally recognized as good speakers (although people’s real competence is sometimes overestimated by locals, in particular when the language is moribund).
 - People that are locally recognized as “being good at” the practice(s) you are interested in (people having received special training (“professionals”), people having special skills or good mastery, people used to be involved in specific practices, initiates, etc.).
 - E.g. Hunters, fishermen, agriculturalists, breeders, potters, iron workers, craftsmen, therapists (local medicine), musicians, story-tellers, judges, etc., etc.
 - People that are locally authorized to actually use the SV to investigate.
- Choose “experts” from different places within the geographic extension of the cultural area in order to evaluate the extent of variation (vocabulary, practices: degree of mastery).
 - E.g. “city” (*usually more innovative behaviour*) vs. “village” (*usually more conservative behaviour*). [Pascale Paulin. An example from Baka: young

members of the community living in the vicinity of their farming Fang neighbours and their fading knowledge of the terminology of fauna. The “elephant” case.]

- If possible, vary age, sex, social position, etc. of your consultants.
- Also choose some “non-specialists” in order to get complementary information:
 - “Outsiders”.
 - External point of view.
 - If possible, test their degree of knowledge of the language, with the help of other speakers, linguists, etc.

3.3 Kinds of material to collect

- Depends on kind(s) of information/topics one wants to study:
 - Lexical entities (naming, conceptualization, (folk) categorization).
 - Actions associated (conceptualization).
 - Qualities/features associated (conceptualization).
 - Lexical relations between entities (cf. Cruse 1986):
 - Cognitive synonymy (identity).
 - Hyponymy (inclusion).
 - Superordinates (generic terms).
 - Subordinates (hyponyms).
 - Compatibility (overlap).
 - Incompatibility (no members in common).
 - Lexical configurations (vertical and horizontal relations):
 - Hierarchies.
 - Taxonomies (tree-like structures built on the notion of “KIND of”). (Folk categorization and nature of folk taxonomy.)
 - Meronomies (partonomies, part-whole relations, tree-like structures built on the notion of “PART of”).
 - Also see Foley (1997: 125-6). Interesting quote (p. 126): “The Watam data suggests there may be much more language-specific relativity in partonomies of the *body-part domain* than some current strong advocates of universal principles underlying systems of ethno-anatomy would care to admit.”
 - Non-branching hierarchies.
 - Derived (from branching hierarchies).
 - E.g. (*top*) sentence – clause – phrase – word – morpheme (*bottom*). (Cruse 1986: 184)

- Non-derived.
 - Chains, grades, degrees (Cruse 1986: 184-195).
 - *Mound, hillock, hill, mountain*
 - *Mouse, dog, horse, elephant*
 - Proportional series (Cruse 1986: section 5.3).
 - Proportionally relations.
$$\frac{\text{mare} - \text{stallion}}{\text{ewe} - \text{ram}}$$
- Contextualized prototypes: the best exemplar for a given context.
- Linguistic material to collect:
 - **Words** (lexemes) and other lexical units.
 - In isolation.
 - In context (all possible kinds of (oral or written) texts: comments, proverbs, etc.).
 - Collocations in which the lexemes or lexical units occur.
 - Stories, anecdotes, proverbs, myths, etc., related to items of the SV.
 - Experience-based comments (from local experts).
 - If possible, any statistical data about the frequency of use (usually not available for poorly-studied languages).
 - Most importantly, but extremely time-consuming: **Texts!**
- Non-linguistic material to collect:
 - Everything that may facilitate a **scientific identification** (in case this is needed).
 - Pictures or video recordings of the referents.
 - Samples (e.g. herbier).
 - Etc.
 - It should be kept in mind that **both linguistic AND non-linguistic (encyclopaedic) knowledge** is interesting for science in general and for the studies of cultural traits in particular. However, only linguistic knowledge is encoded in the lexicon.
- Also refer to section 4 (“Examples and theoretical Issues”).

3.4 Running the enquiry and helpful tools

- Most appropriate type of elicitation: **semi-directive**.

- Work out overall strategy (stages to follow), and stay alert: words referring to objects, functions, taxonomy, etc.
- Teamwork! Concerted effort!
- Collect material in natural, stimulating **environments**.
 - It is easier to recall vocabulary in a culturally “natural” environment
 - Live with the people, earn their confidence, observe, ask questions.
 - You may have to get to places difficult to reach and/or stay in.
 - Some seasons may not be appropriate for the work envisaged!
- Questions to make the consultants **talk**.
 - Tests: intuitive judgments, pleonasm, dissonance, improbability, zeugma, entailment (Cruse); for further useful tests, see Wierzbicka (1996: chap. 12).
 - Reactive questions to obtain more detailed information.
 - Objective: get as much relevant terminology as possible. However, “category membership” of words and meanings CANNOT be established by asking consultants simple questions, or giving them simple sorting tasks. It can only be established by methodical semantic analysis.
- Helpful **tools** and **stimuli** for elicitation:
 - Pictures and/or drawings of objects or actions.
 - Caution: may be problematic...
 - Two-dimensional representations may seem obvious to us, but rules of transposition are learned! E.g. The size of the objects represented.
 - Pictures/drawings do not always show the (relevant) traits someone from another cultural tradition is looking for.
 - Good quality audio/video recordings (e.g. birdsongs, animal cries).
 - Physical objects (samples).
 - Colour charts (study of colour terms).
 - Caution: sometimes the colour is associated with the aspect or the shape of the object. In these cases, a colour chart is not satisfactory.
- Presence of scholarly **experts** can be desirable: scientific identification of plants, animals, diseases, kinship relations, etc.

3.5 Extensive audio/video recording

- Documenting cultural knowledge (propositional, procedural) that may soon get lost for ever!
 - Physical objects as well as artefacts.
 - Use/role of these objects and/or artefacts in the sociocultural context.
 - How people think and talk about them (conceptualization, categorization).

- Special notebook for writing down all relevant information:
 - Consultants/participants (name, sex, status, etc.), setting (time, place).
 - Kind(s) of linguistic data.
 - Metadata.
 - Also use a diary (things done, things to do, various observations) and keep it up-to-date.
- Make audio/video recordings in “natural”, stimulating (culturally appropriate) environment(s).
- Take good-quality pictures.
 - Ask advice from specialists!
 - Different objects may require different techniques!
 - Good-quality equipment is needed (lenses, flash, tripod)!
- Always ask the community’s authorization.
- Agree on future use and applications of the collected data: informed written consent is required from the individuals involved as well as from the community leaders.
- Agree on access to data: who, when, for what purposes, by what means? Any special conditions?

3.6 Things to mind, in particular

- Enquirers are **intruders!** The way we behave (in general, but also as researchers), the way we treat people and their cultural practices, are crucial. People are no mere objects.
- Not all topics can be easily studied. Role of **taboo** (taboo words, swearing):
 - Some types of special vocabulary are more (culturally) sensitive than others.
 - Sex, excretion and bodily effluvia (filth), religion, disease.
 - Avoidance strategies: euphemisms, metaphors, metonymies.
 - Socioculturally acceptable/adequate situations for use.
 - People may use avoidance strategies in case research is carrying on sensible topics.
- Potential **pitfalls**...
 - The kind of questions we ask, the kind of test(s) we submit people to, the way we designed our protocol, the way we “see” things. All these aspects can more or less strongly **bias the results we obtain.**
 - Imposing your way(s) of conceptualizing.
 - Imposing your way(s) of categorizing.
 - If the enquirer’s mother tongue serves as starting point, important concepts may remain unnoticed.

- Elicit while using a pre-established wordlist: avoid foreign vocabulary as stimuli as much as possible. The language of communication functions as an additional filter.
- When using interpreters, mind the extra linguistic and cultural filter!
 - Interpreters can be a barrier when they consider the members of the community as being inferior
 - Individuals born from mixed marriages may be useful here, as they know both cultures.

3.7 Analysis of the collected data

Are particularly concerned the fields of LS, Lexicography, and Culturology. In order to determine the meaning (*denotata*, *connotata*) of the terms:

- No direct questioning of consultants (implicit, tacit knowledge!).
- Researcher's intuition.
- Testing (disciplining intuitions): checking hypotheses.
- Distinguishing between linguistic and non-linguistic knowledge.
- Be aware of semantic filters: no neutral perception, always culturally-marked perception/conceptualization.
- Wierzbicka (1996) gives a good idea of the complexity of careful lexicographic research.

4. Examples and theoretical issues

4.1 Introduction

This section presents an overview of the major **theoretical issues** to keep in mind while documenting SV. These issues concern fields of study that have been strongly marked and/or oriented by research in *cognitive sciences* (being thoroughly rationalist and universalist; cf. for instance Berlin *et al.* 1992; universal basis of classification, no mediation of cultural practices, biological and psychological determinism⁸). This can be easily understood, as human knowledge management (representation and organization) is a central issue here, which is clearly a fundamental activity of the human mind. But what about *culture*⁹? What about *language*? These realities cannot be ignored.

- ✓ Cf. Foley (1997: 177): “*Knowledge as embodied action is always grounded in biology, but as encultured beings, we always live it in a cultural tradition, and hence, relativist understanding is crucial to its full interpretation.*”

⁸ For instance, according to Fodor *et al.* (1980), most if not all concepts are innate, “psychologically simple”, and undefinable. Many cognitive scientists have based their work on the idea that language simply maps a pre-given, knower independent world, and that language is a straightforward reflection of non-linguistic reality.

⁹ The word ‘culture’ does not figure as an entry in the index of *Cognitive Linguistics* (Croft and Cruse 2004)!



- ✓ Culture and language as sources of relativist understanding. Relativism (philosophical position) holds that sociocultural practices play a crucial and determinative role in cognition. (Foley (p. 169): “[It] claims that knowledge is obtained through culturally mediated conceptual schemes, i.e. historically situated, contingent frameworks of meaning and understanding (...).”)



Too often the linguistic approach of these important questions has been neglected and, as a consequence, also the careful study of linguistic signs (involving the paradigmatic and syntagmatic relations between these signs, the context(s) of use, the inherent and afferent linguistic content). This is unambiguously illustrated by publications as Ungerer *et al.* (1996). Too often languages are considered as simple word lists (nomenclatures, inventories of mere labels). In too many studies the “signified” (linguistic meaning; as opposed to the “signifier”) is considered to be synonymous with “concept”¹⁰.

Both approaches, psychological and linguistic, are valuable and should be considered as complementary, be it in theory. As a matter of fact, one may rightfully wonder, with **Rastier** (whose research is a plea for genuine Linguistic semantics and who insists on the mediating role of the semiotic world¹¹), whether the cognitive-based models are adequate for the description of the lexicon of languages.

For a less radical, although also genuine linguistically-oriented view, see **Wierzbicka** (1996: chap. 11): “*Language can allow us –better than anything else– to discover how knowledge is represented and organized in the human mind. (...) Encyclopaedic knowledge is cumulative and inexhaustible. By contrast, the meanings of words are discrete and finite. Words provide evidence for the existence of concepts. Lexical sets, sharing a similar semantic structure, provide evidence for the existence of cohesive conceptual wholes (fields). (...) The organization of cognitive domains is reflected in language, and above all in the structure of the lexicon.*”



The **study of culture** (culturology and interculturality) can gain important new insights from **Linguistic semantics**. The relevance of the latter is the most obvious in **vocabulary**, as the links between the life of a society and the lexicon of the language spoken by the members of this society are very close. The **lexicon** is the clearest possible guide to everyday cognition and to the patterning of everyday discourse. **Words** are a society’s most basic cultural artefacts and they offer the best key to a culture’s values and assumptions. **Concepts** (e.g. ‘freedom’, ‘democracy’) are shaped by culture and history, and are part of

¹⁰ Even in Wierzbicka’s work this distinction is not always clear.

¹¹ According to Rastier (1991) one does not go directly from a physical objectivity to a subjective representation. The semiotic forms the mediating instance between mental states (representational dimension) and cerebral states (biological dimension). Cf. Wierzbicka (1996: chap. 10): “*Whatever happens in the retina, and in the brain, it is not reflected directly in language. Language reflects what happens in the mind, not what happens in the brain; and our minds are shaped, partly, by our particular culture.*”

the shared heritage of the speakers of a given community. However, this does not necessarily mean that all concepts are culturally specific. Nevertheless, the ***outlook of a sociocultural community*** is clearly influenced by its stock of lexical tools. Distinctive habitual modes of thinking become entrenched in language, encapsulated in the vocabulary. (See Wierzbicka 1997: chap.1, section 3; ‘cultural elaboration and lexicon’.) The reality of both ***linguistic and cultural norms*** becomes obvious when they are violated (Ibid. section 7).

4.1.1 Study of folk concepts (vs. scientific/logical concepts)

The challenging task of defining the **content of folk concepts**. Note that “key concepts” of a given culture are part of these folk concepts. This concerns the domain of human conceptualization: universals and culture-specific traits. How do these relate to each other?

- Definition of ***linguistic meanings*** (the “signified”):
 - Can meaning be rigorously defined (Cf. Wierzbicka 1996) or are its boundaries fuzzy (cf. most cognitive linguists, adhering to Wittgenstein’s theory)?
 - Distinctive features (“Semes”, cf. Rastier)? Universal stock? (Very unlikely.) Or culture-specific? Or a mixture?
 - Importance of linguistic paradigms (Rastier: “taxemes”) and the position of a given lexeme within such a paradigm.
 - E.g. Dutch: ‘potatoes’ do not belong to the linguistic paradigm (taxeme) of vegetables. Potatoes are used as garnish for vegetables. As a consequence it is part of the taxeme of types of garnish.
 - Unique and culture-specific configurations of universal primitive concepts (Indefinables, Semantic Invariants, Semantic Primitives)? (Cf. Wierzbicka 1996.)
 - Linguistic meanings = folk knowledge *encapsulated* in the lexicon of a language, language-related folk knowledge.
 - Mel’čuk (1981): “*Not only every language, but every lexeme of a language, is an entire world in itself.*”
 - Folk (everyday) knowledge vs. scientific knowledge.
 - Role of “prototype”: theoretical or merely methodological status? What kind of approach? Prototypical? Semantic primes and universals? A fruitful combination of both approaches (cf. Wierzbicka 1996, chap. 4)?
 - Polysemy should always be taken into account. (Wierzbicka 1996, chap. 8). A word usually has several senses, which have to be carefully separated and studied separately. Study real language use and not entities that have been artificially separated from their situational and textual context.

4.1.2 Study of folk categorization (vs. scientific classification)

This study concerns the domain of **human categorization**: universals and culturally-specific traits. How do these relate to each other?

- Thorough **linguistic** evidence for the taxonomic organization or just an *ad hoc* construction?
 - Objects and lexical units may be classified in many different ways! Objects and words do not belong to the same realm (although objects may also be used as signs)!
 - Classification tasks may be biased by the experimental protocol and related issues (the nature of the questions asked, the way the questions are asked, the relationship between researcher and consultant) (see above-mentioned pitfalls, section 3.6).
 - What is/are the feature(s) that found the categories (paradigms)? How do these features relate to the cultural setting?
 - Is the categorization your consultant proposes idiosyncratic or commonly accepted? Is it linguistically grounded, lexically encoded?
 - Types of linguistic evidence to take into account (Wierzbicka 1996: chap. 11 and 12, underlining the necessity of linguistic tests based on methodical examination of usage and on systematic examination of lexical and grammatical evidence):
 - Ways of referring: e.g. “that tree” while referring to a ‘rose’.
 - Grammatical congruity: words should belong to the same grammatical category.
 - Morphological structure: simple, complex (compounds, associative constructions, etc.).
 - Phraseological evidence: common sayings, proverbial expressions.
 - E.g. Word for “goat” in Geviya: [This noun also refers to species of banana tree which has small bananas with a dark green skin. The lexeme has been reconstructed for Proto-Bantu.] Animal quoted in 10 different proverbs: 140-149. Are highlighted the facts that: one does not see its perspiration (140), it carries (or may carry) a bell (141), its smell is very strong (142), it manages to crush very easily the nuts of the palm tree (143), its head is less eaten than its other parts (144), its numerous droppings allow to follow its trail (145), it is difficult to catch (146), its perspicacity when confronted with death (147), its fat, eaten warmed up (148), its extreme frailty when face-to-face with a panther (149).
 - Lexical evidence: derived words, morphologically-related words (compounds), innovative uses of a word, semantically-related lexical evidence.
 - Conventional metaphors.

- Literature and children rhymes.
- Is the classification of a taxonomic nature (hierarchical organisation, inclusion)?
 - See, for instance, Foley 1997: 112-125. Foley (1997: 124-5): “Recent work (...) strongly argues against taxonomic organizations (...) in any area besides ethnobiology. This claims that there are no true inclusive “supercategories” like *furniture* or *cutlery*. A chair is not a kind of *furniture*, nor a knife a kind of *cutlery*.”
 - The issue of **domain specificity** in cognitive science. Are there domain-specific cognitive universals? Principles that apply in one or some domains but not in others?
 - E.g. Folk biology (domain of “living kinds”): Is hierarchical ranking unique to the domain of living kinds? (Atran 1990)
 - A certainty: Not all subparts of the lexicon of a given language are hierarchically structured.
 - Structure of the lexicon and its subparts: need of in-depth methodical large-scale studies.
- Type of taxonomy? (KIND of, PART of, other?)
- How does the categorization of a given domain in language A relate to the categorization of the same domain in language B?
 - Considerable cross-linguistic differences!
- Number of levels? Nature of these levels? See the example in Appendix 1 (Tzeltal plant classification).
 - Theoretical and practical problems.
- Folk taxonomies often fall short of the ideal. Gaps (i.e. unlabelled categories within a taxonomy). Sometimes one may find clear linguistic evidence (by means of tests) for the existence of the unlabelled categories. In these cases, the gaps are called “covert categories”.
- **Generic level** (Ungerer *et al.* 1996: basic level, basic level categories), superordinate levels, subordinate levels:
 - Generic level (Cruse 1986: 146):
 - “The most significant level of a taxonomy from the point of view of the speakers of a language.”
 - “The level of the ordinary everyday names for things and creatures: *cat, carnation, oak, apple, car, church, cup, etc.*”
 - “Items at this level are particularly likely to be morphologically simple, and to be ‘original’ in the sense that they are not borrowed by metaphorical extension from other semantic areas.”
 - Mono-morphemic words.

- Importance of studying word formation.
- “The level at which the greatest number of items is likely to occur, although it is obvious that if every generic item in a taxonomy had several specifics, then the number of items would be greater at the specific level.”
- Generic level (Ungerer *et al.* 1996):
 - “Prototype categories are not fully developed on the basic level.”
 - “Basic level categories only function as they do because they are structured as prototype categories.”
 - According to Ungerer *et al.* (1996), the primacy and the centrality of this level is based on mainly three factors:
 - A balance between too many similarities (subordinate level) and too few similarities (superordinate level).
 - The common overall shape (holistic, Gestalt perception).
 - The only level on which organisms and objects are marked by characteristic actions.
- Folk genera (folk generic concepts) of living kinds (as opposed to life form concepts): among their meaning component, a “hidden nature” (i.e. an “underlying essence” which cannot be reduced to any observable attributes)? (Atran 1987) Linked, somehow, with proper names? (Evidence from Australian Aboriginal languages.)
- **Specific and varietal levels** (Cruse 1986: 146), subordinate categories (Ungerer *et al.* 1996: 86):
 - “Items which occur [at these levels] are particularly likely to be morphologically complex, and compound words are frequent.”
 - True for all languages?
- Risk of ***circular reasoning***:
 - E.g. Level X is considered as the basic level since its items are the most numerous.
 - E.g. Ungerer *et al.* (1996), above, on symbiosis of basic level and prototype categories.

4.2 Baka terminology of fauna

Pascale Paulin presenting the results of her study as well as an overview of the difficulties she encountered while studying animal names and classification. Her experience and critical comments on widespread ideas about the taxonomic nature of this kind of terminology.

4.3. Terminology of illness and disease in central African languages

The interdisciplinary MRL (“Maladies, remèdes and langues en Afrique centrale”) project Pr. Van der Veen coordinated from 1992 to 1995, which benefited from a close collaboration between linguists, European medical doctors and local healers. Meetings, extensive fieldwork (data collection) and analysis. The overall objective of the project: the study of the conceptualization and the categorization of disease and diseases in this particular area.

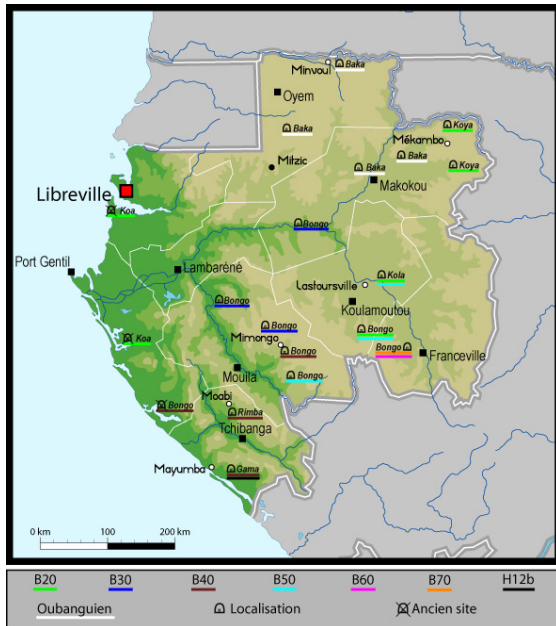
- The results nicely illustrate how different language communities (central African vs. “western” vs. scientific) **cut up reality** in different ways. Good example of folk conceptualization and categorization.
 - What is “illness”, what is “being ill”? Sociocultural disequilibrium: being out-of-balance.
 - Encompasses notions such as “ill luck”, “misfortune”. E.g. The misfortune a man may encounter during the pregnancy of his wife (or of one of his wives)! (Geviya, Bantu 301: mo-yunda 3/4.)
 - No taxonomic structure.
 - No pre-established, pre-existent categorization:
 - Two basic categories based on one single principle/criterion (i.e. the important role played by witchcraft in the given sociocultural context): “illnesses of the day” (diurnal illnesses; Fr. “maladies diurnes”) vs. “illnesses of the night” (nocturnal illnesses; Fr. “maladies nocturnes”).
 - The final outcome (the way a given disease evolves) determines to which category a disorder belongs.
 - Obviously, many (scientific) distinctions are not rendered. One term may refer to several diseases. On the contrary, there may be distinctions that may not have a scientific motivation. [Examples in VDV 2000.]
 - Symptom-oriented approach. [Examples in VDV 2000.]
 - Body parts, organs, etc. E.g. Word for “heart” denoting several locally occurring heart problems. Or, word for “belly” denoting ‘painful period’, ‘gastritis’. Etc.
 - Metaphors.
 - E.g. Word for “elephant” or “elephant leg” denoting ‘elephantiasis’. Word for “parrot” (gray and white body + red tail) denoting ‘diaper rash’. Word for “hammer” denoting ‘headache’. Etc.
 - Metonymies.
 - E.g. Word for “nasal mucus” denoting a ‘cold’, ‘influenza’. Word for “cold” denoting ‘fever’, ‘malaria’. Word for “Portuguese” denoting ‘small pox’. Etc.

- Also, a comparative perspective. The **comparison** of lexical items from 8 different Bantu languages.
 - Recurrent observations as for the ***naming principles*** (lexical creativity).
 - Quite astonishing results: *strong lexical heterogeneity in an overall lexically homogeneous area (relatively close languages)*. Among the a priori reconstructable items (at a very regional level), a majority of **skin disorders** [examples in VDV 2000.].
 - Array of explanations (“cultural scenarios”):
 - Impact of taboo, at various levels? Naming is a dangerous activity. Especially true for life-threatening disorders. May have caused lexical replacement on a more or less regular basis.
 - Dissimilation principle? A differentiation principle operating among communities?
 - Monopoly of the local medicine men? Scattered, experienced-based, non-institutionalized knowledge. Possible influence of Pygmy healers.
 - Perception of illness? Identification of cause and recovering good health are far more important than giving precise names. A typical, ***symptom-oriented folk approach***.
- From Proto-bantu to present-day times:
 - Number of reconstructed items is very limited but this may be due to the kinds of vocabulary taken into account.
 - (Relatively important) shared lexical stock, then extensive relexification? Possible influence of hunter-gatherers’ vocabulary.
 - Limited initial shared lexical stock, then extensive ongoing lexical creation within the various communities?

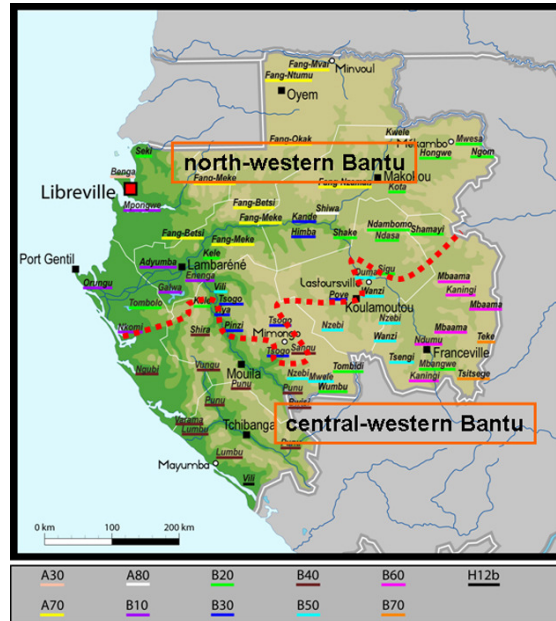
Data and publications:

- *MRL corpus*.
- *Van der Veen (2000): “Dénomination des troubles pathologiques en Afrique centrale bantu”*.
- *Libreville presentation (2006)*.

ANNEXE 1 The Baka hunter-gatherers of Gabon (and general linguistic context)



Distribution of Pygmy groups in Gabon.



The Bantu languages of Gabon.

© Maps: Team of sub-Saharan Africanists, DDL, Lyon.