

“The weather caught/cooked/burnt fire”

The grammar, conceptual schemas and semantics of temperature expressions in Tafi

Temperature is a universal human experience and different languages use different lexical and grammatical devices to express it (Koptjesvakaja-Tam 2015). In this paper, I explore the ways in which speakers of Tafi, a Ghana-Togo Mountain language, describe, evaluate and categorise temperature phenomena linguistically.

It will become evident that there is lexico-grammatical elaboration in the domain of hotness in the language. Moreover, like other neighbouring languages such as Ewe (Ameka 2015), Dangme, Siyase (Adjei 2012) and Sɛlɛɛ (Agbetsoamedo and Di Garbo 2015) hot temperature is expressed using a conceptual schema of an entity catching or acquiring heat from fire and linguistically coded in a Verb Phrase (see the first part of the title). I also examine the various strategies that are used to indicate different degrees of hotness. One strategy is the choice of the verb in the Verb Phrase where ‘catch fire’ relates to the first degree of hotness (1a), ‘be cooked (in) fire’ indicates second degree (1b) and ‘burn fire’ signals the superlative (1c).

- (1) a. **ke-tsukpú ní ke-vu ki-fú**
CM-pot DEF SM-catch CM-fire
'The pot is hot.'
- b. **ke-tsukpú ní ke-bí ki-fú**
CM-pot DEF SM-be.cooked CM-fire
'The pot is very hot.'
- c. **a-dzi a-lilín á-á-tā ki-fú**
CM-woman AM-DIST SM-PRSPROG-burn CM-fire
Lit. The woman is burning with fire
Idiomatic: 'That woman is a deadly witch.'

Moreover, there is a serial verb sub-construction which literally translates as ‘catch fire pass fire’ to indicate extreme degree of hotness (see 2).

- (2) **kí-dɔŋɔ́ŋa ní bí ki-fú flǎ-nɔ ki-fú**
CM-food DEF be.cooked CM-fire pass-COM CM-fire
'The food is extremely hot.'

Another intensification strategy is the triplication, especially, of ideophones to indicate degrees of both hotness and coldness.

I show the distribution and applicability of the different terms to the domains of weather, food, water and bodily conditions. As (1c) shows, the temperature expressions are also used to express meanings outside its domain such as personal attributes. The extended uses and the underlying conceptual schemas will also be explored.

In conclusion, I draw attention to the traces of contact in the lexicalisation of the domain of temperature: (i) the adverbial modifier **bɔkɔɔ** 'cool' in the cold domain seems to have been adapted from Akan; (ii) the adjectival modifier **gbogblo** 'warm' seems to be a reduplicated form of the Ewe verb **gblo** ‘become tepid, warm of liquid’; (iii) the pattern of ‘V fire’ for hot seems to be replicated from Ewe. The temperature domain also thus gives signs of contact among the grammars in the Lower Volta Basin.

References

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