

Pragmalinguistic concepts in Cameroonian Ring languages

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This paper reports on results from ongoing research into indigenous speech practices in two communities (Isu and Men) of the Cameroonian Grassfields. Based on a preliminary assessment of local classifications of speech acts and speech events, as encoded in Isu and Men lexicon, the paper explores cultural scripts and norms which shape two types of communicative events: requesting (as an instance of obligative speech acts) and delivering bad news, e.g. in the context of disease and death (as an instance of informative speech acts). In both cases, the analysis of forms, functions and contexts reveals: (a) the extent to which the Gricean conversational maxims of quantity, relevance and modality could be suspended in observance of culture-specific norms of respect which demand conventionalized implicatures, (b) the extent to which speech acts are shaped and constrained by the paramount maxim of maintaining social balance, rather than by considerations of individual face / image. In this, the paper supports recent findings in non-European cultures of communication (e.g. Wierzbicka 1991, Mutaka & Lenaka 1998, Ngwoye 1992, Ameka & Breedveld 2004) which call for modification of existing pragmalinguistic models such as speech act theory, conversational maxims and politeness-theory with respect to concepts such as face and generalizations about directness vs. indirectness.