

Temperature terms in African Languages

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The numbers of temperature terms in different languages and the way these categorize the temperature domain varies. The linguistic aspects of the temperature domain have on the whole received very little attention, apart from some exceptions like Sutrop (1999) and Koptjevskaja-Tamm (2006), who analyzed temperature terms in Baltic languages, Russian and Swedish.

My work concentrates on temperature terms in African languages and aims at making an African contribution to the discussion of general criteria for the collection of temperature terms established by Koptjevskaja-Tamm. This research, which is still going on at the moment, is based on interviews with speakers of 15 languages from different families. The questions to investigate are:

- *How many temperature terms do the languages have? How many of these can be considered as 'basic temperature terms'?*
- *Is the use of the terms restricted to certain domains (e.g. food/liquids, body-parts, surfaces, weather) or not?*
- *Do the criteria 'tactile' versus 'non-tactile' and 'experience-based' versus 'experiencer-based' play a decisive role in determining the use of temperature terms in African languages?*
- *Are 'basic temperature terms' universal?*

At the present stage of the work it seems that African languages show similarities as well as differences in the structure of their systems of temperature terms. The languages under consideration can be divided into categories according to the number of their temperature terms, as displayed in the following table:

Category 1: 2 temperature terms	Category 2: 3 temperature terms	Category 3: 4 temperature terms	
		Variety I	Variety II
low temperatures	low temperatures	low temperatures	very low temperatures
			low temperatures
high temperatures	high temperatures	medium temperatures	high temperatures
	high temperatures	high temperatures	
	very high temperatures	very high temperatures	very high temperatures

Another categorization may be carried out according to the range of use of the respected temperature terms.

The opposition 'tactile'/'non-tactile' does not seem to be among the main factors determining the use of temperature terms whereas 'experience-based' and 'experiencer-based' are decisive criteria in the use of temperature terms in some of the languages.

Due to the limited number of languages and informants the hypothesized categories cannot be considered as universal and are yet to be confirmed by further research. Nevertheless, they provide an overview of the structures of temperature systems in different language families of Africa and show the necessity of deeper investigation in this area.