

TEMPERATURE TERMS IN NGANASAN

It may be reasonable to assume that languages make distinctions that are crucial for their speakers. Given this, it could be of some interest to take a look at the system of temperature terms (TTs) in a language spoken by a people living inside the Arctic circle, and to see whether living under extremely cold temperatures bear any influence on the temperatures people use to speak about. We shall consider TTs in Nganasan (Uralic > Samoyedic) which is now spoken by approximately 100 people in three villages on the Taimyr peninsula in Russia. The data was collected during several expeditions in the last two years, both elicited and found in (mainly folklore) texts.

In the domains of ‘hot’ and ‘cold’ temperatures there are one (*heku-* ‘be hot’) and two (*d’en’i-* ‘be cool’, *t’esi-* ‘be cold’) main roots respectively, which are used for both tactile and non-tactile temperature, two more roots for ‘warm (mainly about weather)’ (*n’iin’a*), and ‘heat’ (*hejbi*), and a range of verbs denoting change of temperature or entering into a certain state. An interesting fact about Nganasan is the absence of a neutral word denoting the concept of normal, comfortable (warm) temperature, except for weather: the word for ‘hot’ with a diminutive suffix (*hekə-l’ükii*) or just the word for ‘good’ (*n’aagəə*) are used instead. Another temperature term, *kulbaj-*, denotes an unpleasant temperature, especially when speaking about food. So *kulbajka’a t’aj* ‘cold tea’, or *kulbajka’a bi’a* ‘cold soup’ mean ‘too cold’, but the same term means ‘too warm’, ‘too thawed’ when speaking about fish which is eaten frozen. Among the verbs denoting change of temperature there is a specific lexicalized “northern” meaning ‘to freeze very strongly, (almost) up to death’ (*d’an̄kər-*).

As it is usual for words expressing qualities in Nganasan, many temperature terms are not adjectives, but stative verbs (participles when used attributively).

Nganasan possesses a special set of words to describe the weather outside. These words do not define the temperature themselves but imply some conclusions about it. For example, the word *kouđan̄ku* meaning ‘sunny weather’ implies that it is warm or even hot outside and the word *ɲarmii* ‘cold north-eastern wind’ is used to denote frost.

There are a few inflectional peculiarities of TTs in Nganasan. First, when speaking about ambient temperature one can use a marker, which else can be found only in an exclamation, instead of otherwise obligatory verbal ending (1). Second, some TTs may be used in a construction normally denoting direction (2):

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| (1) <i>hiəmə heku-mə</i>
oh be.hot-Excl
‘Oh, how hot (it is).’ | (2) <i>biđə? kəndi-ti</i>
water.Pl freezing-Gen.3Sg
‘The water was freezing.’ | <i>n’ii-d’ə</i>
in.the.direction-Adj
be-Praet-Ant |
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We have attested only two metaphorical usages of TTs so far (over a corpus of 35000 sentences). The verbs of getting cool can be used in the meaning ‘to come out of soak’, and the word *kulbajt’utu* described above can also mean ‘tired’:

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| (3) <i>kulbajt’u-sa tuu-’ə</i>
cool.down-Inf come-Pf.3Sg
‘He came tired.’ | (4) <i>s’in’s’i-niagə-ti bəndi hua-ɲu-ru?</i>
cool.down-Sup-3Sg outside put-Imp-2Pl
‘Take him outside in order for him to come out of soak.’ | |
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It should be noted, however, that metaphorization in general is not very frequent in Nganasan. So, unlike in many other languages, no typical “temperature” metaphors expressing emotions were found so far.

Although there exist some noteworthy peculiarities of TTs in Nganasan, they don’t seem to be connected with the living circumstances of the people. It means that the temperatures that are extremely cold for the majority of the population of the Earth are not conceptualized as such by the people used to them, or at least they do not bear any influence on the TTs of their language.

References

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