

The Semantics of Temperature Terms in Gurenɛ

Abstract

Following Koptjevskaja-Tamm and Rakhilina's (2006) comparative work on the semantics of temperature adjectives and their combinability with nouns in Russian and Swedish and also the claim that temperature phenomena are said to be universal in all languages since all humans experience temperature in their bodies, I set out in this paper to test this claim by examining the semantics of temperature terminology such as *hot*, *cold* etc in Gurenɛ. Gurenɛ is a Gur language spoken in Northern Ghana, West Africa, and belongs to the Niger-Congo language family. It has been noted in the literature on temperature phenomena that the conceptualization of temperature phenomena in a particular language is deeply rooted in the experience of the people's cultural and physical environment. In this regard there are variations of temperature terms ranging from tactile to non-tactile in a particular language. Languages therefore, show a strong variation with regard to the number of temperature concepts and also as to how these concepts help to evaluate their experience. Thus the Gurenɛ speakers, who live predominantly in a tropical savannah land, employ a number of temperature terms to express their experience of the tropical weather conditions as demonstrated in the examples below.

1. a. Wuntɛɛŋa la *tulegɛ* mɛ
Sun DEF hot PART
'The sun is hot'
b. Dia la *tulegɛ* mɛ
Food DEF hot PART
2. Wuntɛɛŋa la *lakeri* mɛ
Sun DEF burn-IMPERF PART
'The Sun is burning'.
3. Wuntɛɛn-*tuulega*
Sun -hot
'Hot sun'
4. Ko-*ma'asega*
Water-cold
'cold water'

From the data above we notice that the temperature term *tulegɛ* 'be.hot' in example 1a is a verb used predicatively to express the personal experience of the heat from the sun while in 1b the same term is used for referring to the hotness of the food which is experienced by touching. Example 2 contains a different temperature verb which is also used predicatively to express the degree of the feeling of the heat. In examples 3 and 4, *tuulega* and *ma'asega* are adjectives derived from *tulegɛ* and *ma'ɛ* 'be.cold' and used attributively. The corresponding morphological structures involve certain morphophonemic processes that seem to lack direct correspondence in familiar European languages. The above illustrates a few semantic and syntactic characteristics of the temperature phenomena in the language and the talk seeks to explore this further in the analysis. Finally, I will also discuss the metaphorical extensions of the temperature terms, such as ex. (5-6), which are often different from those found in the European languages:

5. bi-*tuulega* 'active/energetic child'

Child-hot

6. A puurε n ma'ε 'He has a stomach upset'
1SG stomach REL cold

It is anticipated that a detailed analysis will contribute to the existing body of knowledge about the temperature phenomena by adding to it the African perspective.