
The words of smells : ethnolinguistic study of olfactory vocabulary in the basaa language

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Introduction

2 The question of how olfactory experiences are verbalized and categorized constitutes a major epistemological challenge for contemporary sensory anthropology, all the more so when it comes to apprehending the cognitive and linguistic modalities through which non-Western societies conceptualize and express their olfactory perceptions. Following the work of David Howes (2003) on the anthropology of the senses and the innovative research of Asifa Majid (2015) on the linguistic relativity of sensory expressions, this study sets out to explore the olfactory system in the Basaa language. As Joël Candau (2000) has emphasized in his work on the anthropology of olfaction, the way in which a society linguistically encodes its olfactory experiences constitutes a privileged indicator of its cognitive schemas and deep cultural structures. From this heuristic perspective, and draw-

ing on the analyses of Constance Classen (1993) concerning the olfactory cosmologies of traditional societies, we shall endeavor to demonstrate how the Basaa olfactory lexicon, far from being reduced to a simple catalogue of descriptive terms, constitutes a genuine epistemological system through which environmental, social and spiritual knowledge is articulated and transmitted. As the foundational work of Claude Boisson (1997) on the naming of smells has shown, the richness of an olfactory vocabulary cannot be measured against Western linguistic criteria alone, but must be apprehended in its cultural and cognitive specificity.

1. THE LEXICAL FIELD OF SMELLS IN BASAA

- 3 The systematic analysis of the lexical field of smells in the Basaa language leads to a rich semantics. As Boisson (1997) notes, this lexical richness challenges Western assumptions about the presumed limitations of olfactory vocabulary in natural languages. This lexicon, which is organized around a complex network of perception terms, qualifying adjectives and specialized nouns, testifies to a conceptualization of olfactory experiences. Examining this lexical corpus allows us not only to apprehend the complexity of the cognitive processes underlying olfactory perception in this linguistic community, but also to shed light on the deep intricacies between language, cognition and sensory experience. This analysis is firmly situated within an ethnolinguistic perspective that considers the lexicon as a privileged indicator of culturally determined conceptual schemas.

1.1 The Typology of Olfactory Terms

- 4 Basaa presents a lexicon organized around a morphosyntactic tripartition. First and foremost, verbs of olfactory perception are conjugated along an interesting aspectual continuum, ranging from the voluntary act of sniffing (nùmbè) to the passive reception of scents (nùm), encompassing finely graded processual nuances in between. This verbal category is characterized by the existence of lexical tones: minimal pairs differentiated by tonal height (for instance high tone versus low tone), along with variations in intensity and duration of

the olfactory experience. Qualifying adjectives, for their part, display a remarkable propensity for semantic specification, deploying a range of terms that transcend the simple hedonic dichotomy (pleasant/unpleasant) to encompass olfactory characterizations of considerable granularity. Particularly noteworthy is the presence of compound adjectives which, through a process of morphological agglutination, allow the expression of complex olfactory qualities that are impossible to render with a single term in Indo-European languages. Nouns, finally, constitute a taxonomic subsystem, organized according to a semantic hierarchy that distinguishes not only olfactory sources (njèn for vegetable smells, manding ma binouga for animal smells), but also types of emanations according to their context of occurrence and cultural significance. This lexical organization testifies to a conceptualization of the olfactory universe, where terms are ordered according to a hierarchy that reflects Basaa classificatory thinking with regard to smells.

1.2. The Semantic Analysis of Olfactory Vocabulary

- 5 Basaa reveals a conceptualization that significantly transcends the conventional theoretical models of olfactory linguistics, as developed by Candau and Wathelet (2011) in their work on sensory categorizations. The observed semantic richness is organized around a multimodal system of signification in which literal and figurative meanings intertwine within a conceptual framework of remarkable sophistication. At the level of literal meanings, the Basaa lexicon exhibits a capacity to encode olfactory nuances that Indo-European languages struggle to express without resorting to elaborate circumlocutions. As Majid (2014) has demonstrated in her comparative studies of olfactory lexicons, this terminological richness is not fortuitous, but reflects a culturally specific conceptualization of the olfactory experience. Basic terms, far from being mere sensory descriptors, constitute nodal points around which complex semantic fields are organized. Thus, the term «njèn», which originally designates a fresh vegetable smell, develops a network of connotations extending into the domains of vitality, youth and spiritual renewal. The metaphorical dimension calls for an analysis of referential criteria: rather than a

single basic meaning, it is a set of culturally shared significations that constitutes the anchor point for the various metaphorical extensions. The observed semantic transfers reveal a cognitive mapping in which smells serve as conceptual vehicles for expressing abstract realities. For example, the term and adjective «mbùŋ», initially associated with strong animal smells, extends metaphorically to characterize social situations marked by tension or latent conflict. This semantic extension illustrates what David Howes (2003) describes as the deep interconnection between sensory perception and the social construction of meaning. The connotations associated with olfactory terms are organized along several distinct semantic axes. The hedonic axis is enriched by additional dimensions: intensity, temporal persistence, cultural familiarity and social value.

- 6 This semantic multidimensionality allows for an extremely fine-grained characterization of olfactory experiences. For example, the term «hóó» does not simply designate an unpleasant smell, but simultaneously encodes information about its intensity, its presumed source and its social implications. The system of morphological modification in the Basaa language further enriches this semantic complexity. In Basaa, affixes, tonal modifications and reduplications play an important role in the modulation of meaning. These processes, frequently employed in Bantu languages to express intensity or duration, find their own realizations here: reduplication, in particular, is observed mainly in verbs and ideophones, where it marks repetition, continuity or the reinforcement of an action or sensation. When applied to terms with olfactory value, it appears as a secondary extension of a more general aspectual schema into the sensory domain.
- 7 Recurring lexical associations reveal culturally specific cognitive patterns in the conceptualization of smells. For example, the frequent association between certain olfactory terms and temporal markers suggests a cyclical conception of smells, linked to the natural and social rhythms of the community. The polysemy characteristic of many Basaa olfactory terms does not reflect semantic imprecision, but rather the mode of olfactory conceptualization specific to this language. Rather than a single referential meaning, it is a set of culturally coherent values that serves as the basis for the various metaphorical extensions: metaphorical uses do not depart from a stable “centre”,

but unfold within a field of meanings connected by subtle logical and cultural links. This hierarchically organized semantic structure makes it possible to articulate the expressive richness of the olfactory lexicon around a few central conceptual poles, thereby ensuring the coherence of the system despite the diversity of its forms. The processes of lexical neology in the olfactory domain also deserve our attention. Faced with environmental transformations and the introduction of new odorant substances, the Basaa language demonstrates a capacity for semantic innovation. Newly created terms are harmoniously integrated into the existing system, testifying to the vitality and adaptability of this specialized lexicon.

- 8 The analysis of semantic fields reveals a complex hierarchical organization in which generic terms branch out into increasingly specific categories. This taxonomy reflects a cultural classification of smells that goes well beyond simple perceptual distinctions to integrate ecological, social and spiritual considerations. The semantic relations between olfactory terms and other sensory domains deserve particular attention. The lexical synesthesias observed suggest an integrated conception of sensory experience in which the boundaries between perceptual modalities are more permeable than in Western languages. The study of antonyms and semantic gradients reveals, in Basaa, a conceptualization of oppositions and nuances in the olfactory domain, expressed primarily through lexical processes (distinct terms designating pleasant or unpleasant smells) and morphological processes such as tonal variations and reduplication, which mark the degree of intensity. Terms do not simply oppose one another in a binary fashion but are organized in complex continua allowing for the expression of subtle gradations.
- 9 The pragmatic dimension of olfactory vocabulary must not be overlooked. The contextual use of terms reveals highly codified rules of usage that reflect the social norms and cultural conventions of the Basaa community. Certain terms are reserved for specific contexts or may only be used by certain categories of speakers. The cognitive implications of this semantic richness are considerable. As in all languages, Basaa olfactory vocabulary reflects a particular conceptual division of the sensory field. However, the perceptual categories it mobilizes are distinguished by their own organization and by the cultural values they convey, revealing a specific way of perceiving and

structuring olfactory experiences. This in-depth semantic analysis of Basaa olfactory vocabulary allows us to challenge certain Western assumptions about the limitations of language in the expression of olfactory experiences. It demonstrates that a language can develop an extremely sophisticated semantic system for describing and categorizing smells, provided that its culture accords sufficient importance to this sensory modality. In conclusion, the semantic complexity of Basaa olfactory vocabulary testifies to an elaborate conceptualization of the olfactory experience that harmoniously integrates perceptual, cultural and social dimensions. This lexical richness does not merely constitute a catalogue of descriptive terms, but forms a coherent system for representing and interpreting the olfactory world.

2. CULTURAL CLASSIFICATION AND CATEGORIZATION OF SMELLS

- 10 The systematic investigation of the modalities of classification and categorization of smells in Basaa society reveals a taxonomic system of remarkable sophistication that transcends conventional Western classificatory approaches. As Joël Candau has judiciously noted in his foundational work on the anthropology of olfaction (2000), the categorization of smells constitutes a privileged indicator of the cognitive and cultural schemas of a society. In the Basaa context, this conceptual organization of olfactory percepts is articulated around a complex classificatory architecture that simultaneously integrates ecological, social and symbolic criteria. For example, the Basaa terms “manding malâm” for pleasant smells and “beba inding” for unpleasant smells allow the intensity and duration of olfactory perceptions to be hierarchized, reflecting the sophistication of indigenous sensory knowledge. This in-depth analysis of the classificatory system enables us not only to apprehend the specific modalities of the cognitive organization of olfactory perceptions in this community, but also to shed light on the deep intricacies between sensory experience, social practices and local cosmology.

2.1. Natural Smells

- 11 The categorization of natural smells in Basaa society demonstrates a classificatory system of remarkable complexity, organized around a particularly elaborate taxonomy. As Annick Le Guérer (1988) has demonstrated in her work on the anthropology of smells, and Howes (2003) in his studies on the cultural construction of the senses, the perception and classification of natural smells constitute a privileged analytical prism for apprehending the cultural modalities of the organization of the sensible. This approach finds particularly relevant resonance in the research of Constance Classen (1993) on the olfactory cosmologies of non-Western societies. In the Basaa context, the categorization of natural smells is not inscribed in the nature/culture dichotomy but rests on criteria specific to this society. Smells are classified according to their origin (vegetable, animal, human), their symbolic value (purity, vitality, corruption) and their relationship to time, some being perceived as “living” or “dead” (nwôh) according to their intensity and duration. This conceptual organization of natural olfactory percepts testifies to a holistic approach in which each smell is inscribed within a complex network of culturally determined meanings, thus reflecting the depth of indigenous environmental knowledge.

2.2. Smelling, Classifying, Governing: Olfaction as the Language of the Social among the Basaa

- 12 In Basaa society, olfaction constitutes a principle of social organization that articulates everyday practices, symbolic representations and cognitive categories. Far from being a mere secondary sensory register, smell operates as a socio-cultural and structuring marker, in the sense that Gérard Lenclud (2006) attributes to perceptions within the framework of sensory anthropology: a medium through which societies produce, order and transmit meaning. In this sense, olfactory perceptions are not limited to accompanying social life, but actively participate in the structuring of relations, the hierarchization of statuses and the delimitation of interaction spaces. The foundational work of Alain Corbin (1982) on the social history of smells allows us to

understand how olfactory sensibilities are inscribed within specific cultural regimes, in which the pleasant, the repulsive, the pure and the impure belong to a historically situated social construction.

- 13 Following the analyses of Robert Dulau (1998) on the geography of smells, the Basaa olfactory universe appears as a genuine sensory cartography, in which the smells of the body, fermentation, palm trees and putrefaction participate in the construction and delimitation of social spaces. These smells act as sensory landmarks that organize everyday territories, mark the boundaries between the licit and the illicit, the near and the distant, the acceptable and the deviant. Olfaction thus becomes an implicit regulatory tool for social interactions, helping to signal belongings, to affirm hierarchies or to exclude certain behaviors. This spatial and social dimension of smells reveals a complex semiological system, in which each fragrance whether bodily, culinary or ritual encodes essential information about social roles and power relations.
- 14 This system also rests on stabilized social representations, in which smells function as matrices of social and cognitive categorization. In this regard, the concept of “social olfactory memory” developed by Joël Candau (2016) proves particularly operational for understanding how certain smells become durable collective landmarks, capable of crystallizing belongings and reinforcing community cohesion. In the Basaa context, smells linked to palm trees, fermentation processes or ritual substances act as mnemonic vectors, anchoring individuals in a shared social history and participating in the intergenerational transmission of norms and values. The analyses of Corbin (1986) on the history of olfactory sensibilities show that these representations are neither universal nor natural, but are inscribed within culturally determined value systems, in which the olfactory becomes an instrument for classifying the social world.
- 15 This symbolic elaboration of percepts only becomes fully intelligible when examined through Basaa terms. Olfactory lexemes such as “nding ntibi” (excrement smells), “nding ntibi manyû” (smells associated with bodily putrefaction) or “beba nunumba binouga” (smells of animal putrefaction) do not merely designate sensory stimuli, but refer to specific moral, social and cosmological categories. Their use in everyday discourse, oral narratives and practices reveals a genuine

epistemological system, in which the olfactory serves to classify interactions, mark out socially legitimate spaces and reproduce community hierarchies. Following the work of David Howes (2003) on sensory anthropology, these olfactory categories appear as complex semiotic devices, encoding information relating to power relations, processes of distinction and forms of social legitimacy.

- 16 Furthermore, the exploration of the metaphorical uses of smells reveals a genuine olfactory language, in the sense that Constance Classen (1993) attributes to sensory systems. In Basaa society, olfactory metaphors transcend their perceptual dimension to express moral judgments, social statuses and power relations. A morally upright person is associated with a so-called “pure” smell, while moral corruption is conceptualized in terms of putrefaction, reflecting a holistic conception in which ethical qualities possess tangible sensory manifestations, as David Howes (2003) has shown. Similarly, authority and social prestige are frequently conceptualized through the idea of an “odor of authority” (njnmbog), a metaphor that articulates sensory dimensions. This statutory function of smells connects with the analyses of Joël Candau and Agnès Jeanjean (2006) on olfaction as a marker of social distinction.
- 17 Finally, olfactory metaphors also structure the expression of social temporalities and existential transitions. The stages of life (birth, passage to adulthood, marriage, death) are associated with specific olfactory signatures, which express the transformations in the social and spiritual status of individuals. This logic extends to interpersonal relations and affects: affinity, attraction or relational incompatibility are formulated through metaphors of olfactory harmony or discord (longuè ndjin, béba ndjin). All of these uses reveal a relational ontology in which olfaction constitutes a fundamental principle of mediation between the sensible, the social and the cosmological, confirming that, among the Basaa, smelling, classifying and governing the social are all part of the same symbolic process.

CONCLUSION

- 18 This ethno-olfactory investigation among the Basaa reveals an original olfactory classification system, based not on a linear hierarchy of smells, but on a multi-criteria network structure, in which social,

moral, spatial, bodily and spiritual dimensions are treated with equivalent importance. Unlike taxonomic models organized around binary oppositions, the Basaa system rests on a relational logic in which smells take on meaning according to their contexts of utterance, circulation and use. This specific configuration reveals an indigenous sensory epistemology capable of simultaneously articulating several registers of interpretation without subsuming them under a single principle. While this research follows in the wake of Joël Candau's pioneering work on the semiology of odorant percepts, as well as the historical and symbolic analyses of Alain Corbin and Annick Le Guérér, it is not limited to applying exogenous theoretical frameworks. Basaa ethnography reveals, on the contrary, an indigenous mode of producing olfactory knowledge, in which smells function as cognitive operators in their own right, structuring the apprehension of the social, natural and spiritual world according to their own categories. In this sense, Basaa olfactory knowledge does not merely represent a local illustration of Western theories, but constitutes heuristic, autonomous and coherent explanatory models.

- 19 This perspective connects with the work of Diana Rey and Michelle Boccara (1998) on smells in Africa, which has shown that African olfactory systems rest on complex classificatory logics, closely linked to local cosmologies, kinship regimes and relations to the body. Like these analyses, the study of the Basaa case highlights a situated sensory epistemology, in which the olfactory acts as a principle of mediation between visible and invisible, living and ancestral, individual and collective. The dimension of epistemic decolonization claimed by this research does not therefore consist in rejecting Western theoretical contributions, but in shifting the centre of gravity of the analysis, by recognizing the full legitimacy of local categories as producers of theory. This is less a matter of opposition between knowledges than of a reconfiguration of knowledge relations, in which traditional sensory systems cease to be objects of interpretation and become interpretive frameworks in their own right. By restoring to Basaa olfaction its cognitive, social and cosmological density, this study argues for a renewed recognition of traditional knowledge as major theoretical resources in the anthropology of the sensible.

RÉSUMÉ

English

This ethnolinguistic study explores the olfactory vocabulary of the Basaa language of Cameroon, revealing a complex lexical architecture and cultural classification system. Smells play a crucial role in structuring social space and serve as identity markers and vectors of cultural communication. The research demonstrates the cultural importance accorded to olfaction in this society and challenges assumptions about the limitations of olfactory lexicons.

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