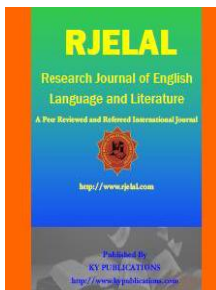# LANGUAGE AND ECOLOGY IN ALOBWED'EPIE'S
THE LADY WITH A BEARD

VALENTINE N. UBANAKO & ERIC E. EKEMBE
The University of Yaounde I
Cameroon

ABSTRACT
This paper seeks to examine the relationship between language and the social/natural environment in *TheLadywithaBeard* from an ecolinguistic perspective. Ecolinguists (Haugen 2001) posit an intensive relationship between language and the social/natural environment. Language exists in the minds of its users, and only functions in relating these users to one another and to their social and natural environment. In such a relationship, it is argued that linguistic systems and usage are determined by the socio-environmental experience of the users of a particular language. Paying attention to lexico-semantic usage by both characters and author in the text, data obtained is analysed on the comparative paradigms of canonical linguistic systems and the influence of socio-environmental concepts. Results show extensive innovations in the English language, determined by socio-cultural experience of characters in the text. Such innovations depict both the physiognomy and the mind of the heroine. In short, the metaphor of a bearded lady would be unclear should canonical English usage dominate the expression of social and natural environment of the Bakossi land. This explains why the 'unconventional' acts of the heroine, Emade, which shape the tides of events in the text, replicate the superordinate nature of environmental structure over linguistic structure in the process of expressing human thoughts and feelings.

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INTRODUCTION

Global concerns nowadays lay emphasis on environmental protection, climate change and global warming and many regional, sub-regional and world summits have been held to discuss these burning issues. Ecolinguists have not been silent on the issue as they posit an intricate relationship between language and the human environment. They see the natural environment as the major determiner of the linguistic systems employed by the user in communication. As Haugen (2001) notes, the true environment of a language is the society that uses it as one of its codes. Language, he explains, exists only in the minds of its users, and only functions in relating these users to one another and to their social and natural environment. The question which arises from this intricate relationship between language and the environment is whether meaning expressed by a user is the outcome of linguistic form or it is the user's experience in a socially constructed environment that determines linguistic usage. If linguistic systems determine usage it leaves the impression that the environment or the social space is static, otherwise it has nothing to do in the construction of human experience during communication. On the other hand, if the

environment determines linguistic usage, it therefore means that linguistic systems need deeper reading given the dynamic nature of society and social space. Users differ and the meanings they express from their social worlds differ from one language user to the other. The purpose of this paper is to examine the kind of linguistic innovations in the English language in Alobwed'Epie's*The Lady with a Beard* as a result of characters' psychological and social attachment to their natural environment with focus on lexico-semantic constructions. The paper hopes to determine how the relationship between the author and characters on the one hand, and their (social) environment on the other influences and/or is influenced by linguistic systems and usage. The difficulty this may pose is whether a reader is capable of blending sociocultural concepts and linguistic system in the understanding of meaning constructed from diverse resources. This definitely gives credit to linguistic research for clearer understanding to be arrived at. For any such research to have its grounds, Anchimbe (2006) argues that both the *external* (the society) and the *internal* (the linguistic system of the language) ecologies of a language contribute broadly to change and so must be central objects of investigations of causes and patterns of linguistic change.

Ecology and Language Use

Mackey (2001) sees ecology as the study of the interdependence within a system. This idea of interdependence of systems was first applied in the field of linguistics by Einar Haugen in 1970 and termed ecolinguistics. Its scope has been extended by different scholars, who fundamentally consent on the principles of interaction and diversity as far as language is concerned. In other words, a common view shared by scholars in the domain is that ecolinguistics deals with the study of interactions between any given language and its environment.

Haugen (2001) notes that the relationship between language and environment suggests a dynamic rather than a static science, something beyond the descriptive that one might call predictive and even therapeutic. It is predictive in the sense that people who live in a natural and socially constructed world use language in a way that is typical of, and aptly reflects their experience as living organisms, but the change inherent in the innovated language remains unpredictive. It is unpredictive because the result of the interaction is the emergence of a complex system. In this regard, Tamjid (2001:13) observes that

> The outcome of a complex system emerges from the interactions of its components; it is not built in any one component. As such, the interactions (connectives) amongst the components in the system are the essential building blocks of the unpredictable structures that emerge in the future. The 'avalanche effect' predicts that the minor events have outcomes exceeding their proportions and informs us greatly on understanding systems by and large.

On account of this, an understanding of both the social networking of human beings in the natural world helps in the understanding of the meanings inherent in the emerging linguistic outcome created by language users. For example, Sapir (2001: 14) notices that language is materially influenced by the background of its speakers in such a way that

> the physical environment is reflected in language only insofar as it has been influenced by social factors. The mere existence, for instance, of a certain type of animal in the physical environment of a people does not suffice to give rise to a linguistic symbol referring to it. It is necessary that the animal be known by the members of the group in common and that they have some interest, however slight, in it before the language of the community is called upon to make reference to this particular element of the physical environment.

It should be added that reference to such an element may carry both inherent qualities of the element and its anecdotal values. The way the environment contributes to the systems of a language is patterned and shared by speakers of the language in question and is generally unintelligible to people who do not share those societal experiences. In a situation where local resources enrich the systems of the English language, there is

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absolute need for an understanding of the emerging systems so as to render them more intelligible on the way to widening readership. From a syntactic perspective, Boa and Wee (1999) hold that the productive nature of *kena* passives in Singapore is the result of an intense contact between English and local languages. They explain that in a sentence like

"*John kena scolded by his boss*,"

the use of *kena* has negative overtones -*victim of*, and thus, render *kena* passives strong attributes of adversity, a feature, which is semantically shared by Singaporean and Chinese. Such social concepts emanating from human behaviour give rise to linguistic tendencies demonstrating the dialectical relationship between language and the social world. In such a dialectical relationship, there is accrued evidence in recent linguistic discourse to show that language is subordinate to the user's social world. This is argued by the fact that content determines structure and content is social experience or, better still, reality. This, perhaps, is why it is held that one of the functions of syntax is to structure the ways in which information is presented in sentences. This structure is dependent on the context in which the information is presented (Liddicoat and Curnow 2004:45).

Information presented in different contexts, using language, seeks to replicate the reality of the human world through the expression of thoughts and feelings of the language user. A seemingly contrary view presented on the relationship between language and content is proposed by Chawla (2001). He argues that the real world is built, to a large extent, upon the language habits of a community. The habits include all the analogical and suggestive values of the speech patterns as he posits. He further claims that our objectification of time and its implications and interaction between language and culture as a whole encompass a world view that shows the shaping influence of language. In a nutshell, he suggests that large scale categories of grammar such as the use of nouns, plurals, and tenses have an impact upon our perception of reality.

One thing to be noted from Chawla's point of interest is the meaning that is read from language use and not the patterns or resources that condition language use. That is why he insists on "our perception of reality". The perception of reality here begs the ultimate question of objective reality: Does the perception of reality depend on the canonical use of language or on the meanings attached to the language in use by the user? In a bid to provide response to this rhetoric, Chawla (ibid) differentiates between objective reality and cognitive reality: Objectivereality, he explains, is the natural environment- air, water, oceans, mountains, climate etc whereas cognitivereality is human perception and creation. The creative dimension modifies objective reality through the use of language. This is where the complexity between language and environment lies.

An example of this complexity posited by the modification of objective reality is provided by Schultz (2001). He takes the case of language use in the exploitation of the natural environment: the word 'develop' has positive connotations with no hint of possible degradation or damage to ecology. Objectively, there cannot be any development without the resulting consequences to ecology, however slight they may be. To make the term more acceptable, conservationists add the adjective 'sustainable' to realise the compound "sustainable development". Schultz (ibid: 110) continues that

> the phrase 'sustainable development' came into common use after the publication in 1987 of *Our Common Future* (the 'Brundtland Report'). However, the commercial users of the environment hijacked the phrase by interpreting it to mean 'sustained development', which is clearly unsustainable, so conservationists added an adverb, and now we talk about 'ecologically sustainable development'.

Schultz's point of concern is that conservationists use the term to their satisfaction and not necessarily to represent objective reality. In his opinion, the term suggests that there can be sustainable development that is not ecologically sustainable, whereas "in the long term nothing is sustainable that is not ecologically sustainable".

There seems to be a clear dichotomy between objective and cognitive reality with regard to the biosphere. In short, it is easy to perceive how

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language is used to twist objective reality within the realms of the biosphere. A more complicated relationship is at the level of attributes given to the biosphere by different communities and how such attributes are carried over in language. This is an area where the creative dimension of language is subordinate to objective reality. Objective reality in such a case ceases to mean the physical, but extends to cultural values and the symbolic reference of elements of the biosphere as shared by members of a speech community. In this guise, it dictates language structure so that the beliefs, feelings and thoughts of the user are expressed without any alterations. For this to be realised objectively, canonical expressions of an alien language cannot serve the purpose fully and expressions will have to be twisted or recreated to suit the superstratum. Here, inter-subjectivity comes into play and tends to blur the divide between objective reality and language structure, while imposing a deeper reading of a text.

In fact, Byram (1989: 84) notes that "it is evident that the agreement and formulation of cultural meanings is carried out in the language of the community". To this effect, he argues that

> common and inter-subjective meanings exist independently of given individuals, they are the objects produced by the group. They are not accessible in a pure form but are inherent in the expectations of the group as to 'rational' behaviour, and in the artefacts which symbolise and are expressions of the meanings of that behaviour. There are thus two potential starting points for analysis: behaviour-including in particular linguistic behaviour-and artefacts and symbols. Because language has a special relationship to common and inter-subjective meanings, it is likely to provide the best starting point. But because linguistic behaviour does not exist independently of other behaviour, analysis has to be of language in the context of other symbols. The purpose of analysis is to provide a reading of the behaviour and associated artefacts which includes a formulation of the meanings

inherent in it.

Given the rather complex relationship between cultural meanings and denotative meanings in the construction of linguistic systems that paint objective reality in communication, it becomes crystal clear that in every community in general and the Bakossi community in particular, an understanding of the culture, beliefs and general ecology is a prerequisite to understanding the meanings of words and expressions within the geo-cultural sphere painted by Alobwed'Epie in *The Lady with a Beard.*

Mutaka (2008), in an attempt to establish a link between African cultures and ecosystem maintenance opines that African people have always maintained the ecosystems of their lands through various manifestations of their cultures. Using notions like animism, totems and sacred forest, tree species (having medicinal values and therapeutic properties), etc, the researcher is able to prove that Africans, through their beliefs, cultural habits and practices are able to reflect their flora and fauna and consequently care about preserving the ecosystem of their land. As a matter of fact, this falls in line with the main concern of this paper where Alobwed'Epie is able to use a battery of elements; animals, plants, products of plants etc. to paint the ecology of a specific area, which can indeed help in preserving the ecosystem of Bakossi land**.**

From Mutaka's research, it comes out clear that although a relatively novel domain, the area of ecolinguistics can indeed contribute in the preservation of the ecosystems of specific areas, promotion of languages and cultures.

Ecolinguistics and Language Research

Deriving from the interwoven nature of language and ecology, it becomes, at times, difficult to identify a methodology of linguistic inquiry that determines the relationship between language and reality. Scholars have come up with different approaches that can be used in this domain. Carbaugh (2001) believes in the strength of the ethnographic method in dealing with ecolinguistic research. He holds that the ethnographic mode of inquiry seeks two primary goals simultaneously: the description and interpretation of local communication systems where focus is on the

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patterned use of verbal depictions in specific cultural community, and empirical claims about such communication patterns, identifying systems of local terms, meanings and uses significant in particular communities. This is complementary to the view advanced by Haugen (2001: 63) who argues that

> The analysis of ecology requires not only that one describes the social and psychological situation of each language, but also the effect of this situation on the language itself. As a starter it will be necessary to indicate the languages from which influence presently flows as reflected in the importations and substitutions now being created in each.

Haugen's point of view gains prominence in the fact that, in indicating the languages 'from which influence presently flows', meaning is guarded against counterfeiting. The above two views seem to concern with how data in ecolinguistic research, in general, can be treated. A more specific approach is provided by Sapir (1912) who is quoted by Haugen (2001:2) as intimating that

> It is the vocabulary of a language that most clearly reflects the physical and social environment of its speakers. The complete vocabulary of a language may indeed be looked upon as a complex inventory of all ideas, interest, and occupations that take up the attention of the community and were such a complete thesaurus of the language of a given tribe at our disposal, we might to a large extent infer the character of the physical environment and characteristics and the culture of the people making use of it.

While the vocabulary items may simply refer to things, perhaps of the physical world, it is the social meanings associated with the vocabulary items that determine the communicability of the expressions. Such social meanings range from religion, health, education, traditional beliefs and all aspects of society. For a good match between the expressions and the intended referents, Carbaugh (2001: 126) holds that verbal depictions follow a general communicative form in such a way that:

1. For any physical place, there is a set of terms which could be used to make adequate reference to that place. This foregrounds the relationship between words and the world, the classic referential functioning of language.

2. Given a specific context for communication, however, one such term, or phrase, is chosen rather than the others. This foregrounds the relationship between words and social context, the pragmatic functioning of language.

3. The selection of a term co-occurs with other such selections of the terms, which a speaker has made; this foregrounds the relationship between words, the sense- making function of language.

4. The system of co-selections, in context, about a place, constitutes a verbal depiction of that place, and, in its use, a context, achieves specific and various outcomes rather than others, through its potent of complex socio-cultural messages.

While holding the relevance of the other views above, two areas which strike our attention in Carbaugh's views are 2 and 4. They both deal with the relationship between contextual relevance and terminological preferences writers may make use of in communication. Such preferences are guided by the socio-cultural meanings which they intend to communicate. This again poses the problem of decoding meaning, a problem which is addressed by Muhlhausler (2001: 34) in terms of systematic adequacy. Systematic adequacy is linked with the ease of decoding, which, according to him, is achieved in many ways, one of which is the use of classifiers. Classifiers assign lexical items to a particular semantic field. Muhlhausler thinks that they are particularly useful where speed in decoding is essential. The classification into semantic fields tends to handle the denotative aspect of the expression, while societal attributes to the lexical item determine the structure and its actual meaning, that which is necessary for the understanding of a text. Muhlhausler's view appears

to be more relevant in the treatment of the data collected for this study.

Data

The data were collected through reading and selecting lexico-semantic (compounds) expressions whose 'Englishness' tempered with communication. The Englishness of the expressions was judged on two fronts: 1. Structures which are borrowings from the local language having a more expressive power than English words within the context in question. These words need interpretation to show how local attributes determine usage; 2. English expressions that have gained local colorations, carrying with them socio-cultural meanings, and which render them more communicative than their original English expressions. These expressions are arranged in terms of classifiers under plants, animals, residues, and celestial. The idea behind this arrangement is that such semantic fields have various cultural meanings which have given the expressions the communicative values they have in the text. The expressions are stated in one column, while their textness is presented in the last column. This paradigmatic arrangement enables us to see how linguistic systems are analogous to cultural systems. With this, it will be easy to evaluate the strength of each of them in shaping language use in the text.

Animals

Expression	Page	Social Meaning
Widow-of-the-upstream Python	12	A woman, widow, whose enterprising qualities supersede what society expects of her
Inquisitive cockerels	13	Warning addressed to a stubborn person on the consequences s/he might face if s/he fails to heed advice
The owls hooted	13	A sign of impending doom either on the community or individual
Brook-of-the-serpent	13	A sacred place where nobody is expected to fall
Big goat big rope	14	A person rated to be equal to heavy tasks attributed to him or capable of handling challenges s/he meets
Fighting a tiger	17	Usually a warning addressed to an unnecessarily courageous person trying to perform an impossible task
Daughter-of-the-roaring Lion	19	A person/woman whose acts are dreaded. The idea of offspring insinuated by the expression is a way of flattering by attributing courageous acts of a woman to ancestral sources even if that were not the case
Rotten iguana	70	A person with no value considered useless by his community
Legs-of-the-Hunting dog	99	Used to refer to a person who is responsible for running errands
Baboon	100	A person vulnerable to attacks and who has no external support

Plants

Expression	Page	Social Meaning
Perforated leaf	7	Afragiletissue, usually of leaves,placed on a pot of cocoyam/cassava/plantain to allow vapour underneath to heat anything placed on it, e.g., vegetables, before covering the pot.
Sweet Bitter leaf bushes	7	Fertile area
Indian bamboo tubes	7	Containers used for the preservation of perishable things, associated with withholding information so that it doesn't get out to inappropriate quarters
Deep-rooted mushroom	18	A well established person having fame in his society
Mother-of-the plantain stem, Plantain	25	Source of abundance

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grove		
Mother-sugar- cane-grove	82	Woman considered to be imbibed with good behaviour and is considered to be charitable towards others

Products of Plants

Expression	Page	Social meaning
Wooden spoon	10	A person who would live in harsh conditions just as if they were normal
Polished bowls	11	A symbolic bowl inherited from ancestors representing significant past
Essange, essisang, mbulikang	12	spices reserved for preparing special types of meals
Wet wood fire	16	Burden of a person believed to be his primary preoccupations
Bamboo-pith-box	26	A box containing invaluable items that are accessed only on specific occasions
Collective firewood splitting	29	Communal work intended to enhance solidarity
Wooden box	100	A replica of traditional customs of the society

Celestial

Expression	Page	Social Meaning
Daughter-of-the-deity-of-kupeMuaneguba	14	A person, woman, believed to be imbibed with special qualities not commonly found in the community
Daughter-of-the-dreaded deity	14	A woman, believed to daring and engaging in situations /activities reserved for men
Male rain	26	Heavy downpour that causes destruction
Female rain	26	Rain that is considered to be useful for rejuvination
Wife-of-the- water-source	30	A woman of benevolence whose acts are considered extraordinary
Early-morning sunshine	59	A person who gives inspiration to others in times of gloom and dismay
Ndibendile	98	A sacred pool believed to be harbouring mermaids and other dangerous supernatural creatures
NyangoMadiba	105	A female soothsayer

Discussion

The data suggests an intensive relationship between animals, plants, residue and the supernatural world in the establishment of language use. Each of these elements of the natural environment has varying ways through which they inform linguistic choices made by the writer.

In the first place, the meanings derived from the animals used in the text showcase strength and bravery. Conventionally, these are attributes associated, within the Bakossi land, with the male. For example, expressions such as *lion*, *tiger*, *elephant*, *dog*denotequalities exhibited by men. The complexity in the use of these expressions is exposed by the fact that whereas canonical expressions that might be appropriate in depicting the heroine would be coined from *Lioness*, *tigress*, *bitch*, which all indicate bravery, but from a feminine note, are not sacrificed for the male counterpart as one is likely to imagine. The point is that linguistic equivalents of such animals do not exist in local experience and as such can only appropriately be used to express meaning when they carry local colour through the masculine point. The end point is that forms of usage are generated which do not actually represent conventional linguistic usage.

The processes of such linguistic adaptations are determined by local experience and social pressure and not necessarily by normative structures. In another situation, while it is acknowledged that a man gives birth to children in the context in which the text is set, it is uncommon

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to find a lion giving birth. A *lioness*, which is equally a great symbol of strength and bravery – and represents the female experience of child bearing –, should have been collocated with the heroine. But such usage would defy the value of acts posed by the heroine and her patriarchal figure in a male dominated society. Notice that Emade digs a grave, an act in the society, which is traditionally reserved for men.

The linguistic systems derived from the world of plants are shaped by positivity, as opposed to those derived from animals. Compounds such as *perforated leaf* originally may give the reader a sense of something damaged, but it rather depicts utility within the context of usage. Given the use of the plants to the community, the taste of *bitter leaf* becomes sweet, hence the expression *sweet bitter leaf*. This does not only seek to illustrate a reversal of values but to rather show how socio-cultural attributes can influence the structure of linguistic systems in a context of natural communication. A holistic picture of abundance and kind-heartedness is portrayed by linguistic choices derived from plants. Very little or nothing is said about the poisonous nature of plants or the unruly growth of some plants such as weed. Here the figure of the heroine, her acts which challenge the natural order in the Bakossi land and the linguistic representation of symbols carrying attributes of her acts do expose the dialectical relation that exists between linguistic systems and objectivity. Since human experience differs from society to society a diversification of linguistic systems is likely to ensue. On this note, Howlett and Raglon (2001: 250) observe that

> Elements of nature have long provided humans with the symbols and metaphors that have helped order and explain the world, and these symbols and metaphors extraordinarily resilient, long-lived, and in some cases at least, seem even to transcend specific cultural and linguistic borders. Some theorists speculate that such symbols and metaphors derive purely from custom, and thus are quite fanciful, while others suggest that there is a structural explanation. The cultural use of natural symbols challenges the idea that there is

ever 'one' nature humans gaze upon. Just as there is never one nature which 'humans gaze upon' linguistic creativity leads to diverse unpredictable systems of language use.

Deities and gods generally do not give birth but do have successors determined by processes unknown to the community. They would be reduced to normal mortals if their process of livelihood wereaccessible to the common man. These deities constitute the supernatural in the environment and are most often referred to by individuals not to seek salvation but to evoke fear and send across a warning of some impending unusual incidences. Thus, expressions such as, *daughter-of-the-deity-of-kupeMuaneguba* and *daughter-of-the-dreaded deity* normally depict a figure of extraordinary decent, who for one reason or another, has certain extraordinary functions in the community. This is certainly not the case in *The Lady with a Beard*. The expressions are created by the pressure to give the referents qualities which objectively collocate with their acts. Such expressions are determined by the individual's social experience and a sense of judgment orientated by knowledge of the natural environment.

The need to create linguistic expressions which aptly reflect the object is driven by social worldview and not by any language rules. Language rules are built in such a situation because their canonical rule-governed nature does not permit language users to build an accurate mental object in communication. Instead, the very nature of the object in the environment and the values such an object represents in a specific society determine what kind of recreations can be used for the object in question to be depicted objectively. Consequently, linguistic systems are not only recreated for objective reality to be painted, but rather to question the hegemony of canonical structures in communication. Alobwed'Epie thus stands for an environment where man lives in perfect harmony with nature. To achieve this, he paints a beautiful environment with an extremely rich flora and fauna. He is in effect portraying that man lives on, and makes use of, his fragile environment and thus has the obligation of preserving its biodiversity. Hence if the environment

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is destroyed, there may be no more *wooden spoons, Indian bamboo tubes, bamboo-pith-boxes, owls, ndibendiles etc.* which are all very important for the Bakossi geo-cultural space. Similarly, the extinction of once venerated animals like the *pythons, tigers, lions,etc*. will reduce the significance and power associated with them within the Bakossi community and hence, a blow to the Bakosso culture.

Conclusion

The linguistic choices made in line with plants, animals and the celestial in the text all demonstrate the intricate relationship that exists between language and ecology. The peculiarity in Alobwed'Epie's experience is that an interaction of such biosphere with language has given rise to linguistic systems that represent not only the structural space of the language user but also his social space. In this line, ladies do not have beards if they do not 'roar like lions', if they do not 'kill elephants at the crossroads' and in demonstrating how such acts critically challenge the old order, language gets affected tremendously. In such a dialectical relationship, linguistic dependence on social and environmental praxis creates an avalanche effect of extensions in meaning and unpredictable recreations for objective reality to be communicated. This has created a democratisation of linguistic systems brought about by social pressure of objectivity in natural communication. The consequence of this in *The Lady with a Beard* is that while the social hegemony is challenged, the linguistic hegemony of normative structures is equally challenged by the need to communicate naturally thereby showing how the natural order and social experience determine the linguistic order.

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