Documenting & valorizing special vocabulary

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Course outline

According to Sapir (1949), “Language [is] a symbolic guide to culture. Vocabulary is a very sensitive index of the culture of a community.” Therefore, “linguistics is of strategic importance for the methodology of social science”. The aim of this course is to discuss various theoretical and practical aspects of investigating, handling and valorizing (i.a. sustaining, highlighting) so-called “special vocabulary”. Valorizing special vocabulary is one of the means of attempting to revitalize a language and its associated culture.

The instructors of this course will draw on their extensive experience of the study of (special) lexicon from (mostly) African languages. The following issues will be explored:

- What is special vocabulary?
- How to study special vocabulary?
- Why study special vocabulary?
- Valorizing and revitalizing special vocabulary.

Preliminaries

- Who is who, and who is doing what?
  - The instructors
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  - Their colleagues
  - You, as students!
- Some selective readings and other useful references
1. What is special vocabulary

- Short overview of previous courses
- Why is SV so difficult to define? [DISCUSSION]
- Possible definition:
  - Vocabulary related to specific (sometimes distinctive) sociocultural practices of a speech community as a whole or of one or more subgroups within this community

Problems and things to keep in mind

- Vocabulary and its intrinsic relation with sociocultural practices (via discourse types)
- In fact, *all vocabulary is special!*
- Examples…

The OVERALL/GLOBAL determining the LOCAL

(Several encompassing spheres, linguistic and non-linguistic.)
Examples of discourse: medical, political, economic, religious, judicial, etc.
(Alter Rastier)
1. What is special vocabulary

- What is *special*? What makes *special*?
- No easy, unambiguous solutions
- Two definitions retained here (1)
  - Kinds of vocabulary (kinds of ‘specialized lexicon’) used in sociocultural practices that may be considered to be the defining (particular) features of the culture of a speech community (or of a subgroup of this community)

1. Definitions retained here (2)
   - Vocabulary resulting from the naming of categorized entities within a given semantic DOMAIN

- [DISCUSSION]
2. How to study special vocabulary

- See the *London 2009 3L document* for a more detailed account
- Some major remarks
  - The language and the language variety
  - Previous documentation efforts, if any
  - Sociocultural practices and associated terminology to document
  - Lexical data and… what else?
  - Kind of enquiry most suitable
  - Good consultants

- Indispensable help from scholarly specialists
- Equipment and special instruments and tools
- Once started:
  - Importance of good overall relationship with the community + careful observation
  - Language of communication
  - Elicitation in “natural”, stimulating environments
  - Extensive audio and/or video recording → databases

2. How to study special vocabulary

- Different approaches, more or less realistic
  - Basic “list approach” to begin with
  - But better… studying SV from within
  - Software for data processing: Toolbox, ELAN, LEXUS; Excel
  - Examples of less traditional, more time-consuming but also more promising approaches

3. Why study special vocabulary

- Comprehensive overview of reasons and objectives
- Bruce Cole’s claim (2008) as essential issue:
  “Language is the DNA of a culture”
- We may add: “And vocabulary its building blocks”
3. Why study special vocabulary

- Documentation and description of languages and cultures
  - Linguistic classification
  - Linguistic typology
  - Kinds of knowledge very likely to disappear for ever!
    - Distinguish between linguistic (lexically encoded) vs. encyclopedic knowledge

- People are usually interested in how to say things in their language!
- Therefore, revitalization activities, in particular creation of new terminology in line with the resources of the language and the culture
  - E.g. German ‘Fernsprecher’ (Telefon, Handy)
  - Also, preservation of existing vocabulary
  - Stimulating, reinforcing effect on the sociocultural activities themselves

- Wide array of possible APPLIED LINGUISTIC and ANTHROPOLOGICAL studies
  - Anthropological linguistics
  - Cognitive linguistics, cognitive anthropology
  - Lexical semantics (various approaches!)
  - Lexicography
  - Historical and comparative linguistics

- Studied of languages: important approach to the study of culture and social sciences (sociocultural practices)
  - Culture and language as sources of relativist understanding
3. Why study special vocabulary

- Anthropological linguistics
  - **E. Sapir (1949)**: “Vocabulary is a very sensitive index of the culture of a people.”
  - **Mel’čuk (1981)**: “Not only every language, but every lexeme of a language, is an entire world in itself.”
  - Study of cognition, but also study of sociocultural practices and study of interculturality

- Cognitive linguistics, cognitive anthropology
  - Human perception, conceptualization and categorization
    - How is knowledge represented and organized in the human mind
    - Part of biology (universals)? Part of culture?
    - Folk concepts, folk categorizations
    - Linguistic determination (concepts vs. thinking)
  - Best studied domains and ongoing research

- Best studied terminologies
  - Kinship
  - Colour
    - New perspectives in cognitive anthropology (search for universals)
  - Ethnobiology: flora and fauna
  - Space, time
3. Why study special vocabulary

- Lexicography
  - Words and definitions, but also relevant information about **semantic domains** and **discourse types** in which the words may occur (issue of polysemy)
  - Lots of special vocabulary!

- Lexical semantics (various approaches!)
  - Often overlap with cognitive linguistics
  - What is meaning?
    - Features? Nature of boundaries?
  - Lexical (= linguistically encoded) categories
  - Role of prototype and family resemblance?
  - Lexical and semantic relations
  - Lexical creativity
  - Semantic shift and change: rules?

- Historical and comparative linguistics
  - Retrieving information from and about the linguistic (and indirectly non linguistic) past
  - Major objective: reconstruction (proto-forms)
  - Relatedness, common descent, language history, inherited traits vs. linguistic innovations, language contact and borrowing
  - Linguistic palaeontology
    - Hypotheses about proto-cultures
    - Examples
4. Valorizing and revitalizing SV

- Sharing ideas…
  - Instructors’ experience and thoughts
  - Your experience and ideas
  - Discussion
    - Africa vs. other places
    - Efficiency of programs, projects, actions
    - Toward more innovative approaches

- Traditional ways of valorizing (often mainly academic interest)
  - Study of lexicon: core lexicons, specialized lexicons
  - Lexicography and dictionary writing
  - Other scientific, lexically-based, publications

- Less traditional, more innovative ways
  - Lexicons and dictionaries for popular use
  - Lexicons or dictionaries on CD
  - Audio lexicons (online)
  - Multimedia interactive database on DVD
  - Audiobooks
  - Short radio programs
4. Valorizing and revitalizing SV

- Culturally acceptable discussion groups, seminars and workshops
- Thematic booklets
- Collection of proverbs or sayings with a particular theme

Some important ethical questions:
- Socioeconomic situation of the community?
- What is the community’s desire?
- Do people want other group members to know?
- Do they want to be seen on the Internet (facebooked)?
  
  What are the consequences of our documentation and valorization (popularization) efforts? Of making things accessible to other publics?

Funding options

[Discussion]

4. Valorizing and revitalizing SV

Summing up

- There is more behind special vocabulary (SV) than just “special vocabulary”
  - Theoretically, all vocabulary is special and therefore interesting
  - SV is more than just specialized terminology, jargon…
  - A crucial way of accessing culture (sociocultural practices)
- Many culture-specific semantic domains remain to be explored
  - Minor languages
Summing up

- Centrality of sociocultural practices on which the various linguistic practices rely and which, in their turn, sustain and influence the sociocultural practices
  - Privilege genuinely linguistically-oriented approach
  - “Counterbalancing” the prevailing cognitive approach
  - Privilege endogenous (emic) approach
  - Privilege “ecology of language” approach
  - Close collaboration with cultural anthropologists and members of the speech community

- Documentation of SV may be profitable for a variety of theoretical and/or applied linguistic and anthropological studies
- Documentation of vocabulary as an essential contribution to the documentation and the valorization of languages and correlated cultures
  - If carried out in an attitude of respect and in close and mindful collaboration with the community
  - Be innovative, be creative