

Sign metonymies in Komnzo

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Komnzo is spoken by around 250 speakers in the village of Rouku in the south of Papua New Guinea. The language belongs to the Tonda subgroup of the Yam language family. The author has been working on the documentation and description of Komnzo since 2010.

This paper builds on Evans (1997), who points out how in Australian languages biota of different species, families or even kingdoms are connected by sharing a linguistic sign, i.e. they are referred to by the same word or stem. For this type of semantic relationship, Evans uses the term ‘sign metonymy’.

One observation, that can be made for Komnzo is the high number of reduplications that are found in the names for biological species. In some cases we have a reduplicative orphan, because the base form is missing. In other cases, the base form exists only in another language. However, in most cases a base form exists in the Komnzo lexicon.

The semantic link between the two referents shows a wide range of complexity. At the lower end, reduplication can single out some salient part of one plant, usually the fruit, establishing a relation of non-prototypicality. For example, *mefa* and *mefamefa* refer to two chestnut species (*Semecarpus* sp), but the nuts of *mefa* are roasted and eaten, while the nuts of *mefamefa* are too small. Note that non-prototypicality is a general feature of reduplication in Komnzo. At the upper end of complexity, the reduplication pattern links referents through cultural conventions and practices. One example is *ruga* ‘pig’ and *rugaruga* (*Gmelina ledermanii*). The two biota are linked in the following way: *rugaruga* is the tree from which *brubru* ‘kundu drums’ are made. These drums are used for *wath* ‘dance’ or *ruga wath* ‘pig dance’, because a pig will be killed and distributed in the morning hours after the dance. Thus, the technical concept of ‘drum’ and the cultural practice of ‘dance’ mediate between *ruga* and the reduplicated form *rugaruga*.

I offer in this paper an overview of sign metonymies in Komnzo, which are particularly high in plant and bird names. Such sign metonymies establish both metaphorical and metonymic links. Metaphorical links may be based on movement, appearance, colour, taste, feeling, sound, or patterns of human interaction. Metonymic links comprise three types: temporal, spatial and cultural/technical links. These links have to be checked thoroughly with several speakers. Otherwise, we run the risk of either documenting folk etymologies or not recognising existing links at all. Therefore, I will provide a description of the process of documenting biological knowledge. Information about plants and birds is often hard to document because someone with linguistic training may not possess enough specialised knowledge in these extra-linguistic fields.

References

- Evans, N. (1997). Sign metonymies and the problem of flora-fauna polysemy in Australian languages. In: D. T. Tryon and M. Walsh (Eds.), *Boundary Rider. Essays in Honour of Geoffrey O’Grady*, pp. 133–153. Canberra: Pacific Linguistics.