Sprache und Geschichte in Afrika 20: 51-64

Semantic Vagueness and Cross-Linguistic Lexical Fragmentation in Bantu: Impeding Factors for Linguistic Palaeontology

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1. Introduction

The method of 'linguistic palaeontology' developed from Adolphe PICTET's (1859–1863) original idea 'that prehistory can be reconstructed from specific evidence drawn from modern spoken languages and the transformation of individual words' (BLENCH 2006:36). In different language families of the world, the discipline has served to reconstruct the material and immaterial cultural history of ancestral speech communities and to pin down their homeland. In the field of Indo-European studies, the German *Wörter und Sachen* movement of the late 19th and early 20th century gave a strong boost to the use of language for historical reconstruction. Scholars like Hugo SCHUCHARDT (1912) and Rudolf MERINGER (1909) reacted against the predominance of phonetics in historical linguistics and the too mechanical view on language evolution of the Neo-grammarian school. The *Wörter und Sachen* school tried to restore the balance between signifier and signified and to reassess the contribution of diachronic semantics (MALKIEL 1993:63-68). Language was seen again as a cultural product that cannot be dissociated from the society and the history of its speakers. In this regard, linguistics is considered as a social and human science rather than as an exact science approaching language from the nativist assumption that it is an aspect of human biology operating according to natural laws. In the realm of African studies, a real interest in the cultural-historical potential of comparative vocabulary studies only emerged in the second half of the 20th century. For a historical overview, the reader can be referred to for instance BLENCH (2006:38-40) or BOSTOEN (2005a:8-18). Historians like the pioneering Christopher EHRET (1967) and his disciples were the first who tried to fully exploit the assets of linguistic palaeontology for early African history. As I and others have written more extensively elsewhere (see for instance BOSTOEN 2005a, 2006, 2007a or KLEIN-ARENDT 2005), these 'linguistic historians' have

[1] My thanks go the organizers of the *Conference on Language and Ethnohistory in Southern Africa* for having invited me to participate and to my colleagues Yvonne Bastin and Jacky Maniacky for giving their comments on a draft of this paper.

analysed language rather superficially and have not always followed what linguists would consider as their code of practice. This takes nothing away, however, from their merit of having promoted linguistics as a discipline for the study of African prehistory. African historical linguists, on the contrary, have been rather half-hearted devotees of linguistic palaeontology. They have only gained relatively little and late interest in the interdisciplinary capacity of their discipline. Not being considered as 'genuine' linguistics, journals of and conferences on African linguistics have generally dedicated little attention to this kind of studies. However, the growing body of cultural vocabulary studies carried out by historical linguists demonstrates that the latter can contribute considerably, not only to the historical output of African linguistic palaeontology, but also to the general methodology of the discipline. Unlike 'linguistic historians' who tend to examine multiple semantic fields to deal with the global history of a particular (language) area, historical linguists rather approach one well-defined lexical field in a more or less global way in order to reconstruct its diachronic evolution and the extra-linguistic cultural domain with which it is associated, for instance metallurgy (DE MARET & NSUKA 1977; KLEIN-ARENDT 2004, 2005), woodwork (BULKENS 1999a & b), pottery (BOSTOEN 2005), food plants (BLENCH 1994–1995; BOSTOEN 2005b; MANIACKY 2005; PHILIPPSON & BAHUCHET 1994–1995; SOMMER 2001) or animals (BEYER 1998; MOUGUIAMA-DAOUDA 1995). To do so, they ideally rely on larger data lexical databases containing richer semantic information drawn from both linguistic and ethnographic sources (see BOSTOEN 2007b for an online version of such a database). These differences in approach have inevitably led to differences in research output as well as to new insights into the sense and non-sense of linguistic palaeontology for the reconstruction of early African history. In this paper, I wish to discuss two phenomena, which popped up in my comparative research on Bantu cultural vocabularies and which can be considered as impeding factors for linguistic palaeontology in Africa, i.e. the semantic vagueness and cross-linguistic fragmentation of vocabulary associated with very specific cultural items or practices.

2. An integrated onomasiological and semasiological approach of semantic fields

In order to fully exploit the historical potential of linguistic palaeontology, a basic principle should be that cultural vocabulary is approached in terms of semantic fields. Ever since TRIER (1934) introduced the Saussurian principles of contrast and inclusion into semantics, it has been assumed that individual words only acquire meaning through contrast with other words belonging to the same semantic field (KRONENFELD & RUNDBLAD 2003; LEHRER 1974, 1985; LYONS 1977, 1995; ULLMANN 1957). So, as LEHRER (1985:283) claimed, 'to understand lexical meaning it is necessary to look at sets of semantically related words, not simply at each word in isolation'. In spite of this fundamental premise of semantic field theory,

the drawing of historical conclusions from single lexical reconstructions is common practice among scholars using vocabulary to reconstruct African prehistory. In the literature, the concepts of 'semantic field' and 'lexical field' are often used interchangeably, but they can actually be distinguished quite clearly. Following LYONS (1977, 1995), a 'semantic field' can be defined as a conceptual domain reflecting the way the speakers of a particular language conceptualize the world, while a 'lexical field' is then the set of lexemes imposed over that conceptual domain in order to be able to communicate about the concepts (KRONENFELD & RUNDBLAD 2003:67-68). Both types of fields do not necessarily coincide. One lexical field may cover to a certain extent different semantic fields, while one semantic field may be covered by distinct lexical fields. As I have shown elsewhere for the Bantu languages (BOSTOEN 2005a), the semantic field of pot-making is hybrid in the sense that it is covered by different independent subsets of lexical items related to different aspects of this craft, i.e. the artisan, the raw materials, the instruments, the technical operations [...] All the same, it also shares certain of these lexical sub-fields with other conceptual domains, for instance cooking. Consequently, in order to understand the diachronic evolution of a semantic field, one has to examine not only how it was lexicalized throughout time, but also which semantic changes each of the individual lexical items underwent. Both aspects are intimately interrelated, of course, and require an integrated onomasiological and semasiological approach (BLANK 2003; GEERAERTS 1997; GRZEGA 2002; MALKIEL 1993). Onomasiology is concerned with the different 'names' (OldGr. *ónoma*) for a given concept and is the actual point of departure of every study in linguistic palaeontology, whose intention it is to explain how the changing lexicalization of a given conceptual domain through time is at the origin of the varying way in which it is currently verbalized across related languages. Semasiology is its reverse side and examines the different meanings or polysemy of the same 'sign' (OldGr. *séma*). It is thus to a great extent synonymous with the more common term 'semantics' (ULLMANN 1957:5). Figure 1 below presents a synchronic cross-linguistic onomasiological and semasiological perspective on the semantic field related to the oil palm in Bantu (BOSTOEN 2005b).

An onomasiological approach of Bantu oil palm vocabulary learns that this semantic field, represented by the concepts on the right-hand side, must originally have been covered by the first three proto-forms on the left-hand side. These lexical reconstructions represent the lexical proto-field, or at least part of it, since the lack of reconstructible vocabulary is not necessarily evidence of its absence in the ancestral language. In order to reconstruct which signified was exactly linked with which signifier, a diachronic semasiological approach of the same lexical field is needed. The full lines above represent these original meanings, while the dashed lines symbolize the secondary senses which the reflexes of each of these proto-forms subsequently developed across Bantu languages. Through these semantic changes, reflexes of *-gàdí started to be associated with concepts belonging to

distinct semantic fields, i.e. ‘blood’ and ‘fat, oil’, and replaced the lexical items that initially covered them, i.e. *-jíngà and *-kútà. This shows how lexical change can only be fully understood as a sophisticated interplay between onomasiological and semasiological change.

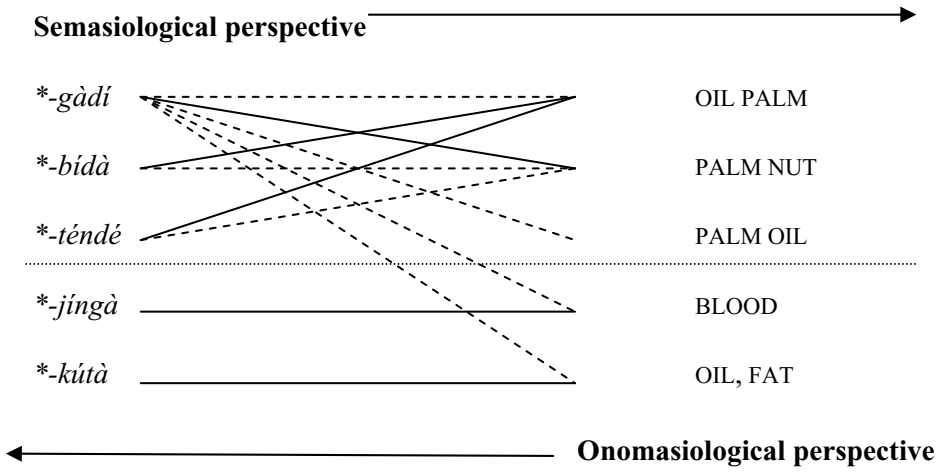

Figure 1 Semasiological and onomasiological perspective on Bantu oil palm vocabulary

3. Bantu pottery vocabulary and the notion of semantic vagueness

Semantic vagueness is a common feature of human language and of all human languages, but at the same time, one of the most problematic and less studied areas of semantics. In the literature, ‘vagueness’ is often contrasted with the concepts of ‘fuzziness’, ‘generality’ and ‘ambiguity’, but their distinction is not always clear. The interpretation and analysis of vagueness are not clear-cut matters and its relation to ‘polysemy’ is tricky (DEVOS 2003; GEERAERTS 1993; LAKOFF 1970; ULLMANN 1957; ZHANG 1998). The aim of this paper is definitely not to contribute to the theoretical debate on this issue, but rather to assess the methodological implications of the phenomenon of ‘semantic vagueness’ for the aptitude of linguistic palaeontology as a historical method.

The test case for method I wish to develop here is that of the semantic field of pot-making in Bantu, and more especially that of the semi-specialized verbs which constitute its conceptual center. As I have shown elsewhere (BOSTOEN 2005a), the number of Common Bantu verbs that refer to the craft of pottery making is relatively limited and manifest similar semantic properties. They can be considered as specialized because nearly all Bantu languages dispose of a specific verb that all

speakers of a given language associate with the craft and that is not a simple syntagm of a verb meaning ‘to make, to produce’ and a noun meaning ‘clay pot’. These verbs refer to the craft in its entirety, without being genuinely generic terms, but also to several more precise technical operations and instruments involved through verbal and nominal derivations. With respect to these technical aspects of the craft, the verbs unmodified by derivational affixes refer most typically to the fashioning phase, which actually constitutes the quintessence of the pottery production chain. They are undetermined however vis-à-vis the different most common African fashioning techniques, i.e. molding, pounding, drawing of a (ring-shaped) lump, superimposing and drawing of large rings, and coiling (GOSSELAIN 2000: 202). Two communities applying a same shaping technique may use different verbs, while, inversely, two communities using the same verb may have distinct shaping techniques. Consequently, from a historical point of view, the reconstructtion of such a verb into a given Bantu proto-language, be it in Proto-Bantu or in a more regional proto-language, may indicate the existence of the craft as such, but it will remain necessarily insignificant as regards its technical evolution.

What is more, even if these most Common Bantu verbs represent the craft in its entirety, their semantic range is generally not limited to the semantic field of pottery. Hence, it is more convenient to call them ‘semi-specialized’. They are lexically polyvalent in the sense that they may cover at the same time different conceptual fields. The meaning ‘to make pottery’ is at most a specialized instantiation of a more fundamental meaning. Their polysemy has been acknowledged in several individual Bantu languages, but it is even more obvious from a comparative point of view. The making of pots should be seen as the most prototypical of way of fashioning things in clay, but other traditional trades, such as the plastering of mud walls or the building of dirt roads, are also covered in certain languages. The comparative semasiological analysis of one of the most Common Bantu pottery verbs, i.e. *-bÐmb-, has shown that their semantic range may even reach far beyond the use of clay for fashioning purposes. The semantic map in figure 2 attempts to schematize the cross-linguistic polysemy of this Common Bantu verb.

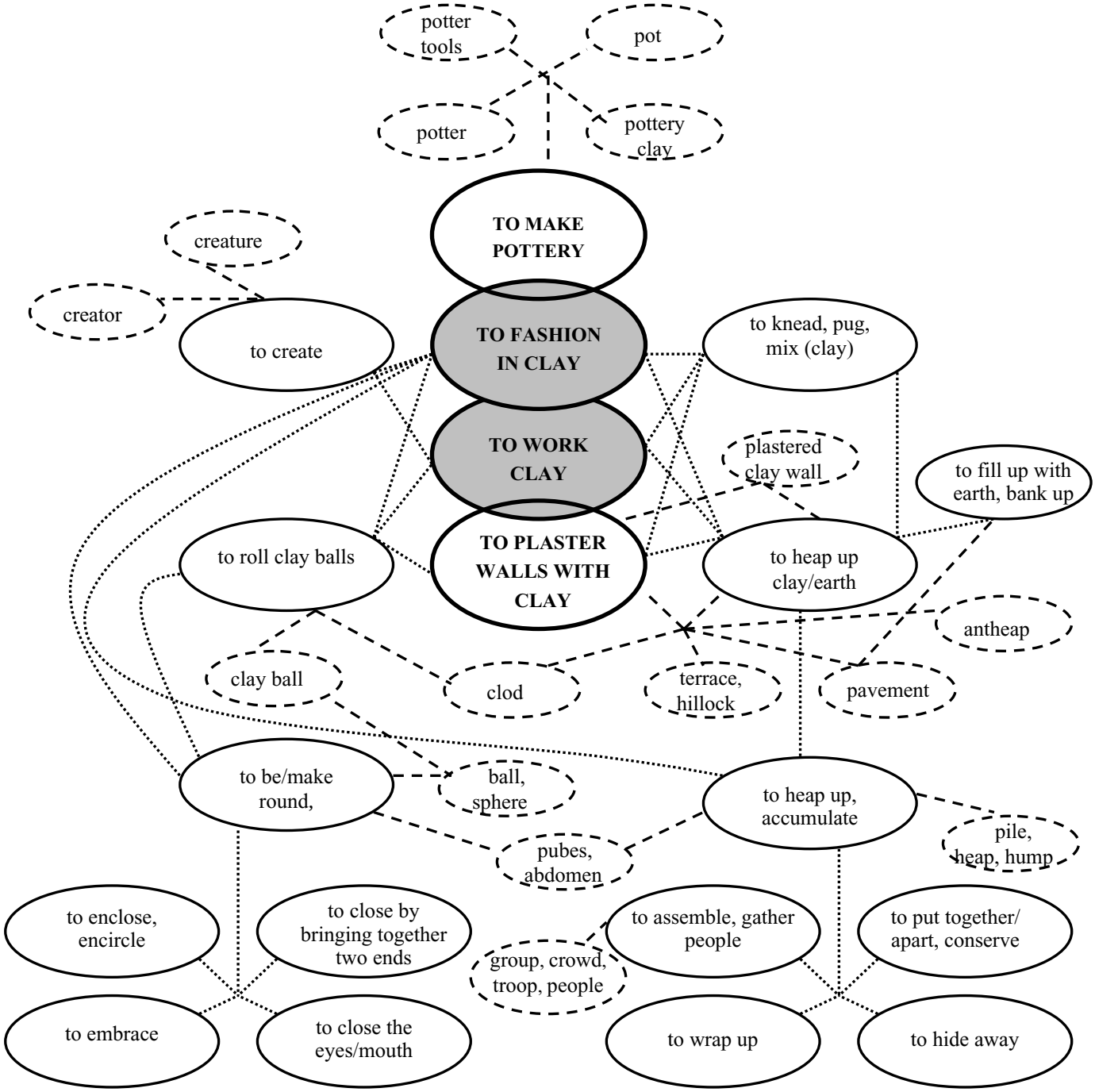

Figure 2 Semantic map representing the cross-linguistic semasiological evolution of the Bantu verb *-búmb-

The semantic map in Figure 2 is meant to synthesize and schematize the different meanings that are associated with the verb *-búmb- and its derivatives across Bantu languages. The meanings developed by the verbal reflexes of *-búmb-, either modified by derivational suffixes or not, constitute the principal components of this scheme. They are outlined with a full line. All meanings of nominal derivations are outlined and linked with their verbal source by striped lines. The dotted lines represent possible semantic relationships between the different verbal reflex senses. It should be stressed that this scheme does not intend at all to represent the exact diachronic semasiological development of this verb. It is simply the result of an attempt to find out whether the numerous reflexes of *-búmb- manifesting a plethora of meanings represent a case of polysemy or rather a situation of homonymy, as others had suggested before. GUTHRIE (1970), for instance, reconstructed two homonymous verb roots, i.e. *-búmb- 'to put away, store; to hide' (C.S. 198) and *-búmb- 'to mould pottery' (C.S. 199). It is true that the interrelationship between meanings, such as 'to store away', 'to embrace', 'to mould pottery', and 'to close the eyes', is not evident when one considers each of them individually. However, if one takes together all different meanings and shades of meaning, it turns out to be possible to link them via many little steppingstones implying that we have to do with polysemy rather than with homonymy. The semantic map should thus be seen as an attempt to structure this synchronic cross-linguistic polysemy of the verb in the best possible and most logical way.

To come to such a tentacular semantic network composed of multiple nodes of related and imbricate meanings, which cluster around a central node with some main instantiations, I have been largely inspired by insights from diachronic prototype semantics, notably by the work of GEERAERTS (1997). The semantic structure of the verb *-búmb- can easily be accounted for in terms a prototypical category, if one considers the four properties often cited as typical of prototypicality: (1) prototypical categories exhibit degrees of typicality, since not all members not equally representative; (2) they exhibit a family resemblance structure, in the sense that their semantic structure takes the form of a radial set of clustered and overlapping readings; (3) they are blurred at the edges; and (4) they cannot be defined by a single set of criteria (GEERAERTS 1997:11). Research has revealed that synchronically speaking, semasiological categories have a dominant core that is the prototypical instantiation of the category. This core is surrounded by peripheral instantiations that deviate not only in one or more features from the more central cases but are also less frequent. The core is also structurally dominant, since it constitutes the area where the sets in the semasiological cluster exhibit maximal overlap. From diachronic point of view, semasiological categories show increasing flexibility. The core area remains intact, but periphery gets more and more extended, because the allowed variation grows broader and broader. The number of peripheral instantiations grows and their degree of deviation from the prototype increases (GEERAERTS 1997:39-41).

If we apply this approach to the synchronic cross-linguistic polysemy of the Bantu verb *-búmb-, the meanings ‘to work clay’ and ‘to fashion in clay’ can be taken to form the dominant core of this semasiological category. It is possible to derive all other meanings from them, be it directly or indirectly, and they are also the most attested meanings across Bantu languages. The semantically closest and statistically next most frequent instantiations of this prototypical core are the craft-related specializations ‘to make pottery’ and ‘to plaster with clay’. As I have shown elsewhere (BOSTOEN 2005a), these instantiations are widespread in Bantu but not omnipresent, in the sense that they occur in certain subgroups but not all major subgroups. This denotes that they are probably later specializations of a meaning that was more general in the beginning. Around this most central instantiations, we observe meanings that gradually move away from the dominant core by losing one or more of the prototypical features. An important stage in this process of alienation from the category’s centre is the dissociation of its meaning from the raw material, i.e. the clay, which is present in all central instantiations. The loss of this prototypical characteristic allows the semantic network of the verb to radiate considerably in order to form a family resemblance structure and to increase its lexical valence. The marginality of these meanings cannot only be deduced from the fact that they are much more rare cross-linguistically, but also from the fact that they are most often expressed by morphologically derived verb forms, modified by suffixes like -an-, -akan-, -at- or -ûd-. Moreover, it is not always straightforward to divine from which more central instantiations these meanings in the periphery are derived. Contrary to what we are used to in diachronic phonology, regular and linear shifts are impossible to reconstruct. However, as GEERAERTS (1997:45-62) showed by way of the diachronic semasiological development of the Dutch verb *vergrijpen* between 1500–1900, the joint influence of several existing meanings may give rise to new meanings. An individual meaning may thus have multiple origins, suggesting a prototypical structure of partially overlapping readings without clear boundaries. In the case of *-búmb-, meanings like ‘to roll clay balls’ and ‘to heap up clay or earth’ seem indeed to be linked to the act of kneading and pugging of clay, which is a preparatory phase in the pot-making production chain, but the plastering of clay walls, for example, also involves the heaping up of clay. This vagarious nature of semantic change accounts for the maze of dotted lines in Figure 2. What is more, these more peripheral readings of the more central instantiations do not subsist in time, but tend to crop up occasionally, a phenomenon called ‘semantic polygenesis’ (GEERAERTS 1997:62). So, as regards *-búmb-, the more marginal meaning may pop up and vanish again repeatedly and independently at different times and in different languages, which explains why they are far less attested and much more scattered across Bantu languages. Only the dominant core is stable through time and thus historically relevant.

What is true for *-búmb-, also holds for the other Bantu pottery verbs. Although no detailed diachronic semasiological analyses are available for them so far, the sense

'to make pottery' appears to be not more than a specialized instantiation of a more general dominant core. Similar observations have been made for verbs linked to other important crafts like metallurgy (DE MARET & NSUKA 1977; KLEIN-ARENDT 2004). The dominant core of their semantic structure is historically the most pertinent, since it the most persistent in time. However, this core is at the same time quite vague, and thus lexically polyvalent. Consequently, the historical information one can infer from their reconstruction is necessarily quite rudimentary. On the other hand, more detailed technical information associated with certain stages of the production chain are conveyed by more peripheral meanings which are much less stable through time and may rise independently from each other. They have a much more scattered distribution cross-linguistically and can have risen in a convergent way through Common Bantu derivational procedures. Consequently, they do not necessarily indicate shared history.

This kind of semantic vagueness combined with lexical polyvalence is certainly not limited to the verbs that are at the centre of the pottery related semantic field. Other categories of this conceptual domain actually show very similar features. This is for example the case for other pottery terms that have persisted in time, such as the earliest inherited Bantu names for two basic types of pottery, i.e. *-bìgá '(cooking) pot' and *-jùngú 'cooking pot'. Both terms have been reconstructed in Proto-Bantu. A comparative semasiological analysis of their current-day reflexes has allowed to assume that *-jùngú must have designated a type of pot used for cooking food in water. The original meaning of *-bìgá is more difficult to reconstruct, since the types of pots to which its current-day reflexes refer is much more diverse. It may have been a co-hyponym of *- jùngú, referring to another type of cooking pot, or maybe more likely, a hyperonym in the sense that it was the generic name for clay pot, either referring at the same time to a specific type of pot which was seen as the most prototypical representation of this category or not. However, what matters to the present discussion is not so much the precise type of pot to which these proto-forms referred, but rather the fact that their dominant semasiological core was sufficiently vague for these nouns to be maintained in the vocabulary of numerous Bantu languages. Despite the many changes pottery underwent through the ages, in shape and function as well as in terms of the composition of the entire pottery assortment, their semasiological structure was flexible enough to prevent that these extra-linguistic innovations necessarily induced onomasiological changes within the conceptual field. A change in the material culture does not necessarily trigger a change in the vocabulary. Therefore, cognate terms originating from one of the above proto-form may currently refer to quite different types of pots, both functionally and morphologically. This makes it particularly hard to get a precise idea of the shapes and functions of the pots originally designated by these terms and thus to draw possible parallels with pottery types known from the archaeological record. Moreover, what is true for inherited vocabulary like *-bìgá and *-jùngú, also holds for widespread borrowed vocabulary. Given that loanwords

generally designate imported culture, a loanword referring to a particular kind of pot can be assumed to have entered the vocabulary of a language when its speech community assimilated the very object through contact. As a result, one would expect that a loanword shared by many languages is associated with the same type of pottery in all these communities. The case of the –bûngû loanword, which I developed elsewhere more extensively (BOSTOEN 2005a), illustrates that this is not necessarily so. This term is a borrowing that diffused from the Kongo-speaking coastal area through the Atlantic trade network far into the hinterland. Although this word most often designates a kind of jug or pitcher, this is certainly not always the case. In certain languages, it may refer to a kind of cooking pot and even to a clay pipe. Not only the functions of the pots vary considerably, also the shapes differ. Moreover, the farther removed from the coast, the more fluctuating the meanings become, as if the more the word got diffused, the loser became the association with its original extra-linguistic referent. In terms of semasiological evolution, one could assume that the dominant core got more and more diluted and that peripheral instantiations start to gain the upper hand. Consequently, even if it is evidence of past contact, the present-day geographic distribution of the word cannot be taken as the true reflection of the diffusion path of particular item of material culture, or at best only partially. Once more, language history and cultural history have taken divergent paths.

4. Bantu pottery vocabulary and cross-linguistic lexical fragmentation

The Bantu pottery vocabulary which has been most resistant to change and which should thus be the most telling on the early history of this craft turns out to be semantically quite vague and related to the more general concepts of this semantic field, such as “to make pottery”, “pot” and “pottery clay”. Although the reconstruction of such a vocabulary gives access to basic information on the early history of the craft, it is quite insignificant as regards important technical evolutions to which pot-making was subject through the ages. On the other hand, the comparative study of vocabulary related to the techniques and implements characteristic of the different phases in the pottery production chain, such as the preparation of the raw materials, the actual fashioning, the decoration, the firing and the post-firing treatment, is historically not unproblematic either, as I have demonstrated elsewhere in more detail than I will do here (BOSTOEN 2004a/b, 2005a). Two impeding phenomena for linguistic palaeontology can basically be distinguished.

The first is actually closely related to the phenomenon of semantic vagueness described above. The vocabulary of certain stages of the pottery production chain is not specialized in the sense that it would be unique to the jargon of potters. Especially vocabulary linked to the preparation of clay and the firing of pottery is shared with other conceptual fields, most notably the production and preparation of food, because the operations and tools involved in both activities correspond to a

high degree. The mortar and pestle used for the crushing of dried clay are not different from the ones used in the kitchen and are thus not designated differently. The kneading of clay involves the same acts as the firmly and repeatedly pressing with the hands and fingers of pasty foodstuffs, just like the baking of pots and food. As a consequence, the fact that several Bantu languages share the verbs *-kànd- for kneading clay and *-jòk- or *-tùmb- for firing pots does not necessarily tell us much about the history of these components of the pottery production chain. A second encumbering factor is rather typical for the production stages that are characteristic of pot-making, such as the different fashioning and decoration techniques, i.e. a total cross-linguistic fragmentation of the vocabulary. Inasmuch as this technical vocabulary is documented in the literature and insofar as my own fieldwork among different Bantu-speaking potters has allowed to observe, the percentage of shared vocabulary between Bantu languages for these specific semantic subfields appears to be very low. These happen to be conceptual subfields that are particularly liable to lexical innovation. Besides semantic change through the specific use of pre-existing words with a more general meaning, the most common onomasiological strategy involved in this varying verbalization is word-formation by the modification of inherited vocabulary. Regular Bantu verb-to-verb and verb-to-noun derivation strategies are used to derive language-specific words from verbs that are often Common Bantu and are not especially related to pottery. In Zulu (S42) and Bukusu (J31c), for instance, the noun referring to the clay coil used for building up a pot is derived from the same Common Bantu verb *-búdûng- meaning ‘to be round; make round; surround’ (BASTIN ET AL. 2003), but by means of different derivational morphemes, i.e. umBulunga (DOKE & VILAKAZI 1949:91) and embulungusie (NANGENDO 1994:260) respectively. In both languages, the source verb is used to refer to the rolling of the clay between the palms of the hands in order to make coils, but has at the same time a more general meaning. Once more the semantically vague dominant core of the verb gets a more precise instantiation through its application to a specific technical context without necessarily implying what EVANS (2003:20-23) has described as the semanticization of pragmatic interference. Even if this particular use of the verb is characteristic for the socio-economic category of potters, ordinary speakers of the language also know it and use it in other contexts. This is less the case for nominal deverbatives, which tend to be more specialized in the sense that they are only known by the potters themselves. With respect to the method of linguistic palaeontology, most important is the striking absence of inherited vocabulary and borrowings from the conceptual subfields of pottery fashioning and decoration. Cross-linguistic lexical correspondences are thus rare and most often the result of convergent derivation strategies, like it is the case for the Zulu and Bukusu examples above. This is particularly annoying for a method which embraces the equation ‘shared vocabulary = shared history’ as a basic premise. The lexical field covering these semantic subfields has been diversified to an extent that it no longer

holds the potential of historical reconstruction. Nonetheless, this extreme lexical fragmentation could make sense historically, if it could be considered as a normal reaction to the rapid spread of material culture across ethno-linguistic boundaries. The adoption of foreign culture is usually accompanied by either the borrowing of foreign vocabulary or the formation of new vocabulary in the language of the receiving community. Such a scenario might be plausible for decoration techniques of which ethno-archaeological research has demonstrated that they are easy to imitate, to learn and thus to borrow. Rouletting offers a case in point of such a technique, whose current-day sub-Saharan distribution is remarkably contiguous and transects several major language phyla and of which archaeological findings indicate that it was subject to a rapid spread (GOSSELAIN 2000). This is less likely in the case of shaping techniques, which are more stable in space and time, though not frozen. They may also be modified through borrowing and innovation like other stages of the production chain, but their transmission tends to be inter-generational and their stability appears to be deliberately sought by potters. Therefore, they are often considered as an inheritance and the material correlates of social boundaries (GOSSELAIN 2000, 2007). Accordingly, inherited vocabulary could be viewed as the most likely correlate of this cultural transmission within ethno-linguistic boundaries. Nevertheless, such is not the case at all. As regards coiling, for instance, although potters from many different Bantu speech communities shape pots with this technique, and have done this for generations on end as can be concluded from the archaeological record, none of them share the same technical vocabulary, even not when they speak very closely related languages. Hence, material culture shared through inheritance does not necessarily correlate with inherited vocabulary. Moreover, there is a clear-cut discrepancy between the high ethnographic salience of the shaping techniques, which constitute the most characteristic part and the very quintessence of the pottery production chain and are also conceived in that way by the potters themselves, and their low lexical salience in the sense that the transmission of their vocabulary does not seem to really matter. The precise reasons for this discrepancy are not well understood yet, but the phenomenon is definitely not restricted to Bantu nor to the craft of pottery. Similar tendencies have been observed, for example, with respect to the diffusion of 'recuperation metallurgy' in western Africa (VAN DER VEKEN 2006).

5. Conclusion

SCHRADER (1907:20) set out the basic premise of linguistic palaeontology as follows: 'Wenn ein Wort in gleicher Form und gleicher Bedeutung [...] in allen oder mehreren Sprachen des indog. Stammes wiederkehrt, so muss dieses Wort schon in der indog. Ursprache gegolten und mithin der von ihm bezeichnete Begriff schon in der Urzeit existiert haben'. As an exponent of the *Wörter und Sachen* movement, he stressed the equality of meaning and form and the notion of cross-linguistic

lexical recurrence as necessary conditions for exploiting current-day languages with a view to build hypotheses on the prehistory of their speakers.

A good understanding of the diachronic semantic evolutions is obviously essential to get access to the original extra-linguistic referent of a word and thus to come to reliable cultural historical conclusions. In this paper, I have argued that against common practice in studies in linguistic palaeontology on African prehistory, a sound diachronic semantic approach is only possible if individual words and concepts are studied as part of wider lexical and semantic fields and if one acknowledges that lexical change results from an intricate interaction between onomasiological and semasiological evolutions.

All the same, one has to admit that the nature of semantic change is such that the kind of historical information to which linguistic palaeontology lends itself is often rather sketchy without much cultural or technical detail. The lexemes, which are most stable in space and time and which are transmitted through inheritance or contact, are not necessarily the most revealing ones culturally. Their durability can be attributed, at least partially, to their semantic vagueness, which allows them to adapt themselves to evolutions in the extra-linguistic world. Their semantic core is sufficiently vague for them not to be affected by cultural change. Minor evolutions in the material and immaterial culture – or in any case what speakers conceive as minor evolutions – are not automatically reflected in the vocabulary, while the reverse is no doubt also true.

If cross-linguistic lexical recurrence is an indispensable notion for the basic premise of linguistic palaeontology, it is obvious that the lack of lexical correspondences is a serious threat to its success. Nonetheless, such a lexical fragmentation is precisely what is observed within certain semantic (sub)fields. What is more, the culturally most salient aspects of conceptual domain often turn out to be the most peripheral lexically. As regards pottery, for instance, the gestures and instruments belonging to the most characteristic production phases of this craft happen to be the ones that are most prone to lexical innovation in the Bantu languages. Due to this and the fact that the diachronically most stable lexemes covering this semantic field only refer to the more general concepts, it is most often beyond the bounds of the possible to retrieve from language any detailed historical information on, for example, shaping and decoration techniques or functions and forms of pottery types in early Bantu speech communities. In such a context, a close-knit interdisciplinary integration of linguistic and archaeological findings becomes particularly difficult.

The existence of impeding factors as semantic vagueness and cross-linguistic lexical fragmentation does not so much cast doubt on linguistic palaeontology as a useful approach to African prehistory, it only pleads for some modesty when applying it. Or to say it with LEHMANN (1970:2), '[… language can] be used only as a diacritic, not as a primary source for reconstruction of early culture […]'.

References

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