CHAPTER TEN

PERCEPTION IN LUSSESE (BANTU, J 10)

Marilena Thanassoula

1 Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to examine the meaning and the use of the words expressing sensory experience with special reference to some verbs of perception in Lussese. Since the following empirical data are based on my PhD thesis, I will discuss here the first findings of a work in progress and make some preliminary notes about possible theoretical approaches regarding the linguistic expression of perception in this language. First I will give some introductory information about the grammar of Lussese. After an overview of the domain of perception exemplified by the verbs of perception we will focus on the domains of audition and vision. I will argue that both the grammar and the meanings of the Lussese counterparts for ‘hear’ and ‘see’ reflect primary cultural categories. We will see that the verb -húlirà ‘hear’ covers much more semantic domains than the verbs expressing vision. Still the frequency and rich polysemy of the verb -húlirà do not support the claim that the visual domain lacks symbolic values or, in other words, that the visual domain might be less important in comparison to the auditory: Demonstrating the metaphoric power and the cultural significance of the visual domain color terms will serve representing qualities primarily associated with vision.1 Some examples of the use of color terms will show that the interpretation of colors again depends on cultural concepts.

At the end I will discuss the empirical data with respect to theoretical issues concerning the language of perception: I will argue that the choice to categorize meanings of the sensory verbs as being more “basic” compared to others, hence peripheral, meanings seems to be for Lussese, as well as the two major neighboring languages, Luganda and Lusoga, an inappropriate approach, since some of the “peripheral meanings” cannot be expressed by other verbs in these languages. Further I will argue that a

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1 On colors and synaesthesia see Majid et al. 2009.
modal hierarchy of the various domains of sensory experience must take into account cultural concepts; again the choice which domain of perception should be considered as the most “prominent” one is rather a matter of innate cultural interpretation regarding the human body and the environment than a matter of the human body and the environment as given by biological and/or physical conditions.

1.1 Language and Speakers

Lussese is an East African Bantu language. This linguistic variety is spoken in Uganda, on the Ssese Islands, located at the coast of the capital city, Kampala. The Ssese archipelago in the northwest of Lake Victoria consists of 84 Islands, 37 of which are inhabited. Although the total population amounts to some 35,000 people (last census 2002) the indigenous language of the islands is almost extinct. These days the few remaining Lussese speakers are over 80 years old, further they do not have regular contacts with each other. The local Lingua Franca is Luganda, the status of Lussese is basically seen as one of four dialects of the former.

Benue Congo
  Bantoid
    Southern
      Narrow Bantu
        Central: Group J
          Group J10: Hema, Hima, Ganda, Soga, Gwere. Dialects of Luganda: Ludiopa, Lukooki, Lussese, Luvuma

Figure 10.1. Linguistic affiliation of Lussese

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2 Criteria to distinguish between language and dialect include political, social and economic aspects, thus they will be not considered here; Luganda, Lussese and Lusoga will all be referred to as separate languages.