

THE 'WORDS AND THINGS' METHOD

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Suppose you want to put archaeological potsherds in functional context: what did people prepare in these pots, and how? Laboratory analyses may reveal whether they were used for boiling foodstuffs or conservation purposes. However, due to climatic conditions and soil acidity in tropical Africa, the chance of finding diagnostic organic residues is extremely remote. Food processing also implies a series of stages that hardly leaves any traces in the archaeological record, many kitchen utensils being made of organic, hence perishable, materials. In sum, the direct evidence delivered by archaeology and related studies (see chapter 5) cannot answer all historical questions. Indirect evidence in the form of words may provide a solution (see Bostoen, this volume, pp. 257-260). The comparative linguistic study of contemporary words for plants, animals, tools and technologies offers insights into their past. The name for this type of historical-linguistic research – 'Words and Things' – underlines its relevance for the history of material culture. Nevertheless, it may also be used for the history of ideas or cultural concepts, like socio-political structures and religion.²

The following paragraphs offer a step-by-step guide for the 'Words and Things' method, illustrated with examples from food history. The first step is data gathering. When a large number of language varieties is concerned, retrieving words from dictionaries and glossaries may suffice. However, specialized vocabulary is often missing, making fieldwork necessary. When a smaller linguistic subgroup is studied, it is advisable to make field recordings in order to cover dialectal differences, since these may be historically significant. To apply 'Word and Things' in the field is to combine ethnographic observation and linguistic inquiry. In case of material culture, it is important to document the entire *chaîne opératoire* (see Gosselain, this volume, pp. 292-295). The ethnographic observation allows both for a better understanding of a word's meaning and the recording of specialized vocabulary. **Table 1** offers the example of cassava preparations (Ricquier 2013) with words in five language varieties of the Kongo group for which little literature is available.

When collecting vocabulary, linguistic elements such

Table 1. The *chaîne opératoire* of making cassava porridge in five Kongo varieties.

	Vili	Yombe	Kunyi	Kamba	Sundi
cassava (generic)	mayák(a) (or meyáka)	mayáka	mayák(a)	mayáka	mayáka
to soak/to ret	-íín(ik)-	-íín-	-íín-	-yinik-	-inik-
place where the tubers are soaked	-	kísíma	kicinga	bandá	bandá
to peel the tuber	-túúnd-	-túúnd-	-yúbul-	-tund-	-kátul-
to wash the tuber	-súkul-	-súkul-	-	-súkul-	-súkul-
soaked tuber	liyáka libóómb	-	diyáka di máamba	kikóóngo (kiá máamba)/ mukédi	cikédi
to dry in the sun	-ánik-	-ánik-	-anik-	-yánik- / (-yúúmís-)	-yánik-
drying shelf	cyângə	kíyaanga	-	kitálaka	cítálaka
dried cassava	cikoongo	kíkooongo	kikóngó	kikóóngo (kiá yuma)	fúfu
to pound	-tuut-	-tuut-	-tók-	-tuut-	-tuut-
mortar	cyúfu	kívu	kídu	kidú	cítuutulú
pestle	ńti cyúfu	múfu	muswá	mutí / mwáána múúsú	mutí
to sift	-	-yéngis-	-yengis-	-yengos-	yengizá
sieve	-	kíyéngis(a)	kíyengelé	kíyengosó	cíyengoló
flour	fúf(u)	fúfu	kitó	fufu	fúfu
to stir flour in hot water	-vóót-	-vóot-	-hóót-	-hot-	-ot-
stirring stick	ńti fúfu	nti	lukú	múukú	mwiikú
pot	nzúúngu	nzúúngu	kísa	nzúúngu	ndzúúngu
porridge	fúf(u)	fúfu	kitó	fufu	fúfu

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2 A discussion of the history of the method and its applications to the pre-colonial history of sub-Saharan Africa can be found in Bostoen (2005:8-18). Ricquier & Bostoen (2010) offer an overview of results obtained by means of the Words and Things method with respect to the food history of Bantu speech communities. Lexical reconstructions have been made for several African language groups. The online database by Bastin *et al.* (2002) assembles most lexical reconstructions that have been proposed for Bantu languages.

as noun classes and tone must be taken into account. Another precaution is to have a questionnaire at hand since ethnographic observations may not cover all known practices.

The Words and Things approach usually starts with ‘onomasiology’, namely the study of words expressing a given concept. These words are paired to their possible ‘cognates’, words that are similar in form and meaning and thus probably share a common history. Each set of cognates is subjected to a formal analysis. Inherited words have undergone sound changes specific to the respective languages and the outcome displays regular sound correspondences with the cognates in related languages. The examples in **Table 2** display regular sound and tone correspondences.

	Ewondo (North-west Bantu, A72)	Venda (East Bantu, S21)	BLR
Example	<i>dúg</i> ‘to row’	<i>-bviúwa</i> ‘to beat up porridge’	*-dúg-
Compare with	<i>dum</i> ‘to thunder’ <i>túg</i> ‘to subject (a slave)’	<i>-bvúma</i> ‘to thunder’ <i>-fiúwa</i> ‘to keep livestock; to keep and handle people expertly, as patron, protector’	*-dúm- *-túg-

table 2. Sound correspondence (Reflexes from Tsala (s.d.: 127, 128, 631) and Van Warmelo (1989: 18, 19, 60), reconstructions from Bastin *et al.* (2002), detailed discussion of the example in Ricquier (2013).)

Loanwords typically display irregular sound correspondences, especially when complex sound changes should have been in play. Sometimes, however, sound changes are minimal and cannot be used to identify loans. East-Bantu nouns with the form *unga* meaning ‘flour’ are a good example, since they could be inherited from Proto-East Bantu or borrowed from Swahili (see discussion in Ricquier 2013). Loans can also be distinguished from inherited vocabulary by their geographical distribution. When forms occur in a continuous region, it is likely that the distribution is the result of borrowing, especially when crosscutting linguistic boundaries. In contrast, a distribution in the form of distant dots on the map, with cognates in different linguistic subgroups, suggests common inheritance. The immediate common ancestor of the languages involved then indicates the word’s age. The Ewondo and Venda examples illustrated above belong to a series that

has cognates in all major Bantu subgroups. The immediate common ancestor consequently is Proto-Bantu. This step implies the insertion of the linguistic data into the genetic classification of the languages involved.

Next, inherited forms are subjected to a ‘semasiological’ analysis, meaning the study of a word’s semantic history. Often, the cognates belong to different semantic fields. Ewondo *dúg*, for example, is part of the semantic field of navigation, whereas its Venda cognate refers to a cooking technique. The latter is a metaphorical extension of the first semantic value: both actions involve the circular movement of a wooden instrument in water. Geography is again in play here. When a given meaning occurs in different linguistic subgroups, whereas another is limited to a smaller language group, the first is more likely to reflect the original semantic value. As for the example offered, the meanings ‘to row with a paddle’ occur in all Bantu subgroups, whereas ‘to stir porridge’ is an East-Bantu innovation.

Sometimes, a word is not inherited or borrowed, but created. Neologisms frequently stem from derivation: for example, in Xeso (West Bantu, C52), *mòpùlùngù* ‘stirring stick’ derives from the verb *-pùlùng-* ‘to stir porridge’ (Ricquier fieldnotes 2010). Other types of neologisms include composition, word blending, eponymy (derivation from the name of a place or region), and the imitation of sounds, or onomatopoeia.

As soon as the etymology of the words for a given concept has been unraveled, the history of these words may be turned into a history of things or ideas. Inherited words refer to realities that were familiar to the ancestors. When an inherited word underwent a semantic shift, or when a new word was created, this may point to the introduction or invention of a new reality. Loanwords, finally, are indicators of novelties adopted from other communities. For example, no word for ‘stirring porridge’ can be traced back to Proto-Bantu, but a reconstruction could be made for two subgroups – East and Southwest Bantu (see Ricquier & Bostoen 2011; Ricquier 2013). This indicates that the cooking technique was new to the first speech communities of the mentioned subgroups.

The final step is to integrate the historical interpretation of comparative linguistic analysis into a known historical context. For the example discussed here, the new insights regarding culinary history need to be linked to the available knowledge about the relevant historical speech communities as well as plant history. Thanks to

historical-linguistic research, we know that the first East and Southwest Bantu speech communities lived in savannah areas where they adopted cereal cultivation. The new cooking technique must have been intended for the preparation of this new starch ingredient (see Ricquier & Bostoen 2011; Ricquier 2013).

Several obstacles need of course to be acknowledged. As the 'Words and Things' method develops in the present, we only have access to the origins of *existing* words and practices. What is lost can no longer be recovered by linguistic means. Second, languages do not always have specialized terms for specific extra-linguistic realities, making it impossible to study their history by means of comparative linguistics (see Bostoen 2009 on 'semantic vagueness'). For instance, in many Bantu languages grindstones are simply named 'stone for grinding' or 'stone for [a certain foodstuff]', nouns too vague to be relevant for food history. Next, a word's history may reveal the time at which a certain practice or tool came into fashion but still conceal its origins. Loanwords indicate the source of inspiration, but when an inherited word underwent a semantic shift or when people use neologisms, no link can be established with other communities. Finally, the interpretation of the results obtained by the 'Words and Things' method largely depends on the classification of the languages involved. Choosing between different classifications often implies choosing between common inheritance or language contact.

Despite these drawbacks, the 'Words and Things' approach can offer valuable insights into matters for which archaeological data cannot be consulted. Moreover, historical-linguistic conclusions have proven to be a trigger of further archaeological and archaeobotanical debate, as in the case of bananas and cereals (see chapter 5) (see the summary in Ricquier & Bostoen 2010).

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