Changing the leopard's spots: changing and exchanging color pattern and megafauna terms.

Samuel Beer (Metropolitan State University of Denver)

Throughout Africa, megafauna terms are notable both for their fragility and for their tremendous geographical reach. Terms for animals like lions, giraffes, and rhinos are often unreconstructible due to the lack of any particular root with widespread attestations within a family, and yet common roots (such as %meri) for such animals (in this case, leopards) can also be found from Songhay in the northwest to Datooga in the southeast, spanning at least three of the four phyla (Nilo-Saharan, Niger-Congo, and Afro-Asiatic). These two distributional facts (instability within families, exuberance in crossing language family boundaries) have left megafauna terms as dubious prospects for the reconstruction of proto-languages. However, these same distributional facts also point to the promise of megafauna terms for reconstructing past sociocultural scenarios: within-family instability of roots indicates that megafauna terms are domains of accelerated lexical replacement, and inter-family mobility of roots indicates that transfer has been a common strategy used to feed the demand for new terms.

This paper traces the trajectories of an ecosystem of roots related to spottedness. The notion of spottedness connects roots used to label megafauna species like leopards and giraffes to livestock color patterns, and roots such as %meri 'leopard/spotted', %kori 'giraffe/spotted', and %gwec 'giraffe/leopard' each exhibit semantic variation across these domains, sometimes within a single language, as in Karimojong, in which a simple form form of %meri means 'leopard' and a derived form means 'spotted'. In other languages, such as Maa, 'leopard' is the more morphologically complex sense.

These properties of the 'spotted' terms provide a number of avenues for historical interpretation. This paper will take up some of these questions, such as:

What local contact scenarios explain the cross-family distribution of far-flung roots such as %meri? (For example, Eastern Nilotic, Southern Nilotic, Kuliak, and Great Lakes Bantu all have %meri for 'leopard', 'spotted', or both, and Southern Nilotic seems to have played a significant role as a mediator for the spread of the term, as a version of the root in which a regular Southern Nilotic assimilatory process had taken place was borrowed into Eastern Nilotic Karimojong as a doublet on top of two pre-existing versions of the root.)

Is there any correlation between a society's mode of production and whether the animal name or the color term is more morphologically simple? (For example, are languages spoken by hunter-gatherers more likely to have a morphologically simple term for 'giraffe' from which a term for 'spotted' is derived than languages spoken by pastoralists.)

Can the stability or instability of megafauna roots be demonstrably correlated with widespread cultural practices such as taboos against the names of megafauna, terms used to report weapon strikes against particular animals, or expert registers?

The paper will appeal to scholars interested in problems in the reconstruction of terms for culturally salient but linguistically volatile entities, in pathways of semantic shift between color vocabulary and animal vocabulary, or in the effects of sociocultrual organization on language change.