

Understanding Environmental Degradation through African Proverbs

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Abstract

This paper investigates the effects of environmental degradation on humanity, linguistics, knowledge, and culture. This study employs a tripartite theoretical framework to analyze Lāmnso' proverbs: Structural Linguistics, Semiology, and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). Basing its analysis on thirty-nine Lāmnso' proverbs, the study rigorously demonstrates that the extra-linguistic and sociological variables in the data contribute to the process of signification—or meaning generation—in language at both denotative and connotative levels. The paper reveals that geographical environmental degradation has devastating consequences for humanity, linguistics, knowledge, and culture. It argues that environmental degradation is a long-standing concept in African societies, particularly in the Nso' community, dating back as far as the Nso' people, their language (Lāmnso'), and their culture. Furthermore, by presenting fresh and reliable evidence, the study establishes that language is intrinsically linked to environment, knowledge, and culture. Its key contributions include:

1. *Highlighting a previously neglected aspect of linguistic studies—the relevance of geographical environment to meaning generation and effective communication.*
2. *Proposing that game reserves and forest reserves should serve not only as touristic sites but also as knowledge-based, linguistic, and cultural laboratories.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Linguists have long been interested in “ecolinguistics”—the language we use to frame environmental issues. Our ecolinguistic patterns reveal our underlying beliefs (Alwin, 1998). Linguist Halliday argues that the anthropocentric grammar of human languages embeds an ideology positioning humans as separate from nature, framing unlimited growth and resource exploitation as both normal and admirable (Halliday, 1990; 2001). Maiwong (2023) expands this view, asserting that while language may reflect human-nature separation, the relationship between the natural world and language is profoundly interconnected. This linkage, he suggests, represents a slow-moving tragedy, with the fates of both inextricably entwined.

Research further identifies a strong correlation between biodiversity and linguistic diversity (Berlin et al., 1973; Maiwong, 2023). As biological diversity declines, so too does linguistic and cultural diversity (Maiwong, 2023), underscoring nature's centrality to the human experience. Paradoxically, many societies increasingly distance themselves from the natural world. Anthropologist Brent Berlin and colleagues demonstrated universal patterns in how

humans name biological species: across languages and cultures, botanical lexicons evolve systematically, progressing from generic categories to specific varieties as communities deepen their awareness of local flora (Stanley & Brown, 1978; Berlin, 1972; Gary et al., 2002).

In linguistically diverse indigenous communities, abundant biodiversity fosters rich folk taxonomies and traditional ecological knowledge (Christine & Todd, 2009; Laferriere, 1987). Language thus not only reflects but actively shapes our environmental perceptions—with consequences extending far beyond climate crisis discourse (Maiwong, 2023).

Environmental degradation extends far beyond physical, economic, and biological consequences—it also devastates linguistic systems, knowledge transmission, and cultural heritage. This threefold impact affects:

1. Communication effectiveness
2. Knowledge preservation
3. Cultural expression (including the understanding and promotion of societal values).

This paper illuminates these understudied linguistic, cognitive, and cultural consequences of environmental degradation, bringing critical attention to a neglected dimension of ecolinguistic research.

We argue that when proverbs persist in usage while their concrete environmental referents disappear, the original relationship between statement and meaning becomes arbitrary and obscured. Consequently, these proverbs lose their axiological power to endorse certain values or critique specific attitudes and practices.

Furthermore, the paper posits that losing a proverb's connotative meaning leads to:

- A trivialization of social values.
- The erroneous reduction of proverbs to mere denotative statements.

Were this the case, metaphorical richness would serve no purpose—and there is no evidence these proverbs were ever created to promote *l'art pour l'art*.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The role of extra-linguistic and sociological variables in language has been extensively examined by leading linguists, semiologists, and semanticists. While space constraints permit only a selective overview, key contributions include:

Barthes (1964; 1967) demonstrates that signs acquire cultural meanings beyond their representational function when reaching second-order signification, thereby becoming connotative agents that convey values, emotions, and attitudes.

Fairclough (1995) asserts that rigorous linguistic analysis must engage with social and cultural practices, uncovering the implicit motivations embedded in texts. This aligns with Wodak & Meyer (2001), Fairclough (1995), and Kristeva (1986), who collectively emphasize:

1. The necessity of historical-social knowledge for language interpretation.
2. The critical examination of ideological subtexts (cf. Widdowson's (2000) framework for "uncovering implicit ideologies in texts").

3. The intertextual and interdiscursive relationships linking utterances, texts, genres, and discourses.

Löbner (2002) further illustrates how connotative meaning relies on cultural knowledge—e.g., the term *pig* conventionally connotes ‘dirtiness’ despite the existence of clean pigs.

This study’s contribution lies in:

- Its novel dataset (*Lămnso*’ proverbs) and analytical scope.
- Pioneering emphasis on geographical environment as a determinant of linguistic meaning, knowledge systems, and cultural values.
- Systematic examination of environmental degradation’s multidimensional impacts (humanity, linguistics, knowledge, culture).

3. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a tripartite theoretical framework to analyze *Lămnso*’ proverbs:

1. Structural Linguistics

- Analyzes lexical/denotative meanings.
- Grounded in de Saussure’s (1959) paradigm: language constructs meaning through shared systems of signification.
- Posits that all communication exemplifies underlying structures governing signifier (form)-signified (content) relationships.

2. Semiology

- Examines extra-linguistic and sociological variables.
- Adopts Barthes’ (1964) premise: communication is inherently motivated and culturally embedded.
- Treats connotative signs as carriers of cultural meanings (values, emotions, attitudes).
- Rejects surface-level interpretations of messages.

3. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

- Views discourse as culturally situated praxis exceeding sentence-level analysis (Wodak & Meyer, 2001; Fairclough, 1995).
- Reveals:
 - Conditions enabling specific discursive productions.
 - Historical transmission of societal knowledge (Kristeva, 1986; Löbner, 2001).
- Provides a macro-analytic lens for interpreting texts as communicative acts.

This integrated approach enables:

- Systematic decoding of proverb semantics (structural).
- Uncovering cultural ideologies (semiological).
- Contextualizing discourses within environmental knowledge systems (CDA).

4. A BRIEF ETHNOGRAPHY OF THE NSO’ PEOPLE

The *Nso* ' people primarily inhabit *Bui Division* in the grasslands of Cameroon's *North West Region*. Their centuries-old centralized governance system is led by:

- A **Paramount Fon** (supreme monarch)
- The **Ngwerong** (regulatory council)
- Subordinate **Fons** (local chiefs)
- **Shuufaays** (nobility lords).

Historical Origins: The *Nso* ' migrated from *Tikari* (Adamawa Region) in 1387. Their dynasty traces its foundation to *Princess Ngonnso* ', the namesake of both the tribe and its capital, *Kumbo*—home to the Paramount Fon's palace.

Cultural & Linguistic Profile :

- **Language:** *Lămnso* ' (language of the *Nso* ') is among Cameroon's most developed indigenous languages, with:
 - Extensive literature.
 - A complete Bible translation.
 - A comprehensive dictionary.
- **Education:** The *Nso* ' are renowned for their high literacy rates, mastering *Lămnso* ', English, and *Cameroonian Pidgin*.
- **Economy:** Predominantly agrarian, with farming and fishing as primary livelihoods.

Ecological Setting: The *Nso* ' homeland features a savanna landscape interspersed with woodlands and gallery forests along waterways.

5. DEFINITION OF SOME CRITICAL TERMS

The following culturally and linguistically African terms are essential for contextual understanding:

1. **Fon**
 - The traditional sovereign ruler/king in *Nso* ' and other Grassfields societies.
 - Serves as both political authority and spiritual custodian of cultural heritage.
2. **Egusi**
 - Protein-rich seeds harvested from cucurbitaceous plants (squash, melon, gourd).
 - Processing: Sun-dried → dehulled → ground into flour.
 - Culinary role: Primary thickening agent and nutrient source in West African soups/stews.
3. **Fufu**
 - Staple carbohydrate dish with regional variations:
 - *Nso* ' version: Typically made from maize/corn flour.
 - Other regions: May use cassava, plantains, or yams.
 - Preparation: Boiled and pounded into elastic dough.
 - Consumption: Served with soups/sauces as a communal meal.

This study adopts *Lămnso* ' colloquialisms as its primary corpus to maintain analytical focus while achieving three objectives:

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1. **Effective Communication:** Colloquialisms utilize concrete imagery that enhances message transmission.
2. **Knowledge Preservation:** They encapsulate historical experiences and cultural convictions.
3. **Cultural Specificity:** They express the *Nso* ' people's values through linguistic artistry.

Corpus Characteristics :

- **Size:** 39 *Lămnso* ' proverbs (presented in a subsequent table with denotative/connotative meanings and implied values).
- **Selection Criteria:**
 - Collected from elder *Lămnso* ' speakers during ceremonial/ritual contexts.
 - Translated to facilitate cross-linguistic comprehension.
- **Scope:**
 - Excludes other *Lămnso* ' linguistic forms (e.g., formal registers).
 - Does not extend to other African languages/communities.

Methodological Constraints :

- **Depth-Breadth Tradeoff:** The limited corpus enables detailed analysis but sacrifices comparative breadth.
- **Representativeness:** While the proverbs are illustrative, they cannot capture the entirety of *Nso* ' ecological-linguistic relationships.

6. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The analysis presents thirty-nine *Lămnso* ' proverbs systematically organized in the accompanying table, detailing:

- **Denotative meanings** (literal interpretations).
- **Connotative meanings** (cultural/symbolic associations).
- **Embedded values and attitudes.**

Methodological Approach: Given the qualitative nature of this study, exhaustive coverage is neither feasible nor necessary. Instead, we employ a **strategic selection** of proverbs to:

1. Provide sufficient evidence for hypothesis testing.
2. Maintain analytical depth while ensuring representativeness.
3. Highlight the intricate relationships between environmental degradation and linguistic/cultural erosion.

Key Analytical Focus: Each proverb will be examined as:

- A **linguistic artifact** reflecting ecological knowledge.
- A **cultural repository** transmitting *Nso* ' values.
- A **case study** in environmental-semiotic interdependence.

S/N	PROVERBS	DENOTATIVE MEANING	CONNOTATIVE MEANING	HUMAN VALUE OR NEGATIVE ATTITUDE
1.	a rà̃m moo bó'	creep like pumpkin	flourish greatly	Progress
2.	a tǎ' moo ndzǎə	flourish like foliage	flourish very much	
3.	kfər nyam shə' loŋ	eat an animal and laugh at the horns	make a mockery of your former benefactor	Ingratitude
4.	tin viruŋ vé e dzǎə	cut your yams when you have not dug deep enough	foolishly deprive yourself of what you were still to gain by misbehaving	Ingratitude / Lack of manners
5.	mǎ' ày sǎŋ e koo mvəy	throw away the millet and keep the chaffs	throw away the essential and keep what is not important	Lack of discernment
6.	sho' kidzəm e tǔy sēm	substitute fig wood with wood from another smoky tree called "Sēm"	replace a bad ruler with another bad ruler	
7.	té' jáŋ e koo ŋgò'	ignore the feces and catch the termites	persevere in order to achieve a thing / stoop in order to conquer	Perseverance
8.	bòŋ e kóm e shò'óy kiban	nice –looking saucer which allows fufu to stick onto it	Someone who has physical beauty but lacks moral beauty	Need for functional beauty
9.	a dzǎ shinya' sheé shūu dzee	be the good garden eggplant by the roadside	be good in public but bad at home	
10.	kur bàrà' mentsiŋgiy	dress like a beetle	dress flamboyantly but haphazardly	Pride
11.	kaŋ bàrà' mentsiŋgiy	fry beetles as if it were a rich stew	an impostor	
12.	a yòr moo ncù'	chatter like weaver birds	too talkative	Lack of caution in speech
13.	a jìrì moo kintsiy	screech like a cricket	talk too much for others' comfort	

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14.	kùm ko' e kfən shon	set a trap and be considered a thief when it catches an animal	deprived of what rightly belongs to you by the more powerful	Misuse of power
15.	koo baá áa yon ji kishòn	kill a leopard and it is termed a civet cat	deprived of the honour and benefits of one's achievement by refusing to recognize it	
16.	a koo yó fo bii e wóo	attempt to catch a snake from its hole with your hands	be rash or go dare-deviling	Adventurism
17.	a sə' yúu	tease or provoke bees	adventurous	foolhardiness
18.	a səŋ mètòn	be as wily as the sunbird	be crafty or greedy	Greed
19.	a tenín moo mbáyítí	kick like a brown grasshopper	difficult to control / heady	Headiness
20.	a tenin moo kimèm	kick like yellow grasshopper	uncontrollable / heady	
21.	a ñayìr moo kingongoón e shù	wriggle like an earthworm in the sun	feel very uncomfortable as a result of alienation	Alienation
22.	a bu' moo bóy	be as restless as a tadpole (out of water)	feel great discomfort due to estrangement	

23.	a dzə shighaà	be a swallow or harbinger	be lonely because of your foresight or because you are ahead of your time	intellectualism and deviance
24.	a dzə kiyà ke ŋgo'	be a harbinger termite	be lonely because of your foresight or because you are ahead of your time	
25.	fóo a dzə kiyà ke ngùmí	to be a harbinger locust	to be lonely because of your foresight or because you are ahead of your time	
26.	fóo a dzə kimbóv	to be a clock bird	to be lonely because of your skepticism and foresight	
27.	shĩŋka' shi bgu e ŋgaà ŋjam e si	a dry tree has fallen in front of a good hewer	an opportunity has presented itself to one who can use it	Competence
28.	ŋgi' si koóm à mbùu sòŋ	egusi has done well in the farms of the toothless	an opportunity has presented itself to one who cannot use it	Lack of competence
29.	a bvəy moo mbvənjàŋ	flying without a sense of direction like a group of butterfly	lack a sense of focus or direction	need for goals
30.	fóo a fəy moo ŋgo' yeé jàŋ	to be like termites on a mound of feaces	to constitute useless abundance	taboo abundance
31.	fóo bùr ŋgi' e ndəə	to break and open a pumpkin with the knee	to perform a feat	Courage
32.	fóo tsəm nyar e tíyí	to kill a buffalo with a stone	to perform a feat	
33.	Ŋgaà sùm woó gwan tón ji kún lééy sùm, a woó mbo' tón ji kún sèn sùm.	He who farms on the slope is alarming that erosion has washed away the farm while the one on the plain is	Soil erosion does damage to every farmer. The one farming on the hill loses top soil that is fertile while the one	caution

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		crying that erosion has covered his farm.	on plain has all his crops buried by the eroding flood.	
34.	Á ba'ar Tavngwà', e wáy vóy é kighìn, é wù boy fo kimbùñ ke nyàm Fòn.	Let's keep Tavngwà' (the leader of the royal hunting team) away, and set the bush on fire and he will be free from blame for the lack of the Fon's game.	When you ignore the advice of people specialized in caring for the environment and do things your own way, do not blame when your actions backfire negatively on you.	Dictatorship
35.	Kinshaàri ki ghá' vé kiñkaasii, á bì vóy woo kaàsì vèv, e laàr mbòrír.	A thick bush has overwhelmed those to clear, and they invited fire that clears swiftly, but kills manure.	When people became lazy in taking care of the environment, it degrades, destroying fertility.	Negligence
36.	Wiíy wáy vóy é kinshaàr ji kiñkaàsì kee cér, bo vé kivi wíy kfòn a dzè e vinsaánsánj ví é ñkaà.	When a woman sets a bush on fire for easy clearing, the harvesters will come back only with stems in the basket.	When you abuse the soil, the harvest will leave nothing to be desired (or harvesters will bring forth harvest that is pitiful).	Abusing the environment
37.	Kúnj yò' yii li sùm, kimbùñ kí kfòn sòr mbè' vé kintoòri.	When erosion washes down a farm, the corn carriers do not suffer any longer from blistered shoulders.	When top soil is eroded on the farm, harvesters will basically carry nothing home.	Consequences of environmental degradation
38.	Wír mò'ón yii yúmer ntoò ndzèy, bo wíy teèsì mǎngòñ kirev.	When one man dries the water source, many will suffer the effects.	One act of abuse on the environment will result in the suffering of many.	Consequences of environmental degradation
39.	Wír wo wù neer ñwa', kfèn kañ kóv kù kfér a dzè virim ve shùý ví.	He who is setting a hive and cutting down a forest is practicing daylight witchcraft.	When you want to benefit from nature and at the same time you are destroying it, then you are not different from a witch.	Wickedness

Cultural Conceptions of Progress in Nso' Society →The Nso' people conceptualize progress as an unimpeded process essential for both individual and collective advancement. This worldview is embodied in their botanical metaphors of growth, particularly through two significant plants:

1. Progress Imagery in Lāmnso' Proverbs :

- *Pumpkin* (symbolizing expansive, visible growth).
- *Foliage* (representing abundant, proliferating development).

These metaphors typically appear in the subjunctive mood, expressing aspirational desires:

- *"May he flourish like pumpkin"*
- *"May they flourish like foliage"*

2. Ecological Knowledge as Communicative Prerequisite →The full semantic and emotional impact of these proverbs requires:

- Regular environmental exposure to these plants.
- Intimate understanding of their growth patterns.
- Cultural internalization of their symbolic meanings.

3. Communication Breakdown →For listeners lacking this ecological knowledge:

- The proverbs lose their evocative power.
- The metaphorical connection between plant behaviour and human progress weakens.
- The urgent cultural imperative for unimpeded advancement (central to these proverbs) becomes less compelling (Maiwong, 2023).

4. Consequences of Semantic Erosion →When environmental degradation:

- Removes these plant references from daily experience.
- Diminishes shared ecological knowledge→ The language loses:
 - Its persuasive capacity.
 - Its ability to transmit cultural values effectively.
 - Its function as a motivator for communal progress.

Analysis of Ingratitude Proverbs (Proverbs 3 & 4) →These proverbs employ powerful biological imagery to condemn ingratitude through two interwoven rhetorical strategies:

1. Ontological Argument :

- The proverbs establish an inseparable physical relationship between:
 - The consumed flesh (benefit received).
 - The mocked horns (source of that benefit).
- This reflects the philosophical principle that beneficiaries owe their existence to benefactors, making derision logically inconsistent.

2. Aesthetic Argument :

- The imagery suggests that true beauty/completeness ("symmetry") emerges from:
 - The functional unity of flesh and horns.

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- Respect for the entire being that provided sustenance.
- Thus, ingratitude constitutes both:
 - A cognitive failure (misunderstanding biological relationships).
 - An aesthetic violation (disrupting natural harmony).

Cultural Implications → The effectiveness of this moral teaching depends on:

- The listener's zoological knowledge (understanding animal morphology).
- Shared cultural values about reciprocity.
- The conceptual link between physical and moral "wholeness".

Contemporary Relevance → As environmental changes:

- Reduce encounters with horned animals.
- Erode traditional ecological knowledge → The proverb's persuasive power diminishes because:
 - The flesh-horns relationship becomes abstract.
 - The symmetry metaphor loses its concrete referent.

Analysis of Discernment Proverbs (Proverbs 5 & 6):

1. Core Critique → These proverbs condemn the failure of discernment through two potent agricultural metaphors:

- *Winnowing folly*: Keeping chaff while discarding grain.
- *Botanical blindness*: Inability to distinguish:
 - *Fig wood* (substantive, valuable).
 - *"Sem" wood* (counterfeit, worthless) → Representing the failure to differentiate:
 - Competent vs. incompetent leadership.
 - Essential vs. peripheral concerns.

2. Semiotic Analysis (Barthesian Framework) → The metaphors operate at three levels of signification:

- a. *Denotative*: Literal agricultural errors.
- b. *Connotative*: Social criticism of poor judgment.
- c. *Ideological* (Barthes, 1964 ; 1967):
 - Naturalizes cultural expectation that maturity requires discernment.
 - Positions political acumen as biological imperative (like crop selection).

3. Ecological-Cognitive Dependencies → The proverbs' effectiveness requires:

- Hands-on agricultural experience (winnowing processes).
- Dendrological knowledge (wood characteristics).
- Political consciousness (ruler-courtier dynamics).

4. Contemporary Erosion (Maiwong, 2023) → Urbanization and environmental changes:

- Make winnowing/botanical references obsolete.

- Detach listeners from the embodied knowledge needed to:
 - *Feel* the stupidity of keeping chaff.
 - *See* the danger of poor leadership analogies.

The Cultural Valuation of Perseverance in Nso' Society:

1. Core Cultural Value → African cultures, and particularly *Nso'* society, elevate perseverance as:

- A fundamental character virtue.
- A prerequisite for meaningful achievement.
- An antidote to impulsive action (which often incurs loss).

2. Proverbial Embodiment (Proverb 7) → The cultural premium on patience finds expression in the metaphor:

- *"The patient man ignores nearby feces to catch termites"*
This operates through:
 - *Tactical delay*: Forgoing immediate but lesser gains (feces as distraction).
 - *Strategic focus*: Pursuing substantive but delayed rewards (termites as protein-rich prize).

3. Cross-Cultural Parallels → The proverb demonstrates:

- *Intertextuality* (Wodak & Meyer, 2001; Fairclough, 1995):
 - Resonates with English maxim: *"The patient dog eats the fattest bone"*.
 - Reflects pan-African valuation of patience (Kristeva, 1986's horizontal intertextuality).
- *Cultural-ecological specificity*:
 - Requires lived experience with termite harvesting.
 - Presupposes knowledge of termites' nutritional value vs. feces' worthlessness.

4. Environmental-Knowledge Dependencies → The proverb's full semantic force depends on:

- Regular interaction with termite ecosystems.
- Practical understanding of:
 - Termite harvesting techniques.
 - Nutritional hierarchies (termites > feces).
- Shared cultural memory of hunger strategies.

5. Contemporary Challenges → As environmental changes:

- Reduce termite populations/visibility.
- Urbanize younger generations → The metaphor loses:
 - Its visceral immediacy.
 - Its motivational power.
 - Its intergenerational teachability.

Functional Beauty and Social Responsibility in Nso' Proverbs (8 & 9):

1. Core Cultural Principle → These proverbs articulate *functional beauty* as:

- **Local competency preceding global contribution** ("Charity begins at home").
- **Social utility over performative virtue.**
- **Contextual effectiveness as aesthetic ideal.**

2. Ecological-Semiotic Foundations → The proverbs derive meaning from two cultural-ecological knowledge systems:

a. Garden Egg Metaphor (Proverb 8):

- *Literal Context:*
 - Roadside garden eggs as communal food source.
 - Cultural permission for hungry travelers to harvest.
- *Social Critique:* → Condemns those who neglect local obligations while seeking external validation.

b. Calabash Saucer Metaphor (Proverb 9):

- *Material Culture:* Traditional calabash saucers as:
 - Functional objects (serving *fufu*).
 - Symbols of fertility (female beauty standard).
- *Aesthetic Philosophy:* → Values utilitarian perfection over superficial ornamentation

3. Theoretical Implications (Wodak et al.) :

- **Interdiscursivity** (Fairclough, 1995): Links:
 - Agricultural practices → social ethics.
 - Domestic tools → gender ideals.
- **Vertical Intertextuality** (Kristeva, 1986): Connects:
 - Bodily fertility ↔ vessel functionality.
 - Crop generosity ↔ communal responsibility.

4. Knowledge Dependencies → Full comprehension requires:

a. Botanical Literacy:

- Garden egg growth patterns.
- Communal harvesting norms.

b. Material Culture Expertise:

- Calabash crafting techniques.
- *Fufu* serving traditions.

5. Contemporary Erosion → Urbanization and cultural shifts:

- Replace roadside gardens with commercial farms.
- Substitute calabash with industrial tableware → **Proverb opacity** occurs through:
 - Lost agricultural referents.
 - Disappearing material practices.

Condemnation of Pride and Imposture in Nso' Proverbs (10 & 11):

1. Core Cultural Critique → These proverbs target:

- **Unnecessary pride** as social vice.
- **Flamboyant imposture** as community threat.
- **Authenticity** as cultural ideal.

2. Entomological Semiotics → The beetle metaphor operates through:

- **Morphological symbolism:**
 - *Wing position*: Represents false pretenses.
 - *Color display*: Signifies empty showmanship.
- **Behavioural analogy**: Beetle's ostentatious appearance vs. actual fragility → Parallels human:
 - Superficial boasting.
 - Lack of substantive worth.

3. Ecological-Epistemic Dependencies → Full proverb comprehension requires:

- a. **Firsthand entomological experience:**
 - Regular beetle observation.
 - Understanding of insect biology.
- b. **Cultural valuation systems:**
 - Community norms against arrogance.
 - Premium on unpretentiousness.

4. Communication Breakdown (Wodak, 2001) → Environmental degradation causes:

- **Referential loss**: Disappearing beetle populations → Fading mental images.
- **Semiotic erosion**: Broken signifier (beetle) - signified (vanity) link.
- **Cultural amnesia** → Younger generations lose:
 - Insect knowledge
 - Associated moral teachings.

5. Comparative Framework → This phenomenon exemplifies:

- **Ecolinguistic precarity** (Maiwong, 2023): Language-territory-knowledge interdependence.
- **Critical discourse vulnerability** (Fairclough, 1995): Environmental change → cultural meaning loss.

Condemnation of Reckless Speech and Abuse of Power in Nso' Proverbs (12-15):

1. Linguistic Caution as Cultural Value → The Nso' people demonstrate:

- **Speech vigilance** as social necessity.
- **Reckless words** as equivalent to:
 - *Weaver birds'* disruptive chattering.
 - *Crickets'* incessant noise.
- **Semiotic requirements** (de Saussure, 1959):

- Must observe these creatures':
 - Auditory patterns.
 - Social behaviours.
- To fully grasp:
 - The signifier-signified relationship.
 - Why such speech patterns are condemned?

2. Ecological Foundations of Meaning :

- **Weaver birds** symbolize:
 - Chaotic, unfiltered communication.
 - Lack of purposeful speech.
- **Crickets** represent:
 - Mindless repetition.
 - Noise over substance.
- **Knowledge dependency** (Maiwong, 2023): Direct ecological experience needed to:
 - *Hear* their sounds.
 - *Observe* their disruptive behaviours.

3. Power and Justice in Hunting Metaphors (Proverbs 14-15):

- **Leopard vs. civet cat:**
 - *Leopard* = true merit (strength, skill)
 - *Civet cat* = false privilege (unearned status)
- **Trapping symbolism:** Questions legitimacy→Is the trap owned by:
 - The hunter who *set it* (skill)?
 - The noble who *inherits rights* (birth)?
- **Historical force:** These proverbs carry generational trauma of:
 - Systemic exclusion
 - Corrupted reward systems.

4. Psycholinguistic Impact →For those who understand:

- **Emotional resonance**→Personal/collective memory of injustice.
- **Cognitive dissonance:**
 - When "leopards" are called "civet cats".
 - When traps are claimed by those who didn't labour.

5. Contemporary Threats :

- **Environmental loss:** Disappearing weaver birds/crickets → eroded metaphors.
- **Cultural erosion:**
 - Fewer traditional hunters → fading knowledge of:
 - Trapping ethics
 - Animal behaviours
- **Discursive consequences:** Weakened ability to critique:
 - Reckless speech
 - Abuse of power

Condemnation of Recklessness and Greed in Nso' Proverbs (16-20):

1. Cultural Rebuke of Dangerous Behaviours →The Nso' society expressly condemns:

- **Adventurism** as foolish risk-taking.
- **Foolhardiness** as threat to communal harmony.
- **Greed** as self-destructive vice.
- **Headiness** (arrogance) as social disruption.

2. Ecological Metaphors and Their Semiotic Weight:

a. Danger Proverbs (16-17) :

- *Snake handling*:
 - Symbolizes reckless confrontation.
 - Requires knowledge of:
 - Serpent defensive behaviours.
 - Traditional hunting safety protocols.
- *Bee teasing*:
 - Represents unnecessary provocation.
 - Depends on understanding:
 - Hive defense mechanisms.
 - Consequences of agitation.

b. Greed Proverb (18):

- *Sunbird hunting*:
 - Despite cleverness → inevitable capture.
 - Reflects:
 - Futility of excessive desire.
 - Irony of outsmarting oneself.

c. Arrogance Proverbs (19-20) →Grasshopper behaviour:

- Jumping without direction.
- Making conspicuous noise→ Parallels human:
 - Reckless ambition.
 - Attention-seeking without substance.

3. Knowledge Dependencies →Full comprehension requires:

a. Zoological Literacy:

- Snake/Bee defensive behaviours.
- Sunbird hunting challenges.
- Grasshopper ecology.

b. Cultural Values:

- Community over individualism.
- Prudence over bravado.

4. Environmental-Cultural Interdependence → Potential losses if insects disappear:

- **Linguistic:** Broken metaphor-meaning connections.
- **Cultural:** Lost moral teaching tools.
- **Cognitive:** Reduced capacity for:
 - Risk assessment.
 - Self-reflection.

5. Theoretical Implications:

- **Ecolinguistics** (Maiwong, 2023): Proverb viability tied to species survival.
- **Anthropological Linguistics:** Embodied knowledge → moral instruction.

The Ecology of Alienation in Nso' Proverbs (21-22):

1. Ontological Vulnerability → These proverbs conceptualize alienation through two visceral biological metaphors:

- *Earthworm desiccation:*
 - Forced exposure → irreversible bodily crisis.
 - Parallels human:
 - Removal from kinship networks.
 - Loss of cultural hydration.
- *Tadpole stranding:*
 - Aquatic deprivation → developmental arrest.
 - Reflects social:
 - Disconnection from nourishing traditions.
 - Existential disorientation.

2. Semiotic Precision → Full comprehension requires:

- **Ecological Literacy:** Firsthand observation of:
 - Anoxic earthworm death throes.
 - Tadpole asphyxiation patterns.
- **Cultural Codification:** Understanding these as:
 - Biological emergencies → social emergencies.
 - Individual suffering → collective warning.

3. Environmental Epistemology → The proverbs demonstrate:

- **Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK):** Detailed understanding of:
 - Soil hydrology (earthworm needs).
 - Aquatic ecosystems (tadpole requirements).
- **Projective Cognition:** Ability to map:
 - Biological distress → human psychology.
 - Ecosystem fragility → cultural fragility.

4. Degradation Thresholds → As environments change:

- **Metaphor Decay** occurs when: Urbanization reduces:
 - Childhood exposure to wetlands.
 - Agricultural soil interaction.
- **Meaning Collapse** manifests as:
 - Lost emotional resonance.
 - Weakened didactic power.

5. Theoretical Implications:

- **Ecolinguistic Criticality** (Maiwong): Proverb survival \approx species survival.
- **Biocultural Diversity**: Language-territory-knowledge triage.
- **Semiotic Scaffolding**: Organic referents as moral frameworks.

The Isolated Intellectual in Nso' Proverbs (23-26): An Intertextual Ecology:

1. Avian Epistemology of Genius → These proverbs employ *clock bird* symbolism to articulate:

- **Temporal dislocation**:
 - Bird's prescient dawn calls → intellectual foresight.
 - Folkloric escape from *wànyétó* (anteater) → evading ideological traps.
- **Cognitive exceptionalism**:
 - Solo survival → necessity of nonconformity.
 - Unique perceptiveness → social isolation.

2. Folkloric Intertextuality → The proverbs derive power from:

- **Embedded narrative knowledge**: *Wànyétó*'s snares as:
 - Conformity pressures.
 - Intellectual suppression mechanisms.
- **Kristevan horizontal intertextuality** (1986): Requires familiarity with:
 - The full trickster tale cycle.
 - Avian behavioural observations.

3. Semiotic Scaffolding → Full comprehension demands:

- **Ornithological expertise** → Clock bird's:
 - Distinctive vocalizations.
 - Nesting avoidance strategies.
- **Cultural literacy** → Understanding why:
 - Only this bird outwits *wànyétó*.
 - Dawn prophecy equals social threat.

4. Discourse Analysis Perspective (Wodak & Meyer 2001) → The metaphors function as:

- **Resistant discourse**:
 - Counter-hegemonic positioning.
 - Critique of anti-intellectualism.
- **Critical interdiscursivity** (Fairclough 1995): Blends:

- Hunter lore → academic struggle.
- Animal cunning → scholarly survival.

5. Knowledge Vulnerability → Urban ecologies jeopardize:

- **Referential stability:**
 - Disappearing clock bird habitats.
 - Fading trickster narratives.
- **Discursive potency:** Without avian sightings:
 - Metaphors become abstract.
 - Intertextual links break.

Cultural Valuation of Competence and Purpose in Nso' Proverbs (27-30):

1. The Semiotics of Competence (Proverbs 27-28) → These proverbs establish a **binary moral ecology** through agricultural metaphors:

- **Positive exemplar:** *"Dry tree before good hewer"*
 - *Competence* as:
 - Efficient resource utilization (no waste).
 - Skill-environment alignment (right tools for right task).
 - Ecological knowledge required:
 - Woodcutting techniques.
 - Timber quality assessment.
- **Negative exemplar:** *"Egusi flourishing for toothless"*
 - *Incompetence* as:
 - Resource-teeth disjunction (can't chew what's grown).
 - Agricultural irony (success without utility).
 - Cultural presuppositions:
 - Egusi's nutritional value.
 - Dentition's role in consumption.

Barthesian analysis (1964; 1967): Operates at *third signification level* → Naturalizes cultural ideology that:

- Skills must match opportunities.
- Value lies in functional outcomes.

2. Teleological Imperatives (Proverbs 29-30):

a. Directionless Beauty (Butterfly Proverb):

- *Entomological symbolism:*
 - Butterflies represent:
 - Youthful potential (vibrant but erratic).
 - Female adolescence (cultural expectations).
 - Flight patterns signify:
 - Lack of purposeful trajectory.
 - Wasted kinetic energy.

- *Societal projection*→Condemns:
 - Collective drift despite resources.
 - Unfocused human capital.

b. Taboo Abundance Critique →Contrasts:

- Material plenty vs. moral lack.
- Forbidden excess vs. virtuous moderation.

3. Knowledge Dependencies →Effective communication requires:

1. **Agricultural literacy:**
 - Dry tree decomposition rates.
 - Egusi cultivation cycles.
2. **Entomological observation:** Lepidopteran flight ethology.
3. **Gender socialization awareness:** Nso' female coming-of-age norms.

4. Ecolinguistic Vulnerabilities →Environmental changes risk:

- **Metaphor disintegration:**
 - Declining butterfly populations → fading mental images.
 - Agro-industrial shift → lost woodcutting/egusi knowledge.
- **Value transmission breakdown:** Youth unable to:
 - *See* the dry tree/egusi irony.
 - *Read* butterfly flight as warning.

Taboo Abundance and Courage in Nso' Proverbs (30-32):

1. The Semiotics of Waste (Proverb 30) →This proverb constructs a powerful **ecological metaphor of futility**:

- *Termite-feces mound* symbolizes:
 - **Taboo abundance:** Resources that cannot be ethically utilized.
 - **Moral contamination:** Wealth from "polluted" sources (prostitution, corruption).
- **Environmental knowledge required:**
 - Termite colonization patterns.
 - Cultural prohibitions regarding waste.

Discourse analysis perspective (Fairclough 1995): Naturalizes cultural ideology that:

- True value requires ethical sourcing.
- Abundance without utility = social pathology.

2. The Ecology of Courage (Proverbs 31-32) →These proverbs establish **heroic minimalism** through:

- *Pumpkin pod feat:*
 - Raw courage overcoming physical limitations.
 - Courtship as societal contribution.

- *Buffalo hunt:*
 - Skill transcending material lack.
 - Community protection as moral duty.

Required environmental literacy:

- Pumpkin shell resistance properties.
- Buffalo behaviour and hunting techniques.

3. Cognitive-Linguistic Interdependence → Full comprehension demands:

- a. **Firsthand ecological experience:**
 - Observing termite mounds.
 - Participating in pumpkin cultivation/hunting.
- b. **Cultural memory:**
 - Heroic narratives
 - Survival ethics

4. Degradation Impacts → Environmental loss erodes:

- **Metaphorical potency:** Urban youth may never see:
 - Termite-colonized feces.
 - Traditional hunting.
- **Value transmission:** Without concrete referents:
 - Courage becomes abstract.
 - Taboo loses visceral impact.

5. Theoretical Implications :

- **Ecolinguistic precarity** (Maiwong 2023): Proverb vitality tied to:
 - Species survival
 - Traditional practices.
- **Embodied cognition:** Physical experience → moral understanding.

Ecological Wisdom in Nso' Proverbs (33-35)

1. Terraced Knowledge: Anti-Erosion Principles (Proverb 33) → This proverb encodes **indigenous geotechnical knowledge:**

- **Slope-specific agriculture:**
 - Mountain farming techniques.
 - Earthen bund construction.
 - Contour planting methods.
- **Pedological understanding:**
 - Soil conservation practices.
 - Watershed management.

Required environmental competence → Firsthand experience with:

- Highland vs. lowland cultivation.

- Erosion patterns in Bui Division (Nso').

2. Anti-Authoritarian Ecology (Proverb 34) → The proverb establishes participatory environmental governance:

- **Royal hunting protocol** as metaphor for:
 - Expert knowledge deference.
 - Collective decision-making.
- **Consequences of arrogance:**
 - Ecosystem collapse.
 - Hunting failures.

Cultural prerequisites: Understanding:

- Fon's hunting traditions.
- Specialist roles (trackers, herbalists).

3. Labor Ethics & Soil Health (Proverb 35) → Condemns ecological negligence through: Comparative farming methods:

- *Clearing*: Sustainable practice
 - Maintains soil microbiota.
 - Preserves organic matter.
- *Burning*: Destructive shortcut
 - Carbon release.
 - Biodiversity loss.

Embedded agronomic science: Traditional understanding of:

- Fire ecology
- Nutrient cycling

4. Theoretical Frameworks :

- Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK):** Demonstrates sophisticated:
 - Soil science
 - Conservation ethics.
- Political Ecology**
Links:
 - Governance styles → environmental outcomes.
 - Labour practices → ecosystem health.
- Ecolinguistics** (Maiwong 2023): Proverb viability depends on:
 - Continued farming practices.
 - Hunting traditions.

5. Contemporary Threats :

- **Knowledge erosion** from:
 - Youth migration.

- Industrial agriculture.
- **Metaphor obscurity** due to:
 - Disappearing royal hunts.
 - Changing land use.

Ecological Ethics in Nso' Proverbs (36-39): An Indigenous Conservation Framework:

1. Soil-Human Reciprocity (Proverb 36) → This proverb articulates a moral ecology of cultivation:

- **Agricultural consequence principle:**
 - Soil abuse → pitiful harvests.
 - Caregiving → abundant yields.
- **Intergenerational education:** Embeds conservation in:
 - Farming practices.
 - Language socialization.

Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) components (Berkes, 1999):

- Soil fertility knowledge.
- Sustainable yield calculations.

2. Cascading Impacts (Proverbs 37-38) → Demonstrate ecological interconnectedness:

- **Erosion domino effect:** Topsoil loss → harvest failure → communal hunger.
- **Collective accountability:**
 - One abuser → many sufferers.
 - Parallels modern "tragedy of the commons".

3. Environmental Witchcraft (Proverb 39) → Establishes moral taxonomy of harm:

- **Ecological witchcraft:**
 - Simultaneous use/destruction of nature.
 - Viewed as:
 - Spiritual transgression.
 - Social betrayal.
- **Cosmological framing:** Positions environmental abuse as:
 - Anti-life force.
 - Cultural sacrilege.

4. Historical Depth of Ecological Consciousness:

- **Temporal dimensions:** Environmental ethics embedded in:
 - *Lămnso'* lexicon.
 - Origin narratives.
 - Agricultural rituals.
- **Comparative perspective:** Predates Western conservationism by centuries.

5. Theoretical Implications:

- a. **Ecolinguistic Analysis** (Maiwong 2023): Proverbs as:
 - Early warning systems.
 - Mnemonic conservation devices.
- b. **Political Ecology**: Traditional sanctions against:
 - Resource hoarding.
 - Ecosystem exploitation.
- c. **Environmental Philosophy**: Animist underpinnings:
 - Nature as sentient partner.
 - Destruction as spiritual violation.

6. Contemporary Relevance :

- **Climate change mitigation**: Indigenous precedents for:
 - Soil conservation.
 - Sustainable harvesting.
- **Knowledge revitalization**: Urgency in documenting:
 - Erosion prevention techniques.
 - Traditional monitoring systems.

7. SUMMARY FINDINGS: ECOLOGICAL DETERMINANTS OF LINGUISTIC VITALITY

Based on systematic analysis of thirty-nine *Lămnso'* proverbs, this study demonstrates:

1. **Environmental-Linguistic Interdependence** → Degradation of natural ecosystems directly diminishes language's communicative capacity by:
 - Eroding denotative reference points (concrete ecological signifiers).
 - Attenuating connotative meaning layers (cultural associations).
2. **Multidimensional Impacts of Ecological Loss** → Environmental degradation catastrophically affects:
 - **Humanity**: Disrupts traditional lifeways and social cohesion.
 - **Linguistics**: Impairs metaphorical richness and intergenerational transmission.
 - **Knowledge**: Severs ties between TEK (Traditional Ecological Knowledge) and language.
 - **Culture**: Undermines value systems encoded in ecological metaphors.
3. **Geographical Environment as Foundational Semiotic Variable** → The study establishes terrain features as critical:
 - Contextual parameters for meaning-making.
 - Untapped focus area for ecolinguistic research.
4. **Tripartite Nexus of Language-Knowledge-Environment** → Analysis reveals an inseparable relationship where:
 - Lexical systems archive environmental understanding.
 - Cultural values emerge from ecological engagement.
 - Knowledge transmission requires stable referential ecosystems.
5. **Historical Depth of African Environmental Consciousness** → The *Nso'* case proves:
 - Ecological ethics predate colonial contact.
 - *Lămnso'* encodes centuries-old conservation principles.
 - Environmental stewardship is foundational to cultural identity.

Recommendations for future research & action:

1. Comparative African Ecolinguistic Studies

Priority: High → **Approach:** Conduct cross-cultural analyses of proverbs in 10+ African languages using:

- **TEK (Traditional Ecological Knowledge) frameworks.**
- **Critical discourse analysis** (Fairclough, 1995).
Objectives:
 - Map continent-wide patterns of environment-language-knowledge linkages.
 - Identify conservation strategies encoded in indigenous lexicons.

2. Youth Knowledge Gap Assessment → **Methodology:** Mixed-methods survey of 500+ Nso' youth (15-35 years):

- **Quantitative:** Proverb comprehension tests.
- **Qualitative:** Interviews on ecological metaphor recognition.
Metrics:
 - Correlation between:
 - Urbanization levels ↔ proverb understanding.
 - Schooling type (Western vs. traditional) ↔ TEK (Traditional Ecological Knowledge) retention.

3. Pragmatic Dimensions of African Proverbs → **Theoretical Lens:** Apply **Speech Act Theory** (Austin, 1962) to examine how proverbs:

- Function as indirect directives.
- Enforce environmental norms.
Focus Areas:
 - Face-threatening acts in conservation contexts.
 - Intergenerational politeness strategies.

4. Language Adaptation to Ecological Crisis → **Research Questions:** How are indigenous languages:

- Lexically innovating to describe new environmental realities?
- Preserving endangered ecological knowledge?
Methods:
 - Corpus analysis of:
 - Neologisms related to climate change.
 - Archival vs. contemporary proverb usage.

5. Linguistic Contributions to African Development → **Policy-Relevant Research:** Document how native languages like *Lāmnso'* can:

- **Innovate:** Seed indigenous STEM terminologies.
- **Preserve:** Digitize ecological knowledge banks.
- **Transform:** Inform UN SDG localization (e.g., Goals 13-15).
Partnerships:
 - UNESCO Living Heritage programmes.

- African Academy of Languages (ACALAN).

6. Ethical Documentation Protocols → Develop Custodianship Models ensuring:

- Community ownership of linguistic data.
- Benefit-sharing agreements.
- Intergenerational participation in research.

8. CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated, through the analysis of thirty-nine Lāmnso' proverbs, that environmental degradation is not merely an ecological crisis but a multidimensional threat to **linguistic vitality, cultural memory, and epistemic systems**. Four critical insights emerge:

1. **Language-Environment Nexus** → The proverbs reveal that geographical features are active participants in meaning-making. When concrete referents (e.g., pumpkins, beetles, termites) vanish due to ecological loss, the proverbs' **denotative clarity** and **connotative richness** erode, impairing communication and value transmission (Barthes, 1964; Maiwong, 2023).
2. **Cultural Emergency** → Nso' proverbs encode **Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK)**, such as soil conservation and species interdependence. Their opacity to younger generations—due to urbanization and biodiversity decline—signals not just linguistic loss but the unraveling of **indigenous conservation ethics** centuries in the making.
3. **Historical Consciousness** → Environmental stewardship in Nso' society predates colonial modernity, embedded in Lāmnso' lexicon and rituals. This challenges dominant narratives that frame sustainability as a Western construct (cf. UN SDGs), highlighting Africa's **untapped epistemological contributions** to global climate discourse.
4. **Actionable Pathways** → To mitigate this crisis, we propose reimagining ecosystems like game reserves as **living laboratories** where knowledge, linguistic, cultural, and ecological preservation intersect. Future research must prioritize:
 - **Documentation** of endangered proverbs and their ecological contexts.
 - **Policy integration** of Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) into education and conservation frameworks.
 - **Interdisciplinary collaborations** between linguists, ecologists, and Nso' knowledge holders.

In sum, this study underscores that saving a language like Lāmnso' requires saving the **butterflies, forests, and soils** that animate its metaphors. The proverbs' wisdom is clear: humanity cannot thrive where nature withers. Their call to action resonates across disciplines—to heal the environment is to preserve the very **grammar of human meaning**.

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