

# Cardinal directions and environmental concepts of landscape in Kwanyama (Owambo)

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## 1. Introduction

<1>

This contribution examines some conceptual domains of environment among the Kwanyama speakers of northern Namibia, focussing on the linguistic expression as well as on their semantic facets and richness. In many cases, it will become clear that the designation of landscape and its scenic characteristics of landscape does not necessarily require specific terms. Instead, it often makes use of phraseological and descriptive devices, which must be regarded as strongly context dependent.

<2>

The major part of this paper deals with different types of landscape, their conceptualisation as well as their linguistic expression. This includes mainly the domains of forest, savannah, seasonal grassland and their salient features and elements. Finally, the findings will be contrasted with results from my survey on place names conducted in the Owambo region as part of a [Sonderforschungsbereich \(SFB\) 389](#) (1.12.2005) project. [1]

## 2. The position of Kwanyama within the Owambo dialect cluster

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Kwanyama, a Bantu language of zone R [2], is spoken in central northern Namibia as well as southern Angola. Besides Ndonga, Kwanyama is one of the major languages of the Owambo region. Like Ndonga, it gained its status through early missionary activities starting in the late 19th century.

The data relevant to this work were elicited from the northern Namibian variety of Kwanyama.



Map: Distribution of Kwanyama in Northern Namibia

<4>

The Owambo languages form a dialectal continuum delimiting itself from neighbouring languages – i.e. Herero in the West and the Kavango languages in the East. For linguistic grounds, the Owambo dialect cluster may be divided into two distinct areas: South Owambo and North Owambo.

While Ndonga is closely connected to southern Owambo, Kwanyama is strongly linked to northern Owambo. Linguistic evidence for this division, which is also reflected in the environmental terminology, is mainly based on phonological and lexical features.

1.		Kwanyama	Ndonga	
	phonological	omufima	omuthima	'water-hole'
	lexical	omufitu	omuheke	'savannah'

<5>

In addition, there exist also grammatical differences among the Owambo dialects. This involves, e.g., the noun classes, the pronouns and the demonstratives. However, the existence of nominal pre-prefixes as found in the neighbouring Herero language, but absent in the Kavango languages is a common feature of all Owambo dialects (see also ch. 7).

<6>

Many concepts of environment are not expressed by one single lexical item. For the designation of such a structure I will use the term phraseolexeme according to Gréciano (1999) as quoted below. In principle, phrasemes are regarded as 'pre-fabricated' parts of language. Their appearance and expression in the field of common language, is designated by the term phraseolexeme.

Die immer klaffenderen Lücken von Nominationen [...] erklären den engen Zusammenhang zwischen Sprachfertigteilen und Neologie; ihr Aufkommen besonders in Fachbereichen führt zur Terminologie; ihre Identifikationskraft schlägt die Brücke zur Onomastik; ihre linguistische Eruiierung geschieht im Rahmen der Phraseologie. Phraseme sind Sprachfertigteile, Phraseolexeme in der Gemeinsprache, Phraseoterme in der Fachsprache.

Sprachfertigteile, Schematismen, Formeln gelten als phraseologisch, wenn sie mehrgliedrig, festgeprägt und/oder figuriert sind.

<7>

The system of noun class formatives in Kwanyama constitutes the basis for two underlying strategies in establishing phraseolexemes to express and refine environmental concepts. In the examples given below, the class specific possessive concords as well as infinitive marking are applied [3]. The instrumental readings result from the interplay between the semantics of nouns and the nomino-verbal constituents. The latter are either causative or neuter-passive infixes to the verb.

2.	Emanya lokutungifa	'The stone for building' (i.e. 'brick')
	Emanya lokupika	'The stone for sharpening' (i.e. 'grindstone')

<8>

Another fundamental possibility of phraseolexeme formation is the possessum-possessor relation involving two nouns and the corresponding possessive concords:

3. Emanyala lomundilo 'The stone of the fire' (i.e. 'flintstone')

As compared to the examples in 2., a higher degree of lexicalisation must be assumed for that in 3. The phrasemes cited in 2. represent an area of Kwanyama morphology that neither can be labelled occasional nor usual. Notwithstanding, these phrasemes taking into account their overall function are considered as parts of the nominal lexicon in Kwanyama.

### 3. Cardinal directions

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Cardinal directions and concepts of landscape are immediately linked by their anthropocentric character. Both represent culture specific frames of cognition and the expression of spatial orientation [4] among the Kwanyama. In his comparative study on cardinal directions in Ndonga, Kwanyama, Herero and Nama, Fourie (1992: 144-153) concludes that the three first mentioned languages form a linguistic and cultural unit, strongly opposed to the Nama (Khoisan). Within this context, Fourie distinguishes three conceptual types of expressing cardinal directions in Kwanyama: (1) ethnonymic reference to neighbouring groups, (2) reference to the sun, and (3) reference by using gender dichotomies, e.g. olundume 'male' for North and olukadi 'female' for South.

While the linguistic encoding by means of (1) and (2) is frequently ascertained in our data, at least in Kwanyama, we were not able to confirm the dichotomising expressions. We only found an alternative lexeme with the meaning 'North' (oufiku 'night'). However, for the cardinal direction 'South', a corresponding lexeme, i.e. 'day' (omutenya) was not attested.

The following expressions represent the cardinal directions in Kwanyama:

4. Eembinga dounyuni	'Cardinal directions'	Verbal translations
oushilo	'East'	'rising' (of the sun)
outokelo	'West'	'setting' (of the sun)
kevale ~ oufiku	'to the North'	'to Evale' ~ 'night'
kondonga	'to the South'	'to Ndonga'

<10>

The lexeme eembinga 'directions' as one constituent of the whole expression demands the plural prefix ee- of class 10, whereas ounyuni 'world' is treated as an abstract noun, which determines the abstractness of the whole phraseme. The plural marking by the prefix ee- is due to the dual character of possible directions. The morphological assignment to the so-called animal class can best be explained by taking into account the basic meaning of -mbinga. This lexeme originally denotes 'horns of cattle', recognized as pointing into two opposite

directions. The point of reference is the base of the horns on the cattle's skull. [5] Therefore, the occurrence of the singular of the lexeme, i.e. ombinga is rare in Kwanyama. But by marking the term either for singular or plural, the language distinguishes whether a direction is specific (5.a) or vague (5.b):

5.a) Omufitu owayo kifa kombinga eyi.

'The forest is towards this direction.'

5.b) Ngenge owa hala okushakena naye inda meembinga edi!

'If you would like to meet her/him go towards those directions!'

Both examples show the necessity of applying a locative class marker (16, 17, 18). [6] Furthermore, the selection of the respective singular/plural prefix emphasises the degree of propositional particularity in the statement.

<11>

The terms given above for 'North' kevale – verbally 'to Evale, towards Vale country' – and 'South' kondonga – literally 'to Ndonga, towards Ndonga country' – show ethnonymic reference. For the purpose of disambiguation, they are usually quoted with the locative prefix of class 17.

The encoding of the concepts of 'East' oushilo and 'West' outokelo is more complex. From an etymological perspective, these terms are derived from the verb stems -sha 'rise of the sun' and -toka 'set of the sun' combined with the applicative suffixes -il(a) and -el(a), respectively. Thus, both lexemes refer to the sun, more precisely to the sunrise and the sunset.

## **4. Forest areas and seasonal grasslands**

### **4.1. Forest areas**

<12>

The data presented here are altogether a reflection of landscape perception among the Kwanyama. Due to this, not the specific terminology – like names for trees, etc. – is highlighted here but the quality and semantics of expressions, i.e. the perception of vague borders. In preparation for the collection of data on landscape terminology, we looked through the relevant dictionaries of Kwanyama. We discussed the cases where problems of semantic demarcation and/or contradictory results arose with mother-tongue speakers. [7]

<13>

The lexical demarcation of landscape (see ch. 5.2.) is frequently perceived as a continuum. In order to specify the semantic spectrum of a lexeme and its features, the lexical roots under consideration were tested with diverging noun class prefixes. This approach renders a first access to the semantics of environmental terminology as will be demonstrated by the basic concept of 'forest'. Only in that area a cattle camp (ohambo) can be found, while it will never be found in the adjacent landscape called oshana 'seasonal grassland area' (cf. 4.2.).

The term ofuka refers to dense forest, where neither houses nor settlements exist. In contrast to ofuka, the term omufitu designates the savannah area that shows dense vegetation. Omufitu is the grazing area for livestock, suitable for the establishment of settlements. The aspects of human exploitability is prominent for the omufitu. [8] Omufitu, the savannah, serves as the principal area of subsistence for the Kwanyama. The economic functions of these landscapes are indicated by the designations ovafita 'herdsmen of goats' and the ovanahambo 'herdsmen of cattle'.

<14>

In the singular omufitu denotes a definite area showing savannah vegetation, whereas in the plural omifitu refers rather to regional phenomenon. For instance, standing at the the location of Oshakati, the characteristics of landscape according to the regional qualities of the Eastern Owambo area can be expressed by means of omifitu in a more abstract sense.

<15>

Another important feature of omufitu is that, in the cognition of a native speaker, vegetation is increasing gradually with distance from his/her actual standpoint. The spatial expansion lies in the horizontal perspective. However, the height of the vegetation does not increase according to distance, i.e. the idea of vertical size remains constant. Furthermore, omufitu has necessarily a minimal expansion; a small omufitu is called okaluxwa. In the okaluxwa-area (i.e. epumbu), only bush vegetation is found, but no trees. It is noteworthy that the characteristics of this lexeme focus on the vertical dimension of the environmental phenomenon. The horizontal dimension is not decisive in this case.

<16>

A general strategy for differentiating shapes of landscape is the application of the diminutive prefix oka-. Conceptually okamufitu ranks between omufitu and okaluxwa as described above. While, to a certain extent, omufitu shows some natural covering of trees, there is usually none in the okaluxwa, and okamufitu possesses a mixed vegetation of shrubs and trees. Evidently, the flat vegetation seems to be an important feature of this conceptually intermediate expression.

<17>

The application of the noun prefix e- (class 5) to the stem -fitu leads to a derived interpretation: efitu designates an extremely large omufitu that is associated, inter alias, with dangers, like wild animals or evil spirits.

## **4.2. Water reservoirs and seasonal grassland**

<18>

A prominent type of landscape in the Owambo area is the oshana (pl. oyana). The oshana is primarily associated with the plains, the open country called oshilongo. Originally, a contrastive name for the forest area, oshilongo is more and more referring to the country in general. The oshana denotes shallow watercourses, which are seasonally full of tall grass and temporally filled by flood-waters (efundja). The dimension of the efundja depends mainly on the rainfall in Angola.

The potentials of exploitation are many fold: the system of the oshana provides water for the people, animals, and agricultural activities as well as fishing activities. Besides the oshana other forms of water reservoirs and depressions are important landmarks in the Owambo area of Northern Namibia.

<19>

Any depression and hollow where (rain-)water can accumulate, independent of its extension, is called ondobe. Semantically it competes with ondama. Both lexemes are synonymous in their use. The latter is a borrowing from a European language. Whether its source is German or Afrikaans is not certainly attested.

<20>

Another important landmark in Owambo is the ekango. This term can best be transcribed as a 'depression with a high degree of salinity', i.e. 'salt-pan'. The ekango like the oshana is flooded regularly in the rainy season and is a natural and temporary water reservoir. For the description of the surface of ekango when it is flooded, the term ehenene (pl. omahenene) is used. However, this idea is not exclusively associated with the surface of water, since it also applies to any vast levelled area. Furthermore, we find it as a place name in the central Owambo area. In the flat shallow water of the oshana, grass species like ondjado 'sweet sedge' or omukashulwa 'water grass' grow. Although, these plants form part of the livestock diet and especially the latter is used for roof constructions, the omufitu area is the more suitable and appreciated pasture for livestock.

<21>

A small lake that is usually artificially created is called etale. It can even be located in a salt-pan ekango.

6. Etale oli li mekango lakatana.

'The small lake is in the salt-pan of Okatana.'

Two more concepts of water reservoirs are lexically distinguished. Both denote artificially created waterholes that are used by people for watering the livestock. A waterhole located in the omufitu is called omufima. With reference to a small omufima the diminutive okafima is applied. A well, located in the grassland or salt-pan (ekango, dim. okakango) is named ondungu. Due to the sandy quality of the ground in the omufitu, these wells (ondungu) are mostly dug outside this area. The steps, leading into a well or a waterhole are in both cases encoded as eendodo (pl.).

## **5. General Elements of Landscape**

### **5.1. Paths and streets**

<22>

A path is called ondjila. The concept of ondjila neither possesses the quality of being wide nor to run straight. Curves and bends are basic features of ondjila. The term ondjila therefore stands in opposition to passable ways or streets like the modern coinages oshitauwa 'motorway' or opate 'road'. The lexeme engondi denotes unexpected bends and curves in this context.

7. Oshitauwa eshi shayuka, kEengela oshina engondi.

'The street leading to Eengela has curves.'

<23>

Another item for 'bend' is engolyo (pl. omangolyo). In combination with prefix of class 5, the lexeme represents an unmarked denotation. Omangolyo is as basic to the idea of ondjila as engondi is. In combination with a class 8 prefix: oingolyo, the term is used in contexts where somebody is weary of walking a zigzag path. While oshitauwa can be specified by means of engolyo and, as seen above, with engondi, the co-occurrence of ondjila with engolyo as well as engondi is excluded, due to redundancy:

- |      |                    |                         |
|------|--------------------|-------------------------|
| 8.a) | engolyo loshitauwa | 'bending of the street' |
| 8.b) | engolyo loshitai   | 'bending of branch'     |
| 8.c) | engolyo loshiti    | 'bending of a stick'    |

Examples 8.b) and 8.c) show the primary reading of engolyo. Branches and sticks normally possess bent characteristics to which engolyo refers.

## 5.2. Borders and demarcations

<24>

With regard to crossing the border from one environmental domain entering into another environmental area, the question of borderline terminology arises. Omungulo marks the edge of a concrete object, e.g. the upper edge of a 'basket' (oshimbale) or the bordering of a tar road to its shoulder. In the context of landscape, when forest, savannah and seasonal grassland areas meet, omungulo has a more abstract, not precisely tangible application. This refers, for instance, to the area where savannah and grassland area meet. The borderline between these two landscapes is usually perceived from the vast surface of the plain towards the savannah and not vice versa. The same holds true for the border between the savannah and the forest. In this case, the unmarked point of reference is the omufitu, since it is the entrance to the dense forest area (ofuka). Only phraseological constructions allow the inversion of the perspective by breaking up the underlying concept, e.g. omungulo wofuka ('border of the forest'). If this encoding is not explicitly made, omungulo associates with the savannah land.

<25>

Another term for border, more specifically 'borderline' or 'demarcation', is relevant in the ethnical and national contexts:

9. ....peengaba dOukwambi nOukwanyama  
...at the borders between Kwambi and Kwanyama

Foregrounding the territorial aspect, eengaba (pl.) is not as central in terms of landscape as the lexeme omungulo is in the context of perception and designation of scenic features, since it represents a more abstract quality comparable to the wider system of cardinal directions.



## 6. Surface

<26>

According to Tönjes (1910: 16), the lexeme eheke denotes 'coarse sand'. According to our field data, the quality of cleanness is a further distinctive feature of eheke. Sand of the eheke type can only be found below the surface. Due to the semantic specificity of eheke, an eventual modified reading when combined with noun class 6 omaheke must be excluded. The noun ongweshe denoting dirty and dusty sand is conceptually different from eheke. Nevertheless, both are subcategories of the hyperonym edu 'ground, soil'. [9] A peculiarity of the noun edu is its capacity of being suffixed to eheke as well as to ongweshe:

- |     |            |                                 |
|-----|------------|---------------------------------|
| 10. | ehekedu    | 'clean sandy ground'            |
|     | ongweshedu | 'dirty, dusty and sandy ground' |

Furthermore, the lexeme edu can be suffixed to the lexical items ondwi 'dust' and ombudu 'powder': ondwedu, ombudwedu.

<27>

Ondwi denotes 'dust from sand'. Given this basic meaning, ondwedu serves the specification of the 'dust from soil', excluding the aspect of a sandy dust. Both lexemes, i.e. ondwi as well as ondwedu are conceptualised as part of edu 'ground'. More specifically, ondwedu has to be understood as representing one possible type of ongweshedu. The core meaning of ondwi denotes the fine and dry dust.

- |     |               |                    |
|-----|---------------|--------------------|
| 11. | opena ondwi.  | 'There is dust.'   |
|     | opena ombudu. | 'There is powder.' |

Any form of powder is referred to as ombudu. Primarily, this term is used with regard to the process of pounding mahangu ('millet'). It denotes the fine mahangu-powder vanishing with the wind when fanning the pounded, worthy part of mahangu called oufila from ombudu. The criterion of uselessness becomes an obvious characteristic for ombudu. In other words, it is considered to be merely a substance for which further specification is not needed. [10]

<28>

Another differentiation with respect to types of sand is given with efululu, 'deep and loose sand' that, in contrast to eheke, is considered very dirty. The above-mentioned noun edu 'ground' can also stand in 2nd modifier position with efululu. The compound efululwedu denotes no longer the sandy character of the surface but rather loose ground or soil. Since the encoding in noun class 5 is the unmarked form, the combination with noun class 6 evokes the idea of a multiplicity referring to different spots showing the characteristics of omafululwedu.

<29>

In Kwanyama, the lexical item emanya 'stone' is neither linguistically nor conceptually as differentiated as the above-mentioned notions of surface quality. No variation in shape or type of stone like 'rubble' or 'gravel' could be found.

## 6.1. Steps and gradations

<30>

As stated in 4.2., the lexeme *eendodo* 'steps' refers to a sequence or series of steps that make a well or a waterhole accessible. The use of the singular form *ondodo* 'step' is rare in Kwanyama. The same holds true for steps, carved into a tree to climb on it. The latter are usually referred to as *omalyatelelo* (sg. *elyatelelo*). Etymologically steps are distinguished as to their function, of descending and ascending. The underlying verb is *-lyata* meaning 'step on'. As in the case of *eendodo*, the plural form *omalyatelelo* is the more frequently used. Therefore, the singular encoding has to be regarded as the marked lexical variety offering a singulative reading. [11] For example, rivers cutting into the ground may cause natural gradations. These 'steps' never appearing as single phenomenon are expressed phraseologically by *omikungu lukilo domeva* – verbally: 'steps encrusted of water'. Combined with the plural noun class 6 *omakungu lukilo omeva* indicates a large agglomeration of gradations. Consequently, the transposition results in a frequentative reading. It is essential for the concept of the step formations in nature that these are caused by flowing water. They cannot be thought of as the result of any other liquid. [12]

<31>

The phraseolexeme *eheke lokoshi yomeva* – verbally: 'coarse clean sand washed by water' – denotes the moist and clean sides of such step formations. A plural marking has again several readings. In the expression *omahekeyokoshi yomeva*, the constituent *omaheke* specifies the sand that is at the sides of the draining off water (*omeva*). It is also the essential – since constitutive – physical component in this formation.

<32>

In Kwanyama, a specific verb is used for denoting the smoothness and wetness of this formation. While the adjectival stem *-pu* refers to the softness of any object even the soil, e.g. *omadu mapu* 'soft soils'; the stative verb *-talama* ('being wet and soft') shares a lexically exclusive relation with *edu* ('soil') and *omeva* ('water'):

12. *Edu ola talama.*

'The soil is soaked.'

*Ondobe opo hapa talama [omeva].*

'The hollow there is soaking wet [from the water].'

The natural causation of this wet soil/sand by soakage seems to be semantically decisive: "It must be a natural place, where the water was suffering to come to by defeating the sand through its flowing there." (Shinime p.c.). The agent, *omeva* 'water', is covert but tacitly implied in the verb *-talama*.

<33>

Another lexeme in Kwanyama that expresses a certain kind of step is *omutune*. Semantically it refers to the ridge of a mountain, the top or the vertex. *Omutune wefilu* denotes the ridge enclosing a valley: *efilu*. On the whole, *omafilu* and *omitune* are rarely occurring landmarks



documented. Other examples from category 13.c) are, e.g. etyapa 'muddy water' or lashindobe (< ondobe, 'depression').

<37>

Many places are morphologically combined with the diminutive class (oka-). In how far this assignment bears an emotional aspect of the relationship between humans and their location or whether it is a reflection of landmarks perceived as particularly small, remains open for further research [14]. A fourth strategy in the Owambo area for place naming is the reference to animals – wild as well as domesticated ones, e.g. okatana ('small calf') or etale lyeenguva ('lake of the knob-billed duck' *Sarkidiornis melanotos*).

## 8. Summary

<38>

Lexemes for the denotation of the environment possess different semantic degrees of inherent precision. As was shown, the system of orientation by means of cardinal directions in Kwanyama is a mixed one. While the 'North-South' opposition goes along with ethnonymic reference this is not the case for the expression of 'East' and 'West'. The latter, although morphologically more complex are the more abstract ones. Therefore, in many cases the inherent precision is not depending on the realisation as a lexeme or phraseme. Particularly phrasemes function as specifiers and modifiers establishing a certain degree of permeability in the process of transferring underlying concepts into neighbouring domains of perception. The noun classes 3, 5 and 9 mainly encode the lexemes on which we focus in this paper. Deviations from this assignment, which frequently occur, are marked forms that induce a semantic expansion and/or narrowing of the context. Only the diminutive marking is an exception to this. In Kwanyama, from a conceptual perspective, the forest area, the savannah and the seasonal grassland are strictly opposed. But within these conceptual domains, fuzzy relations are prominent: the continuum of the environment is reflected in scenic perception and expression. The selected terms of landscape are representative for the nuclear area of environmental concepts among the Kwanyama. Although the naming strategies for place names are the same for the entire area of Owambo, among the Kwanyama it correlates with the central concepts of landscape perception.

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[2] In Guthrie's classification of 1971 (vol. II, p. 61), Kwanyama is referred to as R. 21.

[3] Noun Class Prefixes of Kwanyama and Ndonga and their most important semantic functions:

<b>Class</b>	<b>Kwanyama</b>	<b>Ndonga</b>	<b>Semantics</b>
1	omu- / omw-	omu- / omw-	humans, other animates
1a	Ø	Ø	kinship terms, proper names
2	ova-	aa-	
2a	oo-	oo-	
3	omu- / omw-	omu- / omw-	trees, plants, non-paired body parts, other inanimates
4	omi- / omy-	omi-	
5	e-	e-	fruits, paired body parts, natural phenomena
6	oma-	oma-	liquids, masses
7	oshi-	oshi-	things, instruments, manner
8	oi- / oy-	ii-	
9	o(N)-	o(N)-	animals, inanimates
10	ee(N)-	oo(N)-	

11	olu- / olw-	olu- / olw-	long thin objects, abstract nouns
13	oka-	oka-	diminutives
14	ou- / ow-	uu-	abstract nouns, mass nouns
15	oku- / okw-	oku- / okw-	infinitive
16	pu- / pw-	pu-	near
17	ku- / kw-	ku-	remote
18	mu- / mw-	mu-	inside

[4] For a more extensive approach towards the transfer of landmarks into the expression of cardinal directions cf. Heine 1997: 49ff.

[5] Kwanyama has a large variety of terms taking into account the shape and bending of horns. Ombulu, for example, refers to the part between the ear and the emergence of the horn.

[6] These classes are regarded as the most productive noun classes. Only a few examples exist, where the basic meaning is no longer traceable in a synchronical perspective (e.g. koshi, poshi 'below', 'beneath').

[7] Our main partner in these conversations was L. Shinime.

[8] In Ndonga, this area is named omuheke.

[9] In Ndonga edu corresponds to the lexeme evi.

[10] Oumbodi is the general term for weeds or even herbs which cannot be specified according to their origin. This idea of an unspecified mixture is extended to the designation of different forms of agglomerations, like waste or rubbish.

[11] The lexical item for 'ladder' in Kwanyama is omhani. In Ndonga, the corresponding meaning is represented by the deverbal noun oshilondelo derived from -londa (+applicative) 'climb', a verb otherwise attested in both languages.

[12] It is noteworthy that any other liquid – except water – is characterised as being oily, e.g. ink, milk etc.

[13] See also Möhlig (1989: 194).

[14] In contrast to the neighbouring Kavango region, place names with click articulations were not to found in the Owambo area. Report of the [SFB 389](#), project B1 Möhlig (2001).