

## “Swallow fire”: Literal and figurative usages of Ngəmba verbs for EAT and DRINK

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Verbs for eating and drinking provide a rich resource of metaphors cross-linguistically. Ngəmba, an Eastern Grassfields Bantoid language spoken in West Cameroon, has a particularly wide range of these metaphors. Out of its fourteen consumption verbs, seven have figurative meanings beyond the source domain of the physical act of eating and drinking. Beside the generic verbs for eating, i.e. *ttsó* (which also refers to ‘eat soft food’), and drinking, i.e. *nnó* ‘drink’, there are five more specific verbs: *pfét* ‘eat solid food, chew’, *nóη* ‘suckle’, *fé* ‘suck’, *mmyə̀* ‘swallow’, and *màηcà* ‘eat with relish’. This paper explores the figurative uses of these seven verbs and their underlying motivations, starting with a description of their literal meanings within the context of food texture and consumption processes.

The semantic expansions of *ttsó* ‘eat’ can be categorised under the overarching structural metaphor of APPROPRIATION OF RESOURCES IS EATING, with three conceptual entailments derived from different aspects of the act of eating, i.e. ENJOYING RESOURCES IS EATING, WINNING IS EATING, and INFESTING IS EATING. The verb *pfét* ‘chew’ has two distinct figurative uses, both motivated by the destructive effect that chewing has on solid food: INFLECTING HARM IS CHEWING and EQUIVOCATING IS CHEWING (THE MOUTH). Semantic expansions related to the verb *nnó* ‘drink’ include ABSORPTION IS DRINKING, INHALATION IS DRINKING, DEPLETING RESOURCES IS DRINKING, and UNDERGOING INVESTIGATION IS DRINKING. The last notion is metonymically derived from the idiom *nnó ηkkhwò* which refers to the cultural practice of an ordeal which involves the drinking of a concoction. Semantic expansions of the verb *mmyə̀* ‘swallow’ can be explained by the structural metaphor of INTERNALISING IS SWALLOWING. It encompasses three related metaphors: DENYING STRONGLY IS SWALLOWING (FIRE/BEE), ASSIMILATING POISON IS SWALLOWING, and KEEPING INTERNALLY HIDDEN IS SWALLOWING. The verb *fé(ncà)* ‘suck’ transfers its semantics to the domain of extraction, resulting in the metaphor of EXTRACTING A SUBSTANCE IS SUCKING. Finally, the verb *nóη* ‘suckle’ extends to the domain of kissing, represented by the metaphor of KISSING IS SUCKLING ON THE MOUTH. Six out of the seven consumption verbs elaborate on both positive and negative effects of the consumption process, while *pfét* ‘chew’ is exceptional in focusing solely on negative aspects, driven by the image of physical destruction of food through chewing. Given the close linguistic and cultural connections across the Cameroonian Grassfields, it is striking to find substantial differences in the metaphorical concepts based on these consumption verbs. In contrast to a Ring language like Babanki, Ngəmba attests to a much wider range of consumption verbs that undergo a variety of semantic expansions. Furthermore, in Ngəmba, the metaphorical concept of depletion of resources is conveyed through the verb DRINK rather than EAT, as in Babanki. Unlike other African languages, both Ngəmba and Babanki do not use the verb for ‘eat’ metaphorically to represent sexual intercourse.