5.3: Focal Vocabularies

Every language has a lexicon, or vocabulary. Semantics is the study of a language meaning system. Anthropologists are particularly interested in ethnosemantics, which is the study of semantics within a specific cultural context. Ethnosemantics helps anthropologists understand how people perceive, define, and classify their world. Focal vocabularies are sets of words that pertain to important aspects of the culture. For example, the Saami, the indigenous reindeer hunters in Scandinavia, have numerous words for reindeer, snow, and ice. Snow and ice terminology is based on the physical condition of the layers as well as changes due to weather and temperature. Reindeer terminology is based primarily on sex, age, color, and appearance of various body parts, but may be based on others things such as personality and habits.

Table 5 - Saami Reindeer terminology based on personality and habits (Magga 2006)

| Biltu       | Shy and wild, usually refers to females |

Figure 1 - A Saami family, Norway, 1897
**Doalli**  
Apt to resist

**Goaisu**  
Male reindeer who keeps apart all summer and is very fat when autumn comes

**Já?as**  
Obstinate, difficult to lead

**Láiddas**  
Easy to lead by a rope or rein

**Lojat**  
Very tractable driving-reindeer

**Lojáš**  
Very tame female reindeer

**Láiddot**  
Reindeer which is very láiddas

**Moggaraš**  
Female reindeer who slips the lasso over head in order to avoid being caught

**Njirru**  
Female reindeer which is very unmanageable and difficult to hold when tied

**Ravdaboazu**  
Reindeer which keeps itself to the edge of the herd

**Sarat**  
Smallish male reindeer which chases a female out of the herd in order to mate with it

**Šlohtur**  
Reindeer which hardly lifts its feet

**Stoalut**  
Reindeer which is no longer afraid of the dog

**Čahki**  
Hard lump of snow; hard snowball

**Geardni**  
Thin crust of snow

**Gska-geardi**  
Layer of crust

**Gaska-skártta**  
Hard layer of crust

**Goahpálat**  
The kind of snowstorm in which the snow falls thickly and sticks to things

**Guoldu**  
A cloud of snow which blows up from the ground when there is a hard frost without very much wind

**Luotkku**  
Loose snow

**Moarri**  
Brittle crust of snow; thin crust of ice

**Njáhcu**  
Thaw

**Ruokna**  
Thin hard crust of ice on snow

*Table 6 - Saami Terminology for Condition and Layers of Snow (Magga 2006)*
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Seanaš</td>
<td>Granular snow at the bottom of the layer of snow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skárta</td>
<td>Thin layer of snow frozen on to the ground</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skáva</td>
<td>Very thin layer of frozen snow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skávvi</td>
<td>Crust of ice on snow, formed in the evening after the sun has thawed the top of the snow during the day</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soavli</td>
<td>Very wet, slushy snow, snow-slush</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skoavdi</td>
<td>Empty space between snow and the ground</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vahca</td>
<td>Loose snow, especially new snow on the top of a layer of older snow or on a road with snow on it</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

References