

ETYMOLOGY AND ECOLOGY : CAN ETYMOLOGY BE AN AID IN ECOLOGICAL EDUCATION? THE CASE OF THE SARDINIAN WORD *MITSA*.

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Abstract

In Sardinia, hilly areas cover 67.9% of its land. Its climate is prevalently Mediterranean, with prolonged summer drought and mild winters. Of the more than thirty thousand springs found in Sardinia, most fall into the category of small. Anthropization of springs, which is common in settled areas and in their vicinity, has occurred even at the springs scattered over the countryside, in places known only to the experts. In the Sardinian language we find many different names for springs: *mitsa* is typical of the central southern area. I will reconsider the discussion of the etymology of *mitsa* (Guarnerio, Wagner, Mensching). Mensching rejects the prestigious etymology of Wagner who argued for a Punic origin of this word. His final hypothesis is that *mitsa* may derive from an endocentric Latin/Romance syntagm: TERRA MITIA. I will support this hypothesis on the basis of the cognitive motivation of the meaning. As direct knowledge of the object and its environment are in some cases of fundamental importance in understanding the origin of nouns and changes in their meanings, this kind of research can be embodied in the discipline that from the '90s onwards is referred to as ecolinguistics.

Keywords: Sardinian language, etymology, ecology

Introduction

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Italy

http://digilander.libero.it/spillo65/Regioni%20d'Italia/Mappa_Italia.html

Sardinia's mean altitude is 334 meters above sea level, with a prevalence of hilly areas covering 67.9% of its land; plains represent 13.6% and mountains 18.5% (Enne, Iannetta, Zucca 2006: 31). Although the climate is prevalently Mediterranean, with prolonged summer

drought and mild winters, some areas in the interior are considered similar to continental climates. Its insularity and position between the European and African continents with strong winds determine both its most important climatic features and great variability (<http://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sardegna#Clima>). This climatic variability causes a changing distribution of rain and snowfall. Following are the main features of the climate as classified in W. Köppen's method (<http://www.passiflora.it/zoneKoppen.htm>: green=temperate subcontinental, yellow=temperate sublittoral, orange=temperate hot, red=temperate subtropical).

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Sardinia

Main Text

Briefly stated, rainfall is scanty, with high rates of evaporation (Enne, Iannetta, Zucca 2006: 35). In such a geomorphological context, these data are significant if we consider that of the more than thirty thousand springs found in Sardinia, most fall into the category of small (less than 2 litres/second; Enne, Iannetta, Zucca 2006: 34). They are sometimes seasonal and disappear at the beginning of summer. These small springs, which are to be found everywhere, have, and especially have had, great importance for the survival of wild animals and strictly local human activities. Hence, the human efforts to protect, improve and stabilize the accumulation of water of these springs, up to the point of their becoming sacred places in the Bronze Age (*sacred wells* in Sardinia), that is, anthropization of springs occurred almost in all cases.

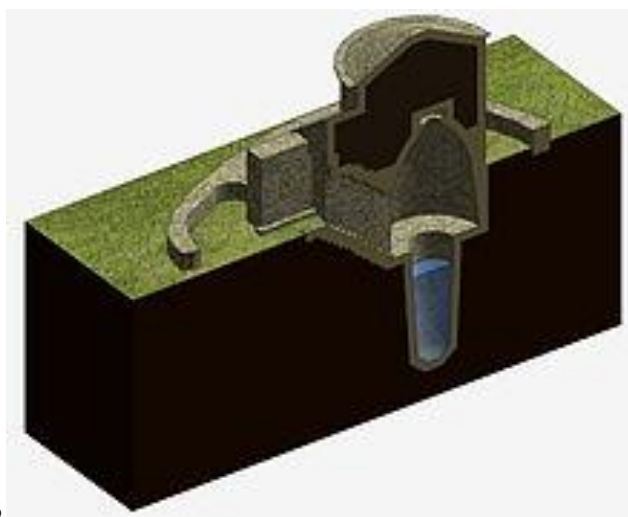


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↑ 1 – 2 The *Funtana Coberta* “Covered Well”, nuragic sacred well, 1200 - 850 B.C., with a depth of over 5 meters; it is located on land belonging to the village of Ballao (province of Cagliari in the southeast centre of the island, altitude 90 m a.s.l., at the foot of a high hill); the second photo shows the interior with water (<https://www.flickr.com/photos/desmobts/4967624328/>)



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↑ while the third shows a reconstruction of it. (http://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pozzo_sacro_di_Funtana_Coberta).

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4 *Mitsa Fanèuas*, a small spring with human works in the mountains of the Sulcis region in the southwest of the island; December 2013; photo by ML.

5 *Mitsa*, a spring with no human intervention, originating a puddle, a stream and small waterfall (Castiadas, CA, extreme southeast of Sardinia); <http://www.castiadasonline.it/natura/sorgenti.htm>.

5

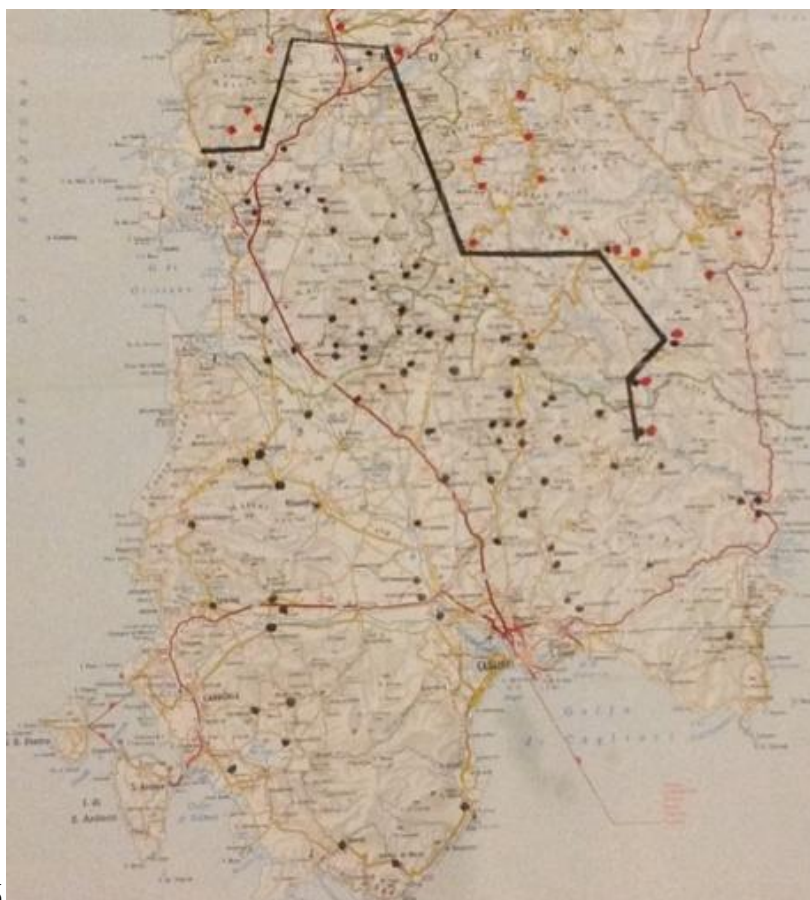
Anthropization of springs, which is common in settled areas and in their vicinity, has occurred even at the springs scattered over the countryside, in places known only to the experts (farmers, shepherds, hunters, forest rangers, but today even specialized tourist guides). With changes and improvements in the supply of water with the creation of artificial lakes starting from 1924, many of these springs (in Italian *fontanile* - fountain) excavated and cared for by humans continue to lose their importance and are no longer maintained. Traces of those that have disappeared for different reasons often remain in place names. But not every spontaneous leakage of water has a name; the smaller ones may disappear or be eliminated by human intervention, leaving nothing but a feeble recollection in the minds of those over sixty years of age, a memory destined to disappear over time. In the words of an inhabitant of the hilly central southern region of the island (<http://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trexenta>), Mr. Antonino Pusceddu (1937 - 2013) from Guamaggiore (CA): “And here the road certainly wasn't paved, it was a dirt road and sometimes there were little springs [...] the water even flowed in streams. I don't know why, but they don't flow anymore. In this part of the year there was always a trickle along the side of the road, but now [...] it's all dry.” (quoted in Pusceddu 2014). Or we can read this other description: “Bearing witness to the importance in the past of what is now a very slight presence of fresh water, near the canebrake is a well and a drinking trough, now almost entirely hidden by a large lentisk bush. When Cannesisa was a place with no settlements it was used for watering the sheep in a nearby sheepcote, which is indicated on the old maps.” (http://torredellestelle.blog.tiscali.it/2010/03/28/cannesisa-incendiato-il-canneto-e-le-tamerici-vicino-agli-scogli-nel-lato-sud-est/?doing_wp_cron;2010).

The springs mentioned in these two quotes are *risorgive* (in Italian, <http://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Risorgiva>), whose equivalent in English, *karst spring*, is misleading. A better equivalent is the Spanish *resurgencia*. Generally speaking, “A spring is any natural situation where water flows to the surface of the earth from underground. Thus, a spring is a site where the aquifer surface meets the ground surface.”

([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spring_\(hydrology\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spring_(hydrology))) A *risorgiva/resurgencia* is created by groundwater that may come to the surface not only at a specific point, but on level ground with porous or grainy soil may also be diffuse and form a spring or puddle or a marshy area varying in size.

My intention is to deal with the origin of the Sardinian name for this kind of spring, which is the most mysterious kind and the least observable in its natural state with no anthropization. To find these, one needs the help of an experienced guide and must penetrate into areas not frequented by tourists but which are fascinating from the standpoint of nature and ecology as well as rich in human history. In such a way we can bring together the history of the object with the history of its name, thus arriving at an understanding of why such a name was given to it. The theme of this study is connected with that of previous studies in which I discussed the southern Sardinian word [akwa] meaning “water” and the names of birds that populate Sardinia's wetlands (Lörinczi 2002, 2008; see also 2013).

The *mítsa*. In the Sardinian language we find many different names for springs. *Mitsa*, with its local variations (*midza*, *miθθa*, *migia*, *mintsa*, *miltsa*), is typical of the central southern area roughly bounded by the black segmented line on the map. On this map (6), showing the central and southern parts of Sardinia, the black dots indicate the many findings of the noun *mitsa* present in proper nouns (hydronyms and micro-toponyms). The red dots mark the beginning of the area where, according to a survey, the word *mitsa* is no longer present. Along the final three southern segments we find the coexistence of *mitsa* and *funtana* “spring” (red and black dots side by side indicate a sort of transition zone from *mitsa* to other names for springs: *funtana* etc.). ↓



6

↑ The area with the black dots indicates the presence of proper names containing *mitsa* but not always the presence of actual springs, since some of them may have disappeared

owing to natural or human causes. It is also reasonable to believe that the area where *mitsa* is present in proper names coincides almost perfectly with the diffusion of the word *mitsa* as a common noun, although along the boundary there may be discrepancies caused also by the relative vagueness of the meaning of the word in question, about which we shall speak later on.

The documents in which I found proper nouns containing *mitsa* are 1. the geo-onomastic database of the Sardinian regional government (Sardegna Geoportale <http://www.sardegna-geoportale.it/index.html>> Strumenti > Ricerca toponimi, with over 400 findings of all kinds: springs, roads and microplaces, streams etc.) and the list of microtoponyms compiled by the State Archives in Cagliari (

<http://www.archivio-statocagliari.it/archivio2/toponimi.pdf>, containing 761 sheets with over 100 presences of *mitsa*). On the map above are indicated roughly 75% of the places named in the second list, that is, those that are certainly villages, while others were found by consulting the internet. The areas delimited in the two databases show a good correspondence.

Other Sardinian names for "spring" are *funtana* (with its phonetic variations) and *bena* (with phonetic variations), both of Latin origin. *Funtana* and *bena* are to be found also in the *mitsa* area, not as a "spring" but the former as a "well, a spring dug by humans", and the latter as a "vein of water". Already from these data we can see that the words for "spring", if taken all together, can assume quite imprecise meanings that fade into one another. Overall, what we have is that from "spring" we come to "marshy area adjacent to the spring", to the "stream of water running off from a spring", then to the "well", to the "spring dug by humans". To the primary names we must add the derived ones with suffixes or compound nouns such as *mitsadroxu* "water puddle" (Wagner, *DES*); *mitzarxu* "puddle, spring" (Puddu); (*ab*)*benadroxu*, *venadroxu*, *benale*, *benardzu*, *benatzu*, *benàtile*, *benatinu* (Puddu) and other names for "spring puddle, where plants can grow, a sort of small marsh" (at this point the meanings of *mitsa* and *bena* encounter that of "marsh", which has specific names). The compounds *mits'e s'akua* (at Settimo San Pietro, CA), *Mitza Ena/Uena* (at Palmas Arborea and Burcei, OR, CA) would appear to be tautological ("spring of water", "spring spring"). The anonymous stream of spring water that may form along a road until the beginning of the dry season can be indicated as *abenadroxu* (<*bena*>) in the southern dialects of the island. (Note: Sardinian orthographic <x> should be read as the French <j>.)

Wagner's definition of *mitsa* is ambiguous or complex: "spring" but also "spring puddle". These meanings describe water that comes out of the earth spontaneously with no digging involved and which can immediately assume a roundish shape like a puddle.

A spring of this kind can be seen in the photo below (7); it was taken on a basaltic plateau (the Giara di Gesturi) in the southern central part of the island (mean altitude approximately 550 m a.s.l., 45 km²). On the Giara there are at least seven *mitsas* and several *funtanas*. Without an expert naturalist as a guide, in this case Mr Roberto Sanna, it would be impossible to find this *mitsa* and identify it.

7 - *Mitsa of spring water on the Giara di Gesturi*, 2 March 2014, after a period of abundant rainfall. Photo by ML. The *mitsa* is at the point where in the pond (formed by a mixture of rain and spring water) we can see a greyish extension of calm water at the base of the bushes (the colour is probably the result of the mud brought to the surface or created there by the spring water). Disregarding seasonal water characteristics, from a spring of this kind on flat land a puddle or pond forms immediately; to keep the water clean and clear and allow it to accumulate, some work by humans is called for. If the rainwater had evaporated we would see only muddy water. In muddy puddles of this kind the wild boar love to wallow and this makes them still muddier; for this reason the water is artificially channelled into protected drinking troughs for sheep and other animals. ↓

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8The basaltic plateau *Giara di Gesturi* seen from the south; 10 May 2014; photo by ML. ↓



Mr Efisio Giglio from Guasila (Trexenta, historical region at the centre of the southern half of the island) is a man with a great knowledge of the countryside since he is a breeder, farmer and also a water expert. From his viewpoint, in a spring at low altitude (like the one found more or less where the last panoramic photo was taken) first comes the *mitsadroxu* or *benarxu* “puddle formed by the spring” (two words deriving from *mitsa* and *bena*), that is, the spring in its natural state surrounded by plants and mud and so also turbid and even dangerous if the mud is deep, not yet worked by humans. Moreover, the *mitsadroxu* is not seasonal but perennial. For Mr Giglio, a *mitsa* is a spring that has been cleaned, furnished and made usable by and for humans, when the spring water is clear and able to be taken (the Italian word for it is *fontanile* = fountain). In this second exploration, in May 2014, the expert guide was necessary since the vegetation covers the springs, as can be seen in these photos: 9 - 10 (beyond this flat land a hill rises to a height of 360 meters a.s.l.); the water can reach a depth of two meters because the spring has been cleaned and reinforced with masonry walls); 10 May 2014; photos by ML. ↓

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Other quite interesting springs can be seen in cavities in the rock, either natural or of human making. Here, not far from the spring shown in the previous photos, but on the other side of the hill, we see **(11)** *Sa forredda de akwa* (literally “a hearth dug in the ground, full of water; a basin full of water” which is quite cool even in summer; photo taken by Davide Giglio with his cell phone). Another is a seasonal *mitsa* **(12 - 14)**, a spring that up to June fills the lower part (excavated to a depth of about 20 cm) of a hypogeal grave dating from the 4th-3rd millennium BC, which is found in a hilly area at the foot of the mountains of Sinnai (a town in the south of the island, about 20 km from Cagliari).

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12-13-14

↑**12 - 14** *S'akua de is dolus* “The water of pains” (that is, a pain remedy, according to the local legend). It is inside a hypogeal grave of the 4th-3rd millennium BC (in the countryside of Settimo San Pietro in the province of Cagliari, southern Sardinia), which is fed by seasonal/winter springs; photo by ML, December 2013.

([http://www.monumentiaperti.com/it/default/2470/Domus-de-Janus-de-S-acqua-Is-](http://www.monumentiaperti.com/it/default/2470/Domus-de-Janus-de-S-acqua-Is-Dolus.html)

[Dolus.html](http://www.monumentiaperti.com/it/default/2470/Domus-de-Janus-de-S-acqua-Is-Dolus.html);http://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/S'acqua_'e_is_dolus

<http://www.traccedisardegna.it/archeologia/domus-de-janus-sacqua-dolus>

http://it.worldmapz.com/photo/312588_en.htm)

These two springs in the rock (**11** and **12 - 14**) are too different to be considered true *mitsas* even though they are in the technical sense; indeed, they have special names. *Mitsa*, taking into account the applications of the term, is used prevalently where the flow of water immediately creates a muddy puddle or the water becomes turbid if moved. And this brings us back to the question of the etymology of the Sardinian word.

Discussion of the etymology of *mitsa*. The first discussion was summarized by M. L.

Wagner in the entry of the *DES* and *La lingua sarda* (149-151). In the opinion of P. E. Guarnerio (in 1906), *mitsa* derives from the Latin *MÎTIA, feminine gender formed from the adjective MÎTIS “sweet, mature, calm, mild, courteous and so on” (N.B.: MITIA, MITIS etc., first I long). As the key to the phonetic and semantic vicissitudes of the Sardinian word, Guarnerio traces it to the Italian adjective *mézzo* [mettso] “said of [pulpy] fruit close to the
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305t305i305o305n305a305l305]305305b305e305t305w305e305e305n305305'305s305o305f
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305o305n305w305a305r305d305s305,305305t305h305e305
P305u305n305i305c305305(305S305e305m305i305t305i305c305)
305o305r305i305g305i305n305305305305o305f305305t305h305e305305w305o305r305d
305.

However, we must also add the simple meaning of “soaked, full of water” of the Italian adjective *mézzo*, according to the entries in the most common Italian dictionaries and, if used as a nominative form, “the rotten part [soft and damp] of a fruit”, “swampy place, mud” (see *Vocabolario della Lingua Italiana* Treccani, 1989).

The Italian *mézzo*, according to Vittorio Pisani (Mensching, 297), comes from the Latin MÎTIUS (neuter comparative of the adjective MÎTIS “sweet, ripe, calm, mild, courteous and so on”). So the meanings of “soaked, full of water”, as well as “swampy place, mud” of the Italian *mézzo* may shed light on the origin and transmission from Latin to Sardinian of the word that has become *mitsa*. These meanings are to be found in Italian from Dante onwards. Dante says: “Così girammo ... tra la ripa secca e 'l mezzo”, *DC, Inf. VII, 127 – 8; And so, between the dry shore and the swamp, / we circled much of that disgusting pond; transl. by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, 1867.*)

As G. Mensching points out in the most recent work I have been able to consult, Dante's commentators have several times explained that in the cited verses the noun *mezzo* signifies “a soft and wet place, not hard”, “the opposite of dry”. Subsequently, we also find “drenched (with blood)” and so on. Mensching adds that through modern findings in the Italian dialects, words having the same etymon mean “soaked, impregnated with a liquid, drenched, wet, damp, dripping wet”, “very wet with rain or sweat”, “very ripe / very wet”. For the many other details that further strengthen the “watery” meaning, we refer readers to Mensching's article.

Returning to Guarnerio's hypothesis concerning the origin of the Sardinian *mitsa*, in Latin the adjective MÎTIS means “sweet, ripe (lat. *mollis, maceratus speciatim* [N.B.] *de fructibus maturando mollitis; maturus*, ThLL; Mensching: 297), tender, soft, calm, mild, courteous and so on”. For our discussion, perhaps more pertinent are some meanings of the Latin co-radical verb MÎTIGO, -ARE, that is, “weaken, soften” (besides the more important ones of “ripen, make tender”); these meanings may also have been those of the adjective MÎTIS, especially of the comparative (MÎTIUS) if absolute and intensive (* “softened, made soft by an excess of liquids”) but which are not found in Latin (Latin in the total sense, not only vulgar and/or late), while they (re)appear abundantly in Italian and Sardinian. Particularly interesting is the fact that as an adjective the Italian *mezzo* “too ripe, softened, rotten, drenched, decomposed-putrefied and so on” is applied mostly to overripe fruit,

drenched, dark in colour, rotten, but particularly to pears (which when overripe are soft and watery). How is a fruit when too ripe and rotten on the inside, or when it has fallen to the ground and rotted there? This is the inside of a rotten quince (photo **15**, by ML): ↓

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15

The resemblance to the wet soil (**16**, part of a photo taken from the web) is evident. It is also evident that country folk, and in the past not only they, were more familiar with rotten fruit than we are today (cfr. Lakoff, Johnson 1980). We can thus hypothesize an analogy between rotting fruit, or more specifically with ground covered with rotten fruit and soil soaked with spring water. Both the fruit and the water are in reality important and significant for humans. Just as rotten fruit or rot in general attracts insects (and certain animals) as food (and for regeneration), the water from springs, especially when it is hard to come by, attracts insects, animals and humans to quench their thirst.

Also on the basis of such a demonstration, which indicates the so-called cognitive *motivation of meaning* (that is, why a word has assumed or developed a determined meaning, what is the conceptual connection in semantic evolution?), we can agree with G. Mensching's argument (*art. cit.*) which rejects, on the basis of the opinion of Semitists, the prestigious etymology of M. L. Wagner, who argued for a Semitic, Punic origin of *mitsa* (despite the etymology of Italian *mezzo* was already clear in the nineteenth century: Tommaseo, Bellini, 1865). Mensching returned to Guarnerio's original etymology and developed the theme in the Romance field and not only that of Sardinia. Thus, his final hypothesis is that the Sardinian *mitsa* may derive from an endocentric syntagm, TERRA MITIA, that is, "water-soaked soil" (*art. cit.*, note 40). With the later ellipsis of the first element, the noun (implicit in the frequent use of the endocentric syntagm; Pronin'ska 2011), we obtain the nominalization of *mitia*, that is, "the soaked, the wet, the drenched" thus "spring/spring water and adjacent ground". Continuing this line of thought, I have tried to demonstrate the motivation, that is, the relationship between significatum and the extralinguistic object on the basis of the Italian occurrences, which are far more abundant than the Sardinian ones, thus indicating only parallel semantic changes starting from Latin and nothing more (there is absolutely no implication of Italian influence on Sardinian in the case of the word in question).

Conclusion

Etymology and Ecology. Here I shall try to respond to the question in the title. When we are dealing with the names of birds, plants, traditional local place names or the names of tools invented thousands of years ago (such as the knife, the ploughshare, the hammer, the needle), in-the-field surveys and direct knowledge of the object and its environment are in

some cases of fundamental importance in understanding the origin of nouns and changes in their meanings. Today, ethnoscience practices this kind of approach systematically, while linguists do so to a much lesser extent. While an environmental anthropology is now established and we know the histories of the classic linguistic atlases drawn up by "trekking" linguists and dialectologists, investigations in pure historical semantics can follow identical approaches, also in promoting ecological awareness. In the case of my searches as a "tourist" into the reasons behind the meaning of *mitsa*, what I have called "the search for springs" and which I have shared with friends and colleagues, the enthusiastic welcome received even from children during our visits to natural environments that are not visited, or cannot be visited without a guide, has strengthened the conviction of having available another empiric means for creating and spreading knowledge and understanding, both general and specialized: it can be embodied in the discipline that from the '90s onwards is referred to as **ecolinguistics**.

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