Tales from a Concave World
Liber Amicorum Bert Voorhoeve
TALES FROM A CONCAVE WORLD
LIBER AMICORUM BERT VOORHOEVE

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Leiden University
1995
Tales

Tales from a concave world: liber amicorum Bert Voorhoeve / ed. by Connie Baak, Mary Bakker, Dick van der Meij. - Leiden : Projects Division, Department of Languages and Cultures of South-East Asia and Oceania, Leiden University. - III., foto’s
Ook tekst in het Nederlands. - Met bibliogr.
ISBN 90-73006-06-6
Trefw.: taalwetenschap ; opstellen / antropologie ; opstellen.

Omslagontwerp: Studio Henk de Bruin, Leiden
Deze uitgave is tot stand gekomen met financiële steun van het Indonesian Linguistics Development Project II (ILDEP II)

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Afdeling Projecten, Vakgroep Talen en Culturen van Zuidoost-Azië en Oceanië, Rijksuniversiteit Leiden

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ISBN 90-73006-06-6
SPIRITS AND FRIENDS:  
EXPLETIVE NOUNS IN KOROWAI OF IRIAN JAYA

Lourens de Vries

1. Introduction

Korowai is a Papuan language of the Awyu family spoken in the district Merauke of southern Irian Jaya, Indonesia, in the area (see Map) between the upper Becking and Eilanden rivers and east of the headwaters of the Becking river (Van Enk and De Vries 1994).

Korowai speakers number about 4000. Korowai has Kombai (De Vries 1993) as its southern neighbour. To the east Tsakwambo is spoken, like Kombai and Korowai an Awyu language. North of the Korowai, the linguistic situation is not yet entirely clear. Most probably, the Korowai language borders there on the Kopka language which could very well be a Lowland Ok family language (Kroneman and Peckham 1988). To the west, Citak, of the Asmat family (Voorhoeve 1980), is spoken.

The first regular contacts between (some) Korowai clans and outsiders, Dutch missionaries, started in the early 1980s. Doing linguistic research in the Upper-Digul and Upper-Becking area from 1982 to 1991, I was one of the first foreigners to enjoy the hospitality of the Korowai. The Korowai live in tree houses some 20 meters above the ground, use stone axes and do not know Indonesian.

In this article, I describe a class of Korowai expletives which derive from nouns but function as interjections: semantically, they have no referents, syntactically, they do not have valence and phonologically, they are always pronounced with intonational prominence. For ease of reference, I call them expletive nouns, to

\[ (1) \text{meli-to fire-wit} \]

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1 Research for this paper was conducted in the framework of the NWO (Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research) priority programme "The Irian Jaya Studies: a programme for interdisciplinary research" (ISIR) financed by WOTRO (Netherlands Foundation for the Advancement of Tropical Research).

1 I will only dr published in V:
Spirits and friends: expletive nouns in Korowai of Irian Jaya

2. Spirits and friends

The expletive nouns in the corpus-Van Enk come from two sources: proper names of 'supernatural' beings and nouns denoting 'dearness' relations (friend, companion, dear).

The Korowai avoid personal names of people, let alone of supernatural beings. But as in so many other speech communities, it is words of taboo and avoidance that are used as expletives. We have found the following proper names of supernatural beings used as expletives: Ginol, the creator-spirit, Gufom, a water-spirit, Gén, a river-spirit and Faül, a mythical pig.

Gufom and Gén can be heard daily in Korowai conversations; they are popular swearwords for every day use, for example when somebody hurts himself. The use of names of spirits as expletives is subject to restrictions. For example, the name Gén, very often used in contexts of strong amazement, should not be used as a swearword close to the turn of the river Nailop where this spirit lives. That could cause accidents and mishap.

As far as Faül goes, there is a fascinating myth of origin in the Van Enk-corpus in which Faül occurs first to refer to the mythical pig, and much later in the same text, as an expletive noun. Consider first its non-expletive use:

(1) meli-to ye múl-khup meli-to ye fire-with he former-time fire-with he

I will only draw examples from those texts in the Van Enk corpus which will be published in Van Enk and De Vries (forthcoming).
dofo-dakhu sé ap-ta
be.burnt.RESULT.3SG.REAL-SS next there-LOC

maé-takhefi-mekho-do¹ khe-nè
water-open-SUPP.3SG.REAL-DS go-SS

lokhté-do
go.away.3SG.REAL-DS
In former times with fire he had..., with fire he had burnt (the
world) and then there he had opened the (streams of) waters and
it ran away and..'

(2) ap-ta alo-bo-dakhu-fekho
there-LOC stand-stay.3SG.REAL-SS-ATTENT

fo-ngg-alingga lu-nè
take-INF.CONN-without move.up-SUPP.SS

be-bakh-i be-bakh-i be-bakh-i sit-HOD-3SG sit-HOD-3SG sit-HOD-3SG.REAL
'.there he stood and he kept shoving aside (all of it) for a long
time...'

(3) émente-bo-tofekho
of.a.long.duration-stay.3SG.REAL-DS

émente-bakh-i-tofekho
of.a.long.duration-HOD-3SG.REAL-DS
'.it had taken quite a period, but after a long time..

(4) Faül dadúai-tofekho
Faül swim-go.down.3SG.REAL-DS

Faül ül-nè
Faül kill-SS

bul-mekho-kha-fefè
slaughter-SUPP.3SG.REAL-CONN-TOP

Faül ba-nggolol yaüya-pé
Faül chest-bone under-LOC

¹ Maël lakhaftimekho, litt. 'to open the water(s)’ pointing to the action of giving way
to the water of a blocked up river. Especially during longer spells of dry weather,
the Korowai block up streams in order to catch fish.
Spirits and friends: expletive nouns in Korowai of Irian Jaya

fe-nè fu muf-e-kholol
get-SS put.3SG.REAL back-TR-bone
wola-khi-pé fe-nè fu-tofekho
world-over-LOC get-SS put.3SG.REAL-DS
‘...Faul came swimming downstream, after having killed and slaughtered Faul, he put his chest-bone part (of meat) beneath (i.e. on the ground), his back-bone part he placed towards the sky...’

This text exemplifies the lamol-aup genre within the oral tradition, myths about the origin of the world. After the creator-spirit Ginol has burnt the first creation with fire, he cleaned up the remnants and opened a water stream in which the mythical pig Faul came swimming downstream. Body-parts of Faul are used in the construction of the new world.

In a much later episode of this text we meet the Original Couple, two brothers. The older turns the younger brother into a woman by cutting off his penis and scrotum. The older brother then has sex with his brother-turned-sister but it does not feel good and then:

(5) khayal-yabén di-lu-dakhu
   kind.of.fish-fat ?-rub.3SG.REAL-SS

gomo-tofekho
have.sex.3SG.REAL-DS

be-sikh-té-da-lelo-tofekho
NEG-delicious-be.3SG.REAL-NEG-be.3SG.REAL-DS

malan-yabén di-lu-dakhu
kind.of.snake-fat ?-rub.3SG.REAL-SS

gomo-tofekho
have.sex.3SG.REAL-DS

be-sikh-té-da-lelo-tofekho
NEG-delicious-be.3SG.REAL-NEG-be.3SG.REAL-DS
‘he rubbed (her) with the fat of the khayal-fish and had sex again, but it still did not feel good, so with the fat of the malan-snake he rubbed, had sex again but still it did not feel good and...’
(6) wap-ta milon sip non¹
there-LOC kind.of.sago root.end sago.grub
dé-daku-fe kho get.out.3SG.REAL-SS-ATTENT lu-lu-daku-fe kho rub-rub.3SG.REAL-SS-ATTENT
goma-tofe kho have.sex.3SG.REAL-DS
'.there he got a sago grub out of the root end of a milon-tree, rubbed
repeatedly (with the fat of it) and then he had sex another time and .'.

(7) Nggé Faül
friend Faül

sikh-ayan-telo
delicious-very-be.3SG.REAL
"Oh dear, Faül!, this feels very good!".

The first satisfactory sexual intercourse of the Original Couple fills
the Older Brother with excitement and the emotion comes out in
the use of the two expletive nouns in (7), nggé and Faül. (The text
does not inform us whether the other partner liked it.) Faül as a
mythical being does not play a role in this episode (5)-(7); in fact,
having been killed by the creator-spirit, his role as a mythical
participant ended in (4). Notice that in (7) a 'dearness' expletive
and a 'supernatural' expletive are combined. This brings us to the
' dearness' expletives.

Other 'dearness' expletives besides nggé are: mayokh
'friends, dear people' and khojêlapa 'boy! '. Cross-linguistically,
relationship terms with strong connotations of solidarity and
helpfulness (friend, dear, mother, brother) are often used as
expletives of distress but may also be connected with other
emotions such as surprise and amazement. Example (8) is taken
from the same myth of origin as the examples (1)-(7). Ginol, the
creator spirit, discovers that his fire has gone dead:

¹ The sago grubs (non) in the very lower end (sip) of the milon-sago tree-trunk
usually are very fat. The Korowai use the fat of the sip non to smear it at a new
trap in order to warrant successful hunting. The sip non magic is applied here in a
sexual context.
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(8) Wé mayokh dé-dakhu meli-tekhé
EXCLM friends QUOTE.3SG.REAL-SS fire-purpose
di-atì-afé-mémo-tofekho
? -hold-turn.3SG.IMM.REAL-DS
"Oh help" he said and wandered around looking for fire and..'

In the context there is no one else around that mayokh could have
been addressed to; it is safe to interpret the example (8) as a case
of a 'dearness' relationship term used as an expletive noun. This
analysis is strengthened by the presence of another exclamative in
(8): the interjection wé. This interjection belongs to the lengthened
vowel interjections which may be combined with the noun-based
interjections.

The (semi-)vowel interjections of Korowai are the following:
wé, ü, wi, aü, i, ayè, a, o, e, iè, ëë, éi. Although it is very hard
to pin down these vowel interjections in terms of their function, iè,
ëë and éi are typically used to attract the attention of the addressee,
to make him or her listen, a and o have been found to reinforce
the illocutionary force of utterances such as hortations and denials,
and the remaining vowel interjections occur in contexts of
amazement, fear, shock and surprise.

Example (10) illustrates the use of khofélapa 'oh boy!' in a
case of fear and shock, following the interjection wé:

(9) khala yafin-bo-ta
couple fills
up stairs-opening-LOC
dal-meko-do
appearing-SUPP.3SG.REAL-DS
'and upstairs in the stairs' entrance he appeared, and...

(10) ima-të-tofekho wé khofél-apa
see-3PL.REAL-DS EXCLM boy-only.EXCLM
'. they looked but - Oh boy! -.'

(11) khof-e-kha khomilo-do
that-TR-CONN die.3SG-DS
mé-laimekho-bakha-ti-kha abül
earth-bury-HOD-3PL.REAL-CONN male.person
lu falé wii appear.3SG.REAL EXCLM
nggé gu laléo friend you demon
lai-ati-bo-dakhu lelé-mbol-e-kholo-ê come-hold-stay.2SG.REAL-SS come-2SG.PROGR-TR-Q-or
'..that man who died and who they had buried earlier that day did appear right now!, "Oh dear, are you coming as a bad spirit, or..'"

de-té-tofe kho QUOTE-3PL.REAL-DS.but
'..how are you coming?", they asked, but...'

mayokh manda nu khomile-lé-dakhu kho-sú1 friends no I die-1SG.REAL-SS there-to kha-lé-lofe kho go-1SG.REAL-DS.but
"No, friends, I died and went there, but..."

debúlo-talé2 walúp-ta lúl aüle-té-do road-big half.way-LOC barrier close-3PL.REAL-DS
'..half-way the big road they had made a barrier and...'

sé wokhelime kho lailo la-lé-lofe kho next return.SS return.SS come-1SG.REAL-DS.but
'..and then I returned and came back, but...

gèkhene nu mé-lamèka-bakha-ti-do you me earth-bury-HOD-3PL.REAL-DS
'..you already had buried me, and...'

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1 This refers to the journey of the 'soul' (in Korowai: yanakpayan 'the very man') to his own clan-territory in the land of the deceased where he is united with his relatives who went before.
2 The dead travel the 'big road' to the land of the dead. When people have lost consciousness and regain it, they have met a barrier on the 'big road' and were forced to return. When somebody loses consciousness, the word khomilo- is used to denote that state, the same word which is used for 'to die'. In cases of prolonged loss of consciousness, the relatives begin the wailing and lamentations for the dead.

The expletive to the use of tsjonge-jonge is used as an This -apa lit speakers use, receive the sj Notice used as form between the The 'dearner forms of adc This vocative comes forms E.g. the use of shock wii, c: address.

Since expletive us boy' expletive use in (10):

(17) senggile-be.fright
dami-mo open-SU
dé-do quote.3S
'...I was he said: '
The expletive use of *khofélapa* 'boy!' in (10) is strikingly similar to the use of the English exclamation *'oh boy!* and Dutch *tjonge* or *tsjonge-jonge*. The Korowai noun *khofé*(*l*) 'young man, boy', if it is used as an expletive, always occurs with the exclamative -*apa*. This -*apa* literally means 'just, only'. Notice that when Dutch speakers use *jongen* ('boy') as an expletive device, it also tends to receive the special exclamative form *t(s)jongel*.

The context for (10) is a text (from the oral tradition) about a man who was buried (in a shallow grave under the tree house) but who, to the shock of those who buried him, came back to the land of the living. In (10) the 'resurrected' suddenly appears in the tree house entrance: it is the climax of the story.

Notice that in (11) and (13) the 'dearness' terms seem to be used as forms of address (and not as interjections) in the dialogue between the 'resurrected' man and the people who had buried him. The 'dearness' terms like *nggé* and *mayokh* are frequently used as forms of address, also between relatives, replacing kinship terms. This vocative use of 'dearness' terms, in extra- Clausal position, comes formally very close to the use as exclamative interjections. E.g. the use of *nggé* in (11), following the interjection of fear and shock *wū*, can be analyzed both as an interjection and as a form of address.

Since *khofé*(*l*) 'boy' receives a special exclamative form in expletive usage, this ambiguity does not play a role with the *'oh boy!* expletive. Compare the vocative use in (18) with the expletive use in (10):

(18) *khofé mano-pelu-m-é-o*

'Boy, you should grow well!'
3. Discussion

The lexical sources from which Korowai draws expletive nouns are the same sources that are found in many other communities: names of gods/spirits/mythical beings and nouns denoting 'dearness' (solidarity) relations. In the latter category, many languages use kinship terms with strong connotations of solidarity, such as mother or brother, as expletives (cf. the expletive use of mother-terms in Italian mamma mia! and Kannada (of India) amma (Bean 1981)) but we have not found Korowai speakers use kinship nouns as interjections. Instead, Korowai uses non-kinship 'dearness' terms for expletive purposes.

When bodily functions are strongly taboo and subject to avoidance, then words denoting them also tend to be used as expletives (cf. English 'shit!'), but we have not found Korowai expletives from such sources.

More research is needed to establish in which contexts the Korowai use 'supernatural' expletives (power/taboo) and in which contexts they use the 'dearness' expletives (solidarity). Notice that we have examples (such as (7) above) in which expletive nouns from both sources are combined in one expression.

A small number of Korowai speakers is regularly exposed to the local variety of Indonesian spoken at the mission station Yaniruma. In that variety of Indonesian, the two most frequently used expletives are cuki main (possibly of Biak origin) and bukan main (from standard Indonesian but the use is much more general than in standard Indonesian). We have not yet heard Korowai speakers use these Indonesian expletives when speaking Korowai, although they readily borrow other items from Indonesian.

4. Abbreviations

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<th>ATTENT</th>
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<th>DS</th>
<th>EXCL</th>
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<td>attention-marker</td>
<td>connective</td>
<td>different subject (switch-reference)</td>
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