

THE POLYSEMY OF 'INAYAN' ACROSS TRIBAL GROUPS IN MOUNTAIN PROVINCE: EXPLORING EVIDENCE OF CULTURE-SPECIFIC ETHICAL CONCEPTS IN LANGUAGE

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1. Introduction

This study is an attempt to explore evidence of culture-specific ethical concepts in language, as it looks into the polysemy, or multiple meanings, of *inayan* in the Kankanaey language of the Cordillera Administrative Region of Northern Philippines. It hopes to contribute to Polish scholar and semanticist Anne Wierzbicka's empirical search for the "alphabet of human thoughts", and to illustrate additionally how language serves as the best mirror of the human mind and the human culture across different tribal groups and geographic boundaries.

Led by Wierzbicka for more than a decade now, the quest for lexical universals parallels that of linguists Noam Chomsky's and Joseph Greenberg's Universal Grammar (UG), which posits that human beings are born with an innate language acquisition device (LAD) containing a bio-programmed grammar with universal structural characteristics, enabling normal human beings to learn language. Similarly, Wierzbicka claims that there exists a small set of universal lexicons, through which "we can discover and identify culture-specific conceptual configurations characteristic of different peoples of the world... which is the key to real human understanding" (1992:27). In many of her major works, she has strongly asserted that it is an urgent task of linguistic semantics to identify finally the "universal set of semantic primitives." The final identification, she claims, has vital consequences not only for linguistics, but also for cognitive science and for cultural anthropology. The problem is not in whether lexical universals exist or not, but rather, in finding time to search for empirical evidence to justify their existence. Working on Wilhelm von Humboldt framework that "all languages revolve, both in grammar and in lexicon, around a small number of universal concepts" and thus are "bearers of different cognitive perspectives, different worldviews," and on Leibniz's empirical investigative methodology of extensive lexicographic experimentation, Wierzbicka admits that the task may be difficult and time-consuming, but "it is a task for decades, not centuries or millenia" (Ibid, 13). According to her, the goal is eventually generating a "natural semantic metalanguage" which should enable scholars to compare meanings across language and culture boundaries, and interpret data on the idiosyncratic aspects within a culture from a universal perspective. This procedure will enable us to see "human nature within every particular culture" (Ibid, 21).

Already, Wierzbicka has long ventured into crosslinguistic and cross-cultural empirical investigations on both universal concepts and universal emotions. She has postulated and validated at least ten universal concepts, namely, I, you, someone,

something, this, say, want, don't want, feel and think. Many others on her list are under closer inspection. The universal emotions and ethical concepts include fear, good, bad, shame, embarrassment, disgust, pride, among others.

2. Methodology

2.1 Procedure for Data-Gathering

From a linguist's perspective, I definitely share Wierzbicka's position that the search for lexical universals is a purely empirical task. Thus, evidence is culled directly from people's practical experiences. Precisely, this has been the procedure and methodology utilized in this semantic study. Using questionnaire and interview as elicitation tools, data were obtained from 20 informants, 17 to 65 age range, and representing different cultural memberships in Mountain Province and Benguet Province of the Cordillera Administrative Region in Northern Philippines. The data elicited were the meanings attached to the lexicon *inayan*, according to the informants' perception of, and experience with, the lexicon.

The informants were also asked to give sample utterances in which they use the word *inayan*. This procedure and the direct elicitation of the informants' understanding of the word combined to determine various meanings of the word.

2.2 Procedure for Data Analysis

The primary analytical tool used in this study is polysemy, from the Greek *polys* 'many', and *semeion* 'sign' (Ulmann 1962:159); or the analysis of multiple meanings carried by a word. Polysemy derives from various sources, among which are contextual use, metaphorical use, specialization in a social milieu, reinterpretation resulting from identical forms, and foreign influence (Ibid, 159-167). This is why it was necessary to elicit from the informants data on the linguistic usage and the context of use of *inayan*.

In the search for lexical universals, polysemy has been identified as a necessary analytical component of the task. "Polysemy is a fact of life, and basic, everyday words are particularly likely to be polysemous" (Zipf 1949, in Wierzbicka, Ibid, 13).

3. The Kankanaey Language

Inayan is a lexicon in the Kankanaey language, which is spoken mainly by the Kankanaey ethnolinguistic group inhabiting the western part of the Mountain Province covering the municipalities of Bauko, Besao, Sagada and Tadian. Kankanaeys are also found in the northern Benguet province area spanning the Mankayan, Buguias, Kibungan, Kapangan and Guinzadan municipalities.

The Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL) has distinguished the Kankanaey language variety in the western Mountain Province area as Northern Kankanaey, with 70,000 native speakers, from the variety in the northern Benguet area as Central

Kankanaey, with 50,000 native speakers (Ethnologue 1996).

In his subgrouping of Philippine languages, Curtis McFarland has identified Kankanaey as among Central Cordilleran languages and an L-complex, or complex language. L-complexes are languages contiguous to each other and mutually intelligible, “but the degree of mutual intelligibility diminishes with non-contiguity and distance” (In Bautista 1996:14).

One other Central Cordilleran language and an L-complex with a high correspondence with Kankanaey because of contiguity is the Bontok language. This language has 36,000 native speakers, inhabiting the Central Bontok and Eastern Bontok areas of Mountain Province. This is one prominent language in the same province where Kankanaey language is spoken. The SIL has classified the two languages as both “Bontok-Kankanaey”, but because Kankanaey has the larger number of speakers, it is likely the superordinate L-complex group, with Bontok along with the Northern Kankanaey and Central Kankanaey varieties as subgroups.

In contrast, the Cordillera Schools Group (CSG), which produced a three-volume publication of the Cordillera ethnolinguistic group (Reyes 1986, 1987), classifies the Kankanaeys of Mountain Province as the Western Bontok ethnolinguistic group, or the Applais, “those from the mountain slopes, living on the boundaries of Mountain Province and Abra” (Ibid 1987:66). However, it likewise admits that “delineating the Bontoks from the neighbors, the Northern Kankanaeys..., is rather difficult since the culture of the group often overlaps the other” (Ibid, 34), and that there are many shared cultural traits, language among them. I shall elaborate on this observation in the cross-cultural comparison of the meanings of *inayan* in the succeeding sections.

4. The Meanings of *Inayan*

In his publication of *A Vocabulary of the Sagada Igorot Dialect* (1957), William Henry Scott registered two meanings for *inayan*, namely:

- (1) to hold somebody back, prevent from doing, dissuade;
- (2) a mild expression like “shucks”

(Ibid, 30]

The two meanings present the word as an ordinary verb and an exclamation. However, a deeper investigation of the presence of the word in the Kankanaey language reveals that it is an essential signifier of a deeply-seated ethical concept in the Kankanaey culture, namely the fear of a supreme deity, called *Kabunian*, or God, forewarns or dissuades one from doing anything bad or harmful to others.

Data elicited from all the informants yielded this common element of “fear of God” associated with the word. This fear emanates from tribal religious beliefs that there are unseen elements of the “skyworld and the underworld”, such as the “spirits of ancestors, *Ap-apo*, of the dead, *Kakading*, and of the underworld, *anito*,” that can cause retribution and unwanted consequences, for example, illness, death and other misfortunes

to offenders of these spirits.

- (1) *Baken uway di gatgatinan tan inayan.* (Northern Benguet Kankanaey)
'Don't step on anything because it's scary/it might be angry.'

Even today these are widely-held traditional beliefs, especially among the elder members of villages, or *ili*. It is the essence and salience of this cultural tradition among the Kankanaeys that produced the word *inayan* in their lexicon. Wierzbicka and Humboldt both claim that “the presence of a word proves the presence of the concept, and, moreover, its salience in a given culture” (Wierzbicka, *Ibid*, 21). This statement is corroborated by Singer, and I quote:

The absence of certain features or words from a language would not need to mean that the people who use the language, do not pay attention to those things, e.g. the case of taboos and sacred works..., the absence of certain words...has some extraordinary psychological value.
(in Hoijer 1954:225-227)

From my data, *inayan*, as word and concept, is language-specific and culture specific to the Kankanaey culture and language. It is deeply-rooted in the culture specifically of the Sagada and Besao Kankanaey tribes, as claimed by informants from these places. To them, *inayan* embodies all virtues/morals of tribal members—humility, truthfulness, fidelity, honesty, commitment, among others.

While the Northern Benguet Kankanaey informant in illustration # 1 stresses faith in, and respect for, the unseen gods or spirits as the foundation of their *inayan* concept, the Sagada and Besao informants, representing Western Bontok, claim that it is the human conscience that controls this cultural ethic. In addition to the fear of the supreme being, they say that they fear what their fellow tribal members will talk about them, which will affect the succeeding generations of the family.

- (2) *Inayan nan adi mangpati is ina na ya ama na.* (Western Bontok)
'It is bad not to listen or heed parents' advice.'

- (3) *Ay no inchismis da sik-a ichismis mo es daida? Inayan. Padakdakkelem lang nan problema.* (Western Bontok)
'If they gossip about you, would you also do the same? Think twice. You might make a bigger problem.'

- (4) *Inayan di mangibubukod si gawis.* (Western Bontok)
'It is not good to be selfish and not to share good things with others.'

- (5) *Inayan sa.* (Northern Benguet)
'That is scary.'

- (6) *Madi nan ongong-a ay um-umay isnan dap-ay nu obaya tay inayan kanan nan amam-a.*
'Children are not advised to go to the dap-ay during traditional holidays'

because they might do something bad that will disturb the spirits as elders say.'

(7) *Pakay maid paylang chi? Inayan sa.* (Eastern Bontok)

'You did not get it yet? What a disappointment.'

Inayan in (2) has a religious overtone as it cites a moral from the Ten Commandments; (3) illustrates the Golden Rule concept of *inayan*; (4) implies some Marxist principle of material wealth sharing; (5) and (6) illustrate the popular signification of *inayan* as a warning or caution in the conduct of things; and (7) uses *inayan* as an exclamation to express disappointment or annoyance.

A Northern Benguet tribe member, the informant in (5) associates the word with a more intense apprehension of the possible consequences, as she translates *inayan* as “scary” (see also (1)) consistently in all her illustrations of the word in the questionnaire. The other informants use the concept “bad” or “not good” as semantic equivalences in the English language. These concepts do not necessarily imply the concept of “fear”, which is inherent in the word “scary”. Could it be that “*inayan*” as an ethical concept among Northern Benguet Kankanaeys, has a deeper influence and greater salience in their culture, than in the culture of the Western Province Kankanaey group, whose geographic location is very contiguous to them? To validate this observation, a more in-depth empirical investigation is needed as a follow-through of this study.

Given the meanings cited above, *inayan* appears to be perceived generally from a negative sense—unfavorable, disapproving, disgusting, uncommendable, embarrassing, shameful, frustrating, annoying, harmful. Or, in terms of Wierzbicka's posited lexical universal “bad”, whose antonym is the lexical universal “good”, defined likewise by the positive opposites of the hyphenated adjectives above. Based on the informants' statements, it can be inferred that anyone who does anything that is *inayan*, because a taboo in the culture, ends up experiencing any or all of the negative or “bad” feelings enumerated above. In the search for lexical universals, Wierzbicka has included investigations on universal emotions like shame, embarrassment and disgust—which emotions all associate with *inayan*.

In this regard, I quote the oldest informant (65 years old), who emphatically and seriously illustrated in the Ilocano language, a northern Philippine lingua franca, the “bad” experiences with *inayan* from different situational contexts based on his real-life encounters:

inayan

(8) *maysa nga nauyaw* (one who is fault-finding/insulting/
disparaging/derogatory:

ENDED UP marrying the girl whose family he despised;

ENDED UP being bankrupt from gambling;

ENDED UP losing all his properties (an older co-tribal member
after he berated this informant for keeping to *inayan*
principles by saying “*Apay makan mo ti prinsipyom?*”
(‘Why? Can you eat your principles?’)

(9) if you live beyond your means, “*birbirukem ti pakairurumenam*”
(your looking for your damnation')

(10) *kasla dinawat mo no nagaramid ka ti dakes*
'it's like you asked for it when you did something bad'

E.g. A cousin of this informant and employee of an electric company in Baguio City, was found guilty of extortion; as a penalty he was dismissed from employment, then, died shortly after.

(11) *kasla agay-ayat ka nga adda mangyari kenka*
'its like you are happy that something will happen to you (or your family), if you don't subscribe to *inayan*, or you don't do good'

E.g. If you accept the payment given in accidents, or the monetary damages from a legal battle, even if legally awarded by a judge, you invite misfortune to yourself or your family.

All of the preceding interpretations of *inayan* fit in Wierzbicka's semantic metalanguage to explicate the meaning of the word, namely:

inayan

- (a) X thinks something like this:
 - (a.1) I want to do this
 - (a.2) I did something bad
 - (a.3) something bad happened because of this

In this explication, the concept appears universally interpreted as a curse resulting from doing a bad deed. This is concretely illustrated by the 65-year old Besao informant above when he cited (9) and (10). Subscription to *inayan*, he said, will “hinder you from doing wrong.” *Inayan* is the belief that “whatever you do will return to you, your family, or offsprings; adherence to it means you like your life to be OK—nothing bad will happen.”

Wierzbicka has produced related data from an aboriginal Australian culture, Pintupi, of this concept of shame, moral conduct, embarrassment, respect and shyness in the Pintupi lexicon *kunta*. Like *inayan*, *kunta* embodies universal concepts that regulate conduct of tribal members (1992:130-131).

But while generally the cultural norm in the concept revolves around a morally upright social conduct, a different meaning elicited from the same Sagada and Besao informants crumbles the “good” ethic guarded by the concept, namely, *inayan* is commitment to return a “favor” or “goodness” done to someone, i.e. from the illustration given, regardless of the circumstances surrounding the favor. The example given is in politics, specifically during election campaigns:

One who accepts dole outs in material or spiritual form from political candidates, is obliged to return the favor given, by voting for them on election time, regardless of whether they believe in the sincerity of the candidates, or not.

In the contemporary time, “dole outs” from politicians are technically labelled as “bribes”. Bribes, by themselves, are already considered as illegal, hence, “wrong”, “bad”, or “immoral”. More so, the benefactors of bribes are usually those with selfish or bad intentions, hence they themselves are immoral.

Insofar as these informants from Sagada and Besao are concerned, the *inayan* belief recognizes *utang na loob* (the 'I-owe-you-a-favor' Filipino concept), which in this political context, the Kankanaey native regards as “goodness” and “kindness” coming from the giver, hence, requires a commensurate return-the-favor commitment.

In my analysis, this is the significant polysemy of *inayan*, i.e., the presence of the two ethical concepts of “good” and “bad” in *inayan* to fulfill a commitment, but for a commitment that emerges from a dubious stimulus-response chemistry-- the acceptance of a bribe, therefore the need to return the favor is symbiotic—for either a good or a bad motive. Incidentally, bribery has been the popular culprit cited by many critics for the evil immanent in Philippine politics. And while data of this nature is found included in the *inayan* concept in this study, it remains exploratory and subject to closer inspection in future studies. Right now, it may be premature to say that this polysemy in the concept is culture-specific in Kankanaey, and that other indigenous Philippine cultures could be suspect of the same cultural ethic, Kankanaey being a subgroup within a superordinate Filipino culture group. Yet it comes to mind that there is a popular general statement citing Filipinos' *utang na loob* ethic as the source of the weak political system and leadership in the country. With more empirical data, can we say that the negative sense attached to *inayan* is contributory evidence to a culture-specific ethical concept ingrained in the Filipino culture generally?

Interestingly, this polysemy did not appear in the data of the Central and Eastern Bontok informants. It is worth-mentioning though, that while the concept is firmly held by the Western Bontok and Northern Benguet Kankanaey groups, the Central and Eastern Bontok ethnic groups regard this concept superficially in a very limited sense in their world view. Informants from these areas claim that the word itself is not native to them. They attribute the little knowledge they have on the concept from their association and contact with the other Kankanaey groups. If at all they use the word, it is only as an exclamation of disgust or disappointment in ordinary and casual contexts, such as when one did not comply with their promise, or when one did not commit to an agreement. In this instance, the semantic equivalence of the word as a casual expression, according to these groups, is *aysus* or *oshang na*, which are native expressions of disappointment (see (7)).

This instance does not entirely preclude the idea that the *inayan* concept, or similar to this concept, may also be present among these ethnic groups or the other ethnic groups of the Cordillera region. These groups claim that they have a word, *lawa*, which is

generically used to mean "bad". They also recognize that *lawa* does not signify a cultural value as intense as the *inayan* concept.

Interestingly, *lawa* has been cited also by the Cordillera Schools Group, along with *inayan* as taboo concepts (1987 (I):81) among Kankanaeys, i.e., the Western Mountain Province group.

How semantically close the *lawa* concept is of the Central and Eastern Bontok groups, to the *inayan* concept of the Western Bontok and Northern Benguet ethnic groups, can be the subject of another more intensive cross-cultural semantic study, possibly in furtherance still of Wierzbicka's empirical search for lexical universals, but using synonymy this time as analytical framework. For, this study also found additional data that the lexicon *lawa* is likewise present in the Western Bontok culture, and even embedded in their traditional chants, as in the excerpt below from a *liwa* (chant) for a *senga* (ritual) for a newly-built house.

*Ay tay nan maila ay kayman nan begas
nan dinno yo ay dua,
'Now we can see the fruit of your labor
as a couple,'
Ay segpen yo a menpamilya,
tay siya din baken lawa...
'Now as a family you enter this house,
and it's not bad,'...*

*Tay inayan nan adi dumngeg ta,
kali ya bagbaga nan amam-a,
'For lo it is not good to disregard
your parents' advices,'
Siya di nan ikak-ana nan an-ak
ay na'ay da,
'For this is the way it should be for
you my children,
Ta'y siya din baken lawa sinan
adunoen nan gumba ya.
'That no bad things shall ever happen
in your life works.'
(Copy from a Sagada informant)*

5. Conclusion

From the preceding sections of this paper, I have attempted to bring out the polysemy embodied in the lexicon *inayan* of the Kankanaey language. By doing this, I have tried to show preliminary evidence that *inayan*, both as a linguistic label and concept, contributes to Wierzbicka's empirical search for lexical universals.

Using Wierzbicka's theoretical framework on universal innate human concepts

across culture and language boundaries, and her natural semantic metalanguage “to elucidate the meanings encoded in other languages..., which would be maximally universal and maximally self-explanatory,” (1996:17), I have insinuated the following preliminary statements in my analysis of research data:

- 1.As a lexicon, *inayan* appears to be language-specific in the Kankanaey language. Across other ethnic groups within the same geographic area, i.e., Mountain Province, the lexicon is non-existent.
- 2.As a concept, *inayan* with its complex pragmatic meanings, appears as a culture-specific ethic in the Kankanaey culture. Across cultures even within the same geographic area, its meaning appears fuzzy.
- 3.Both as a lexicon and a concept, *inayan* embodies Wierzbicka's universal concept of “fear”, with accompanying “bad” consequences inflicted on non-subscribers of the concept.
- 4.Its range of contextual meanings reveals its polysemy between the two senses of Wierzbicka's lexical universals “good” and “bad”, in the unqualified fulfillment of a commitment surrounded by dubious intentions.
- 5..*Inayan*, likewise, implies association with Wierzbicka's postulated universal emotions, such as shame, embarrassment, and disgust, as emotional consequences of non-subscription to this cultural belief.

In sum, I quote Wierzbicka in her assertion and determination to build eventually the “alphabet of human thoughts”:

The idea that universal human concepts are to be found in the inner world of human thought goes back at least as far back as the seventeenth century, to the great rationalist thinkers of that century...every human being is born with a set of innate ideas which become activated and developed by experience but which latently exist in our minds from the beginning ...The common denominator of all the different uses of language is not communication but meaning.” (1992:8)

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