

Think Twice. Opacity beliefs and the grammar of inner state expressions in Korowai of West Papua

Korowai speakers frequently express beliefs about the opacity of minds of other people, a theme reflected on in many New Guinea communities (Robbins and Rumsey 2008). In the case of the Korowai these beliefs are to be understood, not as epistemological folk theories, but as expressions of deep concerns, negatively in relation to the dangerous unpredictability of other people and positively in relation to the egalitarian desire to respect the autonomy and freedom of action of others (Stasch 2008). These opacity beliefs lead to a cultural awareness of the distinction between talk about inner states and processes of others from the perspective of their ‘insides’, symbolically represented by a person’s guts, and on the other hand talk from the external perspective of the visible and audible actions that express inner states. I will argue that these cultural practices and distinctions surrounding inner states have found their way in the discourse practices and grammatical patterns of Korowai, a Papuan language of the Greater Awyu family spoken in the Boven-Digul regency of West Papua (de Vries 2013).

The external perspective is expressed in discourse in which external manifestations of inner states, often culturally scripted and predictable combinations of verbal and non-verbal actions, play a key role. The speech register of “anger” (Korowai *xén*), analyzed by Stasch (2001: 401-402), exemplifies this way. If you are angry with someone, you shout angry words, or you take bow and arrows, have very aggressive body language, openly refuse to share food with someone. Nobody is angry without the concomitant ‘drama’ and adjectives such as *xén* refer to this actional, outward manifestation rather than to an inner state *per se*. For an example of the *xén* speech register, see the text published by Van Enk and De Vries (1997: 173-186).

When the speakers reports thoughts, emotions and other inner states from the perspective of the invisible and in principle opaque domain of the mind of the other, this internal perspective is obligatorily signaled in the grammatical form of the expression. In the case of volitional inner states and processes this is done by the obligatory use of quotative constructions and the optional but frequent addition of gutsy idioms, see example (1). In the case of involitional inner states and processes, quotative framing cannot be used and gutsy idioms are obligatory in experiential constructions, see example (2).

- (1) *Dajo-menél* *ye-fi-melon*
Dajo-young.girl her-intestines-gall
nu if-è *Muxalé duo-tofexo*
I this-CONN Muxalé put.into.non1SG.REAL-DS
él *y-afé-da-é* *nu Muxalé-lo*
yes his-older.brother-NEG-EXCL I Muxalé-FOC
fo-p *xeliif-é* *de*
marry-1SG.INTEN DESID-EXCL say.non1SG.REAL

‘The Dajo girl thought ‘I really don’t want to marry the older brother, I badly want to marry Muxale’ (Van Enk and De Vries 1997: 207)

- (2) *nə xul-melun* *Ndaun tanux-telo*
I intestines-gall Ndaun only-be.3SG.REAL
‘I could only think of Ndaun’ (from the fieldnotes of Rupert Stasch)

References

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