
BREAKING IN ON THE KARA NET

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0. Introduction

This paper is not really about being caught or escaping but it does concern a network. The network I'm looking at is the network of relationships surrounding the Kara verbs expressing the English meanings 'hit', 'cut' and 'break.' My object in this study is to apply componential analysis as formulated by Nida (1975) to discover all that I can relating to the meanings in the various 'hit', 'cut' and 'break' verbs the Kara speaker employs. Kara appears to be an almost ideal language with which to practice the detection of components as it leans very heavily on the syllable as a basic building unit. A word which demonstrates this is the word meaning 'divide' or more literally 'parcel out shares':

- | | | | | | |
|-----|------------|-------------------|----------------|----------------------|--------------------------|
| (1) | <i>fe</i> | <i>-pa</i> | <i>-'tok</i> | <i>-an</i> | <i>-e</i> |
| | reciprocal | portion:
share | mash:
crush | promotion:
marker | 3rd person:
objective |

Most frequently 'to divide' in this way has to do with a lump sum of money that is to be shared out among several clan members or among the workers on a project. The shares are not necessarily equal but are appropriate to the receiver's status or effort.

If the degree of proliferation of terms is any index to a concept's importance in a society then verbs for 'hit, cut and break' must enjoy universal appeal. Most (if not all) languages have a great variety of ways to express the concepts 'hit', 'cut' or 'break.' In English, we choose our word by the extent of damage or the degree of intensity we want to communicate.

- (2) He scratched his finger.

- (3) He nicked it with a knife.
- (4) He sliced his finger with a knife.
- (5) He gashed his finger open.

If we were to simply say 'He cut his finger with a knife', the first response by a listener would be something like, 'Oh, how bad was it?' We as a western society are interested in the severity of the damage/injury. We want to know whether the man got 'slapped' or if he got 'bashed.' Whether the window was simply 'cracked' or if it was 'shattered.' English also contains words that indicate an action through the longitudinal axis of the instrument. Examples of this action are seen in 'poke, jab, prod, stab.' We can also tell from a word like 'sever' that the action was across the long axis of the object and that it was cut completely through. As we shall see the Kara people are also interested in these kinds of distinctions, choosing their words and parts of words accordingly.

1. Orientation

Kara is an Austronesian language spoken by over 2,500 people on the island of New Ireland, Papua New Guinea. Where the language borders of Kara are is somewhat disputed both by researchers and by the people themselves. However the linguistic center of the language seems to be the villages of Fangalava and Lemakot a little over 40 miles south of Kavieng on the East Coast road. Northern New Ireland languages tend to run in bands across the island with rather distinctive dialect differences on opposite coasts. Depending on where you want to draw the lines Kara has between 5 and 8 dialects. The people themselves are agronomists with cash crops of copra and cacao. They usually have several garden plots per family in various stages of development as well as holdings in the swampy sago palm area. Their agricultural activities are supplemented by hunting wild pigs in the bush and fishing on or near the reef. Animal husbandry is not vigorously attended to, as pigs and chickens are left to forage for themselves most of the time.

The basic Kara word order is SVO. Other grammatical features that have some bearing on this study are the vowel and consonant shifts which indicate word relationships or the degree of transitivity, a dynamic spectrum of transitivity and the previously mentioned intense syllabicity of the language. Affixes are very common and can be added in series creating a variety of permutations of meaning. One result of this flexibility is that the language is referentially specific. For example, there is no generic term with the English

meaning ‘fishing.’ But there are many terms each denoting a specific kind of fishing activity. Again no one word exists with the English meaning ‘animal’ but a wide variety of names exist for the various kinds of creatures: birds, fish and insects.

An example of combining words with vowel and consonant shifts to create a third related word is shown in *saleng*:

(6) *seng* ‘look, or search, for’ plus *salan* ‘trail: path’

becomes

saleng ‘hunting for wild pig.’

Another example, this time showing consonant shifts and syllable rearrangement exists in the triumvirate:

(7) *kaavai* [qabai] ‘a long time ago’

xavai [gabai] ‘old (referring to an object)’

vayak [baiaq] ‘old (man or woman)’

The above example also relates to the transitivity scale where a fricative signals a more dynamic situation than a mere stop would. This is more evident in the comparison of:

(8) *kuus* ‘say’ and *xuus* ‘tell’

‘Saying’ may include only the actor whereas ‘telling’ infers an audience. The more parties involved in the action the higher the transitivity. The consonants most frequently involved in these shifts are /x/, /g/ and /k/ from the velar set and /v/, /b/ and /p/ in labial. Contrasts between /a/ and /aa/ frequently mark transitivity in words without the above labial or velar sets with the /a/ being more dynamic. Two other not so distinctively clear vowels are /i/ and /u/. Normally they contrast; however a wrapped food packet ready for the earth oven can be called either:

(9) *nim* or *num* (*num* also means ‘drink’ as a noun or verb)

In other places as well a degree of slippage (neutralization) exists between these two. With these facts in our minds, we’ll now turn to the information at hand to see if we can break into the Kara network of meaning surrounding the various ‘hit’, ‘cut’ and ‘break’ verbs.

2. Kara 'Hit', 'Cut' and 'Break'

In the following charts the items are arranged so that initial syllables or phonemes which are alike are together. My hope in this is to see if phonemes or syllables are diagnostic of any culturally related concepts. After each word I've given a short English gloss that reflects what I know at the present time about the meaning of a word. The four diagnostic columns indicate the features; instrument(s) used in this action, whether or not there is a required object and if so what it is, any significant orientation of either the instrument or the object and finally if the verb suggests an additional 'hit, cut or break' component. The last column on each chart shows other words related in appearance to the verb under scrutiny. Frequently a meaning association can be seen as well.

The group of words of particular interest, to me at least, are those beginning with *sa-* as noted the verb 'push' is very similar to *saxal*. The common denominator of all these *sa-* verbs, plus several other words, is a hand action away from the body, usually in a downward direction. The word *saxal* frequently refers to filleting a fish but the action can be used with any meat or other soft material as long as the hand action moves away from the body. *Sapak* has expanded to include the whole activity of collecting sago leaflets for the roofing of a house but the action in the main refers to the cutting motion with a bush knife to strip the leaflets off of the main rib. The word *sapal* is another action verb that has acquired additional meanings. the core meaning of the verb includes sitting on a platform by the exposed pith of a felled sago palm and striking the pith with a specially constructed hammer nibbling off a small amount with each double-handed blow. The hammer is also call a *sapal* as is the whole of the process despite the fact that there are various actions going on each with its own name. *Sapiit* appears to have been expanded to include the action of scissors, introduced by Europeans. Previously hair trimming, nail paring, and shaving were accomplished with knives of sharp-edged bamboo or bone. With a utensil of this kind I can well imagine the process was more one of snapping off (*piit*) than cutting.

The verb *xese* 'stripping the bark from a piece of wood' is interesting in view of its similarity of *kete* 'tear with the teeth.' In the absence of a knife the people will actually start the debarking process with their teeth. *Xes*, *lip* and *tei* may be used singly or in conjunction with a second word to produce a complex unit:

- (10) *xes tapin* 'peel off and throw away the skin of
some fruit'
tei fasaxa 'chop, cutting it down with one blow'

Tei and *patal* are cutting actions that may be performed on the same tree. *Tei* indicates the operation of cutting the tree down, while *patal* denotes the cutting up operation. The combination of the two in includes both notions in one concise statement.

- (11) *tei patal a wai*

Chart 1 - 'Cut' terms

Verb	Instrument	Required Object	Implied Direction	Hit	Purpose	Related Words plus
<i>patal</i> 'cut/sever'	axe, knife, glass, etc.	no object	across	+/(-)	-	Verb ₂ of VP
<i>putuk</i> 'cut'	-	animate	-	-	-	<i>punuk</i> 'kill' Verb ₂ of VP
<i>saxal</i> 'cut/fillet'	knife	(fish)	along the long axis	-	-	<i>saxen</i> 'push'
<i>sapak</i> 'collect sago leaves'	bush knife	sago leaves	strip off leaflets	+		
<i>sapal</i> 'pound sago'	<i>sapal</i> (hammer)	sago palm	along grain	+	crush ,	
<i>sapiit</i> 'cut'	scissors, knife	hair, nails	across	-	-	<i>piit</i> 'snap/break'
<i>xatipe</i> 'cut'	scissors, knife	fabric, net	-	-	-	
<i>xes</i> 'peel'	knife	vegetable, fruit				Verb ₁ of VP
<i>xese</i> 'strip'	knife, teeth	tree bark	long axis	-	-	<i>kete/xete</i> 'bite/tear'
<i>xiiil</i> 'hollow out'	adze	canoe, slit gong	-			Verb ₁ of VP
<i>lip</i> 'cut'	grass knife	grass, brush	cut down standing brush	+		Verb ₁ of VP
<i>tei</i> 'chop, fell'	axe	standing tree	-	+	-	Verb ₁ of VP
<i>talak</i> 'carve'	adze, axe, knife	wood	-	+/-	to shape	

The last set of interrelated verbs I want to talk about in relation to 'cut' verbs are ones having to do with carving. One of the cultural foci of the Kara people is the custom of Memorial Feasts. An obligatory part of any true Memorial Feast is the *malangan* carving or weaving, with the emphasis being on the carving. The term which denotes 'carving a *malangan*' is *tak*. This verb is included with the 'hit' verbs since its action has more to do with striking than cutting. The two words related to *tak* are *ratak* 'carving an ornament from tortoise shell' and *talak* 'shaping a large object from wood such as a canoe or slit gong or whittling a smaller object again from wood. For a canoe or slit gong the hollowing out process is denoted by *xil*.

The 'hit' verbs divide roughly into two areas differentiated by the striking surface employed. The verbs with in initial /p/ plus *siip* all focus on the side of the instrument as the striking surface. The two general usage verbs *siip*

Chart 2: 'Hit' Verbs

Verb	Instrument	Required Object	Implied Direction	Hit	Purpose	Related Words plus
<i>baf</i> 'strike'	shoulder, hand, arm	-	forward	-	-	-
<i>pak</i> 'debark'	stick	tree with bark	-	break	-	<i>vapak</i> 'bark' Verb ₁ of VP
<i>pas</i> 'stomp'	foot	-	downward	(break)	-	-
<i>puta</i> 'husk'	sharpened stick	coconut	-	cut	remove husk	<i>pute</i> 'pull out'
<i>pit</i> 'hit'	stick	inanimate object	-	-	-	<i>piit</i> 'break/snap' Verb ₁ of VP
<i>pitan</i>	stick	the stick	-	break	-	-
<i>siip</i> 'strike/slap'	stick, hand, knife	animate (human)	-	-	-	Verb ₁ of VP
<i>salei</i> 'poke'	stick, bamboo	-	-	break, punc- ture		
<i>ting</i> 'tap'	drum stick	(slit gong)	through long axis of instru- ment	-	drum- ming	<i>tung</i> 'thud'
<i>tuk</i> 'punch'	fist	-	"	-	-	prefix <i>tu-</i> 'forcefully'
<i>tok</i> 'mash'	pestle	(food)	"	break	crush	-
<i>tak</i> 'carve'	chisel, adze	<i>malagan</i> image	"	cut	chip away	<i>ratak</i> 'carve'

and *pit* distinguish between human/animate and non-animate respectively. *Pitan* is a reflexive of *pit* so that the object of the action is the instrument itself. An example of this occurs when you are breaking up wood for a fire and you beat a large piece on the ground or against a tree. (The suffix *-an* was noted before as a promotion marker.) These two verbs also occur as the initial verb of a complex unit:

- (12) *siip punuxe* 'strike killing him'
pit gurume 'hit breaking it'

Pak is a method of debarking some hardwoods by beating the surface with a good solid branch until the bark chips off. It is rather time consuming but for certain trees it is much easier than using a knife. *Putā* presents an apparent problem in the /p/ set. The manner of removing the husk from a coconut consists of putting a sharpened stick in the ground at a steep angle, then the coconut is struck or jabbed onto the stick and leverage is applied to strip off a portion of the husk. The verb itself is very similar to and undoubtedly related to *pute* 'remove/pull out as in weed.' The instrument remains stationary while the object is moved and this is why, probably, the phonemics indicate a strike with the side action.

The /t/ initial verbs on the other hand denote a 'strike with the end of the instrument action.' *Tak*, again, is noteworthy in that the tool used is similar to a small adze. At this point in time the cutting blade is usually a blade from a carpenter's plane. Previous to the introduction of steel implements, a blade made from the shell of a very large clam was used. The blade is affixed to a piece of tree with a handy branch to act as the handle. As an English speaker I would term the action 'chipping or chopping.' The Kara concept seems more akin to 'chisel' since the force is aligned through the longitudinal axis of the blade.

One of the interesting sidelights of these *t*-initial words is their strong onomatopoeic overtones. In English the sound a falling body makes when it hits the ground is 'thud.' In Kara the same action makes the sound '*tung*.' Just as in English we can turn the sound into a verb the Kara sound may also verbalize:

- (13) The sailor's heavy body thudded to the deck.
Nane fo tung lapia.
 'He thudded to the ground.'

Other words having an initial *tu*-syllable carry a connotation of longness through one axis:

- (14) *tusung* 'point'
tuturuk 'thorn'
tuf 'sugarcane'
tu 'deep'

The adjective *tu* fits into this list since in testing the depth of a well or a river you would use the longitudinal axis of a line or stick.

The verb *salei* on this list carries the idea of 'jab' or 'poke.' This occurs in various contexts. Two of the more frequent are as follows: In church services one man is given the office of patrolling the congregation to quiet unruly kids and awaken dozing adults. To accomplish this he carries a long stick to prod them into paying attention. A second usage is seen when no one wants to climb a coconut tree so the nuts are pushed loose with a long piece of bamboo. In both cases the action is through the longitudinal axis of the instrument but the pushing hand motion described in the previous section is seen as more important to the action and so contributes the initial *sa*-syllable.

The most numerous of the three kinds of action words, the 'break' verbs also show the most divergent patterns. In my own mind I feel the 'hit' and 'cut' verbs listed represent a reasonably complete inventory. However I suspect there are 'break' verbs that I am not cognizant of yet. These 'break' verbs, unlike the 'hit' and 'cut' verbs, may be marked with an affix which signals a contrary expectation sense of stativeness. All three groups may be marked with the perfective aspect marker *fo* which views the action as completed but a variation of the affix *ta*-, which indicates a passive state of brokenness with no agent appearing, is more frequently associated with the 'break' verbs.

- (15) *A* *fa* *-ak* *ta* *-paar*.
 article tooth 1st.person passive.state break
 'My tooth is broken.'

In previous discussion we've noticed a tendency for words with like initial phonemes to somehow be related in meaning. In Chart 3 on the the following page the items have been grouped by point of articulation as well.

One of the interesting things about the Kara language are the similarities in shape and construction of words of related meanings. It is almost as if their complex interrelated semantic system is being revealed by an equally complex set of surface indices. Sometimes I feel that if I could just grasp the proper key the whole language would be indexed out in front of me. In the

Chart 3: 'Break' Verbs

Verb	Instrument	Required Object	Implied Direction	Hit	Purpose	Related Words plus
<i>paar</i> 'chip'	-	teeth	-	-	-	
<i>piit</i> 'snap'	-	vine, rope, stripping	across	-	trim	<i>sapiit</i> 'cut across'
<i>pasak</i> 'break'	-	(blister)	outward force	-		<i>papasak</i> 'hatch'
<i>vuak</i> 'break'	-	bone, branch	across object	(hit)	-	
<i>viak</i> 'break'	hands	food item	-	-	to share	
<i>pingit</i> 'remove'	fingers	sago midrib	-	-	remove midrib	
<i>mimit</i> 'pinch'	non-sharp	-	flattens	-		<i>mit</i> 'flat bridge of nose' <i>timit</i> 'cover with stone'
<i>murul</i> 'snap off'	hand, knife	food item	-	-	harvest	
<i>taval</i> 'apart'	-	-	not together			
<i>tapalai</i> 'break loose'	-	coconut	falls down	hit	harvest	
<i>taxaar</i> 'loose'	-	-	not broken	-	-	
<i>tepiak</i> 'ruptured'	-	blister, boil	inward force	-	-	
<i>rarak</i> 'split'	axe, knife	wood	longitudinally hit		to split firewood	
<i>ririk</i> 'tear'	-	material, paper	-	-	-	
<i>kete</i> 'bite tear'	teeth	-	-	-	-	<i>xet</i> 'bite'
<i>galang</i> 'cracked'	-	glass object coconut shell	-	-	-	
<i>gurum</i> 'shattered'	-	thin shell	-	hit	-	
<i>xuput</i> 'punctured'	sharp instrument	roundness	inward	puncture		
<i>xaut</i> 'pick'	forked stick, bamboo	flower or fruit	twist	-	harvest	<i>xiut</i> 'tangle'
<i>ngadarak</i> 'break'	-	-	across	-	two nearly equal pieces	<i>xaradak</i> 'straight'
<i>ngas</i> 'tear down'	-	house	apart	-	demolish	Verb ₁ of VP

list above *viak* and *vuak* are quite similar both in form and meaning. They each involve breaking, in one case food for sharing and in the other across a long object. A third word suggests itself *piak* 'gleaning:scavenging' usually with reference to something edible and frequently a breaking off connotation as well. Another word similar in appearance is *siak* 'get.' Scavenging infers 'getting' hence a slightly different but recognizably related form. Once having broken into the network it can usually be followed a short way and then the forms become too divergent. Prefixes also capitalize on this sliding transfer of meaning. The prefix *tu-* from 'punch' adds the idea 'forcefully' to an action:

- (16) *Nane* *tu* *-gurum* *-e*.
 3rd.person:singular force shatter 3rd.person:objective
 'He forcefully shattered it.'

We have been seeing in all three types of actions the main criteria for the choice of verbs is the object to which the action occurs. Second in importance is the alignment of the action and/or the object. The word chosen may infer a purpose or occasionally require an instrument but these count for little when making a verb choice. The three words denoting 'harvest' in chart 3 show little similarity since the purpose is not relevant as a relator. 'Why,' whether cataphoric or anaphoric is a hard question to answer and may not even be pertinent. Actions may be done or not done just because that's the way it is. 'What' is done to 'whom' and 'how' are much more important considerations and the language responds to those issues.

3. Conclusion

In conclusion, in the Kara language we have seen that an investigation of the semantics of a word reveals a network of interrelated meanings. Also the network is marked by structural similarities. We have seen the primacy of the object in determining the choice of verbs as opposed to our English language concern with intensity. Another point that comes across is that a syllable is imbued with meaning but frequently the meaning is only released when certain syllables are juxtaposed. In each verb there is a structural base and permutations are derived by affixing various meaningful syllables to that base. Some form of limitation also exists as to what syllables may be conjoined to a given verb. Obviously this is only an initial investigation. A great deal more study is anticipated in the area of semantics until we can truly break in on the Kara network of meaning.