The Empty Root in Cebuano and Kavalan: 
A Counterexample to Grammaticalization

Fuhui Hsieh and Michael Tanangkingsing
National Taiwan University

In his study of the synchronic role of morphology in Ilocano discourse, Rubino (1996) reports a rather interesting linguistic phenomenon, i.e., the many uses of the versatile empty root kua. This particular linguistic form is in itself semantically empty outside of the discourse context; yet in the context, it can be fitted into any syntactic slot and inflected or derived with appropriate morphological affixations accordingly. In other words, attached with affixation, it can be used as a verb, noun, adjective, or adverb. Rubino interprets such an empty root with appropriate morphological frame as a means for word searching and thus for facilitating interactions.

The use of such an empty root is not unique in Ilocano; it is found in other Philippine languages, such as Bikol and Hiligaynon, as well as in Kavalan, a Formosan language. By investigating narrative and conversation data in both Cebuano and Kavalan, we also found that the distributions and functions of this empty root are far more complicated than what has been reported in Rubino (1996). It is not only used as a searching strategy, as shown in (1) for word searching and the second ku’an in (2) for sentential structure searching, but also as a discourse marker, as shown in the first ku’an in (2) and in (3); moreover, it is used anaphorically (or as a pseudo-deixis), to refer to some shared knowledge between the speaker and the hearer, which could be some entity (as in 4a), some activity (4b), or some abstract state known to both Speaker/Hearer. It may also be a way to avoid a direct mention of sensitive terms, as in (5). Although this empty root lacks semantic consistency (that’s why Rubino acknowledges that it is not yet lexicalized), it is without question that when it is used anaphorically, some negotiated meaning emerges from the discourse context (cf. Huang 1998) and thus it does acquire some semantic content in some uses.

In addition to giving a detailed description of the distribution and function of the empty root in Cebuano and Kavalan, our main concern in this paper is to

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1 Deixis also lacks semantic consistency, since the semantics of a referent differs in different arenas of language use; however, we do not acknowledge deixis as semantically empty (cf. Fillmore 1997; Jackendoff 1983: Chapter 9; Consten 2003; Hansenforf 2003).
offer a cognitive account of such a linguistic phenomenon, i.e., from being used with semantic void to being used with seemingly infinite uses. Our tentative explanation is based on the mechanism of underspecification (Barner and Bale 2002; Halle and Marantz 1993, 1994; Marantz 1997; Harley and Noyer 1999). According to this approach, lexical roots are category-neutral; “when placed in a nominal environment the result is a ‘nominalization’; when the roots are placed in a verbal environment they become verbs” (Marantz 1997, cited in Barner and Bale 2002:772).

Also, in this paper we will demonstrate that this intriguing cross-linguistic phenomenon constitutes a counterexample to the uni-directionality principle in the grammaticalization theory (Traugott 1989, 1995, 2001, 2004; Traugott and Heine 1991; Traugott and König 1991; Hopper and Traugott 1993; Sweetser 1988). As proposed in the theory of grammaticalization, there are clines wherein lexical items go through a grammaticalization process to become grammatical items;\(^2\) the central tenet is the unidirectionality principle, in so far as it predicts that grammatical material will not become lexical (Traugott 1995:1). However, our data show that a particular linguistic form can evolve in a totally opposite direction. It starts from a semantically empty root with purely discoursal function: word searching (a filler indeed), to discourse marker, and then to a pseudo-deictic term, which acquires some semantic content and refers to some shared knowledge (entity, or activity).

\(^2\) For instance, nominal clines (nominal adposition > case) and verbal clines (main verb > tense, aspect, mood marker) are staples of grammaticalization theory.
DATA

(1)(a) Kavalan (Frog-imui)

154. tangi m-zaqis qaniau ta==-iza-an u
    now AF-climb.up 3PL.NOM LOC-IZA-LOC or
    ta babaw na paRin, /
    LOC above GEN tree

'They climbed up to IZA (somewhere), or the top of a tree.'

(1)(b) Kavalan (Frog-imui)

13 (0.9) ngil=ti qa==-iza, \n    AF.want=PFV QA-IZA

14 qa-zukat pasazi ta-peRasku-an. \n    QA-go.out toward.here LOC-bottle-LOC

'It was about to IZA, to come out of the...the bottle.'

(1)(c) Kavalan (Frog-buya)

64...(0.9) t<em>egez nani._
    <AF>stop DM

65. ...me-zukat nani.\n    AF-go.out DM

66. quRu-na na iza na==... siRemuq. \n    head-3SG.GEN GEN IZA GEN deer

'The head of the deer comes out.'

(2) Cebuano (used to change sentence structure)

ku’an =man =to =siya- tung nang-adto mi-g san carlos-
    kuan PAR that 3SG.NOM when AF-go 1EPL.NOM-LK PN

kanang= nagka- ku’an- nay cancer gani
    FIL AF (FS) KUAN exist cancer PAR

'ku’an, when we went to San Carlos, em= (he) em=, there was cancer
(he had cancer).'</n
(Change of structure from AF-V S to existential clause)

(3)(a) Kavalan (Frog-buya)

80. zaqis-an-na sa==(1.0)--, /
    climb.up-1F/PP-3SG.GEN FS
81. (0.9) azu=ti syurin 'nay zin-ta na,
    seem=PFV buoy that say-IPL GEN DM
82. nani. \
    DM
    'There is a tree (trunk) over there; the child thinks the trunk
    is like a life buoy.'
83. (1.2) iza, _
    IZA
84. me-lazyu tu== nengi=ti me-lazyu=ti ta-qazqaz-an
    AF-pass DM good=PFV AF-pass=PFV LOC-shore-LOC
    nani zin-na.\n    DM say-3 SG.GEN
    'He thinks IZA (this way) is easy (easier) to go to the shore.'

(3)(b) Cebuano

SM na ron sa cotabato wala gyud
PN PFV now LOC PN NEG EMPH

pero kung ku'an ha
but if KUAN PAR

kung una cotabato ang una-ng naging city kaysa sa
that at.first PN ANG first-ŁK become city than LOC
davao ug sa general santos m= pero dahil daghan-g muslim
PN and LOC PN FIL but because many-ŁK PN

'There’s really no SM store in Cotabato, but ku’an you know, it
was Cotabato that became a city earlier than Davao and General
Santos, but because there are many Muslim people there…'

(4)(a) Kavalan (Frog-imui2)

24. (1.5) yau=ti pasazi ta== ... iza-an
    exist=PFV toward.here LOC- IZA -LOC
    situqaw tu paRin 'nay==,
    AF.look.up OBL tree that

25. 'nay wasu a yau t<em>ayta tu,\n    that dog LNK that <AF>see OBL

26. Rubu-na na==, \n    hive-3SG GEN GEN
27. turiq a yau, / 
    wasp LNK that 

    ‘That dog came over IZA (here), looked up at a tree and saw a hive
    of wasps there.’

(4)(b) Kavalan (Pear-buya)
39 (0.8) pangmu-an-na=ti
    help-LF/PP-3SG.GEN=PFV

40  m-iza  tu==  sinsuli-na
    AF-IZA  OBL  plum-3SG.GEN

    ‘helped him IZA (pick) the plums

41 (0.8) m-isis  timaizipana  atu==  eh  m  tu,\ 
    AF-support 3SG.ACC  and  FIL  FIL  FIL

42. zitinsya-na  nani
    bicycle-3SG.GEN  DM

(5) Cebuano

=avoidance of mention of a sensitive matter (e.g., salary, confidential 
matters, behavior)

    L  pila  man  sad  imoha-ng  ku’an-  ...s=sweldo
    how.much PAR also 2SG.POSS-LK KUAN salary

    ku’an  ra  dili
    KUAN  only  NEG

    J  a  wala-  dili  ku’an  confidential
    PAR  NEG  NEG  KUAN  confidential

    L: ‘How much is your er… salary? Only er… er no.’
    J: ‘mm… no, it’s not… it’s confidential.’

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