The Empty Root in Cebuano and Kavalan:

A Cognitive Perspective

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Abastract

During our fieldwork we found a peculiar linguistic form which occurs in naturally spoken data, but never in elicited data. This small form is in itself semantically empty outside of the discourse, yet in the context, it can be fitted into any syntactic slot and inflected or derived with appropriate morphological affixations accordingly. In other words, when attached with affixation, it can be used as a verb, noun, adjective, or adverb. In 1996, Rubino also reports a similar phenomenon in Ilocano discourse. He interprets such an empty root with appropriate morphological frame as a means of morphological integrity and thus can be evidence that the planning and production occurs at morphemic level.

By investigating narrative and conversation data in both Cebuano and Kavalan, we also found that the distribution and functions of this empty root are far more complicated than what has been reported in Rubino (1996). Also, we attempt to provide a cognitive explanation to such a cross-linguistic phenomenon. Eventually, we hope to demonstrate that meanings are negotiated and thus emergent from actual use.

1. Introduction

The motivation behind this paper is simple. During our fieldwork, we found that there is a particular linguistic form, i.e., *iza* in Kavalan and *ku'an* in Cebuano. This particular form occurs in naturally spoken texts, but never in elicited data. When we asked our informants what this word meant, most of the time, their first reactions were that, "Well, there is no such a word in our language." However, when we read the whole sentences extracted from the naturally spoken data, some of them would understand it, but they still could not tell what exactly this word means. At best, some of them would reply with such uncertain answers as 'something, someplace, or some things known to the speaker and the hearer', i.e., the speech act participants. As shown in Excerpts (1) to (3) below, this particular linguistic form is in itself semantically empty outside of the discourse context. And interestingly enough, we found that this particular form can be fitted into any syntactic slot and inflected or derived with appropriate morphological affixations accordingly. The following examples may give a better illustration:

(1) Kavalan (Frog-imui) [1]

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.'

(2) Kavalan (Frog-imui)

13   ...(0.9) ngid=ti   **qa==-iza,** \
            almost=PFV   QA-IZA

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

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[1] The Abbreviations used in this study are listed below:
(a) special phonological symbols:
     '   glottal stop
(b) **AF**: Agent Focus; **PF**: Patient Focus; **LF**: Locative Focus; **RF**: Referential Focus; **IF**: Instrumental Focus; **BF**: Benefactive Focus; **NOM**: Nominative Case; **GEN**: Genitive Case; **DAT**: Dative Case; **LOC**: Locative Case; **ASP**: Aspectual marker; **PFV**: Perfective; **PROG**: Progressive; **DET**: Determiner; **NEG**: Negation; **PN**: Proper Noun/Personal Name; **PRON**: Pronoun; **CAU:** Causative Prefix; **RED**: Reduplication; **FS**: False Start; **INT**: Interjection; **LNK**: Linker; **FIL**: Pause Filler; **DM**: Discourse Marker.
(c) Symbols for discourse coding: based on the Du Bois et al. (1993) system.

[ ]	speech overlap	--	truncated utterance
:	speaker identity	.	final intonation
,	continuing intonation	\	falling pitch
/	rising pitch	_	level pitch
^	primary accent	…(N)	long pause
…	medium pause	..	short pause
==	lengthening	(0)	latching
@@	laughter		

(d) The glossing rules used in this paper are mostly based on *Leipzig Glossing Rule*s (2004 version) from http://www.eva.mpg.de/lingua/files/morpheme.html.
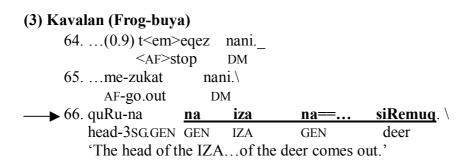
'It was about to IZA, …to come out of the bottle.'

(3) Kavalan (Frog-buya)

64. …(0.9) t<em>eqez   nani._
          <AF>stop   DM
65. …me-zukat   nani.\
        AF-go.out   DM
⟶ 66. quRu-na   **na   iza   na═…   siRemuq**. \
       head-3SG.GEN GEN   IZA   GEN   deer
       'The head of the IZA…of the deer comes out.'

In other words, when attached with appropriate affixation, this particular form can be used as a verb, a noun, an adjective, or an adverb.

In 1996, Rubino also reports a similar phenomenon in Ilocano: the empty root *kua*. He argues that the versatile uses of such an empty root with appropriate morphological frames serve as evidence that planning and production often take place at the morphemic level. Rubino's explanation goes like this, "*kua* is therefore employed by Ilocano speakers to replace a root that they are not able to produce simultaneously with the affixation, or to take the place of any given thought of any morphological complexity (Rubino 1996:661). In other words, he explains that the use of such a semantically empty root is morphological integrity in such a polysynthetic language as Ilocano.

We believe that Rubino's explanation is good; but since such a phenomenon occurs in many other languages[2] and not just in such polysynthetic languages as Ilocano; therefore, we are driven to find a higher-level perspective at looking at this phenomenon, i.e., a cognitive perspective wherein some explanations are anchored at language-users and not just at languages themselves.

The purpose of this paper is thus multiple. The first is to provide a cognitive explanation for this cross-linguistic phenomenon. Second, by carefully investigating the distribution and functions of this particular form, we show that lexical meanings are negotiated and thus emergent from social interaction. Last, we like to show that such a semantically empty root constitutes a counter-example to grammaticalization theory.

The organization of this paper is as follows. Section 2 gives brief sketches to both Cebuano and Kavalan. Section 3 describes in detail the distribution and the functions of this particular form. Section 4 provides a cognitive explanation to this cross-linguistics phenomenon. And some concluding remarks are given in Section 5.

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[2] As far as we know at present, the use of such a semantically empty root occurs in Kavalan, a Formosan language, Cebuano, a Philippine language, Bikol and Hiligaynon, also Philippine languages, and many other Philippine languages as well.

2. A Brief Sketch of Kavalan and Cebuano

2.1 Cebuano

Cebuano, a predicate-initial and a Meso-Philippine language (Mosley & Asher 1994), is one of the major languages in the Philippines, spoken as a first language by approximately a fifth of the total population, mainly on the central Visayan islands of Cebu, Bohol, Negros, Leyte, and on the northeastern half of Mindanao. It is spoken by the rest of the population of the Visayas and Mindanao areas as a second language. Cebuano is characterized by a highly developed focus system, common in Philippine-type languages. Case Marking in Cebuano is shown in Table 1. Oblique here would include the non-topical argument in an AF clause (i.e. object marker) and Instruments.

Table 1 Cebuano case markers (Himmelman 2005)

	Personal name marker		Non-personal phrase marker
Nominative	*si*	Specific (article)	*ang*
Possessive	*ni*	Oblique specific	*sa*
Dative	*kang*	Oblique non-specific	*ug*

Cebuano clauses have a loosely-organized syntactic structure in discourse; there is a moderate frequency of non-overt arguments. Based on the count of two conversational texts totaling 55 minutes, the lone argument in AF clauses is missing 43 percent of the time. In PF clauses, one argument is non-overt in 57 percent of the total numbers of clauses and both arguments are missing 13 percent of the time. The Cebuano data include five face-to-face conversations between acquaintances with a total length of 2 hours, 26 minutes and 53 seconds.

Like most Austronesian verbs, the Cebuano verb is composed of a verb root and an affix, which may denote focus, tense, mood, and aspect. As observed in our data, in verbs, the trouble source almost always occurs on the verb root. In this case, the speaker may recycle the prefix, as in (4), or use a place holder strategy instead of recycling the prefix, as in (5). Placeholders are particles used to keep a turn from being taken by another party, while the speaker is in the process of word search. Placeholders particles in Cebuano include semantically empty words, such as *ku'an* and *kanang*.

 (4) recycling of verbal prefix
  pag-thirty-plus   *=na =ka=/*
  when-thirty-plus   PFV 2SG.NOM

lisod	*=na*	*=daw*	***mag-buntis-***	***mang-anak***
difficult	PFV	EVID	AF-get.pregnant	AF-give.birth

'if you're already more than thirty, it's difficult to get pregnant- to give birth.'

(5) use of placeholder strategy

J	*didto*	*=na*	*sa*	*manila*	*trabaho*	*=na*	*=ko*	*didto*
	there	PFV	LOC	PN	work	PFV	1SG.NOM	there

L	*nag-trabaho*	*...di*	*di*	*wa*	*=na*	*=diay*	*=ka*	*didto*
	AF-work	DM	DM	NEG	PFV	EVID	2SG.NOM	there

nag-kuan-	***tugpo***
AF-PH	reside

J   there in Manila, I was working there already.

L   working, …then- then you're not *kuan* residing there (in Cebu) anymore?

2.2 Kavalan

Kavalan is a sinicized Austronesian language in Taiwan. It is now spoken by fewer than one hundred people, who mainly inhabit Hsinshe Village, Hualien Prefecture and Changyuan Village, Taitung Prefecture. Kavalan, a predicate-initial language, demonstrates focus attrition (cf. Shibatani 2005). Only the AF and LF forms of the verb remain; the –*an* form is used overwhelmingly as PF, while RF is sporadically seen. The case marking system and pronominal system are shown in Table 2 and Table 3, respectively. The main difference between the two dialects, namely, the Changyuan Dialect and Hsinshe Dialect, lies in phonology. Our informants speak the Hsinshe Dialect.

Table 2 Case Marking System in Kavalan (cf. Chang 2000:68)

	Nominative	Accusative/Oblique	Genitive	Locative
Common noun	ya/a	tu	na	ta…an (in/on/at) sa- (to) maq- (from)
Personal Name Proper Name	ya/a	tu	ni	…an

Table 2 Personal Pronominal System in Kavalan (cf. Chang 2000:84)

			Bound		Free Form			
	Number		Nom	Gen	Nom	Acc	Loc	Poss
1st	Singular		=iku	-ku	aiku	timaiku	timaiukuan tamaiku	zaku
2nd			=isu	-su	aisu	timaisu	timaisuan tamaisu	zasu
3rd			---	-na	aizipna	timaizipana	tamaizipana	zana
1st	Plural	Incl.	=ita	-ta	aita	timaita	timaitaan tamiata	zaita
1st		Exc.	=imi	-niq	aimi	timaimi	timainian tamaimi	zaimi
2nd			=imu	-numi	aimu	timaimu	timaimuan tamaimu	zaimu
3rd			---	-na	qaniau	qaniau	qaniauan	zana

Our Kavalan data consist of 4 pear stories, 4 frog stories, and two face-to-face conversations totaling about sixty minutes.

3. The Functions and Distribution of the Empty Root

Many Philippine languages employ a mechanism, i.e., the use of an empty root, to specify the required case frame of any given idea without having immediate access to the lexical root. This empty root refers to the *kua* in Ilocano and *ku'an* in Cebuano. Such a strategy is also found in one Formosan language, i.e., *iza* in Kavalan. As pointed out by Rubino (1996), the empty root kua in Ilocano is a versatile element of the Ilocano language and can be used in many grammatical constructions as a substitute for words of any syntactic form. Basically, Rubino regards this empty root as a morphological strategy that enables the speaker to replace a root that is not available for production simultaneously with affixation, or to replace any given thought of any morphological complexity.

By investigating narrative and conversation data in both Cebuano and Kavalan, we also found that the distribution and functions of this empty root are far more complicated than what has been reported in Rubino (1996). It is used as a searching strategy, for not only word searching but also sentential structure searching.

3.1 Word searching
3.1.1 Searching for a verb in both AF and NAF construction, as shown in (6) and (7), respectively.

(6) frog-imui

    13   ...(0.9) ngid=ti   **qa=-iza, **
               almost=PFV   QA-IZA

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

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

(7) frog-imui

    30   …(0.8) **iza-an=na=ti**   na=,\
               IZA-LF=3SG.GEN=PFV   GEN

    31..wasu   a   yau peRasku 'nay ni-qazuan-an   na   'nay biat,_
        dog   LNK that bottle   that NI-fill-NMZ   GEN that frog

    32…(0.9)   isis-an-na=ti   na wasu   'nay, /
               lift-LF-3SG.GEN=PFV   GEN dog   that

        'The dog lifted the bottle, in which the frog was put.'

3.1.2 Searching for a location

(8) frog-imui

    58   …(1.7) nani   yau   sunis   a   zau, \
               DM   EXIST child   LNK   this

    59   … t<m>ayta   tu==, /
               <AF>see   OBL

    60   …(1.6)   tu   biat   a   yau   **ta-iza-an**
               OBL   frog   LNK that   LOC-IZA-LOC

        ta==-iza-an   u, \
        LOC-IZA-LOC   or

    61   ..ta==-liap-an   na   paRin. \
               LOC-below-LOC   GEN   tree

        'The child saw (looked for) frog somewhere… or under the tree.'

3.1.3 Searching for a noun

 (9) frog-imui2

67.   … (0.9) tu==,_
               DM

68.   …(2.4)   Rayngu-an-na   sayza   tu==(1.1), /
               not.know-LF-3SG.GEN   maybe   TU

69.   (0) **iza**   u .. tu==   nianu   'nay
            IZA   or TU   what   that

    ni-wuzung-an-ku ..   zin-na   sayza   na   siRemuq
    NI-shoulder-NMZ-1SG.GEN   say-3SG.GEN   maybe   GEN   deer

    a   yau   nani,_
    LNK   that   DM

    '(The deer) did not know what it shouldered. It may think, "What did I shoulder?"'

(10) Kavalan (Pear-buya)

    39…(0.8) pangmu-an-na=ti,\
               help-LF-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

(11) Kavalan (Frog-buya)
   64. …(0.9) t<em>eqez   nani._
         <AF>stop   DM
   65. …me-zukat   nani.\
       AF-go.out   DM
→66. .. quRu-na   na **iza** na==…   siRemuq.\
   head-3SG.GEN   GEN IZA GEN   deer
      'The head of the IZA…of the deer comes out.'

3.2 Sentential Searching

As shown in the following Cebuano example, the empty root can be used as a place-holder, not just for searching for a word, but for the speaker to search for a sentence structure. Note that in Excerpt (12), the Cebuano speaker changes the utterance structure from an AF clause to an existential clause by employing the marker *ku'an*.

(12) Cebuano
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).'

3.3 Discourse marker

The second function of such an empty root is to serve as a discourse marker, as shown in the first *ku'an* in (13), and in (14).

(13) Cebuano
→**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).'
   'He thinks IZA (this way) is easy (easier) to go to the shore.'

(14) Cebuano

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

→
pero	kung	**ku'an**	ha
but	if	KUAN	PAR

tung	una	cotabato	ang	una-ng	naging	city	kaysa	sa	davao
that	at.first	PN	ANG	first-LK	become	city	than	LOC	PN

ug	sa	general santos	m=	pero	dahil	daghan-g	muslim
AND	LOC	PN	FIL	but	because	many-LK	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…'

3.4 Deixis-like

Moreover, such an empty root can be 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 the location in 15), some activity or some abstract state known to both Speaker/Hearer.

(15) 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,\
that	dog	LNK	that	<AF>see	OBL

26. …
Rubu-na	na==,\
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.'

(16) KavCon-Earthquake

91.
aiku	t<em>ayta=ay	masang	kiya-pama	nani,\
1SG.NOM	<AF>see=REL	before	small-still	DM

'(That's) what I saw before when I was still young.'

92.
m-rim-zusa	azu-ita	ryaRicay	kwa./
F-RIM-two	like-1IPL.NOM	catch.small.fish	DM

'It was separated into two parts, like when we were catching small fish.'

→ 93.
Ray-baut	tu	s<em>uRuq	**yau**	**a**	**iza**	**kwa./**
catch-fish	OBL	<AF>scoop	EXIST	LNK	something	DM

'(When we were) catching fish by scooping, there was something.'

(17) Kavalan (Frog-buya)

80. …
zaqis-an-na	sa==(1.0)--, /
climb.up-LF-3SG.GEN	FS

81. …(0.9)
azu=ti	syurin	'nay	zin-ta	na,_
seem=PFV	buoy	that	say-1IPL.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.\
    DM   say-3SG.GEN

3.5 Euphemism

Also, it may also be a way to avoid a direct mention of sensitive terms, as in the following Cebuano example (18). Since talking about one's salary is a sensitive or confidential topic in conversation, the speaker uses *ku'an* as a euphemism marker before the sensitive word *sweldo* 'salary'.

(18) Cebuano

→   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.

Although this empty root lacks semantic consistency (that is why Rubino acknowledges that it is not yet lexicalized), it is without question that when it is used anaphorically[3], some negotiated meaning emerges from the discourse context (cf. Huang 1998) and it thus acquires some semantic content in some uses.

4. Cognitive Explanations

Rubino (1996) explains that such an empty root employed by the Ilocano speaker serves as a device of morphological integrity; in other words, he regards this as a purely linguistic phenomenon. On the contrary, we look for an explanation on the level behind the language itself, i.e., on the language user. To be more specifically, we believe that such a language use is motivated by human cognition.

It is believed that language is such a species-specific capacity that only humans possess, which of course distinguishes *homo sapiens* from other ontogenetically-related species that Darwin believes evolved from the same ancestor. And what does

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[3] Deixis is also lack of semantic consistency, since 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).

language do for us? As Clark (1997:193) points out, one easy but somehow misleading answer is that public language is to communicate ideas, since the most obvious evidence comes from that fact that human beings profit from what others know. And just as a single computer is linked to a network of computers, the link to a network is for us humans primarily provided by language, which is not only a code of communication but also an external memory store (Streeck 1995); and thus it locates one major wellspring of our rather unique kind of cognitive success.

Nevertheless, Clark urges us not to neglect a subtler but equally potent role that language may play: as a tool that alters the nature of the computational tasks involved in various kinds of problem solving. And I believe in its broad sense, problem-solving abilities should include the ability language users possess to detect and modify the errors and solve the problems that occur in all linguistic interactions.

In interaction contexts (the places where Schegloff (1996) believes are the natural environment of language use and where Streeck (1995) believes language comes to life), linguistic structures have to meet with the demands of rapid, open-textual and sometimes risky social situation. And those that can survive best are those highly conventionalized formats; among them, *pre* perhaps is the smallest but the best example (Streeck 1995:108). In their cross-linguistic study on repair, Fox, Makoto & Jasperson also attribute the phenomenon of repair in conversations to various interactional pressures, and they believe that it is managed in languages with vastly different syntactic practices to meet these pressures (1996:188).

Here we believe that the use of the empty root by Cebuano or/and Kavalan speakers is also an interaction-motivated phenomenon: like a ready-for-wear filler, the empty root enables both Cebuano and Kavalan speakers to fulfill their goal and go on with their project even under interactional pressures and when they do not have any candidate in mind.

In the 1930s, Vygotsky, a psychologist, pioneered the idea that use of public language had profound effects on cognitive development. One of his ideas is scaffolded action, i.e., action with the "zone of proximal development." And action is called "scaffolded" to the extent that it relies on some kind of external support. Such support could come from the use of tools or from exploitation of the knowledge and skills of others; that is to say, scaffolding denotes a broad class of physical, cognitive, and social augmentations—augmentations that allow us to achieve some goal that would otherwise be beyond us. The most common cases are that where a child is temporarily able to succeed at designated tasks only by courtesy of guidance (Vygosky 1962; Clark 1997). The speech functions so as to guide behavior, to focus attention, and to guard against common errors. In such cases, the role of language is to guide and shape our own behavior; it is a tool for structuring and controlling action,

not merely a medium of information agent.

We would rather believe that language plays a scaffolding role in orienting attention and shaping the re-calling task.

5. Concluding Remarks

In this paper we have demonstrated that this intriguing cross-linguistic phenomenon of using such a semantically-empty root in seemingly unlimited contexts appears to constitute a counterexample to the uni-directionality principle in the grammaticalizaiton theory (cf. Traugott 1989, 1995, 2001, 2004; Traugott & Heine 1991; Traugott & König 1991; Hopeer & 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; for instance, nominal clines (nominal adposition > case) and verbal clines (main verb > tense, aspect, mood marker) are staples of grammaticalizaiton theory. The central tenet is the unidirectionality principle, insofar as it predicts that grammatical material will not become lexical (Traugott 1995:1). However, our data show that a particular linguistic form evolves 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).

Also, we offer cognitive explanations to such an intriguing phenomenon: cross-linguistically, speakers of different languages employ the same linguistic mechanism in facilitating and scaffolding their verbal communication tasks. Thus, we believe that public speech, inner rehearsal, and the use of written and on-line texts are all potent tools that reconfigure the shape of our cognitive space. Time and again we use words to focus, clarify, transform, offload, and control our own thinking, as Cebuano and Kavalan speakers (and many other Philippine languages speakers as well) use such an empty root in various context of interactions to reach different goals. In this regard, Jackendoff is absolutely right when he suggests that the mental rehearsal of sentences may be the primary means by which our own thoughts are able to become objects of further attention and reflection. Thus understood, language is not a mere imperfect mirror of our intuitive knowledge. Rather, it is part and parcel of the mechanism of reason itself.

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