Language As A Semiotic System
The Dawan Language

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Abstract

The study of linguistics as a scientific study of language enhances the understanding of views and attitudes in society, especially those in small communities, such as society in a village in East Nusa Tenggara (a province of Indonesia). For this reason, a branch of linguistics, lexical semantics or the study of meaning of the lexems, is used for a specific aspect of semantic analysis; the semantic field. Until today the local people in this province are regarded as traditional and 'untouched' by other cultures. Observing the Dawan language by looking at the lexical semantic aspects through the semantic field, the thoughts and the behavior of the local people, especially regarding modernization, can be revealed. From this point of view semiotic systems are usually defined as the use of disciplined signs and symbols as a code for communications between people within specific communities (Tobin, 1990, 14). It is mostly used to communicate information through such things as gestures, music and art. Linguistics has been separated from the study of the semiotic systems, yet there is still a link between the two disciplines, according to the concept of meanings (Tobin, 1990, 17). The number of lexems in a semantic field can describe how important the language is and reflects cultural attitudes.

The observation of East Nusa Tenggara village was based on field research and this province was chosen since there has been resistance towards development in the province by the natives of its society who are still traditional and deeply entrenched. For example, there are problems for nursery projects if the sort of plants in the projects is still unknown to them. These unique characteristics have attracted anthropological research requires linguistic support.

The study of language through semantic field analysis can improve knowledge and understanding about views and attitudes of a traditional and 'untouched' community. Therefore, through the distinctive features of semantic field analysis the range of lexems which have functional meanings, and those, which have symbolic meanings can be identified. This was illustrated by the differences between the functional and symbolic meanings, of various lexems. Modernization is slowly having an impact in the natives' life, and cautiously, new things should be gradually introduced to them. This study has enabled a better understanding of the links between linguistics and community life, and therefore, this understanding should be used wisely when modern ideas with remote communities are being introduced.

Keywords: *linguistic, semiotic systems, communications, community*

I. INTRODUCTION

The province of East Nusa Tenggara (Nusa Tenggara Timur) is located in the east of Indonesia with an area of approximately 47,350 km2 consisting of three large islands (Sumba, Timor and Flores) and other hundreds of medium and small islands with mostly hilly and mountainous area.

About sixty six percent of its land consists of critical terrain and rocky areas which are not suitable for continuous cultivation and land is very sensitive to erosion. Exploration or cultivation of the land is by traditional methods depended on technology known by people. Farmers move from one field to another to work on dry rice fields and cultivation depends on rain rather than irrigation. There are land owners patterns, especially in rural areas which orients toward communal ownership within a district or by tribal customs (Pemda Nusa Tenggara Timur: 1994)

II. ABOUT THE PEOPLE

The research took place in a small community who lives in a village near the town **Soe** (**Polen**). **Soe** is located in the regency of **Belu**, one of the twelve regencies in East Nusa Tenggara. The tribe living in this area is called the Dawan tribe or in their language **Atoni Pah Meto,** which means "**People from the dry land".** The Dawan tribe speaks the Dawan language which belongs to Atoni language.

The Dawan tribe is considered by outsiders as illiterate people, or people, who live in remote and isolated places. The **Dawan** is different from the "**Kase",** a neighbouring tribe, which is considered as educated and most of its members have careers as civil servants.

The most respectable position in the Dawan society is the **usif**, or the head of the tribe. The second important position is the **amaf**. **Amaf and usif** are landlords of large pieces of land. The third position in the society is the warlords or **meo** in Dawan language. Common people are called **to**. The house of the **usif** lies in the middle of the village surrounded by houses of the **amaf, meo** and **to**. The rice barn which is called **lopo** lies next to the usif's house.

The ownership of a piece of land or plantation must be verified by the **usif** even if it is inherited from their ancestors.

III. ABOUT THE INFORMANTS

Our informants are people who have influences in the community. One of the informants was the **usif**, whose name is **Markus Teflopo.** He is mostly respected by the **to** and gives the last decision in conflicts resolution among his people. He is the landlord of a large plantation and lives in **Konbaki**, an isolated village far from the major road. Another informant, who is also respected by the community, was **Naes Koan Marga Mella** who lives in a village called **Loli.** He is a devoted Christian and has left all traditional mystical beliefs. The third one was **Jerminas Falbo**, the principal of an elementary school in the village of **Pisan**, which is located near the major road. He is considered as open minded by the people, a devoted Christian and has also left

mystical beliefs. Another respectable informant was **Ir. Ongky Tasuib.** He is an engineer graduated from a university in Jogjakarta and son of the amaf.

IV. LANGUAGE AS A SEMIOTIC SYSTEM, THE DAWAN LANGUAGE

The study of linguistics as a scientific study of language enhances the understanding of views and attitudes in society, especially those in small communities, such as a society in a village in East Nusa Tenggara (a province in Indonesia). The Dawan language, used by the local people, is related to the Malay Polynesian language. For this reason, a branch of linguistics, lexical semantics or the study of meaning of the lexems, is used for a specific aspects through the semantic field, the thoughts and behavior of the local people, especially regarding modernization, can be revealed.

From this point of view language as semiotic system may be observed. Semiotic systems are usually defined as the use of disciplined signs and symbols as a code for communication between people within specific communities (Tobin, 1990, 14). It is mostly used to communicate information through such things as gestures, music and art. Linguistics has been separated from the study of semiotic systems, yet there still a link between the two disciplines, according to the concept of meanings (Tobin, 1990, 17). The study of meaning in linguistics is based on the observation of lexems in a certain language. Lexem means the root of a certain word, without a grammatical process (Kridalaksana, 1993, 134). For example, in the Dawan language the lexem "tok" means to sit. A grammatical process could be "toko", which means a place to sit. The semantic field is a part of the semantic system of language and comprises a group of words, related in meaning and connected under one general term (Lehrer, 1974-1), for example: the word "betel" (a sort of plant) as a semantic field (general term) comprises the words "manus" means betel fruit and "manusufa" means betel leaves. The number of lexems in a semantic field can describe how important lexem in the language is and reflects cultural attitudes. Another example:

The forests in East Nusa Tenggara are not dense, and thus they have limited lexems for the plants growing in the forest. Five types of plants which have basic meanings or denotative meanings as food and medicine are grouped in circle A/B. These are cassava leaves, banana flower, papaya leaves, pinang fruit and betel (sirih) leaves. Pinang fruit, betel leaves and betel fruit are also grouped in circle D as they have symbolic meanings in addition to functional meanings. Pinang and betel are mostly used as symbols in ending conflicts in the community. They are also used in ceremonies such as welcoming a respectful guest or wedding ceremonies.

Lexems	Dawan Language	Distinctive Features		
		For food	For medicine	For ceremonies
cassava leaves	lao no	+	-	-
banana flower	na paf	+	-	-
papaya leaves	ukasno	+	+	-
pinang fruit	puah	+	+	+
betel	manus	+	+	+

East Nusa Tenggara was chosen since there has been resistance towards development in the province, by the natives of this society who are still traditional and deeply entrenched. For example, according to tradition, there are problems in deciding the borders between pieces of land, since land is still owned by traditional landowners, who inherited the land from their ancestors without any legal papers. There are also problems for nursery projects if the sorts of plants in the project are still unknown to them. These unique characteristics have attracted anthropological research and this research requires linguistics support.

To obtain this research, evidence was taken from interviews with informants. Selecting the right people to be interviewed was a difficult task during the research, due to the structure of the rural society in the village. A qualitative research method was used and intensive and well prepared questions were needed. It was hoped the informants would give complete and reliable information. Therefore the informants were selected from local people who have experience and influence in the society and still use the Dawan language in their daily life without borrowing words from the Indonesian language. Most of the questions were open questions, which needed complete sentences in order to answer.

The informants were divided into three categories. Firstly, there were the informants, who have influence in the society such as the head of the village, who could be landowners. They also function as advisers in solving conflicts among people in their community. Secondly there were the informants regarded as scholars, who have an important position in the society such as teachers, employees and civil servants. The last category of informants was the peasants and migrants, which were mostly small shop owners.

The next step was to select relevant vocabulary from the sentences in the Dawan language which were relevant to the topic and to categorize the words through a semantic field analyses. The semantic fields which were chosen, are lexems related to family, house and wealth, since these were likely to reveal the structure of the society. Other semantic fields were plants, animals and forests as they show the environment that the society lives in. each lexem within a semantic field was observed for its semantic characteristics or its distinctive features. For example, the semantic field "house" has a lexem like "main building" or "ume khubu", "terrace behind the house" or "ume kotin", "terrace beside the main building" or "ume sui". These 3 lexems could have a number of characteristics (for example, how people regarded these items in their daily life) used functional or used for particular events (ceremonies or family meetings), which means they may have symbolic meanings. These observations were reflected by the studies of Trier and Weisgerbers, who began a new era in semiotics. Lyons reported

that apparently Trier and Weisgerbers' point of view is that language reflects the way of thinking of the native speaker (Lyons 1974, 252). Therefore data were needed for the interviews, which are shown in tables below:

Lexems	Dawan Language	Distinctive Features			
		Bread-winner	Leader in ceremonies	Responsible for family matters	Decision maker in conflicts
Father	Amaf	+	0	+	0
Mother	Enaf	-	-	-	-
Grandfather	Nai	+	+	+	+
Grandmother	Bei	-	-	-	-
Older Brother	Tataf	0	-	0	-
Younger Brother	Naof	-	-	-	-
Older or younger sister	Tataf	-	-	-	-
Brother of mother	Bawaf	+	0	0	+
Brother of father	Ofif	+	0	0	+

Table 1: The semantic field **family** and its distinctive features.

As the number of lexems in the semantic field "family" is few for female relatives, only lexems for grandmother and mother have been found. For 'brother' and 'sister', 'uncle' and 'aunt' the same lexems have been found. However, as breadwinner and the person with responsibility towards the family, the burden lay on the father or elderly brother. A father has different functions; he could be a breadwinner, a leader in ceremonies, a decision maker in conflicts or he may not have any of these functions (0) if the grandfather is still alive (+). From the table, it can be estimated that lexems reflecting male relatives have more than just functional meanings.

Lexems	Dawan Language	Distinctive Features			
		Used for welcoming guests	Used for dowry	Used for ceremonies	Used for investment
piece of land	pah	-	+	+	+
storage of harvest product	lopo	-	-	-	+
silver	kai ao	+	+	+	-
horse	pikase	-	+	-	-
cow	bijai molo	-	+	-	+
buffalo	bijai meto	-	-	-	+
goat	mimi	-	-	-	-
pearls	inuh	-	+	+	+

Table 2: The semantic field **wealth** and its distinctive features.

From the data in the table above, it can be seen that lexems which belong to the semantic field 'wealth' may be divided into 3 categories. Firstly, sacred belongings inherited from their ancestors are silver and pearls. Secondly, there are animals such as cows, horses, buffaloes and goats. Cows are more important than any other animal in the natives' life, since it is regarded as the most precious investment. Therefore "bijai

molo" (cow) has functional meaning, and "kai ao" (silver), "inuh" (pearl) and "pah" (a piece of land has a symbolic meaning and is often used for sacred events (ceremonies)).

Lexems	Dawan Language	Distinctive Features				
		Functional	Place for family	Place for guest	Place for wealth	Symbolic meaning
main building	ume khubu	+	+	0	-	+
front yard	mau monef	+	-	+	-	+
place beside the house	ume sui	+	+	+	-	-
place behind the house	ume kotin	+	+	-	-	-
main door	nesu	+	-	-	-	+
fireplace	tunaf	+	-	-	-	-
storage for products of harvest	lopo	+	-	-	+	+
storage for water	pan oe	+	-	-	-	-
roof	subah	+	-	-	+	+

Table 3: The semantic field **house** and its distinctive features.

From the table above, it can be seen that lexems with "ume" is placed right next to "ume khubu" or the main building, which is the centre of the place where natives live. Only honored or important guests are able to enter the "ume khubu" through the main door or "nesu". Places, which have symbolic meanings, are places for honored guests ("ume khubu") and places to store the wealth ("lopo" and "subah").

The place beside the house and behind the house (ume sui and ume kotin) is mostly used for family gatherings; therefore, they have functional meanings. Ceremonies and bigger meetings to solve conflicts between groups of the natives may be held in the front yard. There are no changes of physical layout and structure of the house over time, since new lexems which belong to this semantic field could not be found.

Lexems	Dawan Language	Distinctive Features				
		Main food	Cooked meal	For medicine	For side dishes	For ceremonies
sweet potatoes that grow under the earth	laok lole	-	+	-	+	-
cassava	laok hao	-	+	-	+	-
"man" sweet potatoes	laok atone	+	+	-	-	-
"kepu" sweet potatoes	laok kepu	-	+	-	+	-
yellow corn	pen molok	+	+	-	-	-
white corn	pen mutih	+	+	-	-	-
flower corn	pen boso	+	+	-	-	-
peanuts	fue mutu	-	+	-	+	-
green peanuts	fue kase	-	+	-	+	-
earth peanuts	fue naes	-	+	-	+	-
"sirih" (betel)	manus	-	-	+	-	+
betel leaves	maonof	-	-	+	-	+
betel fruits	manusufa	-	-	+	-	+

Table 4: The semantic field for **plants** (inherited from the ancestors) and its distinctive features.

From the table above (table 4), it may be inferred that there are not many lexems which belong to the semantic field **plants**, inherited from their ancestors. "Manus", is the word used for betel, which is another important plant and belongs to the most symbolic and sacred plants and is essential in the natives' life. A very few new sorts of plants are already added in the Dawan lexicology such as water guava ("oblase"), white guava ("obful") and ricefields (the water which comes from irrigation is called "ain oek". Guava plants and water irrigated ricefileds could be found in East Nusa Tenggara but very rare, since the ricefields, which are mostly seen in this province are ricefields, which use rain, called "ane". Other plants which are not found in this province use Indonesians words and have not been added to Dawan lexicology.

Lexems	Dawan Language	Distinctive Features			
		For food	For special purpose	For investment	Used as dowry
horses	wa kasih	-	+	+	0
cows	bijai molo	+	+	+	+
buffaloes	bijai meto	-	+	+	0
pigs	fafi	+	-	+	+
wild pigs	fafus	+	-	-	-
wild hens	monfus	+	-	-	-
chickens	monaim	+	-	+	-
goats	mimi	+	-	+	-
monkeys	kelo	-	+	-	-
deer	lus	+	-	-	-

Table 5: The semantic field of **animals** and the distinctive features.

From the table it can be seen that lexems for animals have more functional meanings than symbolic meaning. Only "bijai molo" (cows) and "fafi" (pigs) are used for dowry. "wa kasih" (horses) and "bijai meto" (buffaloes) is used as dowry only if the natives could not afford cows and pigs. In this case, the sign "0" is used. Animals used for certain purposes mean that they could be used to assist the natives working in the field.

Lexems	Dawan Language	Distinctive Features			
		Homogeneous	Heterogeneous	Place for animals	As place to live
forest	nase	+	-	+	0
conservation forest	naestala	+	-	-	-
peoples forest	minuke	0	0	-	+
lontar forest	lamo noe	+	-	-	-
bushes	mepat	-	+	+	-
wild grass	hobesi	+	-	-	-

Table 6: The semantic field for **forest** and the distinctive features.

From the data above, it can be seen that the Dawan language has only a few number of lexems for the semantic filed **forest**. The forests in East Nusa Tenggara are not dense and have limited use, and are not as essential in the life of the natives as the fields. Therefore, there are many lexems for fields than there are for forest.

In conclusion, the study of language through semantic fields analysis can improve knowledge and understanding about the views and attitudes of a community such as the traditional and 'untouched' village in East Nusa Tenggara. Therefore, through the distinctive features of semantic field analysis the range of lexems which have functional meanings, and those, which have symbolic meanings can be identified. This was illustrated by the differences between the functional and symbolic meanings, of various lexems. Modernization is slowly having an impact in the natives' life, and cautiously, better understanding of the links between linguistics and community life, and therefore, this understanding should be used wisely when modern ideas with remote communities are being introduced.

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