

The Pragmatic Functions of Dummy Terms in Two Austronesian Languages

Fuhui Hsieh

Tatung University, Taipei
hsiehfh@gm.ttu.edu.tw

Michael Tanangkingsing

National Taipei University of Technology
miguel@mail.ntut.edu.tw

Abstract

The purpose of this study is to investigate the pragmatic functions of dummy terms in two Austronesian languages, i.e., *ku'an* in Cebuano and *iza* in Kavalan. Dummy terms, as defined, are linguistic units that are semantically empty, but complete a sentence to make it grammatical. Nevertheless, the dummy terms to be investigated in this study are not just of grammatical significance, but, more important, of pragmatic functions. Syntactically, these dummy terms can be fitted into almost any syntactic slot and inflected or derived with appropriate morphologically affixations accordingly. Pragmatically, they function as various scaffolding tools that can help social interactants achieve successful interactional tasks in transient social interaction, or 'joint action' (Clark 1996).

By carefully investigating the distribution and functions of the dummy term in the languages, we aim to show that lexical meanings are negotiated and thus emerge from social interaction. As pointed out by Evans (2016), language does not emerge "automatically and effortlessly", but rather "reflects human pro-social inclinations for intersubjective communication" (3). In interaction contexts, linguistic structures have to meet with the demands of rapid, open-textual, and sometimes risky social situations. In this study, we will show that the use of the dummy terms by Cebuano and Kavalan speakers is also an interaction-motivated phenomenon: like a ready-for-wear filler, the dummy term enables Cebuano and Kavalan speakers to fulfill their goals and go on with their project even under interactional pressures and when they do not have any candidate in mind. Ultimately, we hope to show (i) that social interactants use grammatical forms to coordinate the production of the social actions, and (ii) that language is a scaffolding tool that helps language users to meet the demanding needs in transient social interaction.

Key words: *semantically empty, dummy term, negotiated meaning, social interactions, pragmatic functions*

1. Introduction

This paper sets out to investigate the dummy terms in two Austronesian languages, i.e., *ku'an* in Cebuano and *iza* in Kavalan, freely translated as '*wacchamaccalit*', which occur in naturally

spoken texts but never in elicited data.* Morphosyntactically, these two linguistic forms can be fitted into almost any syntactic slot and inflected or derived with appropriate morphological affixations accordingly to make the sentences where they occur grammatically complete. They can fit in a NP slot, as in (1), and in a numeral position, as in (2).

(1) Kavalan *iza* in a nominal position (KavNr_Frog imui)¹

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

‘They climbed up to (this) wacchamacalit, ... the top of a tree.’

(2) Cebuano *ku’an* in a numeral position (Frog 1:85-87)

...(1.0) daghan=na=di’ay=ka’ayo=g anak
 many=already=EVID=INTENS=LK offspring

→ ...(1.5) **ku’an** ka bu’uk anak
 KUAN LK CLF offspring

...(3.0) seven ka bu’uk anak
 seven LK CLF offspring

‘(Then they) had many children. (They had) [how many] children, ... (they had) seven children.’

In example (1), the speaker first uttered *iza*, affixed with the locative case marker, *ta-...-an*, to indicate word search, and then in the second line, she successfully found the right word *ta babaw na paRin* ‘the top of the tree’. In (2), *ku’an* indicates a numeral being searched; note the long pause before the exact numeral, *seven*, could be uttered, showing that the speaker must be trying to think of the Cebuano word for it.

Aside from occupying nominal and numeral slots, the dummy terms can also take the predicate slot, as in the Cebuano example (3) and the Kavalan example (4).

* Part of this paper was presented in 2006 at the Tenth International Conference on Austronesian Languages (10-ICAL). We thank the audience at the conference for their precious comments. We are indebted to two anonymous reviewers for their valuable suggestions and comments. A research grant from Taiwan’s Ministry of Science and Technology MOST 108-2410-H-036-003-MY3 to the first author is gratefully acknowledged. The usual disclaimer applies.

¹ The glosses follow the List of Standard Abbreviations in the Leipzig Glossing Rules.

Additional abbreviations are listed as follows: ASSERT: assertion marker, AUX: auxiliary verb, AV: actor voice, BC: backchannel, CAU: causative marker, DEF: definitizer, DM: discourse marker, EMPH: emphasizer, EPL: exclusive plural marker, EVID: evidential, EXIST: existential, EXT: extended argument, FIL: filler, FS: false start, INTENS: intensifier particle; INTERJ: interjection particle, IPL: inclusive plural marker, IRR: irrealis marker, IV: instrumental voice, LK: linker, LOC: locative marker, LV: locative voice, NCM: non-common name marker, NEG: negator, NEUT: neutral, NMZL: nominalization, NOM: nominative marker, OBL: oblique marker, PART: particle, PAST: past tense marker, PFV: perfective marker, PN: proper name, POSS: possessive marker, PV: patient voice, RED: reduplication, REL: relativization, SPONT: spontaneous, and SUPER: superlative marker.

Symbols for discourse coding include [] for speech overlapping, \ for falling terminal intonation, / for rising terminal intonation, <L2...L2> for code switching, ... (N) for a long pause, and @ for laughter.

(3) Cebuano *ku'an* in a predicate position (Conversation 4: 95)

95 ngano=ng mga vietnamese kabalo=man=sila
 why=LK PL PN know=PART=3PL.NOM

→ mag-**ku'an** mag-<in>insik
 AV-KUAN AV-Chinese<speaking a language>
 'Why do the Vietnamese know ehm, ... (why do they) know how to speak Chinese?'

(4) Kavalan *iza* in a predicate position (KavNr_Frog imui)

→ 13 ... (0.9) ngid=ti qa=-**iza**
 want.to=PFV IRR-IZA
 14 ... qa-zukat pasazi ta peRasku-an
 IRR-go.out toward.here LOC bottle-LOC
 'It was about to mmm ... to come, out of the bottle.'

Verbal morphology in Formosan and Philippines languages allows the verbs in verbal clauses to be affixed with a verbal morpheme that indicates the semantic role of the nominative-marked nominal; for example, in (3), the Agent marker *mag-* shows that the nominative marked nominal *mga vietnamese* acts as an Agent. In the event that a word search on the verb occurs, as in the second line in (3), the dummy term *ku'an* occupies the verbal slot <in>*insik* 'to speak Chinese', which is then affixed with the verbal marker *mag-*. Similarly, in (4), the dummy term *iza* in the first line occurs in the position where the verb is required.

As revealed in (1)-(4), when attached with appropriate affixation, these two particular linguistic forms can be used as a noun, a numeral, a verb, or a word belonging to any part of speech. Nevertheless, these words are vacuous in semantics, since they are unrecognizable when they are out of any context. When our informants were asked what the linguistic items *iza* and *ku'an* meant, their first reactions were usually that, "well, there is no such a word in our language." However, when provided with extracts from naturally spoken data, the informants would understand what the extracts conveyed but still could not explain what these linguistic forms meant. At best, some of them would reply with such uncertain answers as "something, someplace, or some things known to the speech act participants", i.e., the speaker and the hearer.

Rubino (1996) reported a similar phenomenon in Ilocano involving the dummy term *kua*. He argued that the versatile uses of such a dummy term with appropriate morphological frames serve as evidence that planning and production often take place at the morphemic level. Basically, Rubino regarded this dummy term as a morphological strategy that enables the speaker to replace a lexical item that is not available for production simultaneously with affixation, or to replace any given thought of any morphological complexity. In other words, the use of such a semantically dummy term is the preservation of morphological integrity in such a polysynthetic language as Ilocano.

However, as pointed out by Evans (2016), "language reflects and builds upon general properties and abilities of the human mind—specifically our species-specific cultural intelligence" and "it reflects human pro-social inclinations for intersubjective communication" (3). Moreover, Tárnyiková's (2019) study nicely demonstrates how English placeholders, one important communicative means of vague languages (cf. Channell 1994), facilitate social interactions. This paper therefore aims at exploring the pragmatic functions of these dummy terms in Cebuano and Kavalan. By carefully investigating the distribution and functions of the dummy terms in the two languages, we aim to show that lexical meanings are negotiated and thus emerge from social

interactions. Ultimately, we hope to show (i) that social interactants use grammatical forms to coordinate the production of the social actions; and (ii) that language is a scaffolding tool that helps language users to meet the demanding needs in transient social interaction.

The organization of this paper is as follows. Section 2 gives brief sketches to both Cebuano and Kavalan. Section 3 describes in detail the pragmatic functions of these particular forms. Section 4 provides some concluding remarks with an interactional explanation to this cross-linguistic phenomenon.

2. A brief sketch of Cebuano and Kavalan

Before investigating the phenomenon, a brief grammatical sketch on Cebuano and Kavalan will be provided in sections 2.1 and 2.2, respectively.

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. The case marking and the pronoun systems in Cebuano are shown in Tables 1 and 2, respectively.

Table 1

Case markers in Cebuano (Tanangkingsing 2009)

	NEUTRAL	NOM	GEN	DAT	EXT	LOC
PERSONAL	=y	<i>si</i>	<i>ni</i>	<i>kang</i>	-	-
COMMON		<i>ang</i>	<i>Sa</i>	-	<i>ug</i>	<i>sa</i>

Table 2

Pronoun paradigm in Cebuano (Tanangkingsing 2013)

	Nominative		Possessive	Genitive	Dative	Locative
1 st person sing	<i>ako</i>	=ko	<i>ako'(-a)</i>	=nako'	<i>kanako'</i>	<i>sa ako'</i>
2 nd person sing	<i>ikaw</i>	=ka	<i>imo(-ha)</i>	=nimo	<i>kanimo</i>	<i>sa imo</i>
3 rd person sing	<i>siya</i>	=siya	<i>iya(-ha)</i>	=niya	<i>kaniya</i>	<i>sa iya</i>
1 st person pl ex	<i>kami</i>	=mi	<i>amo'(-a)</i>	=namo'	<i>kanamo'</i>	<i>sa amo'</i>
1 st person pl in	<i>kita</i>	=ta	<i>ato'(-a)</i>	=nato'	<i>kanato'</i>	<i>sa ato'</i>
2 nd person	<i>kamo</i>	=mo	<i>inyo(-ha)</i>	=ninyo	<i>kaninyo</i>	<i>sa inyo</i>
3 rd person	<i>sila</i>	=sila	<i>ila(-ha)</i>	=nila	<i>kanila</i>	<i>sa ila</i>

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 AV clauses is missing 43 percent of the time. In PV 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 included five face-to-face conversations between acquaintances with a total length of 2 hours, 26 minutes, and 53 seconds.

2.2 Kavalan

Kavalan is a highly endangered Austronesian language in Taiwan mainly spoken at Hsinshe Village in Hualien Prefecture and Changyuan Village in Taitung Prefecture in the eastern coastal area of Taiwan. The total population of the Kavalan people is 1,543 as of September 2021; however, the number of fluent speakers is less than one hundred. Kavalan is a predicate-initial language, demonstrates focus attrition (cf. Shibatani 2005), wherein only the AV and PV forms of the verb remain; the *-an* form is used overwhelmingly as PV. In the AV-clause, the Nominative is usually an actor or an experiencer of psychological verbs, as shown in (5), while in the PV-clauses, the Nominative usually denotes Patient, and the Genitive, denoting Agent/Experiencer, always follows the predicate immediately, as shown in (6).

(5) Kavalan

- a. p<m>ukun tu wasu ya lazat a yau.
 <AF>hit OBL dog NOM person LNK that
 ‘That man hit a dog.’
- b. m-lizaq ya sunis-ku.
 AF-happy NOM child-1SG.GEN
 ‘My child was happy.’

(6) Kavalan

- a. pukun-an=ku ya sunis=ku.
 hit-LF=1SG.GEN NOM child=1SG.GEN
 ‘I hit my child.’
- b. ’etung-an=na ni utay ti-buya.
 kill-LF=3SG.GEN GEN PN NCM-PN
 ‘Utay killed Buya.’

The case marking system and pronominal system are shown in Table 3 and Table 4, 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 3

Case-marking system in Kavalan (cf. Hsieh 2018)

	Nominative	Oblique	Genitive	Locative
personal name		...-an	ni	...-an
non-personal name	ya/a	tu	na	ta ...-an (in, on, at) sa (to) pasa (toward)

Table 4

Personal Pronominal system in Kavalan (cf. Hsieh 2018)

		free				bound		
		person	NOM	ACC	LOC	POSS	NOM	GEN
singular	1	aiku	timaiku	timaikuan	zaku	=iku	=ku	
	2	aisu	timaisu	timaisuan	zasu	=isu	=su	
	3	aizipna	timaizipana	tamaizipana	zana	---	=na	
plural	1	incl	aita	timaita	timaitan	zata	=ita	=ta
		excl	aimi	timaimi	timaimian	zaniaq	=imi	=niaq
	2	aimu	timaimu	timaimuan	zanumi	=imu	=numi	
	3	qaniyau	qaniyau	qaniyauan	zana	---	=na	

Our Kavalan data, taken from NTU Corpus of Formosan Languages,² consisted of four pear stories, four frog stories, and four face-to-face conversations totaling about eighty minutes.

3. The pragmatic functions of the dummy terms

As mentioned previously, the two dummy terms occur in spoken discourses only, and their main functions are therefore expected at the level of discourse rather than at the level of sentences. We propose that the two terms, *ku'an* and *iza*, are indeed discourse markers in that they are vacuous in semantics and that they occur in spoken discourse only. Though lacking semantic content, the two terms are of diversified pragmatic functions, used by the social interactants to meet with the demands of rapid, open-textual, and sometimes risky social situations and to manage the flow and structure of discourse (Schiffrin 1987).

By investigating narrative and conversation data in both Cebuano and Kavalan, we categorized the versatile pragmatic functions of *ku'an* and *iza* into three major types. To begin with, they can be used as a placeholder for the speaker to hold the floor and to manage the structure of the discourse, as in 3.1. Next, they can be used as stance markers, conveying speakers' stances or attitudes, as in section 3.2. Moreover, they can also function as a recognitional deictic term, revealing untold, shared knowledge between the social interactants, as discussed in 3.3.

3.1 Placeholder function

As pointed out by Fox (2010), “[w]hen speakers in a conversation experience difficulty remembering a word, they may engage in a search for that word. One of the key sets of practices that speakers engage in when searching for a word is delay of that word, that is, a delay of what has been projected to come next by the lexico-semantic-syntax of the utterance-so-far, in its activity context” (1). In this subsection, we will therefore present data illustrating how the two dummy terms are used by the Cebuano and Kavalan speakers as placeholders to manage finishing their social interactions. According to Hayashi and Yoon (2010), a placeholder is defined as a discourse marker that is used as a substitute for a specific lexical item that has momentarily eluded the speaker (and which is often specified subsequently as a result of a word search). Moreover, a placeholder usually occupies a syntactic slot that would have been occupied by the target word, and thus constitutes a part of the syntactic structure under construction.

² http://corpus.linguistics.ntu.edu.tw/index_zh.php

In light of this, we may further classify the functions of the dummy terms as placeholders into two subtypes: (i) to do word search (3.1.1) and (ii) to manage the structure of the discourse (3.1.2).

3.1.1 Placeholders to Do Word Search. In transient interaction, speakers very often encounter difficulties finding the target word in their production, which can be evidenced by pauses, repetitions, and fillers, which are common signals indicating word search. In addition to these three frequently observed signals, another important and intriguing signal indicating that the Cebuano and Kavalan speakers are engaged in doing word search during social interactions is also attested, i.e., the use of the dummy terms in almost all kinds of syntactic positions. In the examples below, the dummy terms are employed when the speakers are searching for a verb, as in (7), for the name of a location, as in (8), and for a modifier noun, as in (9).

- (7) Kavalan (KavNr_Frog imui)
- 30 ... (0.8) **iza-an**=na=ti na=\
 IZA-PV=3SG.GEN=PFV GEN
- 31 .. wasu a yau peRasku 'nay ni-qazuan-an na 'nay biat,\
 dog LK that bottle that NI-fill-NMLZ GEN that frog
- 32 ... (0.9) **isis-an**=na=ti na wasu 'nay,\
 lift-PV-3SG.GEN=PFV GEN dog that
- '(The dog) iza-ed... The dog lifted the bottle, in which the frog was put.'

- (8) Kavalan (KavNr_Frog imui)
- 58 ... (1.7) nani yau sunis a zau, \
 DM EXIST child LK this
- 59 ... t<m>ayta tu==, /
 <AV>see OBL
- 60 ... (1.6) tu biat a yau **ta iza-an**
 OBL frog LK that LOC IZA-LOC
- ta==iza-an** uu, \
 LOC-IZA-LOC or
- 61 .. **ta== liap-an** na paRin. \
 LOC below-LOC GEN tree
- 'The child saw (looked for) the frog somewhere. or under the tree.'

- (9) Cebuano
- dili'=ba **ku'an**=na=ka'ayo/ gabi'i=na=ka'ayo/
 NEG=Q KUAN=already=EMPH night=already=EMPH
- 'Isn't it very ku'an, getting very late already!'

Note that in (7), the pause in Line 30 indicates that the speaker encountered some difficulties in her production of the target verb, viz., *-an* form; she therefore used *iza* to fit in the *-an* slot in Line 30 to keep her narration going. The pause in Line 32 shows that the speaker was engaged in word searching again, but this time, she managed to utter the target verb, *isis-an* 'lifted'. Excerpt (8) illustrates a similar situation. In Line 60, we can see a long pause, indicating the speaker's difficulties in her search for the target word for the location, and to keep her narration going, the

- 551 L m= daghan [=ka'ays tanan]
PF many INTENS all
'm... many [of them]'
- 552 J [ug **ku'an**] unsa=na pag usahay-
CONN KUAN what=that NMZL sometimes
- 553 pag ma= **ku'an** kanang
NMZL AV KUAN PF
- 554 ma-dungog=nako sa mga istorya-han sa bus ana
PV-hear=1SG.GEN OBL PL story-LV.NMZLOBL bus DM
'[and aah ...] what's this, ... sometimes, when aaa ... I can hear (them) on buses,
like that'
- 555 L m=
BC
'm ...'

Likewise, when a Speaker decides to modify a clause structure in the middle of speech, as in (12), or signal a climax, as it were, of a narration, as in (13), this dummy term can be used as a placeholder to manage the flow of the discourse.

(12) Cebuano (Conversation 2: 995-997)

- 995 sa= next- next week mag-**ku'an**=na=mi-
LOC next next week AV-KUAN=already=1EP.NOM
unsa=gyu=y amo-a=ng-
what=EMPH=NEUT 1EP.POSS-DEF=LK
- 996 mag-sabot=ra=man=mi
AV-agree=only=PAR=1EP.NOM
- 997 kung kanus'a=mi mag-day-off
if when=1EP.NOM AV-day.off
- 'Next week we will ku'an about our-, we will just agree when we are taking a day off.'

(13) Cebuano (Conversation 4: 981-1003)

- 981 ako=ng igsu'un=pud nag-hikog e
1SG.POSS=LK sibling=also AV-suicide DM
(eighteen lines omitted)
- 999 bungkag=dyud- ang iya=ng ulo lagi
burst=EMPH ANG 3SG.POSS=LK head ASSERT
- 1000 pag-abot=namo tanan
NMLZ-arrive=1EPL.GEN all
- 1001 **ku'an**=na
KUAN=already
- 1002 gapas gi-butang sa iya=ng ulo tanan
cotton PFV.IV-place LOC 3SG.POSS=LK head all
- 1003 wa'=dyu=y laman
NEG=EMPH=NEUT content

'My brother, (he) also committed suicide. He shot his head. His head really exploded. (Upon) our arrival, it was already erm, cotton buds, they were all over the inside of his skull. There was nothing left inside.'

In the middle of the story in (13), the Speaker seems to be trying to build up the suspense, by uttering *ku'an*, as a way to signal that the story is not yet finished and the "finale" is coming up, so to speak.

It seems that aside from being located in nominal and verbal slots during word search, the dummy terms are also used at the start of a discourse either to hold a turn or to signal more things to come. The dummy terms have thus evolved into a marker at the beginning of a particular discourse to signal that something important or newsworthy is going to be said. Similar to the excerpt in (13), the dummy term in (14) serves to hold the turn, inasmuch as there is more information to come.

(14) Cebuano (Conversation 1: 969-974)

969	SM=na	ron								
	PN=PFV	now								
970	sa	cotabato	wala'=gyud							
	LOC	PN	NEG=EMPH							
→ 971	pero	kung	ku'an	ha						
	but	if	KUAN	PART						
972	tung	una	cotabato	ang	una=ng	naging	city	kaysa	sa	davao
	that	once	PN	ANG	first=LK	become	city	than	LOC	PN
973	ug	sa	general	santos						
	AND	LOC	PN							
974	m=	pero	dahil	daghan=g	muslim					
	FIL	but	because	many=LK	Muslim.people					

'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 ...'

In Excerpt (15), not only does the speaker use the dummy term to refer to a particular situation, necessitating a clausal unit, she was also clearly trying to pluck up her courage to talk about a sensitive subject, telling the other person that the person they visited was suffering from cancer. Notice the long preface in the first line before she finally blurts out the truth in the next line. The dummy term is in a predicate slot; not surprisingly, the speaker is thinking of an appropriate clausal pattern to use.

(15) Cebuano (Conversation 1: 226-228)

226	ku'an=man=to=siya-	-								
	KUAN=that=3SG.NOM									
227	tung	nang-adto=mi=g	san carlos							
	when	AV-go=1EPL.NOM=LK	PN							
228	kanang=	nagka-	ku'an	-	nay	cancer=gani				
	FIL	AV (FS)	KUAN	EXIST	cancer=PART					

'*ku'an*, when we went to San Carlos, em= (he) em=, there was cancer (he had cancer).'

This excerpt shows how *ku'an* can be multifunctional, serving as a pause filler to hold a turn and at the same time signaling more information to come, which is supposed to be confidential and kept secret.

3.2 Stance marker function

These dummy terms can also serve as stance markers, whose functions include showing speakers' attitude, leading social interactants to communicative intentions, and eliciting the attention of Hearers.

In addition to serving to hold a turn, the dummy term *ku'an* in excerpt (14), repeated here as excerpt (16), is used by the Speakers to convey that they have something important to say so Hearers had better listen.

(16) Cebuano (Conversation 1: 969-974)

969	SM=na	ron								
	PN=PFV	now								
970	sa	cotabato	wala'=gyud							
	LOC	PN	NEG=EMPH							
→ 971	pero	kung	ku'an	ha						
	but	if	KUAN	PART						
972	tung	una	cotabato	ang	una=ng	naging	city	kaysa	sa	davao
	that	once	PN	ANG	first=LK	become	city	than	LOC	PN
973	ug	sa	general	santos						
	AND	LOC	PN							
974	=	pero	dahil	daghan=g	muslim					
	FIL	but	because	many=LK	Muslim.people					

'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 ...'

In Excerpt (17), Speakers B and N, two friends, were talking about the significance of visiting relatives to the Kavalan people.

(17) Kavalan (KavCon_Buya&Nengi)

89. N:..	nayaw-an=ta	wawai=ta	naRin	sqaw
	that.way-PV=1IPL.GEN	behavior=1IPL.GEN	NEG	forget
	tu qenasuani.\			
	OBL	relatives		

"Our behavior should be like that: Don't forget our relatives."

→ 90. ..	mai=ita	sqaw	tu	iza	u	baqbaqi=ta	m-niz.\
	NEG- IPL.NOM	forget	OBL	IZA	DM	elder=1IPL.GEN	AV-all

"We cannot forget all our relatives."

In Line 89, Speaker N emphasized the importance of relatives and elders for each Kavalan, saying that it is their code of conduct not to forget their relatives. Note that in Line 89, there is no pause before and between *iza* and *baqbaqi=ta* 'our elders', suggesting that Speaker N, indicating that she was not experiencing any difficulty in uttering *baqbaqi=ta* 'our elders', and was not doing any word search. Note also the discourse marker *u* right after *iza*, indicating that *iza* here functions as

a discourse marker, conveying Speaker N's attitude toward the significance of visiting elders and relatives in the Kavalan community.

Excerpt (18) illustrates how the dummy term is strategically used to show her reluctance to talk about a rather sensitive family matter.

(18) Kavalan (KavCon_B&I)

28. I: [..hm]. \
BC

→ 29. B: [**m-iza**] tu= lanas=ta,
AV-IZA OBL matter=1IPL.GEN
'We certainly will gather our siblings and take care of some matters.'

30. I: [nayawu]... nayawu sayzi.\
in.that.manner in.that.manner exactly
'Exactly so.'

31. B: ... hm. \
BC

32. ...(3.0) 'nay zenna tazian nani,\
that paddy.field now DM

→ 33. ...(0.9) panmen ma **ma-iza**.\
unexpectedly DM MA-IZA
'That paddy field suddenly got *iza* (expropriated by the government).

34. ... ma=,\
pause.filler

35. ...(1.9) pun lanas=na tu ni-ala-an=na
finish matter=3SG.GEN OBL NI-take-AN=3SG.GEN
lazan 'nay. \
road that
About the land, that the land was expropriated has not been settled yet.

In Excerpt (18), Speakers I and B, sister and brother, were talking about a paddy field of their family in Hsinshe that had been expropriated by the government; however, they had not received any compensation. They therefore decided to go back to Hsinshe to deal with the matter, though they had appointed a lawyer. Land expropriation and compensation were two sensitive family matters to the siblings; note the long pauses in Lines 32, 33, and 35, showing the speaker's hesitation and reluctance to talk about the matter. Speaker B first uttered *m-iza tu lanas=ta* 'to *iza* our family matter' and used another *iza* in Line 33 to implicitly talk about their land being expropriated, a sensitive matter they were rather reluctant to let a third party know.

All the excerpts discussed so far have clearly revealed that the dummy terms are strategically employed by the speakers to show their stance regarding the issues they were talking about.

3.3 Recognitional deixis function

The third pragmatic function of the two dummy terms is to serve as recognitional deixis, freely translated as ‘*what-d’you-call-it*’ (Sacks and Schegloff 1979; Himmelmann 1996; Enfield et al. 2001; Enfield 2003), to refer to some shared knowledge between the speaker and the hearer. In this regard, the two dummy terms are not semantically “vacuous” anymore; they in fact have acquired semantic specifications which subtly account for the interpretations hearers make. There are two major functions of such recognitional deixis: (i) when speakers do not know or cannot remember the word for something (*what-do-you-call-it*, *thingamijig*, *whatsit*, *doodad*, etc.) or someone’s name (*what’s-his-name*, *what’s-her-name*), viz., referential substitutions; (ii) when speakers want to avoid saying something explicitly (*you-know-what*), viz., euphemisms. These terms can differ subtly in terms of function, but have in common the fact that they can be used to successfully refer to things when the speaker knows that the interlocutor is likely to know or be able to easily work out what the speaker is talking about (see Enfield et al. 2001 for a detailed discussion).

We will begin with the dummy terms functioning as referential substitutions (3.3.1), and then discuss the uses of dummy terms as euphemisms (3.3.2).

3.3.1 Referential Substitutions. Very often intriguing situations can be spotted where the two dummy terms, acquiring some semantic specifications, are used as referential substitutions. As pointed out by Enfield (2003), to figure out what such expressions actually refer to on any given occasion, “interlocutors must rely especially heavily on knowledge assumed to be shared” (101). Expressions of this kind are worth examining because they explicitly depend not only on the common ground shared by both speakers and hearers, viz., not just “what we both know”, but also on “what we each assume that we each assume that we both know” (Enfield 2000:45).

In Excerpt (19), Speaker R and Speaker A were talking about a catastrophic earthquake occurring in Hualien and Taitung more than seven decades ago, which resulted in deaths and serious damage in Hsinshe village. Here, Speaker R uttered one *iza* in Line 103 and another *iza* in Line 104; note particularly the incomplete sentence structure uttered in Line 105, *yau a i-babaw ta tebtet-an anai*, where a noun phrase is missing right after the nominative case marker *a*; nevertheless, Speaker R did not bother to fill in the missing noun phrase, viz., “waves,” in the following turns, and the Hearer showed no difficulty in comprehending R’s utterances, by saying “perhaps it’s like that” in Line 109.

- (19) Kavalan (KavCon_ Earthquake)
- 103. R :: tu Ray-baut tu suRuq=ita nani
 OBL catch-fish OBL <AV>scoop=1IPL.NOM DM
 yau a iza kwa,\
 EXIST NOM IZA PART
 ‘When we were catching fish by scooping, there was what-do-you-call-it...’
- 104. yau a iza kwa,\
 EXIST NOM IZA PART
 ‘There was what-do-you-call-it.’
- 105. yau a i-bawbaw ta tebtet-an nani.\
 EXIST NOM at-top LOC middle-LOC DM
 There were (waves) that were high in the middle.

106. yau a z anum m-lim-zusa snayau estaR tu 'nay,\
 EXIST NOM water AV-divide-two that.way like OBL that

107. ma-qayta buqan yu.\
 MA-see sand PART

'The water was separated into two parts, in the way like, the sand could be seen.'

108. 'nay bettu 'nay Raw qawman azu banyu.\
 that stone that PART exactly like mushroom

'The rock looked like a mushroom, (because the water was going down).'

→ 109. A: nayau sayzi nani.\
 that.way perhaps DM
 'Perhaps it's like that.'

Similarly, in Excerpt (20), Speaker B uttered *iza* in Line 383 and did not go any further by adding or explaining what *iza* referred to. However, Speaker N showed no difficulty in understanding what *iza* was intended for by uttering *kwaya* 'OK'.

(20) Kavalan (KavCon_Buya&Nengi)

→ 383. B:.. m-laziw=ti iza=ta.\
 AV-pass=PFV that=1IPL.GEN

'Our (time) has past. (That's all what we said today. Our time is up).'

384. N:.. kwaya
 OK.

'Okay.'

In (21), Speaker T did understand what Speaker L was referring to by just using *ku'an*. Note that in the line 75, she actually helped repair and fill in the right word to finish the utterance.

(21) Cebuano (Conversation 3: 73-76)

73 T: unya kinsa=man ma-biya-an diri\
 then who=PART SPONT-leave-LV here
 'then who's going to be left here'

→ 74 L: ku'an=mi
 KUAN=1EPL.NOM
 'ku'an, we're-'

75 T: rotation
 rotation
 'taking turns.'

76 L: rotation
 rotation
 '(yeah) we take turns.'

Excerpt (22) shows the speaker narrating her reaction when her boyfriend proposed to her. There were three dummy terms, all representing verbal clauses, but it can be observed that in each instance, the speaker seemed to have no intention of explicitly saying what the dummy term really meant, implying that she was assuming all along that the Hearer of her story must know what she was trying to say.

(22) Cebuano (Conversation 2: 393-400)

- 393 unya' akong- ako=ng gi-ingn-an
then FS 1SG.POSS=LK PFV-say-LV
- 394 tinu'ud=kaha'=ka
true=doubt=2SG.NOM
- 395 basi=g na ...ku'an=na=ka
maybe-COMP PV KUAN=already=2SG.NOM
- 396 unsa- unsa=ma=y imo=ng ganahan
FS what=PART=NEUT 2SG.POSS=LK like
- 397 ako=gyud=siya=ng gi-ku'an ha
1SG.POSS=EMPH=3SG.NOM=LK PFV.PV-KUAN DM
- 398 interesado=ba=gyud=ka=ng
interested=Q=EMPH=2SG.NOM=LK
- 399 mag- mag-minyo
FS AV-marry
- 400 wa'=sad=ko=niya ku'an-a @@
NEG=also=1SG.NOM=3SG.GEN KUAN-PV

'Then I- I told (him), are you for real/ you might just be uhm ..., what- what do you like. I did aah- (ask) him, are you really sure of getting- getting married. He didn't, em, (he didn't) [answer] me. (laughs).'

The sense of the term *ku'an* can be most of the time inferred from the context, as in (23), where the conversation revolved around taking a group of visitors to a picnic by the beach, where wrapped cooked rice was served with roasted pig.

(23) Cebuano *ku'an* can be inferred from context (Conversation 5: 1195-1203)

- 1195 W: pak- pa-ka'on=nimo
FS CAU-eat=2S.GEN
'then you (distribute it) to be eaten'
- 1196 T: init=pa
hot=still
- 1197 unya' human
then afterward
'still hot, and then'
- 1198 W: unsa=man=na' kan-on
what=PART=that rice-PV.NMZL
'what's that, rice'/

- 1199 T: unya' human i-**ku'an**=nimo sa kanang litson
 then afterward IV-KUAN=2S.GEN LOC FIL roast.pig
 a sa inasal/
 PART LOC meat
 'then you ku'an (drench) it over the roast pig or over the meat'
- 1200 W: o=\
 BC
- 1201 litson manok
 roast chicken
- 1202 unya' [hot sauce=pa]
 then hot.sauce=even
 'right, over the roasted chicken, [(and with) hot sauce still]'
- 1203 T: [sus lami'-a]
 INTERJ tasty-EMPH
 '[wow, yummy!]

In (23), the dummy term *ku'an* was deliberately uttered and not repaired at all. The topic of the conversation between Speakers W and T was something familiar to them. Aside from the fact that there was no effort on the part of the Speaker to elaborate on what *ku'an* referred to, as earlier mentioned, Speaker W did not also bother to ask what it had meant because he certainly knew what it was in the first place.

3.3.2 Euphemisms. It is not uncommon that we find *ku'an* and *iza* occur in the situations where speakers avoid explicitly referring to something, partly because they are afraid that making their thoughts explicit would run the risk of creating an uncomfortable situation, and partly because speakers do not want to risk ruining something by openly referring to it (Enfield 2003:1085); in other words, *ku'an* and *iza* have also evolved into a kind of euphemism or a way to avoid direct mention of sensitive terms.

Excerpt (24) involves the solicitation of confidential information. The amount of salary that one earns is a sensitive topic in conversation, so the Speaker used *ku'an* as a euphemism marker before the sensitive word *sweldo* 'salary'. It can be seen that she hesitated in line 54; she did have in mind the word, but used the dummy term, even after she uttered the word *salary*, to mitigate the boldness of her question. In responding to such a sensitive question, J also seemed to stammer before she could finally explain that it's *confidential*.

- (24) Cebuano (Conversation 1:54-56)
- 54 L pila=man=sad imo-ha=ng **ku'an** -...s=sweldo
 how.much=PART=also 2SG.POSS-DEF=LK KUAN salary
- 55 ...**ku'an**=ra ... dili'
 KUAN =only NEG
 'How much is your er... salary? Only er... er no.'
- 56 J a wala'- dili' **ku'an** confidential
 PART NEG NEG KUAN confidential
 'mm... no, it's not... it's confidential.'

Cebuano speakers are generally conservative, but inquisitive. In another excerpt (25), Speaker T was trying to inquire about the love life of Speaker L but she knew this to be a sensitive topic, and thus she initially could not get herself to ask the question and stumbled by uttering a couple of dummy expressions in line 684.

(25) Cebuano (Conversation 3: 684-686)

→	684T	unya DM	ang NOM	kanangku'an PF KUAN	kanang- PF
		ikaw=ba 2SG.NOM=Q	iya=ng 3SG.POSS=LK	una=ng first=LK	uyab lover
		‘then, this ... er ... are you his first lover?’			
	685L	na'a=na=y exist=already=NEUT	uyab lover	no DM	
	686	ka-daghan NMZL-many ‘He’s got lovers, didn’t you know? Many!’			

We also find similar euphemistic uses of the Kavalan *iza* in (26).

(26) Kavalan (KavCon-Earthquake)

→	154. R:	qa~qaitisan RED~terrifying	utuz earthquake	masang before	
		‘The earthquake (occurring) before was terrifying.’			
	155. A:	tenes a.long.time	qaya also	azu seem	u-tani NCM-several
		azu seem	m-tenes AV-a.long.time	bulan month	
		‘For a long time...It also seemed that the earthquake lasted for several months. It seemed a long time.’			
	156. R:	wama only	‘nay that	qa-supar-an=ku IRR-know-NMZL=1SG.GEN	Raw PART
					nani DM
→	157.	naya FS	Raya=ay big=REL	tu OBL	zana iza.\ that IZA
		‘What I remembered was only that that iza was a big (earthquake).’			

In Excerpt (26), Speakers R and A were talking about the catastrophic earthquake occurring in 1951 in eastern Taiwan. Many Kavalan people in Hsinshe Village lost their relatives and houses in that unfortunate incident. Note that in Line 154, Speaker R first sighed how terrifying that earthquake was; then in Lines 156-7, he seemed to avoid uttering ‘earthquake’ but rather used *zana iza* ‘that iza’ to refer to that earthquake.

4. Concluding remarks: An interactional explanation

As revealed by Tárnyiková's (2019) study on English placeholders and Cheung's (2015) study on Mandarin *wh*-placeholders, speakers of different languages employ the same linguistic mechanism in facilitating and scaffolding their verbal communication tasks. In this paper we have demonstrated that the use of the dummy terms by Cebuano and Kavalan speakers is in fact an interaction-motivated phenomenon; We have also shown how speakers of the two languages utilize morphosyntactic tools as resources to construct turns at talk to meet their needs in various social interactions.

Rubino (1996) explains that such a dummy term employed by the Ilocano speaker serves as a device of morphological integrity; in other words, he regards this as a purely linguistic phenomenon. However, we tried to look for an explanation on the level behind the language itself, i.e., on the language user, to be more specific, on the intersection of language and the language user. 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. Nonetheless, language does not emerge "automatically and effortlessly" (Evans 2016:3); to the contrary, "language reflects and builds upon general properties and abilities of the human mind ... it reflects human pro-social inclinations for intersubjective communication" (Evans 2016:3). In interaction contexts (the places which 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 situations. In light of this, the use of the dummy terms by Cebuano and Kavalan speakers can be regarded as an interaction-motivated phenomenon: like a ready-for-wear filler, the dummy terms enable both Cebuano and Kavalan speakers to fulfill their goal and go on with their project even under interactional pressure and when they do not have any candidate in mind.

One important issue we did not deal with but is worth further study is that such intriguing cross-linguistic phenomena of using such a semantically empty term in seemingly unlimited contexts may suggest a counterexample to the uni-directionality principle in the grammaticalization theory (cf. Traugott 1989, 1995, 2001, 2004; Traugott & Heine 1991; Traugott & König 1991; Hopper & 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 grammaticalization 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 the dummy terms evolve in an opposite direction. They start from a semantically empty lexical item with purely discourse functions, and then to a pseudo-deictic term, which acquires some semantic specifications and refers to some shared knowledge (entity, or activity), as in (19)-(23). Such an intriguing development of the dummy terms is not a linguistic coincidence occurring in these two Austronesian languages only; we may find a similar case in Yami, another Austronesian language, as in (27).

(27) Yami

a. (Rau & Dong 2018:204, #13-21b)

ya	ma-ingen	o	oo	ko	kwan	na	ni	akes.
AUX	STAT-hurt	NOM	head	1SG.GEN	say.PV	GEN	GEN	grandma

‘Grandma said, “I have a headache.”’

b. Story #42 *About dried fish*³

o	iktan		na	rana	ito	am,
NOM	fastening.rope		GEN	already	that	PART

i-koan ori, akmi ango,
that that like pandan
ango ori a da n-iktan-an jia an.
pandan that LK their PAST-tie-AN it PART

‘The material of the fastening rope is made from pandan (roots).’

According to Rau & Dong (2018:203), the Yami SAY verb *kwan/koan*⁴ derived from the linguistic term referring to ‘something unclear or hard to explain’. Judging from the word form, viz., *kwan/koan*, we strongly speculate that the Yami SAY verb *koan* derived from the same dummy term. If so, the development of dummy terms in Austronesian languages, i.e., from a semantically empty term, gradually gaining deictic semantic specification, to a SAY verb, may suggest an intriguing counterexample to the uni-directionality principle in the grammaticalization theory. Further studies are needed to clarify the development of the semantically empty, but pragmatically rich, terms in these languages.

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³ Taken from *Digital Archiving: Yami Language Documentation* http://yamiproject.cs.pu.edu.tw/yami/yami_ch/member_c.htm

⁴ Yami is an Austronesian language spoken on Lanyu (Orchid Island), a small offshore island located in the Pacific Ocean 60 kilometers southeast of Taiwan. There are six villages on the island. The form *kwan* is mainly used in Imowrod (紅頭村) and Iratay (漁人村) Villages, while the form *koan* is used in the other villages on Lanyu (Orchid Island).

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