

Referent-wrecking in Korowai: A New Guinea abuse register as ethnosemiotic protest

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ABSTRACT

Korowai of West Papua practice a register of transgressive vocabulary substitutions in which a referent's normal designation is replaced by another expression with independent semantic meaning. Uttering a substitute term in the presence of its referent is thought to damage the referent. Usually the terms are carefully avoided, but they can also be deliberately uttered in anger. Substitutions highlight uncanny iconic resemblances between entities that are otherwise mutually incongruous. Substitutions often involve grotesque imagery of bodily disintegration, and they focus on strange margins close to humans' positions. Speakers use the register to portray uncertainty about the categorial integrity not just of referents but also of language users themselves. Through the register's core idea of avoiding damaging effects of iconic connections beneath fragile surface appearances, Korowai express a reflexive sensibility about language, in which transparently affirmative semantic relations between words and referents are a contingent pragmatic possibility, not a natural certainty. (Lexical substitution registers, figuration, avoidance, euphemism, transgression, pragmatic relativity of referential semantics)*

INTRODUCTION

Korowai of West Papua, Indonesia, practice an unusual register of speech in which a transgressive substitute term is used to speak of a referent in place of the referent's normal designation. Speakers think that using a substitute term in its referent's presence physically damages the referent. The register is a sort of collectively conventionalized set of Freudian slips. Most substitute terms have independent semantic meaning, and substitutions usually have a figurative basis. For example, the substitute term for canoes is 'crocodile' (*semail*), and the term for wind is 'ripple from tail of eel-tailed catfish' (*abun-xəndep-labuop*). Korowai talk about the speech form metalinguistically using the noun *xoxulop*, which means something like 'transgressive substitute designation' or 'underlying iden-

ity'. Speakers often cite specific correspondences using the frame "X, its *xoxulop* is Y."

This article argues that the *xoxulop* register expresses a reflexive Korowai understanding of language use. It is well established that registers are relational phenomena. As a distinctive way of speaking, a register's force rests in its otherness vis-à-vis contrasting speech practices with which it coexists (see, e.g., Irvine 1990:128). So too, the Korowai transgressive register's meaning lies in its figurative, heterodox relation to less marked register possibilities that it disrupts. Agha 2004, 2007 specifically emphasizes that registers consist of reflexive cultural models on the part of speakers. These models can be described as "metapragmatic": They are reflexive understandings of what it is to engage in a practical situation of language use and social interaction. I seek in this essay to spell out the metapragmatic understanding of speaking expressed through the Korowai transgressive register, including not only the principles of speaking organizing the register itself, but also the portrayal of more normal speaking that is effected through the heterodox register.

The finding I develop is that the transgressive register makes referential semantics appear semiotically relative and contingent. The register locates normal, affirmative referential relations between the lexicon and its signifieds WITHIN pragmatics. Affirmative use of the lexicon is one pragmatic possibility, coexisting with other possibilities such as a negative semiotics of destructive, spiteful reference that exposes normal semantics as a tissue of polite but fragile surfaces.

To pursue this argument, I first sketch the transgressive register's practical life. The register exists not only as a form of discourse that is spoken, but also as a subject of discourse, and as a form of discourse that is avoided, or actively NOT-spoken. I then locate this speech form in comparative perspective by outlining cross-cultural phenomena with which it has affinities.

Following these preliminaries, the core of this article surveys conventional substitutions making up the register. These substitutions range across such semantic domains as animal and plant species, body parts, material artifacts, rivers, ethnic groups, monsters, and human individuals. To elucidate the reflexive understanding of speaking contained in the register, I address two intertwined more specific questions: What is the nature of the additional element of indexical significance that is carried by a transgressive substitute term, alongside the term's referential significance? And what is the nature of the understood relation between two items paired in a transgressive correspondence – a normally designated referent and its transgressive underlying identity?

One way of addressing these questions is to look at the densely figurative categorial relations between referents and substitute terms, and the ways these substitutions bear on the positions of the people doing the categorizing. Numerous substitutions are in effect "semantic puns." Phonological puns express speakers' awareness of phonology as a layer of linguistic convention, by drawing attention to resemblances between phonological signifiers associated with other-

wise unrelated signifieds. To speakers and hearers, puns can be said to partake of “uncanniness,” in Freud’s (1955) general sense of an experience of strangeness in what is familiar, or familiarity in what is strange. Phonological similarity suggests the presence of unexpected identity between semantic categories that are mutually distant. In a parallel way, the transgressive substitute terms express speakers’ awareness of conventionality and mutability in the structure of semantic categories, by drawing attention to uncanny resemblances between semantic signifieds. Within their concern with surprising relations of iconicity, substitutions also tend specifically to be grotesque, or otherwise to throw into relief language users’ own situations of estrangement in relation to the world and their categories for living in it. Substitutions thematize boundaries at the periphery of speakers’ being, and they thematize the fragility of people’s basis for routinely applying linguistic categories to a world of strange referents. These points lead in turn toward a finding that the register expresses an orientation toward signification as a performative, time-based practice. Substitutions portray interactional presence, contingent events, and the possibility of rule breaking as central to language rather than secondary to it.

LEVELS OF THE REGISTER’S DISCURSIVE LIFE

About four thousand Korowai speakers live dispersed across several hundred square miles of lowland forest in West Papua, Indonesia (van Enk & de Vries 1997). They make their living by gardening, fishing, and hunting, as well as by stewarding sago palms (*Metroxylon sagu*), the source of their staple starch. Korowai social relations are characterized by volatile egalitarianism. People intensely value both social connection and autonomy. Often, marking of reciprocal separateness and strangeness is the very medium of people’s bonds with each other. As part of this broad pattern, Korowai practice a rich, heterogeneous range of forms of verbal artistry, including the special register discussed here.

The idea that the *xoxulop* register is a reflexive commentary on language use can be initially appreciated through a look at the main ways in which the register exists. One way it exists is in actual events of its use. To Korowai, the most discussion-worthy feature of the register is that a substitute term has a fundamental but damaging relation of identification with its referent, and has to be avoided in its referent’s presence lest it cause the referent physical harm. Yet the potential for harm is also a resource. Asked to explain the register, speakers sometimes say substitute terms exist ‘for wrecking’ (*lembul-le-lo-n-xa-lxe*, lit. ‘for making bad’). Speakers often deliberately utter transgressive substitute terms in the presence of their referents, and in those utterances the transgressive terms indexically express speakers’ affect of anger. One woman yelled the substitute term ‘human shoulder blade!’ (*yanop-max-xolol*) as she threw aside her steel axe out of frustration with the axehead’s looseness on its handle. A man I was interviewing exclaimed ‘cassowary!’ (*küal*) as he threw a stick at a pig that had picked up

one of my shoes. A myth character, angry about his fruitless climb into a tree where mynas appeared to be harassing a game animal, is reported to exclaim ‘Those birds led me on!’ (*maŋgon-to nu mbəmbemo*), calling them not by a merely referential word but instead by the transgressive substitute term *maŋgon*, akin to ‘damn birds’. Speakers usually hold that *xoxulop* terms are damaging to a referent only when uttered in its presence, but spite can still be expressed by a transgressive term when the referent is not present. For example, when one man’s children questioned him about the food on offer at some other people’s feast he had visited, he answered that there had been “‘only sago’,” using for ‘sago’ the substitute term *xawon* ‘tree fern’, a plant resembling sago palms in physical form but yielding no actual food. The man was reporting that the feast hosts served only sago starch, even though beetle larvae are the normal, expected, and prestigious feast food. By using ‘tree fern’ to refer to sago starch, he added further pejorative force to his comment.

Even among uses of transgressive terms in the presence of their referents, there is much variation and ambiguity in who is being spoken to. Often a term is uttered as a bare abusive epithet. Like other abusive epithets cross-linguistically, the term’s force lies in combining referential description and direct vocative contact: A hearer is what a speaker describes the hearer to be, in making linguistic contact with a hearer by that category. Sometimes terms are visibly addressed toward a nonhuman or even inanimate referent that people otherwise would not speak toward, but in other cases the terms are clearly used only to refer to a maligned present referent, while addressing other people. Use of a transgressive substitute term as a “response cry” (Goffman 1981) is very common, as when a person exclaims a *xoxulop* of fire upon suffering a burn, or yells ‘human intestine’ while tripping on a vine. Terms can also be part of more complex exclamatory predications, as in the bird-focused example quoted above, or in one man’s shout ‘Why is the big soft-shelled turtle blinking its eyes?’ to mean roughly ‘Stop the damn lightning!’ Interactional roles can be complexly arrayed in relation to the pejorative, damaging force of utterances. Speakers can utter substitute designations for objects sympathetically, in response to mishaps that a hearer has suffered from the object. Speakers can also use transgressive terms referring to objects to attack people or social situations connected to those objects. For example, a man angry about the political conditions under which a pig was being consumed as social compensation brusquely refused to partake of it by saying ‘I don’t want any of that frog meat.’

Across the variations in substitute term use, a basic commonality is that the register is spoken fleetingly, as a one-word or one-phrase interruption in normal speaking. This transient, abrupt character perhaps sets this speech phenomenon at odds with scholarly expectations that a “register” is an alternative way of speaking that people engage in for extended stretches of interaction. Use of *xoxulop* terms draws attention to the single MOMENT of utterance, and the transgressive utterance’s contrast with non-transgressive forms of speaking around it.

Alongside spiteful use of transgressive terms, the register's life rests at least as heavily on two further levels of practice. One is that the register exists substantially as a subject spoken ABOUT. Speakers explain sets of correspondences to others, they report or comment on events of register use, and they reflect obliquely on imperatives to avoid substitute terms, or on motives for uttering them. The data I present in this article partly reflect people's enthusiasm for citing paradigms of *xoxulop* correspondences. Speakers' practices of metalinguistic typification of the speech form are an integral, dominant face of the register's existence.

Another very substantial mode of the register's existence is as a speech form that speakers consciously AVOID using. It is impossible to know how often people are aware of carefully not using *xoxulop* terms in their referents' presence. Yet speakers' frequent use of odd circumlocutions in order to uphold avoidances, and their responses of nervous laughter, mortification, or corrective instruction right after accidental transgressions, suggest that awareness of avoidance is often strong. The transgressive register exists in Korowai consciousness as language that is actively NOT being spoken, even more prominently than as a register of actual speaking. Around the register, Korowai put the activity of uttering linguistic forms in brackets. Utterance of a specific linguistic form becomes itself a focus of awareness rather than a transparent medium through which other issues are focused upon. This act of uttering a specific form is dwelt upon as a CONTINGENT or POSSIBLE event, not simply as something actually done.

These three levels of the register's discursive life – as a fleetingly spoken interruption in normal speech, as something spoken about, and as something quietly but carefully NOT being performed while other actions occur – illustrate the register's character as thoroughly reflexive. The register portrays practices of speaking as internally complex, rather than as automatic means to other ends. Speaking involves a stance toward speaking itself and its alternative possible organizations. Used, avoided, or talked about, the register is a semiotic medium through which people define a culture-internal, heterodox cultural notion of what it is to use language. In this article, I take the question "What is the relation between a paired referent and transgressive substitute?" as a point of access to this ethnosemiotic model.

THE REGISTER IN COMPARATIVE TYPOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

Nothing exactly like this register seems to have been described previously by scholars. Yet there are striking points of overlap between this singular case and other previously reported or widely known speech phenomena. As one further orienting step before looking closely at actual substitutions, I will touch on some ways the Korowai practice can be located typologically. My point in suggesting these preliminary comparisons is to make general features of the speech register

stand out more clearly, and to appreciate how the register bears interpretively on widely distributed issues in the question of what it is to use language.

One useful comparison is with honorific speech forms, such as T/V pronominal address forms in European languages or status-marking speech styles in Javanese. Discussing main dimensions across which honorific systems vary, Agha (2007:404, n.1) argues that the term “honorific” should be taken in the inclusive sense of “pertaining to honor or respect,” not just in the sense of positively “conferring honor or respect.” The Korowai abuse register is an honorific phenomenon in the larger sense. The register shares with honorifics the property of signifying respect or deference not through propositional statements but through indexical values of word use. The transgressive substitute terms index disrespect and spite, so they are NEGATIVE honorifics. And where honorifics are usually used to express respect toward humans or other social persons or quasi-persons of some kind, Korowai transgressive substitute terms are routinely used to express spite toward inanimate, non-personal entities such as material artifacts or food-stuffs, as well as toward persons. Also, where most honorific signs are understood to exalt or injure the interactional face of the person who is the focus of honorific indexicality, Korowai understand the transgressive substitute terms to injure their referents’ very BEING by causing them to die or physically break apart.

The notion of damage here is not elaborately theorized. It tends to be described elliptically, and it is elastic. Uttering a substitute term for a witch, a pig, or some other creature “scares it away.” A string bag will “come apart” if its substitute identity is uttered while holding it. Healers deliberately utter the *xoxulop* of arrows when caring for a person with an arrowhead in his or her body, to exploit the register’s damaging effects instrumentally. Calling a dog by the substitute term ‘death adder’ might cause it to be hurt by one of those snakes later. People occasionally express the idea that just thinking of a *xoxulop*, without uttering it aloud, is potentially damaging. Utterance of a food object’s transgressive substitute identity is sometimes expected to damage eaters of the food rather than the referent itself. Saying ‘blood’ around the red sauce that is made from pandanus cobs, for example, would cause people eating this foodstuff to vomit. People’s stated expectations about damage are little affected by regular experience of persons or objects being presented with their transgressive identities and failing to suffer obvious negative consequences. The stereotypy has a life of its own. It creates its own confirmations and expresses a conviction about language that is too widely supported in people’s overall cultural lives to be troubled by passing exceptions. Speech is not only ABOUT the phenomenal world but also OF it. Language is analogous to touch and other sensory channels, and analogous to forms of interaction in those physical channels, such as bodily harm.

Another family of speech phenomena to which the Korowai transgressive register belongs is what might be termed “lexical substitution registers.” These are special registers that speakers identify with a high degree of metalinguistic awareness as consisting of a large paradigm of lexemes that are marked substitutes for

corresponding normal ways of speaking. Some of these registers are honorific in pragmatic function. For example, in the widely cited Dyirbal affinal register, all normal lexemes are replaced in a many-to-one fashion by special substitute words indexing respect for a copresent affine (Dixon 1971; see also Haviland 1979). Other registers index participation in special ritual times, spaces, and actions, such as “upside-down Walbiri” (Hale 1971), or “pandanus languages” in some Papua New Guinea communities (Franklin 1972, Pawley 1992). These cases shade into other codified lexical substitution registers associated with functions of aesthetic beauty, persuasion, polite indirection, or humor, such as figurative artistry routinely employed in Hagen political oratory (Strathern 1975), or Asmat people’s repertoire of substitutions for use in song (Voorhoeve 1977). The Asmat poetic register, spoken not far from Korowai lands, centers on some of the same semantic domains as the Korowai transgressive register discussed here. The Asmat and Korowai registers also have in common that the marked substitute terms often have independent semantic meaning in normal speech, and that pairings are iconically motivated. Some specific pairings, such as ‘moon’ as a substitute designation for the sun, and certain marsupial species names as substitute designations for dogs, are found in the Asmat and Korowai registers alike.

Points I develop in this article concerning the Korowai register’s status as a critique and reconstrual of conventional lexical semantics are relevant also to understanding other elaborate lexical substitution registers, and processes of artful, figurative use of lexical signs generally. However, one way the Korowai register is unusual among codified, large-size lexical substitution registers is the negative cast to the relation between substitute vocabulary and referents. In the Korowai case, substitute words are indexically problematic to their referents, whereas a register such as that used in Asmat song composition involves an affirmative relation between poetic term and referent.

This negative dimension to the link between term and referent invites comparison of the Korowai register to a third family of phenomena, overlapping with those already mentioned: all manner of abusive speech forms, including obscenities, slurs, dysphemisms, profanities, and misfortune-causing curses (see Allan & Burrige 1991 and Hughes 2006 for attempts to define and catalog these areas). Korowai transgressive substitute terms are similar to English dysphemisms like *kill trees* for ‘print or photocopy documents wastefully’, or *dump* for ‘poor-quality domestic space’. The Korowai terms are felt by speakers to give voice to harsh truths behind day-to-day euphemistic lying. The expressions are also broadly comparable to curse formulas cross-culturally: *Xoxulop* are compact, referent-specific curses. With curses as well as taboo speech forms generally, *xoxulop* also share a quality of “form fetishism.” Speakers feel the indexical force of a linguistic sign to be directly immanent in its sonic shape. Speech form is felt to impinge materially on other elements of the world.

In this area, too, Korowai *xoxulop* bear comparison to swearwords. Korowai themselves routinely use interjectional swearwords (de Vries 1995). The main

ones are names of occult power-beings, words for 'witch' and 'demon', the word for 'earthworm', and the word for 'human grave'. These are all intensely feared or repulsive entities on the fraught boundaries between humans and the rest of the world. Swearwords are not felt to have *xoxulop* terms' force of physically damaging referents, nor are they felt to be the actual underlying name of a referent. Korowai themselves do not draw strong links between swearwords and the *xoxulop* register. Yet despite such differences, my analysis of Korowai *xoxulop* terms will proceed along lines pursued in Leach's (1964) classic essay on swearwords. Leach's explicit structuralist theory that categories attracting taboo status are those which are interstitial between other categories has been justly criticized on many points, including the fact that most phenomena that are between other categories do not actually attract taboo (Halverson 1976). Much more valuable is Leach's more pragmatic but implicit theory to the effect that taboo accrues to categories that specifically put into question the categorial boundaries and integrity of the speaking, acting subjects who make use of a categorial system and live in its terms (Valeri 2000).

The last set of phenomena I will touch on in situating the Korowai *xoxulop* register comparatively consists of those linguistic ideologies of metaphysical connection between words and referents that locate this connection in a history of linguistic and ontological origins. Examples in the Western tradition include long-running interest in the language of Adam (Eco 1995, Olender 1992), and Cratylus's concern with a natural fit between words and meanings rooted in the absolute intelligence of a name-giving divinity. An ideology of this sort also informs American English users' widespread notion that etymological origins reveal demystifying truths behind the surfaces of contemporary semantics. Cultural models of linguistic degeneration from an ancestral power-language are widely found in non-Western settings as well (Keane 1997, Valeri 1994).

Korowai sometimes elaborate on the logic of *xoxulop* avoidances by saying that a transgressive substitute term describes the origin of the object or person it refers to. Alternatively, people say that substitute designations hark back to a linguistic origin when a creator-nomothete announced the correspondences and the imperative to avoid substitute terms, or a time when a population of earlier people spoke of objects by the substitute terms but then decided those designations should be hidden. What the Korowai register has in common with other people's ideologies of primordial linguistic origin is an effort to think about the relation between representations and their objects by thinking about time, or the relation of disparity and identity between present beings and their past origins.

Here a comment on the term *xoxulop* itself is due. To most Korowai most of the time, this word is monomorphemic and has no meanings beyond its designation of the special register. However, it is likely that this term is composed of the element *xoxu* 'root, rhizome, pelvis, butt, origin, cause, meaning' and the suffix *-lop* 'site, location'. This compositionality seems to be synchronically accessible and resonant for some speakers, on reflection. For example, Korowai who

are bilingual in Indonesian usually say that there is no Indonesian translation for *xoxulop*, but occasionally someone offers Indonesian *tempat arti* ‘meaning place’, a calque of the analysis just mentioned. Another Indonesian gloss sometimes given is *nama lama* ‘ancient names’ (see Stasch 2007 for Korowai bilingualism generally).

From even these brief comparisons of *xoxulop* substitutions with honorifics, lexical substitute registers, swearwords, and ideologies of primal signifier–signified connection, we can appreciate that the Korowai register is sociolinguistically complex, joining many varieties of metalinguistic principle together into one dense practice. Having outlined the practice’s basic shape and affiliations, I turn to actual substitutions. Pairs of referents and transgressive substitute terms are where the register’s core principles are most visible.

AN INDIGENOUS METASEMIOTICS OF ICONICITY IN THE LIFEWORLD

In the remainder of this essay, I survey a selection of the roughly 250 conventional *xoxulop* substitutions I have studied. My sample is biased toward the more commonly repeated and stable substitutions known to most adult speakers.

The most prominent feature of the substitutions is that they explore iconicity as a relation cross-cutting the heterogeneity of phenomenal things, and cross-cutting those things’ normal mapping into different categories. The register is a science of the concrete (after Lévi-Strauss 1966), concerned with the occurrence of similar qualities across different reaches of the sensible and extra-sensible lifeworld. This is easiest to see in pairings involving biotic species. Dogs’ most admired feature is that they bite fiercely, and this is the iconic basis for the pets having as their underlying *xoxulop* the names of two animals whose bites kill humans, ‘death adder’ and ‘New Guinea small-eyed snake’. Substitution of ‘cassowary’ for ‘pig’, noted earlier, is similarly motivated by iconicity. Pig and cassowary are both human-sized terrestrial forest animals. Because of their unique size, they are the most talked-about and prized game animals in Korowai life. The two also resemble each other in not resembling anything else: They are taxonomic singularities. Pigs are not included within the lexical class ‘mammals’, and cassowaries are not included within ‘birds’ (cf. Bulmer 1967; Majnep & Bulmer 1977:148–157). Table 1 offers further examples of transgressive terms for biotic species or their parts, based on iconicities of morphology, habitat, sound, or behavior. Perceived likeness is probably present latently in nearly all *xoxulop* correspondences. To Korowai themselves, the iconicities are so basic to *xoxulop* pairings that people usually do not comment on them, except in asserting the substitutions as such. Interlocutors often agreed to my leading suggestions that a certain category is the substitute term for another “because they are similar [*kül*].” But it would be closer to people’s understandings to put it the other way around: Items are similar because of the *xoxulop* relation. The iconic commonalities are

TABLE 1. *Biotic species.*

Referent	Substitute Term
bamboo (<i>waxi</i>)	<i>baliām</i> 'sugar cane'
all snakes (<i>anol</i>)	<i>dogguop</i> 'wormlike limbed invertebrate, makes holes in wood' <i>wafol</i> 'earthworm'
lizard sp. (<i>mafūm</i>)	<i>wafol</i> 'earthworm'
pig (<i>gol</i>)	<i>kūāl</i> 'cassowary' <i>molun</i> 'large tree sp. with buttress roots (loud when struck)' <i>dabuop</i> 'big edible frog sp. with fat arms and legs' <i>bəkū</i> 'crash of something falling to ground from tree'
cassowary (<i>kūāl</i>)	<i>kikiodop</i> 'bird sp.' <i>abeap</i> 'big turtle sp.'
cassowary talon (<i>kūāl-mesīnga</i>)	<i>abem-lenop</i> 'abdominal segment of crayfish carapace'

evidence and expression of indexical, metonymic identity of being, itself expressed partly via the idea that the present-day referent originated from its underlying *xoxulop*.

Examples surveyed throughout this article also illustrate how extensively iconicity is in the cultural eye of the beholder. The transgressive substitution register reflects a CULTURE OF ICONICITY, an indigenous practice of seeking and creating iconic connections. Items on the right in pairings are interpretive of items on the left, and vice versa. Paired items together reveal categories and qualities that Korowai care about and see cutting across different objects in their lives.

As the examples in Table 1 indicate, some referents have multiple substitute terms, and some words are transgressive substitutes for multiple referents. But Korowai treat the register as being composed of pairings. In actual spiteful use of substitute terms, speakers generally only say one term for a referent, not several. Even when listing multiple *xoxulop* for a single referent during reflexive discussion of the register, speakers recite pairings as one-to-one relationships. Following this Korowai emphasis, I take single pairs as the register's center of gravity.

One response to pairings involving biotic kinds would be to use them to do better ethnobiology, by looking to the substitutions for evidence of covert classificatory structures. This is the approach of Dixon, Hale, and Pawley concerning lexical semantics in general, in their above-cited studies of substitution registers. But the Korowai register is more in the tradition of Borges, Escher, Dali, or Rabelais than in that of Linnaeus. Even in cases where iconicity appears strongest, similarity is tightly conjoined with obvious disparity. Iconicity is a shock, running at right angles to paired terms' classificatory strangeness to each other in normal taxonomic discourse and perception. Pig and cassowary are alike

TABLE 2. *Inanimate vegetal objects with animal substitute terms.*

Referent	Substitute Term
bow (<i>ati</i>)	<i>doxul</i> 'Freshwater Longtom'
rattan (<i>nan</i>)	<i>anol</i> 'snake'
ladder pole (<i>yafin</i>)	<i>anol</i> 'snake' <i>anol-luggul</i> 'snake vertebrae'
pry-bar (<i>laxil</i>)	<i>bajom</i> 'Mangrove Monitor'
barkcloth (<i>fendon</i>)	<i>yemül-xal</i> 'flying fox skin'
tobacco (<i>depon</i>)	<i>xofua</i> 'bird sp. with inedibly bitter flesh'

in being freaks of nature, but they are also freaks to each other. They keep apart from each other and have little morphologically in common besides their bulk. In many cases, material iconicities seem underdetermined or nonexistent, and bizarreness of association is the main chord sounded by a pairing. Classification is here portrayed as a troubled, reflexive project, not a matter of fitting a grid to its flat object.

In other words, *xoxulop* pairings are studies in uncanniness in the categorial ordering of people's lifeworld: They spotlight points of intersection where certain categories are at once strange and familiar to each other. Classificatory uncanniness is perhaps most vividly underlined in pairings that cross the boundary between animal and non-animal, as in 'crocodile' for 'canoe', and in many further pairs describing vegetal objects in animal terms (see examples in Table 2). These again involve iconicity of morphology or other sensible quality. Barkcloth and the membranous skin of flying fox wings are both brown, pliable, translucent, and flat. A longtom is an improbably slender fish with a pointed bill, comparable to a bow's pointed ends. The long tail of a mangrove monitor lizard tapers to a slender point, much like the top of the blackpalm bar used to break open felled sago trunks, and the monitor's angular head is similar to the flat prying end of the tool. These elements of iconicity are conjoined with the sharp difference between apparent inanimate referent and underlying animal identity. The pairings offer unsettling visions of inhaling the smoke of bird flesh, or of taking hold of reptiles when working with a tool or climbing a notched pole ladder. In traditional accounts of "metaphor," the figurative effect is commonly thought to rest in the same kind of conjunction of strangeness and familiarity between compared items that I am describing here for *xoxulop* correspondences. However, the force of Korowai transgressive pairings is greater than and different from that of metaphor. The familiarity between paired items lies not only in iconic resemblance but also in a bond of ontological, causal closeness that is felt to lie behind that manifest iconic similarity. Vines ARE snakes, and saying 'snake' around vines causes them to break.

TABLE 3. *Conjoined iconicity and strangeness.*

Referent	Substitute Term
sun (<i>lup</i>)	<i>waxol</i> 'moon'
moon (<i>waxol</i>)	<i>bilal</i> 'Nassa shells' (white button-like valuables)
string bag (<i>ainop</i>)	<i>nggel</i> 'old man'
	<i>ufox</i> 'bird blind'
bow (<i>ati</i>)	<i>baka</i> 'sound: snap, crack, cry, burst'
	<i>bayam</i> 'tree sp., strong and durable, long-burning'

Table 3 lists selected further correspondences in which the conjoining of contradictory qualities of iconicity and intense difference is at the fore, as pairings' central logic. Here again, the otherness between phenomenal referents and underlying identities, on dimensions like size, location, animacy, or tangibility, defamiliarizes the material lifeworld and people's systems for speaking of it. Using the substitution register, speakers assert that phenomenal referents and people's ways of categorizing them are an appearance, but that other structures of definition are behind that appearance and more real than it.

The main theoretical point I draw from this pattern of conjoined iconicity and strangeness is that in positing *xoxulop* pairings, humans do not merely take a more elaborate classificatory look at objects external to themselves. Rather, through pairings, people problematize classification itself and express uncertainty about human classifiers' own categorial position and integrity. The qualities of categorial uncanniness explored in substitute relations are ones in which human categorizers are themselves implicated. For example, the transgressive register's concern with biotic species probably reflects not only human classificatory interest in animals and plants as objects of contemplation, but also people's sense that the coherence, boundedness, and orderliness of their own bodies and subjective being are in question in the categorial status of the biotic species' bodies (Valeri 2000).

This interpretation of iconicity in *xoxulop* pairings helps make sense of the kinds of objects that most attract *xoxulop* analysis, or are most commonly taken up as underlying substitutes. Many items prominent in the register are objects of particular value and desire (e.g., pigs, sago, tobacco), or ubiquitous fixtures of day-to-day living (e.g., bows, ladders for entering and exiting houses, rattan, the moon). Another tendency is for referents or underlying substitutes to be items that incarnate specific sensory possibilities very starkly. For example, items that are long, skinny, round, or (perhaps) pointed are prominent in substitutions listed in Table 2.

At an opposite pole from the focus on what is valuable and desirable, *xoxulop* correspondences also often focus on items that are dangerous, painful, wicked,

TABLE 4. *Redness, fire, and meeting points between body and lifeworld.*

Referent	Substitute Term
fire (<i>melil</i>)	<i>bün-xa</i> ‘blood’ <i>mboxul</i> ‘fish sp., black with red markings’ <i>wajop</i> ‘Western Black-capped Lory, predominantly red’ <i>xasiäx</i> ‘vine sp., red-colored’
ant sp. with painful bite (<i>kembaxi</i>)	<i>melil-üax</i> ‘ember’
mosquito (<i>lätiin</i>)	<i>melil-üax</i> ‘ember’ <i>fi-lol</i> ‘sharp needles on vegetation’
fingers (<i>me-lol</i>)	<i>fi-lol</i> ‘sharp needles on vegetation’
fish sp. with red markings (<i>mboxul</i>)	<i>wajop</i> ‘Western Black-capped lory’

disgusting, annoying, or beyond human reach (e.g., the sun and moon). Notably, visible and tangible qualities of bodily morphology are not the only ones fixed upon. The ‘bitter’ (*xox*) taste of tobacco smoke resembles the taste of a certain bird’s flesh. ‘Crocodile’ for ‘canoe’ draws on the animal species’s habitat and style of locomotion, as well as its bodily shape. The register’s play of iconicity cuts across different dimensions of people’s sensorium and further imaginative field, including qualities of moral bearing and qualities of impingement on human subjects.

Perhaps a common element across all the patterns – desirability, dangerousness, ubiquity, perceptual extremeness – is that objects involved in *xoxulop* pairings tend to be ones that throw into relief the categorizing activity itself, and to throw into relief the meeting points and zones of overlap between Korowai categorizers’ own bodily being and the world of categorized entities that surrounds them.

A network of pairings illustrating, in combination, many of the interpretations introduced so far is given in Table 4. To Korowai, fire is at once valuable, feared, ubiquitous, and perceptually extreme. Its several underlying identities are markedly different from one another but share redness, which among colors is perceptually extreme and environmentally unusual. The animal designations for fire are patently unlike fire in being living, bodily organisms. These animals, along with blood, suggest an experience of fire as a moving, quasi-living actor. Identification of biting insects with embers and vegetal needles, or of human fingers with needles, similarly suggests that impingements at the human bodily surface are an overall subject addressed by correspondences.

HUMANS’ BODIES IN QUESTION

The idea that *xoxulop* correspondences explore categorical uncanniness in which speaking subjects are themselves implicated stands out with greater clarity if we

TABLE 5. *Body tissues and fluids behind mundane objects.*

Referent	Substitute Term
lowland pitpit, edible inflorescence (<i>bu</i>)	<i>mean-ol</i> 'dog shit'
pandanus sauce (<i>läin</i>)	<i>xi-ol-ax</i> 'dysentery'
	<i>yanop-mamünga</i> 'human blood'
sugar cane (<i>baliäm</i>)	<i>yanop-nen-ax di-ali-bo-xa</i> 'human rot water removed and put in'
	<i>waxol-dul-ax</i> 'moon piss'
palm heart (<i>aun</i>)	<i>yanop-nen</i> 'human rot'
rattan (<i>nan</i>)	<i>yanop-xul</i> 'human intestine'
string bag (<i>ainop</i>)	<i>mbam-manu-lefu</i> 'placenta'
necklace of dog canines (<i>bangil</i>)	<i>e</i> 'maggots'

turn to more kinds of pairings that are overtly grotesque. Alongside the animal motifs already touched on, further grotesque motifs in *xoxulop* pairings include separated body parts, bodily wastes, sexuality and reproduction, painful impingements at the body's surface, decomposition, creeping or wiggling invertebrates, death, and death-causing agents. Grotesque pairings portray the close presence to bodily being of what is strange to it and negating of it. In addition to the fact that two items are at once strange to each other and similar, grotesque identification of two items also implicates human beings' categorical boundaries and dissolution.

Table 5 gives a small selection of pairings that identify vegetal foods and other items of inanimate material culture with excreta, organs, tissues, viscous bodily fluids, and bodily decomposition. Substitutions like 'maggots' for a valued monetary adornment or 'dog shit' for a routine foodstuff juxtapose objects that share physical qualities but normally evoke completely opposite human evaluations. So too, men and women handle string bags every day, often admiringly and possessively, but they are revolted by placentas and other birth substances. The register involves startling, wry construal of people's fixtures of mundane life as being made out of feces, intestines, and slithering creatures, akin to the force of English "shit on a shingle" (military slang for 'chipped beef on toast'). Correspondences like those in Table 6 similarly analyze human or animal bodies into composites of other organisms and their parts, in a manner akin to Arcimboldo's paintings.¹

Grotesque pairings suggest another interpretive step, beyond my basic finding that *xoxulop* substitutions spotlight uncanny conjunctions of familiarity and strangeness in categorical structures. When it is one's own familiar body part or a routinely touched, desired food or article that is identified with disgusting or fearful underlying objects, then classificatory uncanniness mingles with evaluative ambivalence. From the play of iconicity in pairings surveyed so far, it is

TABLE 6. *Body parts as vegetal objects and invertebrates*

Referent	Substitute Term
breast (<i>am</i>)	<i>suf-in</i> 'banana flower'
pig heart (<i>gol-dəbop</i>)	<i>mil-yun</i> 'flower of <i>mil</i> banana variety'
human head (<i>yanop-xabian</i>)	<i>ngoggon-loxül</i> 'round parasitic growth on trees'
human teeth (<i>yanop-ləbil</i>)	<i>xufom-op</i> 'nuts of cosmogonic Xufom tree'
tendon, ligament, blood vessel (<i>məmel</i>)	<i>ndina</i> 'intestinal worms'
penis (<i>dul</i>), men (<i>wafil</i>)	<i>wafol</i> 'earthworm'
vagina (<i>lil</i>), women (<i>nixül, lal</i>)	<i>malin</i> 'fish sp., prob. Striped-cheek Gudgeon'
	<i>xaxü</i> 'crayfish, <i>Cherax</i> sp.'
	<i>mandəlep-lefu</i> 'end of red-sapped tree sp.'
cassowary pelvis (<i>küal-xoxu</i>)	<i>mio-dədil</i> 'buttress root of hardwood sp.'
shit (<i>ol</i>), anus (<i>oto-bol</i>)	<i>bai-nan</i> 'bowstring; its sound'

clear that the register is a culture-internal practice of semiotic interpretation, but there is also a more specific pattern of acknowledging AMBIVALENCE as an internal feature of cultural order. Here I will comment briefly on two grotesque substitutions that illustrate the point particularly well.

To most Korowai, beetle larvae that develop in felled sago trunks are a prototypically valuable food. The best known *xoxulop* of these sago grubs is 'earthworm' (*wafol*), a creature that Korowai consider intensely disgusting and paradigmatic of inedibility. Not only do people use 'earthworm' as a routine interjectional swearword, with force like English "Shit!" (as noted earlier), but the obviously untrue assertion 'Worms are desirable' (*wafol-xup*) is a standard interjection of frustration and disavowal, with force like "Hell no!" Korowai revulsion at earthworms and positive perception of grubs together illustrate the cultural mediation of disgust responses. But it is further likely that grubs and worms have the extreme evaluative statuses they do in part because they are experienced as close anti-types to each other. There is culture-internal unease about the edibility of sago grubs, and this unease is compensated through protesting a great deal about earthworms. The unease surfaces in the fact that grubs are a common food for single, idiosyncratic individuals to find disgusting, even though the grubs are collectively held in high regard. More overtly, the unease surfaces in the transgressive identification of grubs AS worms.

Another substitution that openly expresses culture-internal ambivalence about a normally admired and valued entity is calling houses by the transgressive designation 'death platform' (*lux-lail*). A typical use occurred once when I clumsily knocked against a house's protruding sticks, and a youth nearby casually swore 'death platform' at the building, in sympathy with me. Occasionally Korowai leave a corpse exposed in a house rather than burying it. 'Death platform' (*lux-lail*) normally designates an abandoned house where a corpse has

been left. As a transgressive substitute designation, 'death platform' terms every house a tomb.

Speaking of houses as tombs goes against everyday understanding of dwellings as spaces of belonging, where people are separated from damaging alien forces, and where they share caring copresence with intimate companions. Yet on the fringes of houses' dominant definition as scenes of close social belonging, many further cultural practices construe domestic space as having death as its underside. For example, Korowai strongly spatialize deaths and mourning by moving away from houses where deaths have occurred and by giving opposite roles in mortuary payments to coresident versus residentially separate kin. 'Death platform' as the name of houses succinctly expresses a broader cultural ambivalence to house space and social copresence: people's awareness that the end of bodily life is part of their time together with each other.

I have outlined some cultural background to substitution of 'worms' for 'grubs' and 'death platform' for 'house' less because of the intrinsic interest of these items than because these pairings well encapsulate the central characteristic of the *xoxulop* register at large. The register is a practice of culture-internal cultural heterodoxy. Through it, Korowai give voice to ambivalences and tensions in their own cultural lives.

RECIPROCAL SUBSTITUTIONS AND THE SPEECH COMMUNITY'S MARGINS

The pairings examined so far share a preoccupation with categories that define and cross boundaries of bodily being. The imagery of body parts behind everyday objects, of everyday objects behind body parts, of eating what is disgusting, of living in a tomb, and so forth portrays the fragility of people's everyday categorial ordering of their bodily lives, by staging the idea of disintegration of normal bodily borders. I now look at pairings that are exceptional in one respect, but that are also highly typical in how they thematize speakers' relations to strange margins around them: here, margins at greater spatial remove than the edges of their own bodies.

What is exceptional about these pairings is that they are reciprocal. Usually, in a transgressive pairing, one category is the *xoxulop* of another, but not the reverse. However, there are two sets of pairings in which the relation goes both ways. First, numerous fish species are paired reciprocally with counterpart birds, supported by perceived iconicity of coloration, size, or overall morphological and behavioral impression. The red-focused pairing of a bird and a fish in Table 4 is one example from this paradigm. Another example is the reciprocal *xoxulop* relation between 'Froggat's catfish' (*gum*) and 'sulphur-crested cockatoo' (*ayax*). This quite large paradigm of pairings is linked to a notion that the animals circulate between bird-form in the sky and fish-form in streams. If streams are empty of fish, this is because they are flocking in the treetops as birds. Through these

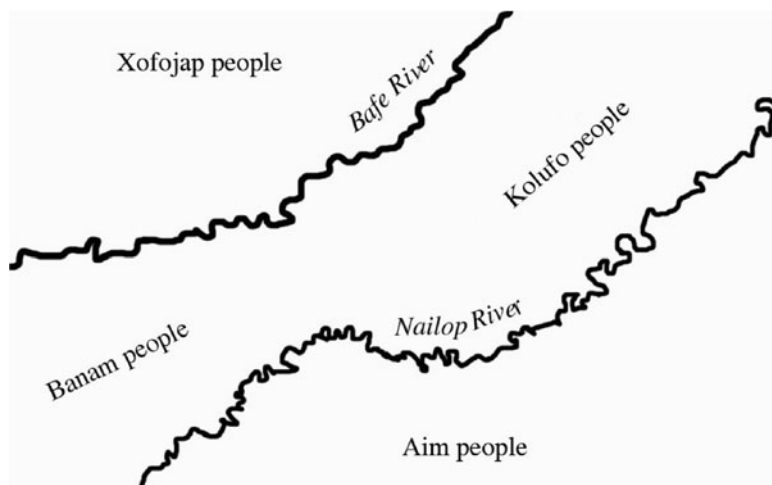


FIGURE 1: Reciprocities of geographic and ethnolinguistic margin.

pairings, Korowai implicitly express a model of a “three-tiered cosmos” (Valeri 2000:68, 78, 249–68, and citations there). Humans in a central terrestrial habitat and morphology look down and up at two peripheral extremes: an aquatic habitat and morphology, and a treetop habitat and morphology. The pairings emphasize that being changes with place, and that opposites might turn out to be the same thing.

Another set of just three reciprocal pairings does something similar at the level of geography. Korowai I worked with live between two large rivers about 10 miles apart. The northern river is called *Bafe*, and the southern is called *Nailop* (Figure 1). The two rivers, *Bafe* and *Nailop*, are each other’s transgressive substitutes.

Most spatial reference in Korowai speech is accomplished using stream-based shifters like ‘upstream’ and ‘downstream’, and waterways are the only features on the landscape that bear proper names. Amid wider patterns of categorizing spatial position via waterways, the *xoxulop* relation between the two large bounding, orienting rivers emphasizes that these two margins go together as a system. Even a physical body of water is not self-defining but relational. Each waterway is defined by its intimate alterity to a counterpart.

The same occurs in ethnolinguistic geography. People who live north of Korowai lands across the *Bafe* river are known as *Xofojap*, and people who live south across the *Nailop* are *Aim*. These two ethnonyms, *Aim* and *Xofojap*, are also each other’s transgressive substitutes. The pattern also obtains between western and eastern populations. Alongside autonymic use to mean ‘Korowai people,’ the word *Kolufo* is more frequently used as an other-designating shifter meaning ‘upstream people, Korowai who live farther upstream than me’. The

next ethnolinguistic population downstream from Korowai are *Banam*. The terms *Banam* and *Kolufo* are each other's transgressive substitutes.

Korowai often mention the river pairing and the ethnonymic pairings in the same breath. The ethnonymic substitutions do in categorization of humans what the river substitution does in categorization of streams: They reverse geographic poles. Like pairings of fish and fowl, these geography-focused pairings locate speakers as subjects in the middle who look outward at margins. These margins are interchangeable with each other. Their reciprocal iconicity lies in a shared quality of bounding otherness. They sit on the edges of the speech community's own position, strange to speakers but there as attention-holding presences in their lives. I take this focus on the interchangeability of surrounding margins as further support for the main thesis developed so far about the register in general. Substitutions dwell on unexpected similarities cross-cutting the normal categorial distinctness of parts of people's world. More specifically, they dwell on similarities that in their uncanniness draw the position of categorizing subjects into play, as part of what is in question in application of categories to objects. Through knowledge of transgressive substitutions that reverse geography or reverse animal habitat, speakers express their situation of being in relations of close strangeness with what is around them. Absorbed by the otherness of what is on their peripheries, humans do not know those peripheral presences as absolute and stable entities but rather as relative ones, the margins of humans' own perspectival location.

OTHERNESS OF ORIGINS

I noted above that Korowai understand substitute terms to reflect ancient origins of contemporary objects. This idea maps the intimate alterity of paired entities – their strange iconic resemblances – onto a relation between present and past. People's notion that substitutions are rooted in diachrony stands out sharply in a paradigm of pairings that allude to the present physical world having originated from the body of a creature named *Faül*. For example, people commonly exclaim 'fat of Faül!' when they slip in mud, or 'Faül bone hit me!' when they knock against a log. To the earlier-noted grotesque pattern of separated body parts, these pairings add a further element of the fear evoked by cosmological power-beings. The idea of an origin is itself a strange periphery and a focus of sublime awe. Pairings express problematic, disruptive immanence of past origin in present states.

The transgressive register portrays as strange and alarming what is close to hand, such as people's own bodies or the food they eat. Many recently created *xoxulop* designations for foreign artifacts make particularly clear that the register can build on experiences of otherness that begin extralinguistically. Innovations in the *Faül* series, for example, illustrate how the register can work as a technique for fighting otherness with othering: Nylon rope is transgressively identified as *Faül-xul* 'intestine of Faül,' mirrors as *Faül-üm* 'liver of Faül,' soap as *Faül-manü-yaben* 'navel fat of Faül,' and so on. Dozens of further *xoxulop*

interpretations of unfamiliar technological artifacts also draw on imagery of cosmogonic power-objects or anatomical carnage, beyond the Faül figure in particular, to find words for the otherworldiness of new objects. For example, a term for 'fishing line' is 'human intestine,' and a transgressive term for 'airplane' joins the name of a cosmogonic wooden machete to the word for 'canoe'.

Transgressive terms for monsters and occult demiurges are another area in which the register is frankly an effort to come to grips with radical alterity. Here again, *xoxulop* analysis is attracted by referents that are dangerous and that are pervasive objects of anxiety and awe. For example, a cassowary-like cosmogonic being thought to go about the land swallowing people has various transgressive designations collocating tree or sago varieties with the word *dəla* 'boom, buttress root', based on similarity between the booming grunts of cassowaries and the boom of a felled sago trunk, or of a tree buttress struck by an axe or foot. Similarly, Korowai think that male witches among the human population cause all deaths, and among the *xoxulop* for witches are 'heart of Faül', various obscure proper names with cosmogonic associations, and a word meaning 'dead grub that is drowned, bloated, and rotten'. In routine Korowai conversation, 'human' (*yanop*) and 'witch' occur in close paradigmatic contrast; the 'witch' category is an intimate, monstrous counterpart to normal humanity. Humans look outward at this and other death-associated monsters from a position of life, much as they look outward at rivers or ethnonymic others in geographic space. Some monster-designating terms again allude to the referents' past origins, or original names. Speakers' sensibility here is partly that if they could simply say an occult power's hidden, shocking, and even nonsensical but true name, then they could by this momentarily know, repel, and control the otherwise unknown, uncontrolled, and troubling power.

My discussion so far has looked to the independent, normal semantic meaning of transgressive designations for evidence of the register's principles, but it is also an important aspect of people's understanding of the register that a transgressive substitute term is felt to be a name. This is well exemplified by a limiting case: pairings in which a transgressive term has no independent meaning EXCEPT as a transgressive designation. For example, *baxol* is a *xoxulop* for 'banana' with no other meaning than its transgressive use, and *alip* has similar status as a substitute term for 'water', 'rain', and 'stream'. In these and similar cases, a phonological signifier, imbued with a sense of connection to cosmological conditions beyond a referent's apparent being, is by itself thought to be the medium of the hidden identity's damaging force.

LIVING SUCCESSORS AND DEAD PREDECESSORS

The clearest evidence of this investment of force in phonological signifiers as such lies in the last kind of substitution I will survey, involving attribution of hidden identities to individual humans. This pattern is based on an idea that ev-

ery baby comes into existence as a reincarnation of a previously deceased person. A spirit medium hired by an infant's parents determines the names that cannot be spoken around the child, in a kind of baptismal event of avoidance instructions. Throughout a person's life, everyone else is supposed to avoid uttering those names in his or her presence lest the name shock, harm, or kill the person. Besides calling these avoided terms the person's *xoxulop*, Korowai also call a reincarnation identity the person's 'hidden name' (*xondum-fī*), 'avoided' (*laxap*), or 'in his/her hearing' (*dai-bol-lop*). These other metalinguistic designations foreground how the transgressive identities exist negatively as sensitive orientations of surrounding speakers toward someone who is not supposed to hear the words.

The reincarnation model organizes a lot of locality-specific word avoidance. Whole households adjust their speech to protect certain persons. One family I stayed with, for example, used *lul sa-* 'throw eyes' in place of the normal verb *imo-* 'see,' because a man among them had *imo-n* 'seeing' as his *xoxulop*.² Yet here too a rule of avoidance raises the possibility of intentional transgression. Close kin sometimes maliciously call out each other's reincarnation identities while fighting. About one mother–daughter pair, people told me that the two "habitually say each other's *xoxulop*." This was an elliptical way of saying the two had a poor relationship.

Personal *xoxulop* correspondences underscore the efficacy of sound alone, or speakers' form-fetishizing sense of the transparency and directness of the relation between a *xoxulop* term's phonological shape and its meaningful force. An individual does not need to know his or her *xoxulop* in order to be damaged by hearing it uttered. Nor does the term need to be uttered in reference to the individual it ends up damaging. Even accidental utterance of a homophone or near-homophone of a person's hidden name is enough. If the sound-form is present, then so is its meaningful effect, regardless of human awareness or intention. In speakers' model of the danger, phonological form alone is the path of semiotic short-circuiting by which an individual is shocked, out of nowhere. This seems also to be the spirit in which people utter or avoid transgressive designations in the presence of nonhuman referents like canoes or houses. The emphasis on sound form's efficacy underlines the way the register thematizes physical presence of entities to each other, as a subject of cultural concern and attention. It is not linguistic form in the abstract but a specific *xoxulop* token uttered in the specific place and time where its referent is also present that is the channel of damaging force.

What individual persons' possession of *xoxulop* most casts into relief about the register, though, is speakers' sense that a referent is waylaid by a linguistic form that is harmfully more foundational and more powerful than the referent's own apparent being. Speakers understand pairings to involve a contradictory relation of simultaneous identity and incompatibility between referent and substitute. In the reincarnation model, the identity that circulates from predecessor to successor bears an ambivalent relation to that successor as a conscious actor.

The reincarnation relationships, and *xoxulop* correspondences generally, suggest a Korowai understanding of being in which identity rests in a structure of deferral and displacement. Beings and objects need to be separated from representations of their origins. Persons' or objects' actual constitution lies somewhere else than their apparent character. The play of identification and repression in the hidden names model is also a play with an event-focused, historicizing definition of what people are. The diachronic strand of people's stereotypy about *xoxulop* correspondences poses origins, or the coming into being of a person or entity, as itself a strange, sublime, and frightening fact. People exist as effects of events they know only obliquely and partially.

CONCLUSION: PAIRING, AVOIDANCE, AND EVENT-FOCUSED SEMIOSIS

Having surveyed some of the main figurative principles apparent in *xoxulop* pairings, I close now by outlining links between this register and wider Korowai cultural practices, as a way of summing up the understanding of language use that the register seems to embody.

Elsewhere I have described a jocular Korowai practice of reciprocal hypocrisy (or pet-naming), in which two persons who experienced a mildly transgressive event call each other by a quasi-kinship term harking back to that shared experience (Stasch 2002). For example, two persons who once shared a single small food object as a snack can call each other by the name of the food (e.g., 'my sago grub'), and two people who fell down together can call each other 'my falling down'. This genre of person reference partnership shares certain themes with the *xoxulop* register (though Korowai do not explicitly connect the two). One shared theme is pairing, and other-centered definition of paired beings: Persons or objects are defined by a counterpart outside of them. Reciprocal pet-name partnerships are similar to the *xoxulop* register, too, in conjoining pairing with avoidance. Two persons in such a partnership are supposed to avoid saying each other's proper names, and the avoidance element is so prominent in Korowai understanding that the main way speakers talk about the partnerships metalinguistically is by saying two persons are 'avoiding' (*laxapo-*) each other. Many of the events recalled by partnership terms are overtly grotesque, involving impingements, defects, ambiguities, or lapses of control at the boundaries between speakers' bodies and the surrounding world, in the same vein as *xoxulop* surrealism. The pet-name partnerships celebrate and commemorate grotesqueries as the basis of a positive social bond, whereas the emphasis in *xoxulop* substitutions is on suppression of sinister truths. Whether taking a path of celebration or suppression, though, each speech practice poses grotesque ruptures of bodily integrity as primal sites of identity and belonging.

While jocular pet-name partnerships and the *xoxulop* register are popular in their own right and have certain themes in common, the two of them in turn

seem to be elaborate variations in a more general cultural pattern of alterity-focused pairing, particularly pairing defined around avoidance. Across quite different areas, Korowai enact a cultural sensibility to the effect that it is in the conjoining of relational qualities of both connection and strangeness that a relation exists. Another area of cultural life in which this pattern obtains is the great importance vested in the dyadic kinship relation between mother's brothers and sister's children, which are relations of simultaneous intimacy and geographic separateness. The pattern can be seen, too, in strong social importance placed on the respect- and avoidance-marked relation between mother-in-law and son-in-law, or in cosmological models according to which the human population coexists with a parallel, counterpart population of invisible others, whom humans should not mix with or know anything about. So too, almost all daily interaction is organized around people's awareness of landownership, the fraught boundaries between people who are 'owners' versus 'guests' in relation to land, and the estrangement people feel toward all the parts of the landscape they do not own. Mourning is another pervasive focus of social life, and its social prominence also broadly involves a pattern of taking measure of otherness (here, separateness in time) as a dominant way of defining oneself and one's relations.³

The *xoxulop* register makes clear that this broad cultural sensibility is also a sensibility about semiotic relations. The register's focus is on portraying certain signifiers as bearing a relation of simultaneous foundational identity and destructive incompatibility with their signifieds. This idea of words that wreck their referents resonates with wider currents of Korowai pessimism about the stable well-being of objects, people, and the world. People often speak of themselves, other people, or material objects as 'bad, ugly, wrecked' (*lembul*). Such statements answer to a cultural valorization of humility and deprivation as aesthetically and socially moving. Korowai also speak of their whole physical world becoming 'wrecked', whether in allusion to a millennial future of fire or flood, or to environmental degradation already felt to have taken place. In this cultural setting, people are exquisitely sensitive to possibilities that appearances at a given moment will give way to future surprises and setbacks. Correlatively, Korowai show great interactional sensitivity to transgression as an integral aspect of social and semiotic rules. The reciprocal person reference partnerships sketched above, for example, make small lapses in conformity to bodily order and boundedness into badges of identity. Practices of affinal avoidance emphasize as much the degree of avoidance a pair practices, and the reality of performative lapses between them, as they emphasize actual separateness (Stasch 2003:329–33). In people's understandings of the *xoxulop* substitutions, the very signifiers of referents are themselves transgressive of those referents. They describe strange deformations of what the referents appear to be, and they cause damage to those referents, even as they express the referents' more foundational identities.

Through the transgressive register, Korowai pursue a kind of prolific negative theology in which it is not just God but everybody and everything whose

names can be negated in favor of monstrosities teaching distrust of signs (cf. Williams 1996). The register is an “anti-language” a little in the sense of the early register theorist Halliday (1978:164–82), but it is an anti-linguistic gesture of the speech community at large toward its own code, rather than a medium around which the speech community divides into stable social fractions. (Core items in the register seem to be known, used, and avoided by all fully competent speakers. Some speakers utter transgressive substitute terms more frequently than others, and there is variation in how many correspondences people know. But I have not noted any ways that these variations in verbal practice among mature speakers correlate clearly with age, gender, or other aspects of social position.) The register is probably most significant within its own environment for the light into which it throws other speech. The existence of transgressive terms, and people’s pervasive awareness of avoiding those terms, make non-transgressive speech a constant practice of euphemism. An overall effect of the register is to underscore the contingency of people’s agreement to speak with each other in a pragmatics of affirmation. In this positive but contingent pragmatics, words are relatively unproblematic vehicles of referents, and speaker-hearers are present to listen to each other rather than wreck each other, or wreck the other, surrounding entities they discuss in speech.

Put another way, the register consists of not just semantic puns but pragmatic ones. I introduced the notion of a “semantic pun” earlier in reference to *xoxulop* substitutions’ attention to strange iconic relations between entities in the life-world that are otherwise obviously distinct. Something similar also occurs at the level of pragmatics: language users’ understanding of their own relations to each other, to language, and to referents. The register places alongside a pragmatics of normal lexical meaning an alternative, nearly identical but vastly different pragmatics of “wrecking.” Not only are certain signifiers strange to their signifieds, but in this same package, sign USERS temporarily reject a semiotics of affirmation in favor of an estranged, negative relation to their linguistic codes and to the wider conditions of living this code mediates. I have developed this interpretation in a preliminary way here by examining how speakers’ bodily being, or their intimate involvement with strange peripheries, is strongly represented in the relationships between referents and underlying substitutes. Sets of conventional substitutions are the easiest aspect of the register to study, but they are subtle and heterogeneous in their own right, and I have thought it worthwhile to look at them here. A next step would be to analyze in close interactional detail many specific examples of the register’s actual use, as well as processes of the constant learning, teaching, creation, and adjustment of known substitutions by networks of speakers. As part of a first general account of register use, though, I noted at the outset that the speech form is a two-sided sociolinguistic coin: The register institutes an imperative to avoid damaging utterances, but as such it also institutes the potential to let loose those utterances in acts of protest. Some kind of speaker alignment of humorous or serious protest seems to be the common

element across interactional events in which substitute terms are actually used. Speakers' specific acts of complaint toward people, objects, and situations in events of register use take some of their force from the figurative organization of conventional pairings. The substitutions themselves are a kind of protest against appearances and against the activity of conventional categorization. Their imagery is a good vehicle for speakers' interactional projects of protest against physical and social conditions they encounter in moment-to-moment interaction.

NOTES

* A draft of this article was presented in June 2006 at a conference on "Honorification and Enregisterment" at the University of Chicago. I thank Sue Philips, Sue Gal, and Michael Silverstein for inviting me to speak, and I thank all participants for their generous comments. Additional crucial and detailed help was given by Courtney Handman, Laura Hendrickson, Steve Hibbard, Barbara Johnstone, Webb Keane, Anne Lorimer, and Alan Rumsey. Fieldwork in 1995–1997 and 2001–2002 was made possible by Fulbright-IEE, the Wenner-Gren Foundation, Reed College, the Luce Foundation, the Australian National University (RSPAS), the Indonesian Institute of Sciences (LIPI), and Universitas Cenderawasih. I am grateful to all Korowai I have met for their patience and humor.

¹ Men and women are not supposed to know or hear their own gender's respective sexuality-focused *xoxulop*. It is likely that most adults know many of the terms, though, if only from having heard them uttered angrily in cross-sex fights.

² People's concern with name avoidance colored their experiences of my interview practices. I learned to speak in ways sensitive to name-avoidance etiquette, but nonetheless Korowai understood interviews with me to involve indiscriminate saying of names. Once a woman who turned down my request for an interview cited the fact that she had a small, vulnerable son. She feared that incessant mentioning of people's names in our conversation would lead to one of us accidentally uttering her boy's *xoxulop*.

³ Subjects mentioned in this paragraph are analyzed in detail in Stasch (forthcoming).

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(Received 21 June 2006; revision received 9 November 2006;
accepted 27 November 2006)