

The Trobriand Islanders' concept of *karewaga*

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1 Introduction

In one of the very first Kilivila texts I collected in 1982 – in the year in which I started my research on the Trobriand Islanders' language and culture – Uveaka, the son of the chief of Tauwema village on Kaile'una Island, described the history of our village in a few sentences.¹ Uveaka ended his description with the following sentences:²

- (1) *E-ma Logai i-karewaga. I-karewaga e i-kariga.*
3.-come Logai 3.-have.authority 3.-have.authority and 3.-die
E besatuta tama-gu Kilagola i-karewaga.
and now father-my Kilagola 3.-have.authority
'He came, Logai, he had the authority. He had the authority and he died. And now my father Kilagola has the authority.'

This was the first time that I heard a Trobriander producing the word *karewaga* – in its verbal form. Before I started my field research I first hit upon this expression in Annette Weiner's famous monograph "Women of

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¹This paper is dedicated to my old friend and colleague Ad Foolen – a true *tokarewaga* for his discipline and his students.

²The Kilivila orthography is based on Senft (1986, pp. 12-16).

value, man of renown” – however, she only mentions the word without providing any translation (see Weiner, 1976, pp. 163, 174, 178, 284). The second source where I read about this concept was Edwin Hutchins’ book “Culture and Inference”. In his glossary at the end of this volume he translates the concept as “right, responsibility, control; specifically, the right to allocation in the context of garden litigation” (Hutchins, 1980, p. 139). In the chapter on “Trobriand Land Tenure” he introduces *karewaga* as follows:

The other individually exercised relation between man and land could perhaps be called a meta-right because it is the right to transfer or allocate rights. It is the right to transfer use rights when circumstances arise in which a rights holder relinquishes his claims. This relation is indicated in Trobriand speech by the nominal and verbal forms of the root *karewaga*. As a noun it can be glossed in English as “authority,” “responsibility”, “place to decide”, “rule”, “law”, “right”, “control”. As a verb, it indicates the exercise of such. Henceforth we will refer to this right as the right of allocation because in the context of land tenure, *karewaga* over land is the right to transfer or allocate rights in land.

(Hutchins, 1980, p. 25; see also pp. 27 & 30)

Although Hutchins explicitly zooms in on the special meaning of the concept in the context of land tenure, he indicates that *karewaga* has a much more general and broader meaning.³

Based on my comprehensive corpus of Kilivila speech data this paper provides a first lexical semantic analysis of the concept *karewaga*.

2 The Trobriand Islanders’ concept “*karewaga*”- a first lexical semantic analysis

Before I deal in detail with the Trobriand Islanders’ concept of *karewaga*, let me briefly provide some basic information about these islanders and

³See also Hutchins’ (n.d.) dictionary.

their language.

The Trobriand Islanders belong to the ethnic group called 'Northern Massim'. They are gardeners, doing slash and burn cultivation of the bush; their most important crop is yams. Moreover, they are also famous for being excellent canoe builders, carvers, and navigators, especially in connection with the ritualized '*Kula*' trade, an exchange of shell valuables that covers a wide area of the Melanesian part of the Pacific (see Malinowski, 1922/1978). The society is matrilineal but virilocal.

Kilivila (also: Kiriwina, Boyowa), the language of the Trobriand Islanders, is one of 40 Austronesian languages spoken in the Milne Bay Province of Papua New Guinea. It is an agglutinative language and its general unmarked word order pattern is VOS (Senft, 1986). The Austronesian languages spoken in Milne Bay Province are grouped into 12 language families; one of them is labeled Kilivila. The Kilivila language family encompasses the languages Budibud (or Nada, with about 200 speakers), Muyuw (or Murua, with about 4,000 speakers) and Kilivila (or Kiriwina, Boyowa, with about 28,000 speakers); Kilivila is spoken on the Islands Kiriwina, Vakuta, Kitava, Kaile'una, Kuiawa, Munuwata and Simsim. The languages Muyuw and Kilivila are split into mutually understandable local dialects. Typologically, Kilivila is classified as a Western Melanesian Oceanic language belonging to the 'Papuan-Tip-Cluster' group (Senft, 1986, p. 6).

Now what about the Trobrianders' concept of *karewaga*? As already mentioned above the word *karewaga* can be realized as a noun and as a verbal expression; moreover, a classifier can be prefixed to the noun to personalize the concept. Let me briefly illustrate this with the following examples.

The Kilivila verbal expression consists of a subject prefix with a marker for tense/aspect/mood, the verb stem proper, and a suffix marking number. The verb stem without these affixes is never used as a verb; however, some nouns – like *karewaga* – can fit into the slot for the verb stem and together with the respective affixes then become verbs (for further details see Senft, 1986, 2008, pp. 204f.). If a classifier – usually the classifier “(-)to(-)” that refers to human beings in general and to males in specific

(see Senft, 1996)⁴ – is prefixed to the noun it gets personalized:

NOUN	VERB	PERSONALIZED NOUN
<i>karewaga</i>	<i>e-karewaga-si</i>	<i>to-karewaga</i>
	3.-have.authority-PL	CLASS.person/male-authority
'authority'	'they have authority'	'a person/a man with authority'

My Kilivila corpus documents the following types of how Kilivila native speakers realize the expression *karewaga*; my free glosses are based on the lexical semantic work I did with my consultants:

- (2) *Bita-go'u* *liku* *e*
 FUT.DUAL.INCL-build.yamhouse big.yamhouse and
liku *ala karewaga*
 big.yamhouse his authority
 'One will build a big yamhouse and the big yamhouse (represents)
 his authority/competence/influence/status/power.'
(consultant/year: Uveaka 1982)

Based on discussions with my consultants and my insight into the Trobriand Islanders' culture I gloss *karewaga* in this context as "authority/competence/influence/status/power". Only a competent man of influence, with authority, status and power can attract other men to not only help him build a *liku* but also work for this owner of the *liku* in their gardens, donate him part of their yams after the harvest and put these yams into his yamhouse assigning him the right to distribute them as he likes it. The reward of these men consists in the fact that the owner of the *liku* will act as a kind of "patron" or head man who will support them in case they have personal, social, political or economic problems or conflicts.

⁴In principle the classifier (-)na(-) that refers to females could also be used in this way; however, I never heard this form on the Trobriands and thus could not document it in my corpus.

- (3) *E-kebiga ... ba-kunukwali-si ... amakala to-karewaga*
 3.-say 1.FUT-know-PL how CLASS.male-power
e-yobwali-mi
 3.-treat.kindly-you(PL)
 'He said ... we want to know how the chief/the man in power/the man in command treats (and cares for) you.'
 (consultant/year: Uveaka 1982)

Uveaka told me that in the speech in which he produced this utterance he was indirectly referring to his father Kilagola, the chief of Tauwema. Thus, *tokarewaga* is most appropriately glossed in this context as "chief" or as "the man in power", "the man in command". Uveaka avoided here the more direct use of the word *guyau* that refers to a "chief" for reasons of politeness. There is only one *guyau* in a village, but a number of *tokarewaga*, for example all *liku* owners (see (1) above), and all owners of big masawa-type canoes, the so-called *toliwaga*. The *guyau* is responsible for all the people living in his village, the other *tokarewaga* are responsible and care for their crews or their group of supporters.

- (4) *Avela gala ala karewaga, bi-setaula o*
 who not his/her decision/discretion 3.FUT-go.straight to
valu, bi-ma avela-ga...
 village 3.FUT-come who-EMPH
 'This is not (a matter of) anybody's decision/discretion, s/he will go straight (home) to the village s/he will come, whoever (he or she may be).'
- (consultant/year: Bwema'uitla 1983; see Senft, 1991, p. 30)

In an admonitory speech Bwema'uitla urges the schoolchildren of Tauwema to immediately come back to their village after end of school; the school buildings are in the neighbouring village Kaduwaga. In this context *karewaga* is most adequately glossed as "decision" or "discretion".

- (5) *Yokwami tauwau: makateki bita-vai... Bogwa*
 you men soon FUT.DUAL.INCL-marry already
karewaga bwena, gala pela kwetarogwa.
 responsibility good not for (just) one
 ‘You (young) men: soon one will marry. Soon (you will have) the
 respected responsibility – no longer just for one (person only).’
 (consultant/year: Bwema’uitla 1983; see Senft, 1991, p. 33)

In the same admonitory speech Bwema’uitla addresses the young men in the village and reminds them that they soon will marry (note the polite, defocusing and impersonalizing use of the Dual inclusive verb form with the future marker). Then they will have the good, respected responsibility to care for a family. In this context *karewaga* is adequately glossed as “responsibility”.

- (6) *E m-to-si-na dimdim, ku-doke-si, gala*
 and DEM.CP.person-PL-DEM white.people 2.-think-PL not
i-komikikini-si ina-sia tama-sia. Ah makala-wa
 3.-persuade-PL mothers-their fathers-their ah like-EMPH
karewaga tommota yakidasi.
 will/decision people us
 ‘And these white people, you think, they have not persuaded/urged
 them – their mothers and their fathers. Ah, (it is) like the free will
 and decision of our people.’
 (consultant/year: Bwema’uitla 1983; see Senft, 1991, p. 34)

Bwema’uitla again refers to the concept of *karewaga* in his admonitory speech, referring to me and my wife – the “*dimdim*”, the white people. He points out that our parents did not urge or persuade us to come to Tauwema and work there; the fact that we are in the village now is based on the free will and decision of two people – be they *dimdim* or Trobriand Islanders. Thus, in this context *karewaga* is best glossed as “(free) will” and “decision”.

- (7) *Karewaga* *makala kidamwa avaka*
 accountability/reliability like if what
kwe-tala *la* *mani bita-kau,* *so-da*
 CLASS.thing-one his/her money FUT.DUAL.INCL-take friend-our
bogwa da-lekodi gaga.
 already our-record bad
 'Accountability/reliability (is necessary) if one takes some money
 from somebody, friend, quickly one's reputation (gets) bad.'
 (consultant/year: Bwema'uitla 1983; see Senft, 1991, p. 35)

In this references to the concept of *karewaga* Bwema'uitla introduces in his admonitory speech the scenario in which somebody borrows money form another person. People doing this must think of their *karewaga* if they do not want to lose their reputation. In this context *karewaga* is most adequately glossed as "accountability" or "reliability".

- (8) *Vovo-gu- ba-karewaga.*
 body-my 1.FUT-care
 'My body – I will care for it.' (consultant/year: Sibwesa 1983)

Sibwesa, chief Kilagola's wife, was quite sick in 1983. However, she comforted her relatives by pointing out that she will appropriately care for her body and her health. Therefore I gloss the verbal expression (-)*karewaga*(-) in this context as "to care (for something, for somebody)".

- (9) *A-tatai tataba.* *Tauwau Tabalu e*
 1.-carve tataba-board men Tabalu yes
m-to-si-na *ma-ke-na* *si koni.*
 DEM-CLASS.male-PL.DEM DEM-CLASS.wooden-DEM their sign
Taga beya pela karewaga *Gunta: i-lukwe-gu avaka*
 But here for wish/will/instruction Gunter 3.-tell-me what
magi-la e a-paisau ma-ke-na *tataba.*
 wish-his and 1.-work DEM.CLASS.wooden-DEM tataba-board
 'I carve a tataba-board. These men belonging to the Tabalu-subclan,
 this is their sign of honor. But because of the wish/instruction of
 Gunter: he told me what he wants and I (started to) work (on) this

tataba-board.'

(consultant/year: Toybokwatauya 1983; see Senft 1996: 21)

In 1993 Toybokwatauya, one of the master-carvers in Tauwema, carved a *tataba*-board for me. Only members of the Malasi-clan are allowed to have these boards in their houses as a sign of their eminence in the Trobriand Islanders' socially highly stratified society. In these few sentences Toybokwatauya justifies that he – a member of the Lukwasisiga-clan – is carving such a board for a white man like me – he emphasizes that he acts because I asked him to do so; thus he follows my “instruction” and meets my wish and will. Therefore in this context *karewaga* is best glossed as “wish” or even “instruction”.

(10) *Ba-selimi e ambeya karewaga*

1.FUT-put yes where authority/right/law/jurisdiction/rule

avetuta buku-sunapula-si Kaile'una onopona

when 2.FUT-appear-PL Kaile'una in.the.middle

'I will put (it) yes (to) where the law (is) when you will appear (there) in the middle of Kaile'una.'

(consultant/year: Katubai 1983; see Senft, 2010, p. 270)

In 1983 people from Kaduwaga visited Tauwema. There had been some rivalry and aggressive tension between the inhabitants of these two villages before. The chief of Kaduwaga, Katubai, who in addition has the political power for Kaile'una Island as a whole and the Trobriand Islands in the east and north east of Kaile'una, gave a kind of admonitory speech in which he refers to his authority as the 'supreme judge' indicating possible trials that evildoers may have to face in 'the middle of Kaile'una', *i.e.*, in Kaduwaga. As his village of residence, Kaduwaga is the most important village on Kaile'una Island. Katubai represents the Trobriand Islanders' indigenous law in any cases of traditional litigation. Therefore *karewaga* can be glossed as “authority” and even more appropriately as “right”, “law”, “jurisdiction” or “rule” in this context.

- (11) *M karewaga bi-ma, ...*
your reign 3.FUT-come
'Thy kingdom come, ...'

In chief Pulitala's translation of the prayer "Our Father" (Matthew 6, 9-13; Luke 11, 2-4) for the Methodist church we find the expression *karewaga* as the Kilivila equivalent for "reign/kingdom" (see Senft, 2010, p. 62).

To summarize, the text examples quoted above illustrate that the concept *karewaga* can and should be glossed in respective contexts as:

1. authority, competence, influence, status, power
2. chief, man in power, man in command
3. decision, discretion
4. responsibility
5. (free) will, decision
6. accountability, reliability
7. care
8. wish, instruction
9. right, law, jurisdiction, rule
10. reign, kingdom

These glosses illustrate how important the concept of *karewaga* is for the Trobriand Islanders' culture and their construction of their social reality.⁵ If Trobriand Islanders are characterized as having *karewaga* this is much more than just an *epitheton ornans*; it implies that these persons have gained authority and influence, status and power by their qualities, their behaviour and most of all by their actions (see also Mosko, 2010, p. 167).

⁵Once I had understood this complex concept of *karewaga* it reminded me very much of the Latin notion of *virtus*, the quality that was so important for the ancient Romans (see Stowasser, 1967, p. 535).

One can rely on them and trust in them, because they are known to use their influence with utmost responsibility always in accordance with the general needs and for the benefit of their fellow Trobrianders. On the basis of their authority one can trust in their decisions and instructions.⁶ They care for the community – both on small and large scale, and they control the indigenous right, law and jurisdiction.

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⁶See also Munn (1986, p. 68) who in connections with the Muyuw speaking inhabitants of the island Gawa, a Massim society like the one of the Trobrianders, refers to their “political formulation of the person as an independent locus of decision-making powers (kareiwaga). The important concept of kareiwaga refers to both the act of deciding, or a decision, and a legitimate sphere of authority or decision making”.

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