

ARTICLES

LIFE AND HEALTH, DISEASE AND DEATH. A COGNITIVE ANALYSIS OF THE CONCEPTUAL DOMAIN

Viktor KRUPA

Institute of Oriental and African Studies, Slovak Academy of Sciences,
Klemensova 19, 813 64 Bratislava, Slovakia

It has been observed before that the semantic characteristics of the concept of life in some Polynesian languages is so fuzzy as to be hardly delimitable from the concept of health just as sometimes no clear line can be drawn between the concepts of death and disease. Average Europeans are inclined to believe that life is separated from health and even more so death from disease by a sufficiently wide and safe gap, but in a society that has (or had, at least in the not so distant past) at its disposal no very effective therapeutic methods, the transition between these adjacent concepts need not be as difficult as all that.

In Polynesia, seriously sick persons were often separated from the rest of the family and neglected or simply left to die by their relatives. “In season of illness, especially if protracted, the common people, and the aged, received but little attention. If the malady was not soon relieved by the prayers of the priest, and the remedies he administered, the sufferer was abandoned” (Ellis 1829:II: 281–282). In such a society, being alive was truly tantamount to being healthy while being ill was a state that might only too often result in dying. Therefore one should expect that such a state of affairs would find its reflection in the lexicon, and the present paper may be regarded as an attempt at testing our hypothesis.

It is at the same time assumed that the different state of affairs in European (and also in many other) societies to which more efficient therapeutic methods are available is reflected in their languages too. One could with some justification expect that these languages tend to more unambiguously distinguish the domain of life from that of health and that the same would be true for the contiguous domains of disease and death.

The comparison and evaluation of synonyms and near-synonyms helps to build up what may be characterized as a conventionally accepted semantic configuration or content of a concept. Of course, various levels of denotation – primary, direct, transposed (metaphorical, metonymical, euphemisms), etc. – are to

be taken into account in the investigation, provided they may be said to compete functionally in speech.

The semantic domain of life overlaps not only with that of health but with other domains as well, for example with those of mental, philosophical and religious phenomena. The domain of death in its turn interferes with such phenomena as decay, disappearance, departure, sleep, rest, night, etc. The two extremes of life and death do not form a symmetrical contrast. First of all their emotional appreciation is obviously very different. While it is universally acceptable to talk of life in an open and straightforward manner (at least in most societies), any open and explicit mention of death is often felt to be embarrassing if not considered explicitly prohibited. As a result, there is a tendency to refer to such phenomena as death indirectly – via employing periphrastic, figurative and euphemistic means when the need arises. This explains why there is (in so many languages) a much greater abundance of terms referring to death than to life. It would seem that this contradicts the Polyanna principle according to which people prefer speaking of positive and pleasant experiences. In this respect the principle is violated just seemingly, which becomes manifest after it has been modified to the effect that people rather prefer speaking of their experiences in a positive and pleasant way.

The asymmetry of the relation between the concepts of life and death, however, has deeper roots. The twin notions of life and death are here torn out in an arbitrary ad hoc manner while their essence and interrelationships may only be fully understood within a more comprehensive scenario.

Below, relevant evidence from several Austronesian languages is collected, described and classified. The data have been extracted from available dictionaries. It should be underlined that the dictionaries discussed here are of varying size and quality, differing also in their coverage of idioms and exemplification; in other words, their comparability is inevitably somewhat restricted.

The following languages are dealt with below: Maori, Hawaiian, Tongan, Samoan (Polynesian group), Indonesian, Malagasy (Indonesian group), Fijian (Melanesian group), Ponapean and Trukese (Micronesian group). The data for the particular languages are arranged uniformly in the sequence *life — health — disease — death* and each entry includes all synonyms listed in the appropriate dictionary (or dictionaries).

MAORI

LIFE

koiora: life

kaiao: alive, living

mataora: living, alive

ora: alive, well, in health, safe, satiated, survive, escape, recover

mauri: life principle, thymos, source of the emotions; talisman, a material symbol of the hidden principle protecting vitality

hau: vitality of man, vital essence of land etc.

HEALTH

hauora: spirit of life, health, vigour; healthy, fresh, well, lively, in good spirits, perfect

waiora: health, soundness

ora: alive, well, in health, safe, satiated, survive, escape, recover

DISEASE

tahumaero: sickness, disease

mahaki: sick man, invalid, sick, ill, loose, cutaneous disease

oke: struggle, wriggle, writhe, put forth one's strength, strive, invalid, sick person, ill, ailing

wheori: diseased, ill

tuuroro: sick person, sick, corpse

mate: dead, extinguished, sick, ill, unconscious, injured, damaged, suffering, in want of, lacking, overcome with any emotion, deeply in love, calmed down, subsided, moving slowly, slack, completed, finished, accomplished, caught, injury, sickness, wound, danger, defeat, calamity, desire, company of mourners, death

mamate: distressed

matemate: sickly; shallow, failing (of streams)

DEATH

kouka: the part of latrine behind the beam, fig. abyss, death

muri: North, death, the place of departed spirits

pirau: rotten, gone out, extinguished, pus, decay, death

poautinitini: tribulation, evil, death

(po)pohe: withered, blind, dead, stupid, dull, death

hemo: be passed by, be gone away, cease, disappear, miss a mark, be consumed, die, be faint, completion of action (*hemonga* object of earnest desire)

(ke)kero: maimed, dead, die, disappear

hurumutu: die, come to an end, end, finish

makere: fall, drop, get down, alight, descend, be lost, abandoned, fail, cease, be seen in a vision, die

marere: drop, fall, be put off, be given, let oneself down, die

moe: sleep, dream, marry, repose, close the eyes, die

moonehu: fine rusty pubescence on the unexpanded fronds of bracken and other ferns, die, expire

hinga (te tootara): (the totara) has fallen

mate: dead, extinguished, sick, ill, unconscious, injured, damaged, suffering, in want of, lacking, overcome with any emotion, deeply in love, calmed down, subsided, moving slowly, slack, completed, finished, accomplished, caught, injury, sickness, wound, danger, defeat, calamity, desire, company of mourners, death

ika takoto a Tiki: the prostrate fish of Tiki, i.e. corpse

maataotao: cool, cold, i.e. die out, extinguished

roku: wane (moon), i.e. grow weak, decline
tatau o te poo: door of night, i.e. death
taawhati: ebb, i.e. die
te manu pirau a Tiki: rotten bird of Tiki, i.e. corpse
whati te (tara o) te marama: the (horn of the) moon broke

Synopsis: The primary Maori word for life, *ora*, denotes both health and life, a few derivatives refer only to life (*kaiao*, *mataora*) as well as a few lexemes referring only to health, namely *waiora* and *hauora*. And, finally, several terms refer to life from the spiritual point of view (*mauri*, *hau*, *hauora*). At the opposite end of the scale, there are some words reserved for disease (*tahumaero*, *mahaki*, *oke*, *wheori*, *mamate*, *matemate*) as well as a few terms referring both to disease and death (*tuuroro*, *mate*). However, the inventory of secondary terms referring to death and dying is impressive, due to verbal imagery, cf. *kouka*, *muri*, *pirau*, (*po*)*pohe*, *hemo*, *hurumutu*, *makere*, *marere*, *moe*, *moonehu*, *taawhati*, *maataotao*, *ika takoto a Tiki*, *tatau o te poo*, *manu pirau a Tiki*, *whati te tara o te maarama*.

HAWAIIAN

LIFE

ola: life, health, well-being, living, livelihood, means of support, salvation, alive, living, spared, recovered, healed, to live, to spare, to save, heal, grant life
ea: life, breath, vapor, gas, breeze, spirit
mauli: life, heart, seat of life; ghost, spirit; fontanel
iwi: (originally bones, i.e., the most cherished remains of the dead, and therefore) life, old age
haa: breath, breathe, spirit, life

HEALTH

ola kino: state of health

DISEASE

ma'i: patient, sick person, sickness, disease, sick, ill, menstruating

DEATH

make: die, defeated, killed, unfortunate, to faint, death, fainting, danger of death, peril, destruction, misfortune, to kill, deathly, deadly, faint, deceased, late, obsolete, poisonous; desire, want, to want
mamake: wilt, wither (of plants)
haa'ule: fall, drop, lose, fail, forget, neglect, die
hiamoe loa: oversleep, sleep deeply, eternal sleep, death (figurative)
ala ho'i 'ole mai: (literally a pathway on which there is no returning)
moe kau a ho'oilo: (literally sleep summer to winter = the sleep of death) death, be dead

Synopsis: There is just one specific term for health (*ola kino*) and likewise one for disease (*ma'i*) in Hawaiian. The basic term for life (*ola*) also refers to health, salvation, escape, well-being while that for death (*make*) denotes faintness, misfortune, danger, etc. Just as in Maori, there are terms for life pointing to the spiritual domain (*ea, mauli, haa*) and, at the other extreme, numerous periphrastic, figurative and euphemistic terms referring to death (*haa'uile, hiamoe loa, ala ho'i 'ole mai, moe kau a ho'oilo*).

TONGAN

LIFE

mo'ui: (honorific *laumaalie, lakoifie*) live, be living, alive, be in health, recover, fig. be burning, be active (volc.), be going, working (of clock)

HEALTH

mo'ui, mo'ui lelei (see above)

ma'ui'ui: be in a healthy and flourishing condition (of plants), fresh

talavou: youth, adolescent, strong and healthy and good-looking

mata-mo'ui: healthy-looking

DISEASE

mate: be nearly dead with, be utterly sick and tired, be overcome or carried away with (laughter, weeping, desire, sleepiness, fear)

DEAD

mate: (*pekia* honorific, *hala* regal) die, be stunned or quite unconscious, go out, be out (fire), be sunk or wrecked (boat), be extinct (volcano), die down, cease (wind), be eclipsed (sun, moon), stop, not be going (engine), be knocked out, defeated, be paralysed; *Kuo mate 'ene mohé* "He is very fast asleep"

mamate: numb; quite barren, desert, lifeless, wrecked (of land, country)

tamate: subside, become less or slower, die down, die away

maalooloo: (euphemistic) die, orig. to rest

mama'o: (euphemistic) die, orig. be distant, far away, be absent

hiki: (euphemistic) die, orig. move from one place to another

vio: (abusive)

fekekeva'i: (abusive) die, cf. *kekeva* stiff, rigid

Synopsis: In Tongan, linguistic denotations of life overlap with those of health (*mo'ui*) and those of disease with that of death (*mate*). The whole picture is complicated by the introduction of an honorific parameter. The concept of death attracts a plethora of synonyms employing figurative processes in the interest of either politeness or euphemism or even abusement (*maalooloo, mama'o, hiki, fekekeva'i, vio*).

SAMOAN

LIFE

ola: (polite *soifua*) live, be alive, get over, recover from, live by, live on, grow, increase, give birth, remit, cancel (a punishment), end (of war), life, living

HEALTH

maaloolooina: (polite *soifua*) be healthy, healthy, health, recover from sickness, be well again

DISEASE

ma'i: be sick, sick, fall ill, infection, disease, sickness, pregnancy

DEATH

mate: die (of animals, plants, fire, streams, etc.)

oti: die (of people) (polite *maalaia*, orig. meaning overcome by disaster, be unlucky; also *maliu*, cf. *liu* change, *taliu* return), be knocked out (of a boxer), finish, death

pee: (of animals) die, be dead, go out (light, fire), be low (tide), be numb, paralysed (limbs), heal (wound)

gase: be numb, without feeling, be dead, killed (of animals)

tu'umaaloo: (of high chiefs) die, death (*tu'u* put, leave + *maaloo* power, victory)

usufono: (polite, for orators) die (orig. attend, take part in a council)

usugaafono: (polite, for orators) death

Synopsis: Samoan, unlike the other Polynesian languages examined here, seems to draw a clearer line between life (*ola*) and health (*maaloolooina*) as well as between disease (*ma'i*) and death (*oti*, *mate*, *pee*). Their semantic structure is complicated by such factors as animateness (human beings – animals – plants) and politeness.

INDONESIAN

LIFE

hidup: life, be alive, living; thrive; run, go, be in the running, be put in use, have life; burn; fresh (fish, vegetables); flowing (water)

nyawa: soul (obviously primary meaning), spirit, life

HEALTH

sehat: healthy, sound

DISEASE

sakit: ill, sick, sore, painful

DEATH

mati: die, dead; break up; fixed (price); numb; stop (e.g. clock), go out (light, gas), fade (of sounds, flowers), dry out (water reservoir, tree), close down

Synopsis: Indonesian distinguishes life from health and disease from death just as European languages do. The words for life, living (*hidup*) and death, dying (*mati*) are extended along the anthropomorphic lines to refer to non-biological processes just as in several other Austronesian languages quoted here.

MALAGASY

LIFE

aina: life, come to life, restore strength, health, take rest, breathe, get rid of, health, strength, cut short, expand
velona: living, flowing (water), working or operating, functioning, resounding, beginning, burning, accessible

HEALTH

salama: healthy, health

DISEASE

aretina: disease
marary: sick, sickly (cf. *rary* pain, suffering)
marisa: sick, in bad condition (cf. *risa* weakness)

DEATH

maty: dead, killed, completely coinciding with, sentenced or executed by mistake; hard- working; wasted away; without progeny, destroyed, abolished, annihilated, forgotten, worn, extinguished, broken, partly paralysed, out of order, dried out, lost (of voice)

Synopsis: The radical distinction of adjacent concepts is present only within the continuum disease (*aretina*, *marisa*, *marary*) – death (*maty*). The continuum life – health comprises the unspecific term *aina*, *velona* (life, health) and the specific term *salama* (health).

FIJIAN

LIFE/HEALTH

bula: live, life, recover from illness, escape death, alive, sound in health either of body or mind

DEATH/DISEASE

mate: death, die, disease, sickness, be sick; sink (of a boat); be extinguished
matemate: sickly

Synopsis: The available dictionary is relatively small. What data are there seem to confirm the assumption that the concept of health overlaps with that of life (*bula*) just as the concept of disease does with that of death (*mate*).

PONAPEAN

LIFE

mour: life, alive, raw, undried or green (of wood), fresh
ieias (honorific): be alive

HEALTH

roson: health, healthy (of human beings)

DISEASE

soumwahu: sickness, disease, sick, diseased, ill
liper: sick, weak, skinny
luhmwuhmw (honorific): sickness, disease, sick, diseased, ill

DEATH

meng: dead, withered, dried (of vegetation) *engila* (slang): die
matala (honorific): die
mehla: die, stop (of a mechanical thing)
pweula (honorific): die (literally be postponed, cancelled, fail)
sipalla (honorific): die (cf. *sipal* cross over, skip)

Synopsis: According to the only available dictionary the Ponapean language distinguishes health (*roson*) from life (*mour*) and disease (*soumwahu*, *liper*) from death (*meng*). In addition to neutral terms there are honorific and partly also vulgar terms.

TRUKESE

LIFE/HEALTH

manaii: life, alive; salvation, saved; health, recovered; fresh, erect, run

DEATH/DISEASE

mä: death, dying, pestilence, epidemic; weakness, collapse, overexertion, overtired; stop, standstill; dead, died, paralysed
pe: die, dead, died; lost in war, fighting or contest; be worsted, unlucky, have a hard time

Synopsis: Trukese, unlike Ponapean, the other Micronesian language discussed here, goes with the majority of the Polynesian languages in fusing the concepts of life and health (*manaii*) on the one hand and those of disease and death (*mä*) on the other.

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It may probably be concluded that those languages which do not clearly distinguish the adjacent concepts of (1) life and health and those of (2) disease and death, i.e., Maori, Hawaiian, Tongan, Fijian, and Trukese, represent a more ar-

chaic phase. By the way, in Biblical time all seriously ill persons were considered “dead” (Kremer 1995: 68). Aside from them there are those languages in which life is carefully distinguished from health just as disease from death, namely Indonesian, Samoan and Ponapean. However, the term archaic ought to be employed with some care. For example, separate lexemes for disease and death are known to have existed in Proto-Austronesian and their fusion in some languages of Oceania is secondary. In some of the languages, however, the overlap is only partial.

The conceptual domains of life (alongside health) and death (alongside disease) exert a powerful semantic influence upon the structuration of lexicon, which is apparent in the plethora of semantic transfers to or from other conceptual domains.

The true relation between the concepts of life, health, disease, and death may only be properly understood if they are inspected within their natural ambient, within a more extensive and naturally defined scenario. What matters is that life and death may be treated as contrasts, but this may degenerate into a simplistic dichotomy. In fact, their ontological status is considerably different. Life may be viewed as a process of some duration while death is better interpreted as a change, that is, as an event taking place during a relatively short time-span. Thus, any consideration of death as a true contrast of life, is acceptable only *cum grano salis*. Death is a terminative event of life which cannot be understood without its inchoative event, that is, without birth. While life is certainly compatible with health, diseases are far from absent in the course of its duration and both health and disease may alternate. On the other hand, death, being perfectly compatible with disease, seems not to go either with good health or with well-being.

Human beings have always been inclined to view the surrounding world with a measure of anthropocentrism. This enables us to view many non-human processes as akin to life and to employ the recognized analogies as a foundation of numerous figurative expressions, transfers, euphemisms, and idioms.

Interestingly enough, few figurative expressions have been attested for birth; however, the notion of death finds a secondary denotation in numerous indirect expressions, very often metaphors, taken from the world of nature, cf. Maori *kouka* the part of latrine behind the beam, figuratively abyss, death, *muri* North, metonym. death, the place of departed spirits, *pirau* rotten, gone out, extinguished, pus, decay, death, *(po)pohe* withered, blind, dead, stupid, dull, death, *hemo* be passed by, be gone away, cease, disappear, miss a mark, be consumed, die, be faint, completion of action (cf. *hemonga* object of earnest desire), *(ke)kero* maimed, dead, die, disappear, *hurumutu* die, come to an end, end, finish, *makere* fall, drop, get down, alight, descend, be lost, abandoned, fail, cease, be seen in a vision, die, *marere* drop, fall, be put off, be given, let oneself down, die, *moe* sleep, dream, marry, repose, close the eyes, die, *moonehu* fine rusty pubescence on the unexpanded fronds of bracken and other ferns, die, expire, *hinga te tootara* the totara has fallen; Hawaiian *haa'ule* fall, drop, lose, fail, forget, neglect, die, *hiamoe loa* oversleep, sleep deeply, eternal sleep, death, *ala*

ho'i 'ole mai (literally a pathway on which there is no returning), *moe kau a ho'oilo* (literally sleep summer to winter = the sleep of death) death, be dead; Tongan *tamate* subside, become less or slower, die down, die away; *maalooloo* (euphemistic) die, literally to rest, *mama'o* (euphemistic) die, originally be distant, far away, be absent, *hiki* (euphemistic) die, originally move from one place to another, *fekekeva'i* (abusive) die, cf. *kekeva* stiff, rigid; Ponapean *pweula* (honorific) die, literally be postponed, cancelled, fail, *sipalla* (honorific) die (cf. *sipal* cross over, skip).

On the other hand, the lexemes with the primary meaning of life and death often undergo an anthropomorphic expansion to include functionally analogous phenomena, cf. Maori *hauora* perfect, *mate* calmed down, moving slowly, slack, completed, finished, caught, defeat, calamity; Hawaiian *make* defeated, unfortunate, destruction, peril, *mamake* wilt, wither; Tongan *mo'ui* be burning, be active (of a volcano), be going, working (of a machine), *mate* stunned, unconscious, go out, be sunk or wrecked (of a canoe), extinct, eclipsed, stop, defeated; Samoan *ola* end (of a war), cancel a punishment, *pe* dry out, go out; Indonesian *hidup* run, be going, be put in use, burn, flow, *mati* break up, stop (of clock), go out, fade, dry out, close down; Malagasy *velona* flow (of water), be working, operating, functioning (a machine), resound, burn, *maty* be forgotten, extinguished, dried out, broken, out of order; Fijian *mate* sink, extinguish; Ponapean *mehla* stop; Trukese *manaü* erect, run (a mechanism), *mä* collapse, stop, standstill, *pe* lost in war.

Appendix

Semantic components of the HEALTH – LIFE continuum (in Maori):

WELL – SAFE – SATIATED – VIGOUR – FRESH – IN GOOD SPIRITS – PERFECT – SURVIVE – ESCAPE – RECOVER SPIRIT OF LIFE

Semantic components of DISEASE – DEATH continuum (in Maori):

STRUGGLE – WRIGGLE – WRITHE – OUT OF ONE'S STRENGTH – STRIVE – AILING – ILL – UNCONSCIOUS – WOUND – INJURY – DAMAGE – CALAMITY – DANGER – SUFFERING – COMPANY OF MOURNERS – OVERCOME WITH EMOTION – DESIRE – DEEPLY IN LOVE – IN WANT OF – LACKING -DEFEAT – SUBSIDE – MOVE SLOWLY – SLACK – CALM DOWN – ACCOMPLISHED – COMPLETED – FINISHED – EXTINGUISHED – CORPSE

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