

A lexicographical analysis of the Eastern Penan verb *pelin*

by Ian Mackenzie (2016)

Introductory note

The author has been conducting linguistic and ethnographic research among the Eastern Penan people of Sarawak, Malaysia, since the mid-1990s. Part of his work has been published in the form of a provisional dictionary of their language; it is available gratis on the Web. This version of the dictionary dates from 2006; since that time the work has significantly grown, and many errors have been corrected. However, the current, improved version is still in a form too rough to be made public. The description that follows reflects the author's most recent thinking on the subject of *pelin*, and entirely supplants the information given about this verb both in the 2006 dictionary and in Mackenzie (2012).¹

pelin

This Penan verb puzzled me for many years. I long wondered why, in my translations, I was forced to shoehorn this verb into English terms as semantically divergent as "deformed", "clumsy", and "peculiarly similar". In actual fact, *pelin* has none of these meanings: the problem is, where Penan has a family of lexemes, English has only a semantic lacuna. In the end I realized that while *pelin* is indeed polysemous, its constituent lexemes are very close to each other in meaning.

This word takes us to the heart of Penan religion, and a concept that one could roughly describe as "magical effect arising from analogy".

Although somewhat simplified, the formalisms used in what follows are based on the methodology of the *Explanatory-Combinatorial Dictionary* (ECD); they are fully described in the introduction to the aforementioned *Dictionary of Eastern Penan*. However, the explanation in the next paragraph should suffice for present purposes.

Each expression in **boldface** represents a term to be defined (=definiendum), which includes not only a lexeme, but all of its semantic actants. The latter are represented by the algebraic variables *X*, *Y* etc., and are defined as those elements that *must* be expressed in a definition in order for the latter to be complete. For example, the sentence "John gives the picture book to Mary's brother" exemplifies the definiendum ***X gives Y to Z***, which reveals three semantic actants: the giver, the object given, and the recipient. A semantic actant can be realized by a phrase or a clause; to make it easier for the reader, we underline all such multi-word actants. Just as in the case of the English verb *give*, not all semantic actants need be expressed in a given realization of the lexeme. (cf *I gave at the office*.) In Penan, even a grammatical subject can be omitted from a sentence.

1a. ***X pelin Y***

= X has peculiar and undesirable characteristics that make X resemble Y, and this resemblance between X and Y is caused by Y or something connected with Y

(NB: "peculiar" is used in the sense 'singular' or 'particular'.)

(i) *Hun bua raha nyakit nah pat lo'ong adang néh sieng uban néh (X) pelin jipen tepun (Y)*

When there are four *raha nyakit* fruits, that means they are tiger's bait, because they (X) are pelin [≈peculiarly similar to] tiger's teeth (Y).*

(ii) *Pelin gem sekering pina nah (Y) besai avé utang ayau temeu ngan lu' da' (X) né' uleu ngelapah kilin inah.* The paddles and spears of the enemies we meet (X) [will] surely *pelin* those many legs of [the] centipede (Y) if we break that taboo. (In other words, if we break that taboo, we will meet enemies, and the number of their paddles and spears will resemble, and be caused by, the number of that centipede's legs.)

(Note that in this example, the order is *pelin Y X* rather than the normal *X pelin Y*. For the sake of comprehensibility, in the gloss we revert to the normal Penan (and English) word order.)

(iii) *Avé hun iteu penakoh pelin. Penakoh kahut péh avé hun iteu “Kung, kung, kung,” uban néh pelin ha' réh muja' tulang néh lem song nah (Y).* Up until this day the *penakoh* [kind of ogre] *pelin*. The *penakoh* still makes the noise, “*Kung, kung, kung,*” for it (X) pelin the sound made by the person who pounded its bones in that rice mortar (Y). [i.e. the sound made by the mortar was “*kung, kung, kung,*” and as a result this is the sound *penakoh* make nowadays]†

(iv) *Iah pelin aseu* = He *pelin* dog. [e.g., he might be barking or scratching like a dog, or have a dog-like physical defect]

1b. ***X pelin Y uban P*** (*uban* = 'because')

= X has peculiar and undesirable innate characteristics Y, because P which occurred earlier; and Y looks like it is the result of what happened when P : P denotes a proposition

(v) *Anak néh (X) pelin pejang ujun néh (Y) uban néh nyapa tuyah metep ujun medok hun do néh nemalé (P).* His child (X) *pelin* [≈deformed with] cleft palate (Y) because he played around while butchering a monkey and cut through its mouth while his wife was pregnant (P).‡

(vi) *Lakei éh pelin jin é'éng néh avé gem néh.* A man (X) pelin [congenitally abnormal] from the waist down.

* The tiger is a spirit that lays bait to trap people. If while walking in the forest you see a small number of fruits lying on the ground far from the tree that bore them, this is likely tiger's bait. If you eat it, the tiger acquires the right to come in the night and devour you. The fruits mentioned are particularly suspect, because they resemble a tiger's canines, both in number and shape.

† In a myth, someone kills a *penakoh* and grinds up its bones as punishment.

‡ By so doing, the husband violates a taboo.

The causation here is always "supernatural", but we prefer to avoid that word since the concept can't be expressed in Penan, even in paraphrase: the preternatural universe and the material one are perfectly blended in their minds.

2. *X pelin P uban R* (*uban* = 'because')

= Because R, X acts in a peculiar and undesirable way resulting in, or consisting of, P; and P denotes an event resembling the earlier event denoted by R: P and R are propositions

(vii) *Boh éh juk kelap ayau ri' lanyu pelin pujek telo néh (P)* [lit., got-spilled dartquiver his] *barei sulat tetong balong rai kekat belat avé tahat néh ri' purun rih bepih ke' lah uban anak néh éh moko tong lamin rai pesayoh tong atip na'o ri' pujek lah bolo telak ri' (R)*. So he was about to escape from the enemies [when] suddenly [he] *pelin* his blowdarts got spilled onto the ground [by his clumsiness] (P) like so many porcupine quills, because his children at home fought over the bamboo tube full of sago forks and spilled them (R).

(Note that X is not realized in the surface syntax; as mentioned, a clause or sentence can be grammatical without having an expressed subject.)

(viii) *Pu'un lakei ja'au éh mavang ayau. Anak lakei inah éh moko tong lamin tojo getungan raho inan kayeu déhé lamin réh boh ka' ha' anak inah: "Iteu itut kei." Boh lakei ja'au inah na'at getungan raho inan kayeu dani avang néh boh lakei ja'au ri' pelin ngeradau [=shout] "Iteu itut kei" (P), boh ha' néh radau nenéng ayau ri' ayau tio kelap.* There was a man lying in ambush for enemies. The man's child who was staying behind in the house pointed to a *getungan* ant climbing down a nearby tree and said, "Look at this." Then the man saw a *getungan* ant climbing down a tree near his hiding place, and he (X) pelin shouted "Look at this," (P) and the enemies heard his shout and fled.

(R does not appear in the sentence containing *pelin*, but a statement in the preceding sentence tells us what the earlier, causative event was.)

Examination of these definitions shows that all three lexemes of the word *pelin* share two semantic components: (a) a peculiar and undesirable characteristic or act arises or occurs, and (b) this characteristic/act resembles and is caused by something in a different place or at a previous time.

The reader might have noticed that in example (vi) this second component is not expressed. Should it therefore be placed under a separate lexeme *pelin* that does not presuppose supernatural causation?

Such a lexeme does not exist. Penans automatically assume that all congenital defects are caused by supernatural agency. Whenever they use the word *pelin*, it is always in contexts where the causation is either explicitly supernatural, or puzzling and inexplicable.[§]

[§] For example, two of the examples here are taken from a myth entitled *Suket irah pelin mavang ayau* 'Story [of] people [who] *pelin* ambush enemies'. The phenomena (R) that cause the inept actions are not expressed in the title, but the stories describe these in detail.

There is an even stronger, formal reason for supposing that the supernatural element is integral to this family of lexemes. Let us look at certain key components of the examples under *pelin 1a*. For brevity, only the glosses are cited:

- (i) *pelin* tiger's teeth
- (ii) *pelin* the many legs of this centipede
- (iii) *pelin* the sound made by the person who pounded its bones...
- (iv) He *pelin* dog.

In all four cases the thing causing the peculiar and undesirable characteristic is expressed as a direct object (which in Penan, like English, is the noun immediately following the verb.) A direct object is the second most privileged element of a government pattern, and normally denotes the second most important semantic actant of the verb.

English has to translate (iv) along the following lines: "He is suffering from some peculiar characteristic as a result of magical power emanating from a dog." (This is a poor translation, but the best that can be done without writing a whole paragraph.) English can only express the supernatural connection by means of a separate and qualifying clause, in no way lexically linked to the verb. By contrast, in Penan the thing causing the supernatural effect is integral to the meaning of *pelin*, and is expressed by an element tightly bound syntactically.

Since as far as we know *pelin* is the only word Penans have to denote such ideas as 'clumsy', 'strangely inept' or 'disfigured from birth', whenever they want to describe these phenomena they must use a lexeme that normally presupposes supernatural causation. This is a rather obvious case of the effect of lexical categories on thought.

(Last amended October 2016. Search terms: "pelin definition" or "pdpelin")

¹ Mackenzie, Ian. *Lexicography among hunter gatherers: the ECD as an ethnographic tool*. In: *Smysly, teksty i drugie zahvatyvayuschie syuzhety / Meanings, texts, and other exciting things: a Festschrift to Commemorate the 80th Anniversary of Professor Igor Alexandrovič Mel'čuk*. Edited by Apresjan et al, Languages of Slavic Culture, Moscow 2012.