5. ‘Our ancestors spoke in pairs’

For a Rotenese the pleasure of life is talk—not simply an idle chatter that passes
time, but the more formal taking of sides in endless dispute, argument and
repartee or the rivalling of one another in eloquent and balanced phrases on
ceremonial occasions. Speeches, sermons and rhetorical statements are a delight.
In this class society, however, with hierarchies of order, there are notable
constraints on speech. In gatherings, nobles speak more than commoners,
men more than women, elders more than juniors; yet commoners, women and
youth, when given the opportunity as they invariably are, display the same
prodigious verbal prowess. Lack of talk is an indication of distress. Rotenese
repeatedly explain that if their ‘hearts’ are confused or dejected, they keep
silent. Contrarily, to be involved with someone requires active verbal encounter
and this often leads to a form of litigation that is conducted more, it would
seem, for the sake of argument than for any possible gain.

Three hundred years of Dutch records for the island provide an apt chronicle
of this attitude toward speaking. The Dutch East India Company’s annual
reports for Timor in the eighteenth century are crammed with accounts of the
shifting squabbles of related Rotenese rulers. By the twentieth century, the
colonial service had informally established Rote as a testing ground. If a young
administrator could weather the storms of the litigious Rotenese, he was due
for promotion. The Rotenese, in turn, obliged the Dutch byreviving all old
litigation to welcome each incoming administrator. Even occasional visitors
to the island were struck by these Rotenese qualities. In 1891, the naturalist
Herman ten Kate, on a tour of the islands of eastern Indonesia, briefly visited
Rote and observed:

   Nearly everywhere we went on Rote, there was a dispute over this or
that. The native, to wit the Rotenese, can ramble on over trivia like an
old Dutch granny. I believe that his loquaciousness is partially to blame
for this, for each dispute naturally provides abundant material for talk.
(ten Kate 1894:221)

I was fortunate to arrive on Rote late at night and thus did not become involved
in dispute until early the next morning.

An ethnography of speaking on an island where speech takes so many complex
forms is a daunting undertaking. Here, my concern is to discuss certain views
Rotenese hold of themselves, of their language and of their dialects. My

1 This chapter first appeared in 1974 in Richard Bauman and Joel Scherzer (eds), Explorations in the
object, however, is to focus these conceptions on the examination of a single, island-wide form of speaking, a code used mainly in situations of formal interaction. This ritual language is an oral poetry based on a binate semantics that requires the coupling of fixed elements in the production of phrase and verse. It is a particular instance of the phenomenon of canonical parallelism whose extensive distribution among the oral traditions of the world has only begun to be surveyed. That this phenomenon should occur in the traditions of such diverse languages as Cuna, Finnish, Hebrew, Mongolian, Quiche, Rotenese and Toda and can be found among the languages of the Ural-Altaic area, in Dravidian areas of India, through most of South-East Asia, in Austronesian languages from Madagascar to Hawai‘i, and in Mayan languages compels critical attention. The first task, in comprehending the role of this ritual language, is to sketch the general language situation and to examine the various forms of speaking that obtain on the island.

Rotenese: The general language situation

The island of Rote lies off the south-western tip of the island of Timor in eastern Indonesia. It is a small island, the southernmost of the Indonesian archipelago. In length, it measures 80 km and, at its widest point, it is no more than 25 km across.

The Rotenese made early adaptations to the arrival of the Portuguese and the Dutch in eastern Indonesia: their rulers accepted alliances, contracts of trade and Christianity. By the middle of the eighteenth century, they were already supporting their own local schools. After an initial period of sporadic localised opposition, the Rotenese managed to avoid major interference in their island affairs by deft token compliance with the Dutch and, in comparison with other peoples of eastern Indonesia, they seem to have taken maximum advantage of the colonial situation. Rote was an area of indirect rule; but, with a subsistence economy dependent on the tapping of lontar palms, the island was never drawn into the colonial cultivation system. In a region of increasing aridity, this palm-centred economy affords the Rotenese distinct economic advantage over neighbouring peoples whose swidden agriculture has reached its limits. By the early 1970s, there were more than 100 000 Rotenese: approximately 70 000 on Rote itself and more than 30 000 on Timor and other islands of eastern Indonesia. Migration from Rote, begun and fostered during the colonial period, continues to the present. The Rotenese are a proud, assertive and energetic people. They neither model themselves on nor are they assimilating to any other local group in the area.

Apart from language, dress is a distinctive mark of Rotenese identity. Their attire is unique in Indonesia. Everyday dress—particularly of Rotenese men—is strikingly
unlike that of any other people in eastern Indonesia. Instead of a head-cloth, men wear a broad sombrero-like palm hat. Their traditional tie-dyed cloths combine native design motifs with *patola* patterns taken from Gujarati cloths imported, as elite trade goods, by the Dutch East India Company in the eighteenth century. Except when working, a Rotenese man wears one of these cloths folded and draped over his shoulder. Together, cloths and hats as ideal visible badges are worn as a conscious mark of differentiation. To the outsider, this is a badge of identity.

Language is another marker of identity. *Dede’ak*, the Rotenese word for ‘language’ or ‘speech’, has multiple levels of specification. It can refer to ‘Rotenese’ (*Dede’a Rote* or *Dede’a Lote*) or to any dialect of Rotenese: *dede’a Pada* (‘dialect of Pada’) or *dede’a Oepao* (‘dialect of Oepao’). Without a qualifying term, *dede’ak* can refer to any organised coherent speech: ‘a court case’, ‘a dispute’, ‘some specific news’ or a ‘piece of recent information’. At this level, *dede’ak* emphasises what is current, is still in process and is personal. It is closely related to *kokolak* or (‘talk’ or ‘conversation’), but distinguished from other forms of organised speaking such as *tutuik* (‘tales’), *tutui-tete’ek* (‘true tales or history’), *neneuk* (‘riddles’), *namahehelek ma babalak* (‘beliefs and consequences’), *lakandandak meis* (‘dream interpretations’), *a’ali-o’olek* (a highly standardised form of ‘mockery’) and *bini* (the designation for all compositions in parallel verse, since all of these relate to some past event or follow a fixed ‘ancestral’ pattern). At one level, *dede’ak* comprises all forms of speaking; at another, it contrasts ordinary speech with other forms of more formal speaking. (The distinction resembles that between English ‘speech’ and ‘a speech’.) The use of *dede’ak*, or any other form of speaking, is not simply situation specific but situation creative. Litigants in a court case are involved in *dede’ak*; lords and elders, in comment and in rendering judgment, invoke *bini*. Bride-wealth negotiations require *bini*; if these overtures are successful, details in the negotiation can be worked out in *dede’ak*. A change in speaking can indicate a subtle change of phase in a continuous speech event.

*Dede’a Lote* is the language of Rote. It is identified with Rote and is said to be spoken by all Rotenese throughout the island. Interestingly, it is not credited with qualities that make its speakers uniquely human. *Dede’a Lote* is contrasted with other known languages of the area: *Dede’a Ndao* (‘Ndaonese’), *Dede’a Helok* (‘Helong’) or *Dede’a Malai* (‘Malay or Indonesian’). To its speakers, even those who have migrated to other islands, it is a distinct and delimitable language. The situation is, however, more complex.

To the west of Rote is the tiny island of Ndao; to the east, the slightly larger island of Semau. On both of these islands live separate ethnic groups of 2000 or more people conscious of their gradual linguistic, cultural and economic assimilation by the Rotenese. For the Ndonaese, the situation is of long standing (Fox 1972). Since the 1720s, Ndao has been treated as one of the semi-autonomous political
domains of Rote. The Ndaonese economy, like that of Rote, is dependent on palm utilisation. The Ndaonese, however, have the special distinction that all men of the island are goldsmiths and silversmiths who, during each dry season, leave their island to fashion jewellery for the people of the Timor area. Ndaonese have migrated to Rote for centuries. In every domain of Rote, there is one clan said to be of ‘Ndaonese origin’ and, to this clan, new immigrants can readily assimilate. Recently—in the past two generations—Ndaonese have adopted Rotenese hats and the design motifs of western Rotenese cloths. Women have begun to leave the island in large numbers to sell finished cloths or to take orders for the weaving of new cloths. Ndaonese is of the Bima-Sumba subfamily of languages; Rotenese is of the Timor-Ambon grouping of languages. Most Ndaonese are polyglots, having spent long periods on neighbouring islands; virtually all Ndaonese men are, at least, bilingual in Rotenese and Ndaonese and an increasing number of women are becoming similarly bilingual. The assimilation is gradual, increasing but also selective. Rotenese parallel songs, for which there are said to be no Ndaonese equivalents, seem to have already been completely adopted. There are, therefore, fluent Rotenese speakers who dress much like Rotenese but who retain their own language and separate homeland. Many of these speakers, when they cease their special occupation, abandon their language entirely and become full Rotenese.

For Helong speakers of Semau and of a single remaining coastal village near Kupang on Timor, the situation is somewhat different (Fox 1972). Helong is a language related to Rotenese, but recent contact between speakers of these languages has occurred only in the past 100 years. The Helong, under pressure from the Timorese, accompanied their ruler to Semau some time before 1815—the time of the first wave of Rotenese migration to Timor. From Timor, Rotenese later began to settle on Semau. The result is that the Helong, with a precarious swidden economy, have been swamped by Rotenese. Lacking a viable and separate means of livelihood and in close contact with Rotenese, many Helong have adopted Rotenese ways and are bilingual in Rotenese and their own language.

The other language with which Rotenese speakers have long been in contact is Malay. Unlike Ndaonese or Helong, Malay, in some form, is understood by a majority of Rotenese. Not long after 1660, Rotenese rulers began an annual exchange of letters with the Dutch East India Company’s Governor-General in Batavia. This correspondence and other dealings with the company’s representatives were carried out initially through Malay-speaking scribes and interpreters located in Kupang on Timor. In 1679, the Dutch General Missives report that one young Rotenese ruler was even transported to Kupang for the express purpose of learning Malay (Coolhaas 1971:338). By 1710, the first company interpreter was stationed on Rote; in 1729, the first Rotenese ruler converted to Christianity; and by 1735, the first Malay-speaking schoolmaster from Ambon had arrived on the island. Within a generation (by 1753), there
were six local schools, maintained by Rotenese rulers, and Rotenese had begun to replace company-appointed teachers from other islands. From the beginning, Malay was a ‘literary language’ linked with Christianity. Knowledge of Malay was necessary to read the Bible and to carry on official correspondence with the Dutch.

Malay also became the language of the heterogeneous settlement of peoples that grouped around the company’s fort, Concordia, at Kupang. Eventually, Rotenese predominated in this settlement and in the surrounding area. Over 300 years, this language of Kupang, known as Basa Kupang (Bahasa Kupang) became a distinct dialect of colloquial Malay with unmistakable Rotenese influences. Many Rotenese who live on Timor regard it as their own peculiar and special form of speaking. It is never the language of official business or, on Rote, the language of home or village, but, like other local variants of Malay, it is a language of the ‘marketplace’, spoken in town when dealing with friends and acquaintances. Later, with the increasing use of Malay in the colonial administration, with its adoption as the official language of the nation and with its use in all the schools, Rotenese were introduced to a new standard form of Malay, the official language of national unity and identity: modern Indonesian (Bahasa Indonesia).

These three varieties of Malay (‘Biblical’ Malay, Basa Kupang and Indonesian) are sufficiently different from one another to be segregated and confined to regularised situations. A Christian Rotenese, with some education, will deal with government officials (even fellow Rotenese) in Indonesian, will attend church services conducted in Biblical Malay and will rely on Basa Kupang when visiting friends or relatives on Timor. In a sense, the Rotenese have added these new forms of speaking (or writing) to their other conventional forms of speech. As with other forms of speaking, however, there is a strong tendency not to ‘mix speech’ inappropriately.

These three varieties of Malay are, however, sufficiently similar that the furtherance of one has consequences for the others. On conclusion of the national literacy campaign in the late 1950s, when the island was certified as literate in Indonesian, there was mass conversion to Christianity. Malay had served as a check on conversion and when, by decree, all Rotenese became Malay speakers, this obstacle was removed. Significantly, Biblical Malay is itself seen as a formal ritual language indispensable for Christian rituals. The parallelism that pervades the Old Testament accords well with Rotenese ideas of a ritual language. A church service consists of readings from the Bible with translations in Rotenese, Malay songs and long sermons often in Malay, with long paraphrases in Rotenese, or interspersed Malay and Rotenese, or even a cacophony of two simultaneous sermons, with one preacher speaking Malay and the other translating the Malay into Rotenese.
The dialect communities of Rote

Rotenese is the language of a small, hilly island with no natural barriers to communication. Any village area is within a day’s walk or horse ride of any other. Politically, however, the island is divided among 18 native states or domains (*nusak*). Each domain was once ruled by its own lord, who, together with the representative lords of the various clans of that domain, presided at a court and made decisions based on the customary law of the domain. Although borders have always been disputed, the separate existence of these states can be traced, through continuous archival records, over 300 years, to the mid-seventeenth century, when their rulers were first recognised by contracts of trade with the Dutch East India Company. By preventing the expansion of any one state, hampering the fluctuations of men and territory, and by dismembering the largest of these states, the Dutch fostered conditions that maintained separate entities. They froze, in effect, what was a more fluid and flexible situation and created a ‘new’ tradition of rule. Later, they attempted to counter the effects of their previous policies, but all of these twentieth-century schemes for the amalgamation of states failed. As a consequence, there exist, at present, virtually the same local political domains as existed in 1656 (Fox 1971). For a period after independence, these domains were afforded administrative
existence within the bureaucratic structure of the Republic of Indonesia, their lords are acknowledged as administrative officials and their courts allowed to retain jurisdiction over most civil disputes. During Suharto’s New Order, the administrative organisation of the island went through a variety of changes and these changes continued into the initial Reformation period. In 2002, however, Rote and Ndao were given local autonomy and since this time, the island’s administration has returned recognition to the local domains (Fox 2011).

With its political divisions, local classes, unique clan privileges and subtle social discriminations, its styles of dress and fluctuation of fashion, its variations in the performance of rituals and its differences in customary law, Rotenese culture forms a complex structure by which social groups are distinguished. Rotenese emphasise their minor social peculiarities rather than overall similarities among themselves. In particular, they invest the slight shades of difference between domains with a high degree of significance to denote their separateness from one another. The result is a family of resemblances, traceable throughout the island—a continuous variation along a multitude of non-equivalent scales. Dress—to the outsider, the mark of Rotenese identity—is internally a heraldic display that identifies a person’s domain, class, status and, in some instances, court office. Land is the other prime mark of identity. Where no natural, visible barriers occur, the Rotenese have erected political barriers fostered by indirect colonial rule. And most importantly, on the island, there is a proliferation of dialects.

By native account, Rotenese, Dede’a Lote, consists of 18 domain dialects (*dede’a nusak*). The statement is as much political as it is linguistic. The assertion is that every state has its own language. *Nusak*, like *dede’ak*, has multiple levels of meaning. It can refer to the ‘domain’, the ‘resident village’ of the lord (*nusak lain*, ‘high nusak’) or, formerly, the ‘court’ of the domain. The claim to separate *dede’a nusak* implies not only a unique dialect but also unique customary law and, previously, distinctive court procedures for dealing with litigation and other ‘affairs’ of state.

When qualifications are made to statements about the separateness of domain dialects, the qualifications are also political. The small domains of Keka and Talae achieved Dutch recognition of their independence from their neighbouring state, Termanu, in 1772. By arguments based on a kind of folk etymology in which Rotenese find a particular delight, the people of Talae are said to have ‘fled’ (*ita lai*, ‘we flee’) from Termanu. When, in Termanu, it is claimed that Termanu, Keka and Talae have a common dialect, this is recognition of a close linguistic relationship and a tactical assertion of past political claims. It is sometimes said that the small domain of Bokai has ‘no language of its own’. Again, this is not a linguistic statement so much as a reference to a well-known myth that relates the curse of the Lord of the Sea on the original inhabitants of this domain. The curse limits the number of these original inhabitants to 30
people and so the domain is said to be composed mainly of outsiders who speak other dialects. The far western domain of Delha, mentioned early in Dutch East India Company records, was the last domain to achieve Dutch recognition of its separation from Oenale, whose dialect it shares. Political factors, especially its long ‘non-recognition’, have contributed to make Delha a hotbed of resistance to all forms of rule. To other Rotenese, Delha is the backwater area of their island. (People there, it is said, are not Christians, speak no Malay and, before 1965, were ‘communist’ to a man.) When the Lord of Korbaffo, a domain of eastern Rote, was appointed a government administrative coordinator for the island, he would—as he proudly explained—speak regularly in Oenale but use an interpreter when touring Delha. All Rotenese statements about dialect intelligibility have an important political component.

A subject Rotenese never seem to tire of discussing is domain and dialect differences. The point of reference is the local dialect and comparison is always pair-wise with some other dialect. Evidence is specific, selective and piecemeal. Domains are self-centred to the point that there are relatively few people with a thorough knowledge of another dialect. Except for the high nobility, marriage occurs within the domain. One effect of Dutch rule was to impede the former migration of people among states. Contact with other dialect speakers is frequent but usually temporary. Thus the curious situation exists in which a large number of Rotenese have visited Kupang on Timor while a far smaller number have spent a single night in a domain at one remove from their own. What therefore passes as information on dialect difference, although rarely incorrect, is highly standardised. These selective features are taken up, occasionally in folktales involving strangers, in pseudo-imitation of real differences.

In 1884, D. P. Manafe, a Rotenese schoolteacher from Ba’a, wrote the first account of the Rotenese language. Through the auspices of the Dutch linguist Kern, this article in Malay, ‘Akan Bahasa Rotti’, was published in a Dutch journal (Manafe 1889:633–48). The article consists almost entirely of a listing of words in the dialects of the island and various verb paradigms in the dialect of Ba’a. Although more extensive and systematic than Rotenese conversational models, the article is itself an excellent native model. After dividing the island into its two divisions, east and west, Manafe presents his own grouping of dialects according to their ‘sound’. Although the dialects have different sounds, anyone in the east, he asserts, can, without too much trouble, understand anyone in the west. His list of dialects is as follows.

1. Oepao, Ringgou and Landu
2. Bilba, Diu and Lelenuk
3. Korbaffo
4. Termanu, Keka and Talae
5. Bokai
6. Ba’a and Loleh
7. Dengka and Lelain
8. Thie
9. Oenale and Delha

This list joins several dialects of contiguous domains; the precise criteria for this grouping are not, however, specified and the paradigms that follow illustrate differences in ‘sounds’ in dialects that are grouped together. The list, however, conforms to Rotenese standards that all valid groupings consist of nine elements, the number of totality. By no means is the list misleading. Intuitively, taking into account language, politics and local geography, it is an accurate representation of perceived domain differences. As a description of dialects, it formed the basis for the dialect study of the Dutch linguist J. C. G. Jonker (1913:531–622).

In discussing dialects, certain sound shifts are particularly noted. Dialects are divided into those that use /l/ and /r/ and those that use /l/ exclusively; those that replace /p/ with /mb/ or those that use /n/ in medial position instead of /nd/. The shift from /ngg/ to /ng/ to /k/ in medial position and the presence or absence of initial /h/ or /k/ are other often-cited distinguishing features. Since a few words, with several of these sound shifts, can be given as evidence of dialect difference, all domains can be shown to have ‘a separate language’. While they are thus concerned with linguistic discriminations, Rotenese are not interested in systematic dialectology.

The semantic diversity of dialects is of more significance to Rotenese than any phonological differences. The sound patterns of Rotenese form a continuum, but the occurrence of different words for the same object introduces radical disjunction. Such disjunction can be used to justify social and political separation. In describing themselves, Rotenese readily point out, for example, that the word for ‘man’ or ‘person’ in central Rote is *hataholi* (or its cognate, *hatahori*; *atahori*), while in Bilba and Ringgou, it is *dae-hena* (or *dahenda*); that the word for a man’s hat is *ti’i-langa* in most eastern areas of Rote, but *so’i-langga* (or *so-langga*) in Ba’a and Thie; or that the word for the annual post-harvest ritual is *hus* in Termanu and eastern Rote but *limba* (or *limpa*) in Thie, Ba’a and western Rote.

This semantic diversity is a resource for ritual language. Some native awareness of this diversity is essential to the continuance of ritual language as an island-wide code. Reflexively, this ritual language provides Rotenese with yet another view of their language and dialect.
Ritual language: A formal speech code

Ritual language is a formal speech code. It consists of speaking in pairs. The semantic elements that form these pairs or dyadic sets are highly determined. Sets are structured in formulaic phrases and their presentation generally consists of compositions of parallel verse. A *bini* can vary in length from two lines to several hundred lines. It includes the genre of ‘proverbs’ (*bini kekeuk*, ‘short *bini*’), ‘songs’ (*soda bini*, ‘to sing *bini*’) and ‘chants’ (*helo bini*, ‘to chant *bini*’). Rotenese can qualify the category *bini* in innumerable ways. A taxonomy of these forms would vary on, at the least, two dimensions: one, an enumeration of the various methods of producing *bini*—‘singing’, ‘saying’, ‘chanting’, ‘wailing’; the other, a listing of the myriad situations for which *bini* are appropriate—greetings, farewells, petitions, courtship, negotiations and all the ceremonies of Rotenese life. *Bini mamates* (‘funeral *bini*’), for example, are further subdivided into a host of *bini* appropriate to categories of deceased people: for a young child, an elder child, a virginal girl, a young noble, a rich man, a widow, and so on. The feature common to all uses of these *bini* is their occurrence in circumstances of formal social interaction. All *bini* are based on the same repertoire of dyadic sets. The same dyadic sets can, therefore, occur in any particular form of *bini*, whether proverb, song or funeral chant. Many forms are equally applicable to a variety of situations. The three *bini* that I quote here can fit any ‘situation of succession’: the installation of a new lord to continue a line of rule or the replacement of a father with his son or of a lineage member with another lineage member. The imagery is of regeneration and renewal.

**Variation (1)**

1. *Oe No Dain bi’in*  
The goat of Oe No from Dai
2. *Na bi’i ma-pau henuk*  
The goat has a yellow-necklaced beard
3. *Ma Kedi Poi Selan manun*  
The cock of Kedi Poi from Sela
4. *Na manun ma-koa lilol*  
The cock has gold-stranded tail feathers.
5. *De ke hen lu pau bi’in*  
Cut away the goat’s beard
6. *Te hu ela lesu bi’in*  
Leaving but the goat’s throat
7. *De se lesun na pau seluk*  
That throat will beard again
8. *Fo na pau henu seluk*  
And the beard will be a yellow necklace again
9. *Ma fe’a henl koa manun*  
And pluck out the cock’s tail feathers
10. *Te sadi ela nggoti manun*  
Leaving only the cock’s rear
11. *Fo nggotin na koa seluk*  
That rear will feather again
12. *Fo na koa lilo seluk.*  
And the tail feathers will be gold strands again.
13. *Fo bei teman leo makahulun*  
Still perfect as before
And ordered as at first.
Commentary (1)

This short bini is composed of seven dyadic sets (bi‘i//manu, ‘goat’//‘cock’; koa//pau, ‘tail feathers’//’beard’; henu//liilo, ‘yellow-bead’//’gold-strand’; fe’a//ke ‘pluck’//’cut’…), one redoubled personal name (Oe No//Kedi Poi), one dyadic placename (Dai//Sela) and a number of variable connective elements (ma, fo, ela, de, sel’a…). Te hu (line 6) is generally invariable, but in this composition, the chanter has attempted to cast it in dyadic form: te hu is intended to form a couple with te sadi (line 10). This is not a required set in ritual language but is the embellishment of a particularly capable chanter. As is evident, parallel lines need not be consecutive or alternating. Sequencing is complex and variable. The parallel lines of this bini are: 1/3, 2/4, 5/9, 6/10, 7/11, 8/12 and 12/14. Knowledge of dyadic sets indicates which lines are parallel. Composition is based on these sets, not on whole parallel lines.

Variation (2)

The second variation on the theme of succession uses many of the same sets. It is slightly longer and its imagery more dense. Full explication of its significance would require a diverting discussion of Rotenese cosmological ideas. It is appropriate only to the succession of a high noble or lord and implies his influence over the sea. Like the first, this variation can be used only in situations of male succession. In ritual language, the complex (crossover) formula for a male child is popi koa//lanu manu (‘a rooster’s tail feathers’//’a cock’s plume’).

1. Benga la-fafada
   Word is continually told.
2. Ma dasi laka-tutuda:
   And voice continually let fall:
3. Manu ma-koa liilok
   A cock with gold-stranded tail feathers
4. Do bi‘i a-pau henu.
   Or a goat with yellow-necklaced beard.
5. Lae: koa liilo loloilo
   They say: the tail feathers’ gold strands flutter
6. Na loloilo neu liun
   They flutter toward the ocean
7. Fo liun dale laka-tema
   The ocean depths are calmed
8. Ma pau henun ngganggape
   And the beard’s yellow necklace waves
9. Na ngganggape neu sain
   It waves toward the sea
10. Fo saini dale la-tetu.
    The sea depths are ordered.
11. De besak ia koa liilo na kono
    Now the tail feathers’ gold strands drop
12. Ma pau bi’in na monu
    And the beard’s yellow necklace falls
13. Te hu bei ela nggoti manun
    Still leaving but the cock’s rear
14. Na dei nggotin na koa ba’i
    But that rear feathers once more
15. Fo na koa liilo seluk
    And the feathers are gold strands again
16. Ma bei ela lesu bi’i’n
    And still leaving the goat’s throat
17. Na dei lesun na pau seluk
    That throat beards again
18. Fo na pau henu seluk. And the beard is a yellow necklace again.
19. Fo leo faik ia Just like this day
20. Ma deta ledog ia And as at this time [sun]
21. Boe nggati koa manakonok A change of tail feathers that were dropped
22. Ma pau manatudak ndia. And this beard that had fallen.

Commentary (2)

This *bini* introduces eight new sets (*benga*//*dasi*, ‘word’//’voice’; *-fada*//-*tuda*, ‘to tell’//’to fall’; *loso*//*nggape*, ‘to flutter’//’to wave’; *fai*//*ledo*, ‘day’//’sun’…) and omits only two sets of the previous *bini* (*fe’a*//*ke*, *ulu*//*sosa*). Parallel lines are: 1/2, 3/4, 5/8, 6/9, 7/10, 11/12, 13/16, 14/17, 15/18, 19/20 and 21/22. A feature of most invariable elements is that they may be omitted in the second of two parallel lines. Thus, *te hu* (line 13) neither recurs nor is paired with *te sadi* in its corresponding line (line 16). The connective *ma* (‘and’) is used instead. An interesting embellishment in this composition is the attempt to create a pairing of the morphological elements *la*//-*laka* (lines 1/2, 7/10). This *bini* also illustrates one of the most crucial features of ritual-language semantics: an element or word may form a pair with more than one other element. Most elements are not confined to a single fixed dyadic set but rather have a variable range of other elements with which they form acceptable sets. In this composition, the element *-tuda* (‘to fall’) forms a set with *-fada* (‘to speak, to tell’); *kono* (‘to drop, to tumble down’) forms a set with *monu* (‘to fall off, to fall from’), but in the final lines, *kono* forms another set with *tuda*. New pairings highlight different aspects of the same semantic element. The linking of elements creates a means of formal inquiry on the semantics of this language.

Variation (3)

This variation is the shortest of the three. Its format closely resembles that of the first *bini*. The imagery of succession has been changed by the use of different sets. Instead of ‘goat’s beard’ and ‘cock’s tail feathers’, renewal is phrased in terms of ‘sugarcane sheaths’ and ‘banana blossoms’. Sugar cane and bananas are, in Rotenese, botanic icons for male persons.

1. Lole faik ia dalen On this good day
2. Ma lada ledok ia tein na And at this fine time [sun]
3. Lae: tefu ma-nggona ilok They say: the sugar cane has sheaths of gold
4. Ma huni ma-lapa losik. And the banana has blossoms of copper.
5. Tefu olu heni nggonan The sugar cane sheds its sheath
6. Ma huni kono heni lapan, And the banana drops its blossom,
7. Te hu bei ela tefu okan Leaving but the sugarcane’s root
8. Ma huni hun bai. And just the banana’s trunk.
5. ‘Our ancestors spoke in pairs’

9. De dei tefu na nggona seluk
   But the sugar cane sheaths again
10. Fo na nggona lilo seluk
    The sheaths are gold again
11. Ma dei huni na lapa seluk
    And the banana blossoms again
12. Fo na lapa losi seluk.
    The blossoms are copper again.

Commentary (3)

This *bini* is based on eight sets. The set *faipleado* is the only set retained from the previous variations. *Lilo* (‘gold’) forms a new set with *losi* (‘copper’), while *kono* forms yet another set with *olu* (‘to shed’). The linkage that occurs in these short *bini* (*fada//tuda::tuda//kono::kono//monu, kono//olu*) gives an indication of the combinatorial possibilities of elements in ritual language. Underlying all expressions in this language is a stable network of semantic elements whose interrelations can be formally represented in complex graphs.

The network of some of the words for ‘speaking’ provides a simple example of this kind of graph. The slight differences among the various terms for speaking, questioning, requesting or promising are often difficult to gloss or indicate in translation. These uses are nonetheless crucial and strictly defined. *Fada*, the general verb ‘to speak, to say, to tell’, is a critical point of articulation (in terms of graph theory), since it may pair with a number of other elements. It forms dyadic sets with *hala*, which occurs as a noun for ‘voice’ or as a verb ‘to voice’; with *nae*, an inflected verbal element for indicating direct quotation; with *noli*, the verb ‘to teach, to instruct’; with *nosi*, an element that occurs only in ritual language and is thus interpreted with the same sense as its permitted co-occurrent elements; with *tuda*, the verb ‘to fall, to let fall’; and with *tudu* (‘to show, to point out’). In turn, most of these elements form sets with other elements. *Hala* forms a set with *dasi*—‘the voice or song (of a bird)’, ‘to sing (of birds)’, ‘to say something in a pleasing voice’. *Dasi* forms another set with *benga* (‘to inform, to explain, to speak when introducing something’). *Nosi* links with various different verbs: ‘to question, to ask, to request, to demand.’ These include the verbal dyadic set *doko-doe//taibi*, which is used, for example, for that special ‘gentle demanding’ that is supposed to characterise bride-wealth requests. *Tuda* is another articulation point for a series of verbs of falling, with glosses ‘to fall off, to tumble, to crumble, to shed, to peel’. The most interesting of these is the verb *olu* (‘to shed, to peel’), since it forms a seemingly curious set with *tui*. According to native exegesis, this verb *tui* is identified as the same element as the verb ‘to tell a story’, as in the partially reduplicated noun *tutuik* (‘tale’). In Rotenese, it can be literally said, of trees, that they ‘peel bark and tell leaves’. This idiom seems less peculiar when seen in light of those connections in the semantic field of which it forms a part. *(N)ae* pairs with two verbs that occur in the most common formulaic prelude for introducing direct speech, *lole hala//selu dasi*. *Selu* is the verb ‘to reply, to alternate, to exchange’ and thus also
pairs with *tuka* (‘to change, to exchange, to barter’). *Selu* is one of the elements that link this network to a larger network of relations. That some of the main verbs for ‘speaking’ should belong so intimately to the same semantic field as the verbs for ‘falling’, and also the verbs for ‘exchanging’, is one of the more interesting discoveries of this form of analysis.

The formal interrelations of all these elements are as follows

(>= forms a set with):

1. *fada* > hala, nae/ae, noli, nosi, tuda, tudu
2. *hala* > fada, dasi
3. *nac/ae* > fada, helu, lole, selu
4. *noli* > fada
5. *nosi* > fada, tane
6. *tuda* > fada, kona, kono, monu, sasi
7. *tudu* > feda
8. *dasi* > benga
9. *benga* > dasi
10. *helu* > ae
11. *lole* > ae, selu
12. *selu* > ae, lole, tuka
13. *tuka* > selu
14. *tane* > tata, teni
15. *tata* > tane, teni
16. *teni* > tata, dokodoe
17. *dokodoe* > teni, tai-boni
18. *taiboni* > doko-doe
19. *kona* > tuda
20. *kono* > tuda, monu, ngga, olu
21. *monu* > tuda, kono
22. *sasi* > tuda
23. *ngga* > kono
24. *olu* > kono, tui
25. *tui* > olu

These formal associations account for all uses of these elements within the dialect community of Termanu.

A graphic representation of these interrelations can also be made. It is of interest to note that more general semantic elements are points of articulation while those elements that are idiomatic or have restricted contextual uses are found on the extreme edges of the graph’s branching structure.
Figure 5.2: Formal Associations of the Verb Fada: ‘to speak’

While these short bini provide some idea of the structure of Rotenese composition, they give no idea of its poetic complexity. Further variations, using similar sets, are unlimited. By describing, for example, only the loss of the ‘sugarcane sheath’ and ‘banana blossom’ and by interweaving this with other plant imagery, this bini of succession can be transformed into a funeral chant. Most chants continue for hundreds of lines. With elaborations and repetitions, their performance can occupy several hours of an evening. To achieve a minimal fluency and become socially recognised as a promising chanter, an individual must have knowledge of at least 1000 to 1500 dyadic sets.

Communities and resources for performance

One direction of some previous studies on parallelism—those that have followed leads outlined by Lowth (1753, 1778)—has been to distinguish three sorts of parallels: 1) synonymous parallels, 2) antithetic parallels, and 3) synthetic parallels. As a general typology, this approach is somewhat useful, but as a precise analysis of a large lexicon of dyadic sets, it has only limited value. The criteria for synonymy or antithesis are difficult to make precise and the more precise these criteria are made, the more the residual class of synthetic parallels tends to increase. Furthermore, the approach limits analysis to the single relation between elements of a pair and takes no account of an element’s range of associations or its location as a node in a network of semantic interrelations.

Using a loose notion of synonymy, however, it is apparent that many pairs have ‘similar’ meaning. Were these the only class of pairs in ritual language, there
would be some justification for reducing parallelism to a mere ritual redundancy. Near synonyms, however, account for only a portion of the lexicon in traditions of pervasive parallelism, and, even between paired elements, differences between these elements cannot be discounted. The general effect is always that of carefully calibrated stereoscopy—a fusion of separate images. A loose notion of synonymy can nonetheless serve as a starting point in the examination of the use of dialect variants in ritual language.

Rotenese bifurcate their island into an eastern division, occasionally known as ‘Sunrise’, called Lamak-anan, and a western division, ‘Sunset’, called Henak-anan. To these divisions, with some justification, Rotenese attribute a host of distinguishing characteristics: economic, political, social and, above all, linguistic. The central domains of Termanu, Keka and Talae straddle the imaginary line that divides the island. There is no consensus on whether these domains belong to the east or west, and they can be assigned by individuals to either division.

In Termanu, it is often explained that in ritual language many synonymous sets are composed of one term from the eastern division and one from the western division. No Rotenese, however, has, nor could have, perfect knowledge of the dialect situation on the island nor do individuals necessarily share the same knowledge of other dialects. In all cases, an individual’s knowledge is held in relation to his own local dialect—a specific speech community. The occurrence of a term in any single dialect of one division is sufficient to cast it as the term of that entire division. The situation of individuals literally in the middle—in Termanu, Keka and Talae—is even more complex. For certain pairs, their dialect belongs to the western division and the foreign term comes from the east; for other pairs, theirs is the eastern division and the foreign term comes from the west. Like all native models, the Rotenese view of division dialects is a partial, specific, though not inaccurate, perception that closely partakes of the phenomenon it is intended to describe. Imperfect knowledge is essential to the maintenance of the model.

The simplest illustration of the use of dialect semantics—one that would confirm the native view—is the following list of dyadic sets:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Eastern Rote</th>
<th>Western Rote</th>
<th>Gloss</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. dae hena [Bilba]</td>
<td>hataholi [Termanu]</td>
<td>‘man, human person’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. luak [Korbaffo]</td>
<td>leak [Termanu]</td>
<td>‘cave, grotto’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. pela [Bilba]</td>
<td>lange [Termanu]</td>
<td>‘to dance in a specific way’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. lain [Termanu]</td>
<td>ata [Dengka]</td>
<td>‘heaven, sky; above’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. ka [Termanu]</td>
<td>kiki [Thie, Dengka]</td>
<td>‘to bite’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. sele [Termanu]</td>
<td>tane [Loleh]</td>
<td>‘to plant’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Examples 4 and 5 illustrate the aspects of borrowing. *Longe* (from *ronggeng*) and *ata* (from *atas*) are probably Malay borrowings. Evidence from Borneo (Hardeland 1858:4–5; Evans 1953:495–6) suggests that the direct borrowing of one term from Malay and the coupling of this term with a term from the native language is a possible, and undoubtedly widespread, means of creating synonymous dyadic sets (compare this with the use of Spanish loan words in the construction of Zinacanteco couplets, as reported by Bricker 1974:379–80). Interestingly, given Rotenese use of Malay, recognisable Malay words in ritual language are surprisingly few. Direct borrowing does not seem to occur. The few Malay words in ritual language are dialect words adopted from Malay in some—but not necessarily all—dialects on the island. Ritual language remains remarkably impermeable to Malay. The same is true of the few Dutch and Portuguese words in ritual language. Instead of being strange foreign words, they are current words in ordinary speech. Two dyadic sets happen, in fact, to combine one Dutch and one Portuguese-derived term. *Kana(k)* (‘small table’) from Dutch *knaap* forms a set with *kadela* (‘chair, stool’) from the Portuguese *kadera*; *kuei* (‘socks, slippers’), a word compounded of Dutch *kous* and Rotenese *ei(k)* (‘foot’), forms a set with *sapeo* (‘non-Rotenese hat’) from the Portuguese *chapeo*.

10. henu [Termanu] sofe [Thie] ‘full, sufficient’

Example 10 illustrates a further important effect of the use of dialect words. It would be almost impossible to expect dialect terms to be so conveniently segregated in eastern and western areas. The set *henu//sofe* is one of the standard sets cited as an example of division dialect segregation. The fact is, however, that *sofe* (or more often *sofe-sofe*) occurs in Termanu dialect. Its sense is altered slightly. Instead of meaning ‘full, sufficient’, it occurs adverbially to indicate something that is ‘too much, overflowing, brimming’. In native exegesis, *sofe*, by its concurrence with *henu*, is taken to have the ‘same’ meaning and this meaning of *sofe* is, correctly, identified as a dialect usage in Thie. Other examples can be shown:

11. pada [Termanu] bata [Loleh] ‘to forbid’

These words are probably ancient cognates, although /b/→/p/ and /d/→/t/ do not presently operate as dialect sound shifts. *Bata* means ‘to forbid’ in Loleh, but it also occurs in Termanu with the related sense ‘to hinder, to hamper’.

12. tenga [Termanu] nggama [Ba’a] ‘to take up, to grasp’
Tenga is ‘to grasp’ something in the hand; it forms a set with nggama, a verb that in Ba’a has the similar meaning ‘to take up’ or ‘to pick up’ something. This verb, when it occurs in Termanu, has quite a different sense: ‘to undertake something, to be on the point of doing something’.

13. bali [Termanu] se’o [Ba’a] ‘to mix, to blend’

This set illustrates a minor but common use of dialect words. Se’o is recognisably sedo in Termanu. Both words have much the same meaning—‘to mix non-liquids’—but it is Ba’a’s dialect form, not Termanu’s ordinary form, that occurs in the ritual language of Termanu. In the third bini variation quoted earlier in this chapter (lines 4 and 12), the word losi(k) (‘copper’) occurs with lilo (‘gold’). The dialect, or other origin, of losi(k) is uncertain. The chanter who provided the bini noted that losi(k) = liti(k) (‘copper’) in Termanu dialect. The sets of ritual language are formulaically fixed. Whether a knowledgeable chanter might legitimately substitute sedo for seö or liti for losi(k) is a question I cannot yet determine.

14. ndano [Loleh] toko [Thie] ‘to catch//to throw away’

The use of dialect words is not confined to synonymous sets and these paired elements are not always from either the eastern or the western divisions of the island. This is an antithetical set made up of words from two domains of the western division. Ndano is equated with ndaso in Termanu since both verbs have a similar sense; toko in Termanu has the meaning ‘to beat, to knock’ rather than ‘to throw away’.


Lima, the word for ‘hand’, is used throughout Rote; one element in its range of pairs is kala (‘chest’). This is equated with the Termanu dialect term fanak. Kala (or kara), however, occurs in eastern dialects and in western dialects but not in Termanu. In areas where kala is used, this is not a dialect set. In Termanu, it is; but its distribution does not fit the native dialect model.

16. pu [Termanu] oku [Keka] ‘to scream, to flush out animals with noise’

Pu is found generally through all the dialects; oku is apparently specific to Keka. Thus for individuals in Termanu (but not in Ba’a), this set is also at variance with the native model. Dialect use pervades ritual language as a fundamental process in the creation of an elaborate tradition of parallelism. No simple model would be sufficient to explain all its aspects.
Conclusions

The impression of ritual language on its hearers is one of some strangeness—in relation to ordinary speech. The use of dialect variants contributes to this strangeness. Words are used in a variety of ways that make them slightly discrepant from their ordinary usage; but the concurrence of each of these words with another that signals its sense creates a kind of resonant intelligibility—one that varies from individual to individual. This ritual code, in its entirety, is probably beyond the comprehension of any of its individual participants. To these participants, it is an ancestral language that they continue. It is a language into which individuals ‘grow’ as their acquaintance with proper forms increases. This process should last a lifetime and tales are told of former elders who, as they approached extreme old age, ceased to speak ordinary language and uttered only ritual statements.

As a linguistic proposition, I would suggest that all elaborate forms of parallelism possess dialect variants in their repertoire of poetic words. Language diversification is a process that parallelism exploits. The Hebrew poetry of the Old Testament shares sets in a common tradition with the ancient Canaanite epics. Similarly, the related ritual languages of Borneo utilise dialectal diversity. There is also a good indication that this may hold as well for various Mayan languages. More comparative research is necessary.

In a speculative vein, I would point to the recent neurophysiological research of Pollen et al. (1971) that suggests, rather strongly, that the brain’s processing of visual information is of the same form as its processing of auditory information. The analogy of linguistic parallelism with visual stereoscopy—a fusion of separate images—is by no means strained. Nor is parallelism a limited and trivial phenomenon. Systems of pervasive canonical parallelism are extreme (and relatively transparent) elaborations of a principle that appears to underlie much linguistic expression and, as Jakobson has repeatedly argued, most poetry. It is further remarkable that canonical parallelism, in its distribution in the world’s oral traditions, is reserved for special situations: scriptures, the utterance of sacred words, ritual relations, curing and communication with spirits. In future studies of semantics, the formal structural systems on which traditions of canonical parallelism are based may provide cases for special study. From these, it could appear that what we refer to as meaning is neither the listing of components nor the accumulation of features but the interval of a function.

Finally, I call attention to the special role of the chanters (manahelo) in the maintenance of ritual language as an intelligible code. At present, on Rote, those designated as chanters are a few male elders recognised by a loose popular consensus in each domain. In an earlier account of Rotenese life,
however, Heijmering (1843–44:356–7) describes chanters as an elite profession of wandering poets who would journey from domain to domain performing ritual services, particularly at funeral ceremonies. Chanters have now become, or are in competition with, Christian preachers. Almost without exception, the chanters from whom I gathered texts were men of wide experience and capable in their other activities. Those who could provide exegesis on chants had spent some time in one or another domain. My own teacher in ritual language, Stefanus Adulanu, was Head of the Earth (Dae Langa) in clan Meno of Termanu; he had lived for a period of his youth in Diu. An old man of near seventy, he was still improving his chant knowledge. In addition to myself, there was another man in his late forties who spent time learning from the old man. After what consisted of more than a year’s apprenticeship, I began gathering texts from chanters in other domains. Old Meno was always anxious that I read to him what I had gathered. Those chants that pleased him, he would have me repeat several times until he could render them as his own. When I questioned him on how he had learned all that he knew, he would tell me the same brief story that, as a child, he would lie beside his father at night on a sleeping platform and his father would instruct him. Old Meno is dead now but his line continues.

It is a Rotenese practice, as the final act of the funeral ceremonies a year or more after burial, to erect a raised ring of smooth stones around the base of a large tree to honour a dead man. In alluding to this custom, Meno gave me this further variation on the theme of succession.

Variation (4)

1. Ngongo Ingu Lai lalo
3. Delalo ela Latu Ngongo
4. Ma sapu ela Enga Lima.
5. Boe te ela batu nangatun
6. Ma lea ai nasalain
7. De koluk Ngongo Ingu Lai
8. Te Latu Ngongo nangatu
9. Ma haik Lima Le Dale
10. Te Enga Lima nasalai.
11. Fo lae: Ngongo tutuü batun
12. Na tao ela Latu Ngongo
13. Ma Lima lalai ain

Ngongo of the Highland dies
And Lima of the Riverbed perishes.
He dies leaving Latu Ngongo
And perishes leaving Enga Lima.
But he leaves a stone to sit on
And leaves a tree to lean on.
Plucked is Ngongo from the Highland
But now Latu Ngongo sits
And scooped is Lima from the Riverbed
But now Enga Lima leans.
They say: Ngongo’s sitting stone
Was made for Latu Ngongo
And Lima’s leaning tree
Was placed for Enga Lima