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The language of eating and drinking: a window on Orang Asli meaning-making

Niclas Burenhult and Nicole Kruspe

1. Introduction

For the ethnographer and field linguist alike, understanding one's object of inquiry involves painstaking examination and characterization of indigenous distinctions, big and small. Whether at the micro-level of meaningful sounds, or the macro-level of overarching cosmological concepts, the teasing out of these distinctions—typically under trying circumstances—is a prerequisite for any successful interpretation of the representational levels and systems that interest us. At every level, however, language provides the primary inroad into the subject matter. This volume is dedicated to two scholars whose indefatigable pursuit of such distinctions has created the foundations of our current understanding of the rapidly vanishing identities and worldviews of the Orang Asli. The editor of the volume is in their company. For these scholars distinctions in language have not only been mere vehicles of analysis but eminent objects of study in their own right.

In the spirit of Geoffrey Benjamin, Bob Dentan and Kirk Endicott, we make in this chapter a first probe into the lexical domain of eating and drinking as it is construed in the Aslian languages, a branch of the Austroasiatic language family spoken by a majority of the Orang Asli of the Malay Peninsula. Fundamental to human experience and representation, the domain of ingestion has received increased linguistic attention in recent years. Setting out from our own primary field data from several Aslian languages, collected over the past 25 years¹, we examine the form, meaning, and history of eating and drinking vocabulary and show that Aslian harbours unusual lexical strategies for ingestion. We place particular focus on ingestion events as expressed in the class of verbs. Moreover, in this seemingly restricted and mundane domain, we unpack semantic principles of wider significance to Aslian meaning-making, which speak directly to cultural distinctions within the Orang Asli sphere. In particular, we uncover a clear distinction in semantic categorisation strategies between foragers and non-foragers.

¹ Archived at www.lu.se/rwaai.

2. Background

2.1. *The linguistics of eating and drinking*

Ingestion is central to human experience and a domain certain to be universally represented in language and thought. In fact, eating and drinking are such basic functions that they might seem to be good candidates for universal lexical expression in the world's languages. However, although all languages seem to target the domain lexically, there is increasing evidence of considerable diversity in how word meanings delimit the domain, and how they divide it up (Newman 2009a). At the one extreme, some languages have a single word which denotes both eating and drinking, and in some instances other activities of consumption as well, such as smoking (Aikhenvald 2009, Wierzbicka 2009). At the other extreme, some languages divide up ingestion into a number of different categories, with distinct words for different kinds of ingestion determined for example by the manner in which something is ingested or, less in evidence, by what is ingested (Rice 2009). Despite this semantic diversity, current wisdom asserts that the basic and universal character of ingestion makes it an important source domain for metaphorical imagery and involves widespread figurative extension to other experiential domains (Newman 2009b:VII). For example, words for eating are frequently mapped onto experiences like internalisation (English *swallow one's words*), emotional or intellectual satisfaction (English *be consumed with passion*), psychological torment (English *eaten up with anger*), and so on. Thus, the domains of cognition and emotion have a strong tendency to become targets of such ingestion imagery. Other more concrete examples of extension include physical destruction and sexual intercourse (Newman 2009c).

2.2. *The Aslian languages*

Aslian is a small geographically and typologically outlying branch of the Austroasiatic language family, comprising some 18 languages, which are divided into three main sub-branches—Northern, Central and Southern—and the isolate Jah Hut (Dunn *et al.* 2011). Peculiar to this branch is a relatively well-documented societal and biological diversity unmatched not only within the family, but across Mainland Southeast Asia more generally. Less well known is the linguistic diversity that the Aslian languages harbour, and the potential insights this can provide into the subsistence modes, the world views, the ethnographies, and the histories of their speakers. In a framework developed by Benjamin (1976, 1985), a three-way division within Aslian was postulated, where Northern Aslian languages aligned with the mobile foraging of the Semang, Central Aslian with swidden horticulture of the Senoi, and Southern Aslian with the collection of forest produce for trade of the Malayic cultural tradition (1976, 1985). These categories

however are not watertight, and several groups display considerable admixture cross-cutting the categories (Burenhult *et al.* 2011), for instance the Central Aslian speaking Semnam foragers, and the Southern Aslian speaking Semaq Beri foragers. Our previous research into Aslian genealogical relationships, using modern techniques (Dunn *et al.* 2011) but inspired by Benjamin (1976), essentially supported Benjamin's findings of a tripartite branching of the Aslian languages. In this study into Aslian semantic typology, we reveal how linguistic categorisation strategies correlate with cultural distinctions, in this case foragers versus non-foragers, cross-cutting the genealogical subgroupings.

The Aslian languages are typologically peculiar in a number of ways. However, the feature of most concern to this study is their unusual penchant for very detailed meanings encoded in single words, especially verbs, and in domains presumed to be fundamental to human experience. This is a recurring feature across various verbal domains and emerges as a systematic and global principle of lexicalisation (Kruspe *et al.* 2014:466-467; see Matisoff 2003:48-50; Wnuk, forthcoming). For example, instead of having a word meaning 'to carry' or 'to transport', many Aslian languages have distinct, formally unrelated words for different manners of carrying: 'carry in one's hand', 'carry on one's back', 'carry on one's shoulder', 'carry on one's head', and so on. Another example is the domain of motion, which in most Aslian languages is divided up lexically according to the substrate and direction of motion: 'walk along a river', 'walk along a hillside', 'walk up a hillside', 'walk along crest of a ridge', etc. Even an activity like 'looking' can be cut up into distinct one-word concepts like 'look right in front', 'look upwards', 'look downwards', 'look sideways'. This semantic principle appears quite extreme from a cross-linguistic perspective, and its causes and effects on language in general remain largely unexplored.

3. The Aslian ingestion lexicon

3.1. Semantic encoding: matter, manner, and more

Lexicalisation of ingestion can take a variety of forms and conflate different components of meaning. For example, in English and many other languages, the properties of the ingested substance account for the basic lexical distinction between *eat* (solid food) and *drink* (fluid). Many languages make further distinctions on the basis of the manner in which the substance is ingested, for example English *nibble*, *gobble*, *sip*, and *swig*. Other conceivable components of semantic encoding include the location of ingestion (for example, at the table vs. in the open air), the instrument of ingestion (for example, an implement vs. the hand), or the force or actor of ingestion, (*eat* vs. *feed*), although such lexical distinctions are less in evidence. Languages also vary greatly as to the semantic extension of their ingestion terms. Some have a single verb which covers both eating and

drinking, and sometimes also activities like smoking, or having sexual intercourse, in which case the term might be better translated into English as ‘ingest’, ‘consume’, ‘enjoy’, or similar (Aikhenvald 2009). Others, conversely, make more fine-grained distinctions, lexicalising for example, the difference between ingesting separate types of solid food as in the Athapaskan languages (Landar 1964; Rice 2009; see Berlin 1967 for Mayan Tzeltal). The semantic range of English *eat* may in such cases be divided up and covered by more than one term.

As noted, a characteristic feature of the Aslian languages is their penchant for fine-grained semantic distinctions in the verbal lexicon (Kruspe *et al.* 2014:466). The domain of ingestion is no exception, and two major semantic components are relevant in accounting for the rich Aslian ingestion vocabularies: (1) the categorial identity of the ingested substance (the ‘matter’, 3.1.1), and (2) the way in which a substance is ingested (the ‘manner’, 3.1.2). Furthermore, occasional terms encode additional components such as location, or cultural mores (3.1.3).

3.1.1 Verbs encoding categories of ingested matter. The simplest and most commonly attested lexical distinction noted for verbs of ingestion is a basic one between properties of the ingested substance where *eat* is for solid food and *drink* is for fluids. This is the case in a number of Aslian languages like Semelai (Southern Aslian) which has *ca* ‘to eat’ and *jɔɔh* ‘to drink’, Jah Hut (isolate) *caʔ* ‘to eat’ and *wəh* ‘to drink’ (Kruspe field notes 2002), and Ceq Wong (Northern Aslian) *caʔ* ‘to eat’ and *ɔuh* ‘to drink’ (Kruspe 2010). The Central Aslian languages Temiar (*ca:ʔ* ‘to eat’ and *ɔ:k* ‘to drink’) and Semai (*cv:ʔ* ‘to eat’ and *ɲɔ:t* ‘to drink’) also appear to follow this basic pattern (Benjamin p.c.; Diffloth p.c.).

Mah Meri (Southern Aslian) lacks a monolexemic (one-word) term for ‘to drink’; the verb *cado* is a fusion of *ca* ‘to eat’ + *do* ‘liquid’, suggesting a more generic meaning of consume, rather than eat (compare with the corresponding term in Mayali, an Australian language, Newman 2009:4). In fact, this appears to be reflected in extended senses of the verb to mean ‘consume’ or ‘destroy’, see 3.4 below.

Another major organising principle present in some Aslian languages—and one that is far less familiar to a speaker of English, Malay, Temiar, or Semelai, for example—is the encoding of different food categories in the ingestion verbs. The first indication in the literature of such distinctions was provided for Batek by Endicott (1974). In such languages, a small set of verbs express ingestion of a corresponding set of generic food categories represented by nouns. This pattern of encoding culturally defined generic categories of foodstuffs in basic eating verbs is hitherto unattested elsewhere among the world’s languages, unrepresented for example in the contributions in Newman (2009a).

The Northern Aslian language Jahai, spoken by subsistence foragers in the upper parts of Perak and Kelantan and adjacent parts of southern Thailand, is a case in point. Here, four generic food categories—*bap* ‘starchy food’, *tʔaʔ* ‘leafy greens’, *bɔh* ‘ripe fruit’, and *ʔay* ‘edible animal’—are closely matched by a set of four ingestion verbs. Each verb encodes the ingestion of members of a particular generic category: *gey* ‘to eat starchy food’, *hẽw* ‘to eat leafy greens’, *but* ‘to eat ripe fruit’, and *muc* ‘to eat animal’. There is no general verb corresponding to ‘to eat’, so the eating verbs always involve implicit reference to which category of edibles is involved. However, the ‘eat starchy food’ verb *gey* serves as a stand-in generic if the eaten matter is not known, or if a meal consists mainly of starchy food (tubers and rice being the most basic and common staples). But it is unthinkable to use this verb generically if the meal is known to consist of only animal tissue, for example.

With almost no exception, each eating verb associates with all the members of the respective food category and closely shadows the distinctions maintained in those categories (Levinson & Burenhult 2009:161-164).² This becomes especially clear in cases where an eaten species is classified differently depending on its state of maturity. Thus, you *but* a ripe banana (categorised as *bɔh*), but you *gey* a cooked unripe banana (categorised as *bap*).

It is interesting in this context to note the categorial treatment of those few food items which do not belong to any of the four general food categories. These are often new introductions into the Jahai nutritional regime. While failing to subsume under those categories, such food does associate obligatorily with the eating verbs. The ‘eat ripe fruit’ verb *but* is used for ingestion of honey, chocolate, and other sweets; the ‘eat leafy greens’ verb *hẽw* for noodles.

Another illuminating indication of the closely matched semantics in eating verbs and food categories is provided by the ‘eat edible animal’ verb, *muc*. While this verb generally denotes the ingestion of any type of animal, one of its readings presupposes a dietary adherence to the Jahai food taxonomy in that it applies to all the species subordinate to the *ʔay* ‘edible animal’ food category, all of which represent wild game or fish. Thus, to *muc* also means to willingly and habitually eat any of those animals. If you have permanent dietary restrictions which significantly reduce your ability to eat these items, such as those prescribed by Islamic law, you cannot *muc*. Indeed, one of the most

² The semantic correspondence between food nouns and eating verbs in Jahai was a crucial piece of evidence in the development of the new theoretical and descriptive concept ‘semplates’, semantic configurations which organize lexicon across form classes (Levinson & Burenhult 2009). In this chapter we document for the first time very similar semplates in closely related languages.

commonly expressed hallmarks of ethnic identity among the Jahai, as opposed to the Malay-speaking Muslim majority of the peninsula, is the practice of ‘animal-eating’.

The closely related Northern Aslian language Batek Deq has very similar food categories and associated ingestion verbs—*ci?* ‘to eat starchy food’ and *bap* ‘starchy food’; *reŋ* ‘to eat game and mushrooms (Endicott p.c.)’ and *ʔay* ‘game’; *hãw* ‘to eat vegetable foods’ and *tʔa?* ‘palm cabbages’ and *sayo* ‘vegetables’; and *lãt* ‘to eat ripe fruit’ and *plo?* ‘fruit’ and *leŋ lwey* ‘honey’. This parallelism was first noted by Endicott (1974, discussed in Lye 2004:60; Kruspe, field notes; Burenhult, field notes). Thus, Batek Deq appears also to lack a generic verb for eat, like Jahai and Semaq Beri.

In a northern variety of Semaq Beri, a Southern Aslian language spoken by hunter-gatherers in Terengganu (Kruspe 2014), there is also a set of ingestion verbs that map onto culturally-specific food groups, first noted by Kuchikura (1987:63). The verbs and corresponding food groups are: *nca* ‘to eat starchy foods’ and *mãm* ‘starchy foods’; *cret* ‘to eat edible animal, fungi or cooked forest greens’ and *ʔay* ‘edible animals, fungi and cooked forest greens’; *glət* ‘to eat ripe fruit’, and *buah* ‘ripe fruit eaten raw’ (from Malay *buah* ‘fruit’), and *mamãh* ‘to eat raw vegetables’ (from Malay *mamah* ‘to masticate’) and the corresponding fourth group ‘raw vegetables’ which has no label, although a subgroup are called *ʔulam* ‘raw accompaniment’ (from Malay *ulam*).

Introduced foods are incorporated into existing categories and select for the corresponding verb, for example cassava, rice, and flour and derivative products like noodles, bread and cakes are in the *mãm* category and select the verb *nca* ‘to eat starchy food’, and introduced vegetables like pumpkin, beans, cabbage and eggplant, and cow’s milk are incorporated into the *ʔay* category and select *cret* ‘to eat edible game, fungi or cooked forest greens’. There are few substances which do not fall into one of these groups, the exceptions being the bodily fluids ‘honey’ and *dak tuh* ‘breastmilk’, and the introduced cultivars *tbo?* ‘sugarcane’ and *jagoŋ* ‘corn’. Honey selects a verb based on the way in which it is prepared and eaten, for example *nca* ‘to eat a starchy food’ is used for cooked bee larvae, which is classed as *mãm*, but with a manner verb (see 3.1.2) as in *blek* ‘to lick’ for extracted honey boiled with young *Bayas* or *Langkap* palm fronds, which it is then eaten off.

If one eats a starchy food in combination with an accompaniment from the *ʔay* class, it is described as *nca mãm* ‘to eat starchy food’, but in all other cases, the speaker must select the verb appropriate to the category, and are observed to self-correct when inadvertently using the wrong term. The combination of a verb and an inappropriate entity is marked and indicates an extraordinary situation.

There is no word for meal, nor are there prescribed meal times; people will eat early in the morning when they wake if they have food, otherwise they only eat when

food becomes available. The Semaq Beri describe *mām* as the minimal component that constitutes a meal, for the purpose of staving off hunger. A ‘real’ meal, includes an accompaniment of animal *ʔay*, which causes one to feel truly sated, rather than simply full, and speakers often say they have not really ‘eaten’ if they have only consumed a meal of starchy food, (Dentan (1970:18) for Semai, Howell (1989:230) for Ceq Wong for similar sentiments, and Kruspe field notes for Semelai). Although meat is highly-prized, it is rarely eaten alone. When a hunter returns with game, regardless of the time of day, rice or tubers are prepared to accompany the meat (Kuchikura 1987:63-4; Kruspe field notes 2008-11).

The Semaq Beri are a disparate group spread over a vast area from northeast Pahang and adjoining Kelantan and Terengganu, to areas south of the Pahang river. In a southeastern variety, also spoken by people who were traditionally foragers (Kruspe field notes), the attested eating verbs are *mĩʔ* ‘to eat starchy food’, *crɛt* ‘to eat edible animals’ and *glət* ‘to eat ripe fruit’. Investigation is ongoing, but there only appears to be labelled food categories for edible animals (*ʔuʔʔʔ*) and ripe fruit (*bwah*), and not for starchy foods. It is unclear if there is a separate verb for the consumption of vegetables, and whether they constitute a separate class.

Preliminary observations suggest that similar semantic principles apply to the basic ingestion verbs in Semnam, a Central Aslian variety spoken by former foragers in the middle Perak valley. Thus, the verb *buut* ‘to eat leafy vegetables’ maps on to the food category *bəəy* ‘leafy vegetables’, *hilĩt* ‘to eat fruit’ to *kmɔɔʔ* ‘fruit’, and *tuuy* ‘to eat animal’ to *ʔnteʔ* ‘animal, game’ (Burenhult & Wegener 2009:295ff.). However, the generic verbs *gɛɛy* ‘to eat’ and *ʔɔŋ* ‘to drink’ encode a distinction similar to that in English (solid food vs. fluid) and do not associate with more detailed classifications of ingested matter. That is, Semnam *gɛɛy*, unlike its cognatic Jahai equivalent *gey*, does not encode ingestion restricted to starchy food, a category for which there is no overarching term in Semnam.

It is noted that generally Aslian verbs do not encode distinctions about the kind of fluid being ingested, perhaps because traditionally after weaning the only beverage available was water; however, distinctions are found as in Ceq Wong *gak* ‘to drink vine sap’, and Semelai *jmɛʔ* ‘to drink alcohol’, the latter being the only group known to distill alcoholic beverages.

It is noteworthy that systems of food category-encoding eating verbs are only recorded in languages whose speakers are or were traditionally subsistence foragers: Jahai, Batek, Semaq Beri, and Semnam. They remain unattested in other Aslian languages, including Ceq Wong, Semai, Semelai, Jah Hut, and Mah Meri. Interestingly, however, the food categories as such may have very close parallels in these languages, as

shown early on for Semai by Dentan (1970), and for Ceq Wong (Howell 1989:170; Kruspe field notes).

3.1.2. *Verbs encoding manner of ingestion.* Aslian languages have a wealth of ingestion terms that encode specific techniques, including delivery of food to the mouth and mastication. Although associated with a limited set of ingested items, such techniques are typically unrestricted in relation to food categories of the kind described in 3.1.1. For example, some languages have a verb dedicated to ingesting by chewing the ingestible substance out of fibrous or crusty material that is then discarded, such as sugarcane, stringy tubers like the edible piscicide *Dioscorea piscatorum*, and honeycomb (Jahai *kpah*; Semaq Beri *kpat*). Another verb denotes sucking digestible matter out of a hard casing, such as molluscs or crustaceans from their shell, or marrow from a bone (Jahai, Kentaq and Batek Deq *sksɔk*, Semnam *soo?*, Mah Meri *cɔcɔp*, and Ceq Wong *krɔŋ*). The preceding Ceq Wong term contrasts with *sɔk* ‘to suck liquids through an instrument’. Other verbs denote ingesting any type of loose matter from a cupped hand (Jahai *həp*, Semnam *suoop*, Semelai *həp*, and northern Semaq Beri *mĩk*); or biting off parts of crunchy or crispy food items, such as stalks, biscuits, or chocolate bars (Jahai *raŋip*, possibly from Malay *rangup* ‘crisp’); sucking until dissolved (Ceq Wong *but*); gnawing (Jahai *kɔc*, Ceq Wong *raŋ* and Semaq Beri *ruŋ*), and licking or lapping up (Jahai, Batek Deq and Ceq Wong *kal*, Semelai *lek* and Semaq Beri *blek*).

Some verbs denote eating techniques that are restricted to certain food types, thereby mapping implicitly onto the food categories described in 3.1.1. For example, the Jahai verb *bic*, Semnam *ŋiic* and Semaq Beri *muc* denote eating that avoids stones or seeds of members of the generic food class ‘(ripe) fruit’ of those languages. Ceq Wong *gɔt* ‘to swallow’ is used for consuming small, whole ripe fruit, including the seed, and also medicine in tablet form. Jahai *lɛk*, Semnam *tic*, Ceq Wong *tis* and Mah Meri *kuntãy* denote eating by tearing off pieces of meat with one’s teeth (from the bones or a larger piece of meat) and are restricted to food items subsumed by the generic class ‘edible animal’, while Ceq Wong *tɔŋ* denotes biting off pieces of large starchy food like pieces of cassava or larger fruits and cassava bread, and *ŋwɛh* ‘to chew on starchy foods’. Semelai *mrataratah* and Mah Meri *latah* ‘to eat game or fish without a starchy food accompaniment’ are loans from Malay *meratah* ‘to eat only one thing’).

There are also verbs specifically for ingesting liquid foods, such as sipping or slurping hot liquids like the gravy from a stew, or slurping up hot noodles (Semaq Beri *timok*; Mah Meri *hirop* (from Malay *hirup* ‘to inhale, slurp’); Jahai *huc*).

Some languages have special verbs for ingesting substances which are then expelled, like Semaq Beri *suŋɛl* ‘to chew tobacco’, and Ceq Wong *mɛh* ‘to masticate food

for an infant'. Chewing betel has a special verb form in Batek Teq *myām*, while other languages simply use the generic verb 'to eat', or the verb 'to eat starch' for this activity.

Another large class of manner verbs is that which encodes the characteristics of the ingestion event in terms of the speed or intensity of the act of consumption, or the quantity of food consumed. These meanings are independent of the type of food eaten, and the technique involved. Jahai examples include *khɔp* 'to gobble down', *cbɔt* 'to devour', *sksɛk* 'to swallow quickly', and *jɨjɔŋ* 'to eat a lot, to glut'. Batek and Semaq Beri encode magnitude with *bagət* 'to eat a lot'. Other examples are Semaq Beri *ratuŋ* 'to chew vigorously (as on tough flesh)', *jɨjɔŋ* 'to suck vigorously', *bhan* 'to eat voraciously', Semelai *ksep* 'to eat a little at a time', and Mah Meri *pəkət* 'to eat clean' and *kōc* 'to gulp down (fluids)'. In Mah Meri there are also two verbs, now rarely heard, which indicate the size of a meal, *teŋkere?* 'to eat a light meal', and *tkancak* 'to feast'. Semelai *bjujay* or *rboboŋ*, which express gobbling or eating up on one's own, are imbued with negative connotations.

Verbs of drinking may encode manner in terms of bodily posture (Ceq Wong *pijər* and Semaq Beri *gakgek* 'to drink with the head tilted back'), and are restricted to the consumption of fluids. The Mah Meri term *dəbək* means 'to drink in a manner that fouls the drink', for example with one's mouth over the bottle.

Aslian languages also have ingestion terms specific to ingestion by infants, for example 'to suckle' (Mah Meri *mũ?*, Jah Hut *b?bu?*, Ceq Wong *bu?*, Semaq Beri *mōm*), or 'to eat pre-masticated food' (Ceq Wong *mōk*). Often there are also special verb forms used when speaking to small children (Ceq Wong *gĩ?* and Mah Meri *mam* 'to eat'), or special imperative forms used to cajole infants (Semelai *??ɔh!* 'Drink!' and Ceq Wong *mɔ?!* 'Suckle!').

3.1.3. Other distinctions. In the Southern Aslian languages Semelai and Mah Meri location is also a relevant distinction in the domain of ingestion, reflecting a general worldview that the forest or areas outside of one's immediate place of residence are fraught with danger. To eat 'in the wild' is a marked event, yet only in Semelai is this lexicalised in a unique verb *bbtir* 'to eat a meal outdoors away from one's residence'.

Across the Aslian sphere there are wide-ranging proscriptions in relation to the acquisition, handling and consumption of food. In many languages this is evident linguistically in avoidance terms for naming animals, and other potential foodstuffs, see Lye 2004:113-4 for Batek. In Southern Aslian this avoidance terminology extends to the articulation of ingestion, for instance in Mah Meri one should eat before setting out for the sea or forest, and the verb *ʔaʔam* 'to eat' replaces the usual *ca*.

In Semelai, a special avoidance language (*cakap bsener*), based on word substitution, is used when speakers enter the forest to prevent various misfortunes such as violent storms. Many terms are often also used around the home, by some for an extra sense of security, for others the enjoyment of wordplay. It is the only Aslian avoidance language known to include verbs, and among them are numerous ingestion verbs. The semantic distinctions in the everyday language are maintained in the avoidance language, such as separate verbs for ingesting solids versus liquids, and smoking, a situation counter to that in some Australian languages for example, where such distinctions are removed. For some verbs there are multiple terms, because certain locations were associated with heightened danger warranting their own variants. *Ca* ‘to eat’ is expressed as *bchər* from ‘to peck, of birds’ or *bcher* ‘to have stomach pains’ or the unanalysable *grphəp* (*g<rp>həp*) from *ghəp* ‘to be hot’. *Jəh* ‘to drink’ is replaced by *srdəc rwaŋ* (*s<r>dəc rwaŋ* cool<CAUS> inner.chamber) ‘to cool the inner chamber’, and ‘to drink alcohol’ is *crlew gŋŋlŋŋ* (*c<r>lew g<ŋŋ>lŋŋ* bathe<CAUS> swallow<NMZ>) ‘to bathe the throat’ from *clew* ‘to bathe, (avoidance term)’.

Ingestion verbs also feature in the formation of avoidance terms, like *ca jklək* (*ca jk<k>lək* eat smoke<HAVE>) ‘to smoke’, expressed as *ʔjuk* ‘to suck, smoke homegrown tobacco’ or *mrəkək* ‘to smoke cigarettes’ in everyday Semelai. Likewise, an avoidance term for *ca pinəŋ* ‘to chew betel nut’, is *ca daʔ br-ca* (eat NEG MID-eat) literally, ‘to eat the inedible’, perhaps making the point that the areca nut itself is not actually ingested. Within our sample, however, we have only documented this feature in Semelai.

Another distinction found in Southern Aslian is the presence of dysphemistic forms for some ingestion verbs, used either to express displeasure or disgust at the consumer (Mah Meri *tdarah* ‘to eat’; Semelai *mmbəriʔ* ‘to eat’, *mmhəl* ‘to smoke’, or at the consumed item (Semelai *caroʔ* ‘to eat’).

The incidental distinctions discussed in this section, location and avoidance language, and dysphemism, while restricted to the Southern branch in our current data set, serve to illustrate some of the kinds of highly specific and culturally-anchored meaning-making that may be encountered within the domain of Aslian ingestion verbs.

3.3. Etymology: The story of *ca:ʔ

The history of languages can be explored by tracing the origins of words and their change in form and meaning through time, across their respective language families. Using such evidence, proto-forms are reconstructed. This approach provides valuable clues to the origins and development of current Aslian eating vocabulary. Thus, on the basis of existing Aslian words, a form **ca:ʔ* ‘to eat’ has been reconstructed for Proto-Aslian, the ancestor of all Aslian languages, estimated to have been spoken 4,000-4,500 years ago

(Diffloth 1975:6; Dunn *et al.* 2013). This Proto-Aslian form is, in turn, ultimately derived from a Proto-Austroasiatic form **ca:ʔ* (Sidwell & Rau 2014:345), reconstructed in eight of their eleven branches of Austroasiatic, and believed to belong to the very oldest layer of the Austroasiatic language family (Diffloth 2011:118). The reflexes of the Proto-Aslian form in present-day Aslian languages are given in Table 1.

Language	Subgroup	<i>*ca:ʔ</i> reflex	Recorded meaning
Ten'en Maniq	Northern	-	[cognate unattested]
Kensiw		<i>ciʔ</i>	'eat'?
Kentaq		<i>ciʔ</i>	'eat'?
Batek		<i>ciʔ</i>	'eat starchy food'
Menriq		<i>ciʔ</i>	'eat'?
Jahai		<i>ciʔ</i>	'ignite'
Ceq Wong		<i>cəʔ</i>	'eat'
Lanoh	Central	-	[cognate unattested]
Semnam		-	[cognate unattested]
Temiar		<i>ca:ʔ</i>	'eat'
Semai		<i>cv:ʔ</i>	'eat'
Jah Hut	Jah Hut	<i>caʔ</i>	'eat'
Semaq Beri N	Southern	<i>ɲca</i>	'eat starchy food'
Semaq Beri S		-	[cognate unattested]
Semelai		<i>ca</i>	'eat'
Mah Meri		<i>ca</i>	'eat'

Table 1. Reflexes of the Proto-Aslian form **ca:ʔ* and their meanings across Aslian languages and subgroups.

As can be gleaned from Table 1, the descendant forms have undergone some systematic sound changes and diversification concomitant to the different subgroups of Aslian. Indeed, such changes form part of the very identification and definition of the subgroups. For example, in the Northern Aslian languages, the long **a:* of the proto-form has developed into a short *i* or *ə*; in Southern Aslian the **a:* has lost its length and the final glottal stop has been dropped; Jah Hut has lost the vowel length but retained the final glottal stop; two Central Aslian languages have retained both vowel length and the final consonant, Temiar displaying a reflex identical to the reconstructed Proto-Aslian form.

The exact meaning of the Proto-Aslian form **ca:ʔ* is unknown. However, most present-day reflexes are recorded as having a meaning close to a generic ‘to eat’ or ‘to ingest solid food’, and it is not unreasonable to posit a similar meaning for the proto-form (Diffloth 1975:6; Sidwell & Rau 2014:345). For some of the languages, the recorded meanings are distinct: the Northern Semaq Beri and Batek exponents are glossed as ‘to eat starchy food’, showing that in these languages the form has undergone a semantic narrowing from a superordinate level ‘to eat’ to denote a subordinate type of eating defined by a food category. The Jahai exponent has a meaning ‘to combust’, ‘to ignite’, having undergone a semantic shift away from ingestion to combustion according to a well-documented pattern of extension of eating vocabulary to denote material destruction (Newman 2009c), see 3.4 below. But note that while the present meaning is likely to be the result of extension historically, it is no longer an example of extension since the meaning has been altered completely and no longer applies to ingestion.

Cognates of **ca:ʔ* are unattested in four Aslian varieties: Ten’en Maniq (Northern Aslian), Lanoh and Semnam (Central Aslian), and a southern variety of Semaq Beri (Southern Aslian). In Ten’en Maniq the most general (but possibly not fully generic) term for ‘to eat’ is *hãw* (Wnuk, p.c.), a form which has cognates in other Northern Aslian languages meaning ‘to eat leafy vegetables’ (see 3.1.1). In this case, the form has presumably undergone semantic widening from a subordinate level to a superordinate one, thus replacing the **ca:ʔ* reflex (which is still present as *ciʔ* ‘to eat’ in the closely related varieties Kensiw and Kentaq). In Semnam and Lanoh the generic eat terms are *geey* and *gey*, respectively; a term that is attested in Central Aslian Semai as *gə:y* ‘to sit’ (Dunn *et al.* 2011, Appendix³). This term from the domain of bodily postures seems to have undergone a semantic shift to ingestion, again replacing the **ca:ʔ* reflex completely. Jahai (Northern Aslian) has a cognate form *gey* ‘to eat starchy food’ while lacking a generic ‘eat’ term and reserving the **ca:ʔ* reflex for combustion senses, as described above.

Assuming that the original meaning of Proto-Aslian **ca:ʔ* was a generic ‘to eat’ or ‘to ingest solid food’, we have here observed patterns of semantic change in the form of narrowing or lexical loss that have affected a subset of the Aslian languages, including members of the Northern, Central and Southern branches of the family. Conspicuously, though, these patterns are restricted to languages spoken by subsistence foragers, and those whose basic system of eating verbs is modeled semantically on different food categories. It is tempting to hypothesise that forager-specific semantic systems based on food categories have provided a rigid framework in which inherited Aslian eating

³ www.lu.se/rwaai/

vocabulary has had to undergo particularly forceful processes of semantic change. This would be in line with a general tendency for rapid replacement and change of basic vocabulary in many of the Aslian languages spoken by foragers (Dunn *et al.* 2011; Burenhult *et al.* 2011). One caveat: detailed semantic analyses of eating vocabulary are still lacking for several Aslian varieties; for example, our current glosses of cognates in forager languages like Kentaq, Kensiw, and Menriq are provisional and may change as new data are collected.

3.4. *The semantic extension of ingestion verbs*

As noted in 2.1, there is a theoretical expectation that basic ingestion verbs are significant sources of extended meanings and figurative and metaphoric language (Newman 2009a). Cross-linguistically, ingestion verbs are well documented as a source for expressing events that focus either on the experiencer's act of consuming, the benefits of consumption, or the consumption or destruction of the ingested entity. To some extent these cross-linguistic patterns hold true for Aslian languages as well, but what is harder to determine is to what extent they are truly figurative, and not just an extension of the core meaning to a more general 'consume'. While some of the examples here are clearly figurative like *ca k^hoy* (eat head 'to be taken advantage of financially' (Mah Meri), in others the consumption is perceived as actual within the speakers' worldview, for example the consumption of the soul by an evil shaman is perceived as actual by the Semelai.

In our current data set, semantic extension is almost exclusively restricted to the generic eating verb, and appears overall to be restricted to quite specific subdomains, and in some cases in set expressions. Further, the attested extensions are almost exclusively based on the adverse effect on the consumed entity, for example *ko=ca bulan* (3UA=eat moon), literally 'Someone has eaten the moon' to describe the moonless phase before a new moon (Semelai), or the blinding effect of a light *ʔu=cəʔ kaʔ mēt* (3SG=eat LOC eye) 'It strikes (it) in the eye' (Ceq Wong).

The agent of destruction may be animate or inanimate as the preceding examples demonstrate. Commonly attested agents range from fire (Semelai and Mah Meri *ca ʔus* 'to be consumed by fire'), meteorological phenomena like a lightning strike, or the sun burning, or causing something to shine, and illness like the effects of a common cold *mrəʔ haʔ təŋ la=ki=ca=la=hawar* (be.itchy LOC ear because=3A=eat=AG=phlegm) '(My) ears are itching because (this) phlegm is affecting (them)', customary law (Semelai), and the grasshopper that causes tooth decay *ʔu=cəʔ blalaŋ* (3SG=eat grasshopper) '(I) have tooth decay', or tight elastic, and chaffing nappies (Ceq Wong). The verb *ca* may also be used to describe the effectiveness of an instrument in working on a surface, the only clear

case of agent-based extension, for example a blade cutting as in *mə=daʔ ki=ca la=wvy* (REL=NEG 3A=eat AG=knife) ‘the one the knife can’t affect’ the Semelai avoidance name for the Malayan Pangolin (*Manis javanica*), or a pen writing (Mah Meri). In Mah Meri *ca* also means ‘to suit, or match’, for example with colours or couples. Very similar extensions have been noted in Central Aslian Semai (Means & Means 1986:24; Tufvesson p.c.).

The one instance of semantic extension with an ingestion verb other than a generic ‘eat’ verb is Ceq Wong *gət* ‘to swallow’, which also means ‘to drown’, and is used to express the adverse effect one suffers when breaking a taboo. The extension of ‘swallow’ to ‘drown’ is again a cross-linguistically attested one (Newman 2009a).

A remarkable fact about the present data is that extended usage of ingestion verbs is limited in the languages in which it occurs, and is entirely absent in other languages. For example, we are unable to find a single example of extended usage of eating verbs in Jahai and Semaq Beri, two of the languages for which we have the most extensive documentation and expertise. Why should this be so? It may not be a coincidence that the languages for which we have recorded extended uses all have and employ a generic eat verb (Ceq Wong, Mah Meri, Semelai). Those without extended uses do not have such a generic verb (Jahai, Semaq Beri) but have instead a more fine-grained basic system of eating distinctions modeled on food categories. Possibly, the more detailed semantics of such distinctions do not lend themselves as well to semantic extension. It is noteworthy that their application within their subdomain of ingestion is rigidly restricted too: the verbs associate very closely with particular biological taxa and in some cases states of maturity or manner of preparation of the members of those taxa. It is unthinkable to extend the usage of such a verb to members of a food class for which it is not intended. On the other hand, we observe a general absence of figurative language and conceptual metaphor in these languages, so it may be a pattern that is not restricted solely to ingestion verbs (Burenhult, field notes).

One final factor to consider here is that the semantic extension may not be an internal development, but is in fact the result of language contact. These constructions may be modeled on similar uses of Malay *makan* ‘to eat, consume, wear away; to take effect (of weapons)’. Indeed this is the probable source of the Batek term *makan* ‘to be sharp’. However returning to the point made previously, such a development may only be possible where a language has a generic eat verb on which to build this extension.

4. Summary and conclusions

This chapter has examined the lexical representation of ingestion events in Aslian languages, as expressed in the class of verbs. Here we summarise our main findings.

First, the domain of ingestion has offered important insights into lexicalisation processes in Aslian. In what emerges as an increasingly clear and distinct Aslian pattern, monolexemic (one-word) verbs encode fine-grained semantic distinctions and divide up the domain into great numbers of categories in each language. This is concordant with similar semantic specificity observed in other domains across the family. The languages display distinct eating verbs for ingesting solids versus liquids, or smoking, as well as rich sets of single-word terms for expressing manners of intake and mastication, and adverbial qualities such as the quantity consumed or speed of ingestion.

Second, two distinct over-arching semantic types or strategies emerge from the data, associating with different subsets of Aslian languages and attendant properties.

1. One type—epitomised by Jahai and Semaq Beri and with parallels in Batek and Semnam—has a basic system of three or four classificatory eating verbs which encode high-level specificity focused on the categorical membership of the consumed item. These verbs denote ingestion of food categories, typically meat, vegetables, starch and fruit. The languages tend not to have a generic ‘eat’ verb superordinate to the food category verbs (but note the possible exception of Semnam, see below). A reflex of the Proto-Aslian eating verb **ca:ʔ* is either retained and then has a narrowed or altered meaning (as in the case of Batek, Jahai, and Northern Semaq Beri) or it has been lost altogether (as in Semnam and a southern variety of Semaq Beri). The food category verbs co-exist with a large number of additional eating verbs which encode manner of eating; in some cases these verbs are subordinate to the basic food type verbs in that they associate with the same food categories, in others they cross-cut those same categories. Extended meanings of eating verbs in the form of figurative usage and metaphorical imagery have not been documented in these languages. This type correlates exclusively with languages whose speakers have traditionally been engaged in mobile subsistence foraging, over-riding language-genealogical boundaries (Jahai and Batek are Northern Aslian, Semnam is Central, Semaq Beri is Southern).
2. The second type—represented by Ceq Wong, Mah Meri, Semelai, and probably other languages like Jah Hut—has a superordinate ingestion category in the form of a generic verb meaning ‘to eat’ or ‘to ingest solid food’. A large number of additional and more specific ingestion verbs are event-focused without specific reference to the participants, i.e. they encode different manners of eating; these types of distinctions also occur in languages of Type 1. Food category verbs are undocumented. A reflex of the Proto-Aslian eating verb **ca:ʔ* is retained and consistently represents the generic ‘eat’ verb in these languages. The languages

show evidence of marginal extension of the ‘eat’ verb to other domains, in accordance with a cross-linguistically expected pattern. This type correlates exclusively with languages whose speakers are not mobile subsistence foragers but engage in mixed swidden horticulture and collecting for trade. As in the case of Type 1, it over-rides language-genealogical boundaries (Ceq Wong is Northern Aslian, Mah Meri and Semelai are Southern).

The Central Aslian languages are comparatively understudied as far as eating vocabulary is concerned and it is not clear if they would fit into one or the other category, or form an intermediate third type. Central Aslian Semnam, spoken by a group which shares societal features with both foragers and non-foragers and for which we have only limited primary data, gives the impression of having both a generic term (albeit not a reflex of **ca:ʔ*) and a basic system modeled on food types and may thus represent an intermediate of sorts.

The food category-encoding verbs and the attendant lack of generic ‘eat’ verbs is a hitherto rarely observed strategy for basic semantic distinctions in the domain of ingestion. Our observation that these systems cross-cut language-genealogical boundaries and coincide with a forager mode of subsistence offers a cultural clue to why such systems exist. The answer may lie in the composition of meals. The peninsular foragers, like many other hunter-gatherers, are ‘immediate return’ societies (Woodburn 1982). Food resources are typically consumed directly, or shortly after they have been foraged, and they are rarely if ever stored for later consumption, nor elaborately processed (Woodburn 1982:432). This has obvious implications for meal habits: meals do not occur according to a regular daily schedule, and they do not typically involve elaborate combinations of different foodstuffs (cf. Rousseau 2006). Many if not most meals involve opportunistic ingestion of a single resource. This means that there is no culturally salient type of ingestion event for which a general concept or label ‘eat’ seems necessary; instead, each ingestion event can readily be conceptualised as something more specific. Possibly, this is what paves the way for more fine-grained systems of distinctions, such as those based on the culturally salient food categories.

The ethnographic literature on the Orang Asli provides ample evidence of differences in food ideology and preferences between foragers and non-foragers. For example, Dentan (1965:249-325) describes for the non-foraging Semai a preferred meal which combines a starchy staple with condiments in the form of meat, fish, mushrooms, or vegetables. Indeed, a meal which does not involve such a combination is considered incomplete. The foraging Batek, on the other hand, do not have such preferences but pursue and consume particular food categories and species according to availability, especially those which are seasonal (Endicott & Bellwood 1991:163).

However, the forces of language contact should not be ruled out as a potential factor as well: as we have shown in previous work, peninsular foragers exhibit distinct patterns of lexical exchange and development not shared by other Aslian speakers (Burenhult *et al.* 2011). It is not unthinkable that their contact situation has also resulted in the streamlining of semantic strategies and principles beyond exchange of individual lexical items.

Whichever cultural underpinnings are at work, we believe we have identified a hitherto unrecognised pattern of lexicalisation of the domain of ingestion. While seemingly at odds with the fundamentality of ‘eat’, lacking for example the theoretically anticipated semantic extensions of the domain, the pattern is concordant with other domains as observed in Aslian languages. The endangered Aslian-speaking cultures have once again proved to be a fertile microcosm for exploring human meaning-making across linguistic and cultural boundaries.

Abbreviations and conventions: AG ‘agent’; CAUS ‘causative’; HAVE ‘possessive’; LOC ‘locative’; NMZ ‘nominaliser’; REL ‘relative clause marker’; SG ‘singular’; 3A ‘third person agent’; 3UA ‘third person unidentified agent’; = ‘clitic’; < > ‘infix’

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