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

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

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

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

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

The comparison and evaluation of synonyms and near-synonyms helps to build up what may be characterized as a conventionally accepted semantic configuration or content of a concept. Of course, various levels of denotation – primary, direct, transposed (metaphorical, metonymical, euphemisms), etc. – are to
be taken into account in the investigation, provided they may be said to compete functionally in speech.

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

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

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

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

MAORI

LIFE
koiora: life
kaiao: alive, living
mataora: living, alive
ora: alive, well, in health, safe, satiated, survive, escape, recover
mauri: life principle, thymos, source of the emotions; talisman, a material symbol of the hidden principle protecting vitality
hau: vitality of man, vital essence of land etc.
HEALTH

hauora: spirit of life, health, vigour; healthy, fresh, well, lively, in good spirits, perfect
wairora: health, soundness
ora: alive, well, in health, safe, satiated, survive, escape, recover

DISEASE

tahumaero: sickness, disease
mahaki: sick man, invalid, sick, ill, loose, cutaneous disease
oke: struggle, wriggle, writhe, put forth one’s strength, strive, invalid, sick person, ill, ailing
wheori: diseased, ill
tuuroto: sick person, sick, corpse
mate: dead, extinguished, sick, ill, unconscious, injured, damaged, suffering, in want of, lacking, overcome with any emotion, deeply in love, calmed down, subsided, moving slowly, slack, completed, finished, accomplished, caught, injury, sickness, wound, danger, defeat, calamity, desire, company of mourners, death
mamate: distressed
matemate: sickly; shallow, failing (of streams)

DEATH

koura: the part of latrine behind the beam, fig. abyss, death
muri: North, death, the place of departed spirits
pirau: rotten, gone out, extinguished, pus, decay, death
poautinitini: tribulation, evil, death
(po)pohe: withered, blind, dead, stupid, dull, death
hemo: be passed by, be gone away, cease, disappear, miss a mark, be consumed, die, be faint, completion of action (hemonga object of earnest desire)
(ke)ker: maimed, dead, die, disappear
hurumute: die, come to an end, end, finish
makere: fall, drop, get down, alight, descend, be lost, abandoned, fail, cease, be seen in a vision, die
marere: drop, fall, be put off, be given, let oneself down, die
moe: sleep, dream, marry, repose, close the eyes, die
moonehu: fine rusty pubescence on the unexpanded fronds of bracken and other ferns, die, expire
hinga (te tootara): (the totara) has fallen
mate: dead, extinguished, sick, ill, unconscious, injured, damaged, suffering, in want of, lacking, overcome with any emotion, deeply in love, calmed down, subsided, moving slowly, slack, completed, finished, accomplished, caught, injury, sickness, wound, danger, defeat, calamity, desire, company of mourners, death
ika takoto a Tiki: the prostrate fish of Tiki, i.e. corpse
maataotao: cool, cold, i.e. die out, extinguished
Synopsis: The primary Maori word for life, *ora*, denotes both health and life, a few derivatives refer only to life (*kaiao, mataora*) as well as a few lexemes referring only to health, namely *waiora* and *hauora*. And, finally, several terms refer to life from the spiritual point of view (*mauri, hau, hauora*). At the opposite end of the scale, there are some words reserved for disease (*tahumaero, mahaki, oke, wheori, mamate, matemate*) as well as a few terms referring both to disease and death (*tuoro, mate*). However, the inventory of secondary terms referring to death and dying is impressive, due to verbal imagery, cf. *kouka, muri, pirau, (po)pohe, hemo, hurumutu, makere, marere, moe, moonehu, taawhati, maataotao, ika takoto a Tiki, tatau o te poo, manu pirau a Tiki, whati te tara o te maarama*.

HAWAIIAN

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

HEALTH
*ola kino*: state of health

DISEASE
*ma i‘i*: patient, sick person, sickness, disease, sick, ill, menstruating

DEATH
*make*: die, defeated, killed, unfortunate, to faint, death, fainting, danger of death, peril, destruction, misfortune, to kill, deathly, deadly, faint, deceased, late, obsolete, poisonous; desire, want, to want
*mamake*: wilt, wither (of plants)
*haa‘ule*: fall, drop, lose, fail, forget, neglect, die
*hiamoe loa*: oversleep, sleep deeply, eternal sleep, death (figurative)
*ala ho‘i ‘ole mai*: (literally a pathway on which there is no returning)
*moe kau a ho‘iolo*: (literally sleep summer to winter = the sleep of death) death, be dead
Synopsis: There is just one specific term for health (ola kino) and likewise one for disease (ma‘i) in Hawaiian. The basic term for life (ola) also refers to health, salvation, escape, well-being while that for death (make) denotes faintness, misfortune, danger, etc. Just as in Maori, there are terms for life pointing to the spiritual domain (ea, mauli, haa) and, at the other extreme, numerous periphrastic, figurative and euphemistic terms referring to death (haa‘ule, hiamoe loa, ala ho‘i ‘ole mai, moe kau a ho‘oiolo).

TONGAN

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

HEALTH
mo‘ui, mo‘ui lelei (see above)
ma‘ui‘ui: be in a healthy and flourishing condition (of plants), fresh
talavou: youth, adolescent, strong and healthy and good-looking
mata-mo‘ui: healthy-looking

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

DEAD
mate: (pekia honorific, hala regal) die, be stunned or quite unconscious, go out, be out (fire), be sunk or wrecked (boat), be extinct (volcano), die down, cease (wind), be eclipsed (sun, moon), stop, not be going (engine), be knocked out, defeated, be paralysed; Kuo mate ‘ene mohé “He is very fast asleep”
mamate: numb; quite barren, desert, lifeless, wrecked (of land, country)
tamate: subside, become less or slower, die down, die away
maalooloo: (euphemistic) die, orig. to rest
mama‘o: (euphemistic) die, orig. be distant, far away, be absent
hiki: (euphemistic) die, orig. move from one place to another
vio: (abusive)
fektekeva‘i: (abusive) die, cf. kekeva stiff, rigid

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

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

HEALTH
maalooolooina: (polite soifua) be healthy, healthy, health, recover from sickness, be well again

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

DEATH
mate: die (of animals, plants, fire, streams, etc.)
oot: die (of people) (polite maalaia, orig. meaning overcome by disaster, be unlucky; also maliu, cf. liu change, taliu return), be knocked out (of a boxer), finish, death
pee: (of animals) die, be dead, go out (light, fire), be low (tide), be numb, paralysed (limbs), heal (wound)
gase: be numb, without feeling, be dead, killed (of animals)
tu’umaalo: (of high chiefs) die, death (tu’u put, leave + maalo power, victory)
usufono: (polite, for orators) die (orig. attend, take part in a council)
usugafono: (polite, for orators) death

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

INDONESIAN

LIFE
hidup: life, be alive, living; thrive; run, go, be in the running, be put in use, have life; burn; fresh (fish, vegetables); flowing (water)
nyawa: soul (obviously primary meaning), spirit, life

HEALTH
sehat: healthy, sound

DISEASE
sakit: ill, sick, sore, painful

DEATH
mati: die, dead; break up; fixed (price); numb; stop (e.g. clock), go out (light, gas), fade (of sounds, flowers), dry out (water reservoir, tree), close down
Synopsis: Indonesian distinguishes life from health and disease from death just as European languages do. The words for life, living (hidup) and death, dying (mati) are extended along the anthropomorphic lines to refer to non-biological processes just as in several other Austronesian languages quoted here.

MALAGASY

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

HEALTH
salama: healthy, health

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

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

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

FIJIAN

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

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

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

LIFE
mour: life, alive, raw, undried or green (of wood), fresh
ieiias (honorable): be alive

HEALTH
roson: health, healthy (of human beings)

DISEASE
soumwhahu: sickness, disease, sick, diseased, ill
liper: sick, weak, skinny
luhmwuhmw (honorable): sickness, disease, sick, diseased, ill

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

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

TRUKES

LIFE/HEALTH
manaü: life, alive; salvation, saved; health, recovered; fresh, erect, run

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

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

* * *

It may probably be concluded that those languages which do not clearly distinguish the adjacent concepts of (1) life and health and those of (2) disease and death, i.e., Maori, Hawaiian, Tongan, Fijian, and Trukese, represent a more ar-
chaic phase. By the way, in Biblical time all seriously ill persons were considered “dead” (Kremer 1995: 68). Aside from them there are those languages in which life is carefully distinguished from health just as disease from death, namely Indonesian, Samoan and Ponapean. However, the term archaic ought to be employed with some care. For example, separate lexemes for disease and death are known to have existed in Proto-Austronesian and their fusion in some languages of Oceania is secondary. In some of the languages, however, the overlap is only partial.

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

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

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

Interestingly enough, few figurative expressions have been attested for birth; however, the notion of death finds a secondary denotation in numerous indirect expressions, very often metaphors, taken from the world of nature, cf. Maori kouka the part of latrine behind the beam, figuratively abyss, death, muri North, metonym. death, the place of departed spirits, pirau rotten, gone out, extinguished, pus, decay, death, (po)pohe withered, blind, dead, stupid, dull, death, hemo be passed by, be gone away, cease, disappear, miss a mark, be consumed, die, be faint, completion of action (cf. hemonga object of earnest desire), (ke)keru maimed, dead, die, disappear, hurumutu die, come to an end, end, finish, makere fall, drop, get down, alight, descend, be lost, abandoned, fail, cease, be seen in a vision, die, marere drop, fall, be put off, be given, let oneself down, die, moe sleep, dream, marry, repose, close the eyes, die, moonehu fine rusty pubescence on the unexpanded fronds of bracken and other ferns, die, expire, hinga te tootara the totara has fallen; Hawaiian ha’a’ule fall, drop, lose, fail, forget, neglect, die, hiamoe loa oversleep, sleep deeply, eternal sleep, death, ala
ho‘i ‘ole mai (literally a pathway on which there is no returning), moe kau a ho‘oilī (literally sleep summer to winter = the sleep of death) death, be dead: Tongan tamate subside, become less or slower, die down, die away; maalooloo (euphemistic) die, literally to rest, mama‘o (euphemistic) die, originally be distant, far away, be absent, hiki (euphemistic) die, originally move from one place to another, fekekeva‘i (abusive) die, cf. kekeva stiff, rigid; Ponapean pweula (honorific) die, literally be postponed, cancelled, fail, sipalla (honorific) die (cf. sipal cross over, skip).

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

Appendix

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


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


REFERENCES


