Kinship Expressions and Terms

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All languages have expressions that can be glossed ‘father,’ ‘wife,’ ‘brother-in-law,’ etc., covering consanguineal, spousal, and affinal categories. However, from the beginning of serious cross-cultural study, it has been apparent that societies differ in the kinship categories used. To facilitate comparison, an ‘etic grid’ is necessary; namely, an open-ended universe of kin-types, such as ‘father’s sister,’ corresponding to the denotata of the infinitely expansible possessive construction seemingly found in all languages. The minimal nuclear components are parent (Pa), child (Ch), and spouse (Sp), a combinatorial algorithm (PaPaSp = parent’s parent’s spouse), and cross-cutting features, including sex of referent (Ch + female = daughter), sex of linking relative (male linking relative + Ch + female = man’s daughter), and relative age within a generation (PaSb + senior = senior sibling). The initial linking relative (e.g., you in your father) is referred to as ‘ego’ or ‘propositus.’

In practice, most anthropologists and linguists operate with atomic categories based on a prototypical set of flesh-and-blood nuclear family members: Fa(ther), Mo(ther), Br(other), Si(ster), So(n), Da(ughter), Wi(fe), and Hu(sband). Combinations are then of the type FaMoBrWi (father’s mother’s brother’s wife).

This grid permits analysis of the denotational scope of each kin term and, ultimately, the entire system, by identifying the complete set of kin-types onto which the term maps. Some terms, such as English mother and brother, denote unique kin-types. Others, such as English uncle, correspond semantically to finite sets of kin-types. However, in languages with ‘classificatory’ kin-term systems, each such term maps onto an unbounded set of kin-types. With such languages, a common approach is to generate the more complex kin-types from simpler ones by expansion rules that link kin-types closer to propositus, with kin-types in the denoted set farther away; doing so entails converse reduction rules that go from complex to simple types. If in a system the term for MoBrDa expands to include MoMoBrDaDaDa, then conversely, MoMoBrDaDaDa reduces terminologically to MoBrDa; they are both denoted by the same term in such a system of terms.

**Kinship Systems**

Ideally, one can elicit the kinship system of a previously unstudied language by sitting down with an informant for a few hours, presenting a reasonable range of kin-types (perhaps using the informant’s actual kin), and recording the corresponding kin terms. A great milestone in kinship study, still widely mined for data, was Morgan’s (1870) analytical compendium of term/kin-type mappings from American Indian languages based on detailed questionnaires filled out by local correspondents (Trautmann, 1987). In interdisciplinary museum expeditions, such as those led by Alfred Haddon in the South Pacific in the first decades of the 20th century, it was common to include an anthropologist who would rapidly record the ‘social structure’ — that is, the kinship terminology — of each tribe visited in this fashion.

The resulting systems were taken as reflecting synchronic native models of how the societies worked, with particular reference to matriliney versus partriliney and to such issues as bigamous marriage involving sibling groups. However, because kin-term systems were often mismatched with observable social practices, ethnologists inferred that the kin terms could reflect social structures from an earlier age that were preserved in linguistic formaldehyde. Evolutionary models were later dismissed in favor of synchronic interpretations, first by early functional-structuralists (e.g., Radcliffe-Brown, 1924, 1950), and later by high structuralists (Lévi-Strauss, 1949) under the influence of linguistic structuralism. In recent decades, anthropology has become heavily concerned with historical processes, which has been reflected in a revival of interest in the evolution of kinship systems (Dole, 1972).

As an example of kinship typology, consider the three male kin-types: Fa, FaBr, and MoBr. The following four groupings are attested: (1) all three terminologically distinct (Sudanese systems); (2) Fa versus [FaBr, MoBr] (Eskimo systems, as in English), emphasizing the distinction between direct and collateral lines; (3) [Fa, FaBr] versus MoBr (Iroquois systems), known technically as bifurcate merging, merging same-sex siblings; and (4) all three merged into one category (Hawaiian systems), emphasizing generation. A hypothetical fifth system with (Fa, MoBr) terminologically distinguished from FaBr is unknown. The treatment of female kin-types Mo, MoSi, and FaSi is almost always parallel within a given system type; for example, Iroquois systems distinguish [Mo, MoSi] from FaSi. Usually (but not always), parental-generation kin-types that are merged terminologically as referents are also undifferentiated as linking relatives. For example, the child of an uncle (whether MoBr or FaBr) is cousin in English.
Two initially baffling systems show the same (bifurcate merging) cuts as Iroquois among the six primary parental-generation kin-types, but skew their extensions to lower generations. Crow systems have a matrilineal skewing rule by which SiSo or (woman’s) So is terminologically merged with Fa; note that (ego’s) Fa and SiSo are in the same matrilineal descent group, which differs from ego’s own. Omaha systems have a structurally similar patrilineal skewing rule; for example, merging MoBrDa with Mo, both of whom are in ego’s Mo’s patrilineal descent group.

**Meaning of Kin Terms**

One is naturally drawn to seek explanations for this cross-linguistic variation in the form of correlation with cross-cultural differences in social practices. However, doing so turns out to be more difficult than it seems. To begin with, there are at least four social parameters that might be considered: (1) society-wide descent groups (matrilineal or patrilineal), including binary divisions (moieties); (2) marriage rules; (3) postnuptial residence (e.g., with the father of the bride); and (4) inheritance (e.g., from father to son). Unfortunately, these social phenomena operate at different levels and are often nuanced and negotiable, rather than binaristic and rigid. Although the parameters may sometimes converge (e.g., patrilineal descent, patrilocal residence, father-to-son inheritance), there are many cases where they do not.

The structural-functional interpretation of “a kinship system as a working system linking human beings together in an orderly arrangement of interactions” (Radcliffe-Brown, 1950) has been plagued by evidence that certain kin terms lump together kin-types associated with quite different behaviors and affective relations.

Yet, it seems reasonable to suppose that kin-term semantics and prevailing sociocultural practices are not unrelated. For example, the fact that Americans have unique terms for parents, but lump the siblings of these parents (and even the spouses of these siblings) together as *aunt* and *uncle*, correlates with the autonomy of the nuclear family in this society. Likewise, societies that have well-developed descent systems and, say, a formalized levirate by which orphaned children are adopted by a brother of the deceased father, are good candidates for systems with Fa = FaBr (distinct from MoBr).

The suggestive but imperfect correlations between terminology and sociocultural practices have led to deep divisions among anthropologists as to what kin terms ‘mean.’ At one pole are exponents of formal kinship semantics, who argue that kin terms constitute autonomous formal systems, decomposable into nuclear primitives and expansion/reduction rules as sketched above. One of the founders of this approach, Floyd Lounsbury, demonstrated that this generative model provided the first accurate analysis of Morgan’s Crow- and Omaha-type data, permitting the identification of previously unsuspected parametric variants within both (1956, 1964a, 1964b).

He showed that previous attempts to explain these systems using sociocultural correlations were empirically inaccurate beyond the simplest kin-types. Lounsbury’s model was later extended by Harold Scheffler to Australian Aboriginal and other difficult systems (1971, 1978).

The modularity of this approach was countered by other anthropologists who argued that sociocultural contextualization was needed. The most outspoken critic, David Schneider (1968, 1984), questioned the core assumption of the formalists; that is, universal concepts of marriage and procreation (or conception) as the foundation of nuclear basic kin-types (for assessments, see Feinberg and Ottenheimer, 2001). For Schneider, kinship systems are based on subjective and therefore culture-specific concepts; for example, Americans have a distinctive notion of blood at the center of their kinship system. Schneider and others emphasized the ways different cultures recognize paternity (and even maternity), citing the widespread nonbiological uses of kinship concepts (e.g., *father* as applied to God, to George Washington, or to priests), and arguing that anthropologists must discover these concepts through sensitive participant-observation. Similar attacks on universal ‘marriage’ were launched by British anthropologists (Needham, 1971).

Ethnographic complications include spirit-child conception, god-parents, compadres and comadres, co-spouses, ex-spouses, adoption, step-kin, namesake relationships, formal renunciation of genealogical relationships, and tightly knit brotherhoods and sisterhoods. Recent phenomena (gay marriage, artificial insemination, test-tube babies, surrogate mothers, and cloning) add further layers of complexity.

**Cognitive Semantics**

Cognitive anthropologists and linguists have grappled with tensions between extralinguistic conceptual structure and lexical categories (Miller and Johnson-Laird, 1976), and have of course reexamined kinship among other domains. Prototype theory has been influential, but no clear consensus on kinship semantics has emerged.

Hirshfeld (1984) argued that a formalist model based on genealogical primitives is inconsistent with
cognitive theories of meaning. He dismissed the claim that nongenealogical uses of kin terms are (experienced by natives as) metaphorical and pointed out that the time-bound acts of insemination and childbearing fail to account for the enduring nature of kinship bonds. He suggested that normative attributions of parent-child physical resemblance play a key role.

Anna Wierzbicka’s theoretical program emphasized a small number of universal lexical primitives, from which the meaning of other lexical items is derived. Addressing kinship (1992), she identified MOTHER, FATHER, HUSBAND, and WIFE as primitives. She partially accepted the argument that the two parental categories are universal, based on cross-cultural recognition of paternal as well as maternal roles in procreation.

Read (1984) argued that American kinship terminology can be modeled as a modular algebraic system independent of its linkage to concrete kin categories (such as kin-types).

**Linguistic Studies**

Anthropologists have long been aware of terminological reductions and shifts from referential to vocative forms of kinship, generally interpreting them as pragmatic skewings of vocatives. Linguists have now brought out much deeper language-internal complexity. There may be several coexisting subsets of nouns: referential terms (*father*), vocatives (*bey Dad!*), deceased kin (*my late uncle*), bereaved kin (*orphan*), terms for nonhumans, and dyadic derivatives (*mother*-Dyad = a mother and her child). In some languages, these subsystems have their own suppletive terms and/or make different semantic cuts. For example, English *orphan, widow, and widower* are a defective set of bereaved kin terms; some languages have additional terms with glosses like ‘bereaved MoBr.’ Tubatulabal (California) has a suffix roughly glossable ‘last surviving X’ (X = e.g., Br; Voegelin, 1935).

Broad kinship relations among two or more referents may be encoded in nonsingular pronouns. Dalabon (Australia) has two forms for each dual pronominal, as in ‘they(Dual)-went,’ depending on whether the two referents are ‘harmonic’ based primarily on generation sets (Alpher, 1982; cf. Koch, 1982 on Kaytej).

One semantic type of kinship verb is glossable ‘X calls Y “mother”’ (cf. Don’t “mother” me!). Another is glossable ‘X mothers Y,’ where (depending on the language) X is any of Y’s (classificatory) mothers, X is Y’s actual (prototypical) mother, or X behaves like a mother to Y. Sometimes at least certain ‘referential kin terms’ are morphological verbs or relative clauses (Amith and Smith-Stark, 1994; Evans, 2000). Even in other languages, the precise semantics of such verbs as ‘bear/sire (child)’ clarifies the conceptual foundations of kinship.

Whenever speaker S and addressee A are both related to a referent R, there is a choice between egocentric (‘my . . .’) and altercentric (‘your . . .’) perspectives. Actual usage may be controlled by pragmatic principles, but these can be intricate (Merlan, 1982). The forced choice between the two perspectives is obviated in some Australian languages in which ‘triangular’ kin terms simultaneously specify S’s and A’s relationships to R (Laughren, 1982; Merlan, 1989).

Special registers can be associated with speech to (or in the presence of) particular kin: bawdy registers for ‘joking relationships’ or respectful registers used in the presence of senior affines. These registers may have extensive vocabularies, including suppletive kin terms, thereby usually making a reduced set of distinctions (Dixon, 1971). The same applies for registers associated with male initiation rites (Hale, 1982).

Kinship categories may be associated with body parts. In this case, touching the body part may replace the spoken term, in isolation, or timed to fill a ‘slot’ in an utterance (Heath, 1982). These kin/body associations are metonymic, alluding to stereotypical behaviors (carrying in the womb, carrying piggy-back, sleeping thigh to thigh, averting one’s eye). The fact that carrying in the womb is treated as just one among several bodily interactions suggests that the sharp distinction between ‘genealogical/biological’ and ‘affective/behavioral’ levels of meaning in anthropological kinship studies may be misguided.

See also: Cognitive Anthropology; Identity in Sociocultural Anthropology and Language.

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Kinyarwanda

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General Background

Kinyarwanda, the national language of Rwanda is probably, after Swahili the second largest spoken language in the Bantu group. It is a sister dialect of Kirundi, the national language of Burundi, and Gih, another dialect spoken in Tanzania. Despite the genocide that took place, taking the lives of more than 1 million Tutsi, it is spoken by perhaps more than 20 million people. Rwanda has approximately 9 million people right now, Burundi has approximately 7 million, but besides the Gih speakers there are also ethnic Banyarwanda in Southern Uganda in the Kigezi district known as Bafumbira. Other Kinyarwanda speakers are Banyamulenge in Southern Kivu, ethnic Banyarwanda in Masisi, and Rutshuro in Northern Kivu in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Kinyarwanda belongs to the interlacustrine (Great Lakes) Bantu languages.

Writing System

Although Kinyarwanda has both long vowels and short vowels as well as high tones or no tones on syllables, the official orthography does not mark


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