New Perspectives on Kinship

Overcoming the Eurocentrism and Scientism of Kinship Studies through Lexical Universals

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1 Introduction: The Ethnocentrism of the Classic Approach to Kinship

In a wide-ranging recent debate on kinship studies in the journal Behavioral and Brain Sciences, linguist and cognitive scientist Stephen Levinson writes (2010: 392): “The neglect of kinship in current anthropology and in the cognitive sciences is not far short of a scandal. Humans are the categorizing species, and kinship systems categorize our own most significant others, so reflecting fundamental forms of social organization.”

How did this “scandal” of the abandonment of kinship studies come about? A number of different diagnoses have been put forward. Undoubtedly, however, one critical factor was the recognition of the profound Eurocentrism of the traditional analyses of kinship terminology.

In their classic study, “The Meaning of Kinship Terms,” Wallace and Atkins (1969: 364) spoke of an “almost unavoidable ethnocentrism” of kinship studies, pointing out that, traditionally, anthropological analysis of indigenous kinship systems consisted in translating ‘local’ kinship terminologies into a ‘global’ metalanguage based on symbols such as “F”, “M”, “Z”, “B”, “S”, “D”, “H” and “W” (usually augmented by some additions like “f”, “m”, “y”, and “e”). All such symbols are, of course, based on English: “M” stands for the English word mother, “F” for father, “B” for brother, “S” for son, “D” for daughter, “H” for husband, “W” for wife, “f” for female, “m” for male, “y” for younger and “e” for elder. It was clear to Wallace and Atkins that since most of these English words have no semantic equivalents in many languages of the world, the interpretive grid offered by the traditional anthropological approach to kinship was in fact not global but ‘local’: it derived from English and thus imposed an Anglo perspective on the kinship systems embedded in other languages of the world. More recently, Leaf (2006: 306) made essentially the same point.

From a cross-linguistic perspective, it seems clear that, for example, the English word brother imposes a certain interpretation of “raw facts”, rather than carving nature at its joints. It is a word that pays attention to a person’s gender but is blind to their relative age, whereas in many other languages this is seen as equally important, or more important, than someone’s gender. For example,
the Australian language Pitjantjatjara (Scheffler 1978) does not have words for ‘brother’ and ‘sister’, but has instead the words *kuta*, *kangkuru*, and *malanypa*, glossed by Scheffler, respectively, as “B+” (“older brother”), “Z+” (“older sister”) and “Sb–” (“younger sibling”). Yet many Anglophone scholars, including linguists, still seem convinced that while concepts like ‘kuta’, ‘kangkuru’ and ‘malanypa’ are culturally constructed, the concept of ‘brother’ simply “fits the world.”

Speaking of a woman’s progress through three marriages and three languages, the English writer Zadie Smith (2009: 5) describes languages as “shared words that fit the world as you believe it to be.” For millions of people, including a great many writers and scholars (see, for example, Hoffman 1989; Besemer 2002), immigrant experience has shattered the natural conviction that the words of their native language fit the world as it really is. But in the case of English, its new status as a global language and the paramount language of science has if anything strengthened the widespread illusion that English words fit the world “as it is.” The concept of ‘brother’ is a good case in point.

In this chapter, I will try to show that while a Eurocentric perspective on the world’s kinship vocabularies is indeed a major problem for the understanding of the ways in which speakers of different languages construct their social universe, this Eurocentrism is not unavoidable. In doing so, I will be building on my earlier work in kinship semantics (e.g. Wierzbicka 1986, 1992, 2010, 2013) and on the recent advances in the semantic theory known as NSM (from Natural Semantic Metalanguage), which, as I see it, allows us to overcome the Eurocentrism of the classic approach and to breathe new life into the study of kinship terminologies. I will discuss NSM methodology, assumptions, and findings very shortly, paying special attention to the developments of the last decade or so particularly relevant to kinship. Before doing so, however, it will be in order to take a closer look at what Sousa (2003) called “the fall of kinship.”

2 Historical Perspectives: The Death of Kinship Studies?

Within anthropology, the strongest critique of kinship studies in the classic mode came from David Schneider, who argued that “kinship has been defined by European social scientists, and European social scientists use their own folk culture as the source of many, if not all, of their ways of formulating and understanding the world about them” (1984: 183).

Unfortunately, this critique led Schneider to throwing the baby out with the bath water and to rejecting the common sense assumption that “kinship . . . has to do with reproduction” (1984: 198). Not surprisingly, this met with strong negative reactions from many cultural anthropologists, as shown in particular by the studies in the volume entitled *The Cultural Analysis of Kinship: The Legacy of David M. Schneider* (Feinberg and Ottenheimer eds 2001).

Yet Schneider’s insistence that the study of cultural phenomena needs to rely on native terms and meanings made profound good sense. Schneider argued that “the first task of anthropology, *prerequisite to all others*, is to understand and formulate the symbols and meanings and their configuration that a particular culture consists of” (1984: 196, emphasis in the original).

Cultural semantics as developed within the NSM approach (see section 3) shares this view and it provides a methodology for exploring and identifying indigenous meanings without imposing on them a Eurocentric perspective. As this chapter illustrates, NSM offers a common measure for comparing kinship terminologies across languages and cultures and provides a comparative framework for describing meanings in a way that makes sense to insiders and is intelligible to outsiders, and thus can be seen as both universal and indigenous.

In his classic account of the development of cognitive anthropology, D’Andrade (1995: 18–19) wrote: “to carry out an *emic* analysis one began with a set of categories brought in by the scientific observer and then tried to find out which of those categories really made a difference with respect to the way the natives understood and responded to things.”
But the idea of a “scientific observer” bringing in his or her own categories to the analysis was at variance with the project of identifying the native speaker’s “emic” categories from an insider’s perspective, and it could not stand up to the arguments of critics like Schneider. As a result, the whole program of research into patterns of kinship based on this more or less collapsed in the last decade of the twentieth century, prompting, for example, Fogelson (2001: 26), to describe componential analysis of kinship as “now consigned to the dustbin of anthropological history” and to conclude, “Indeed, the study of kinship, which played such a prominent role in the development of anthropological theory, now seems to be a dead topic.”

But kinship could not remain a ‘dead topic’ in anthropology for long and, increasingly, scholars have started to proclaim a renaissance of kinship studies. Words like brother and sister in English and kuta and kangkuru in Pitjantjatjara are so important in all languages that investigating their meaning must be seen, in the long run, as one of the priorities not only of linguistic semantics but also of any linguistic anthropology worth its salt. Yes, old-style componental analysis is dead, but the question of what such words mean will never go away. Nor can the new mathematical and computer-driven approaches to kinship (e.g. Read 2001; Jones 2010; for discussion, see Wierzbicka 2010) replace the old questions of psychological reality (Burling 1964; Romney, Kimball and D’Andrade 1964), “the native’s point of view” (Geertz 1976) and the insider’s understanding (Shore 1996).

3 Critical Issues and Topics: The NSM Approach to Language and Culture

‘NSM’ is a ‘natural semantic metalanguage’ based on natural language and representing the intersection of all natural languages, and ‘NSM English’ is an English–based version of this metalanguage. Every NSM is a tightly constrained yet flexible mini-language of simple indefinable meanings (‘universal semantic primes’), along with their inherent universal grammar. To define the meaning of a word or an expression in NSM means to explain, or ‘explicate’ it (directly or in stages) through simple and universal human concepts that do not require further explanation themselves and that can be found as words (or word-like elements) in all languages.

The natural semantic metalanguage (NSM), built through extensive cross-linguistic investigations, is described in great detail in many publications, especially in Goddard and Wierzbicka (2002), which also contains six studies demonstrating that the posited semantic primes and their basic syntactic frames exist in a set of typologically and genetically diverse languages. A sizable bibliography is available on the NSM homepage (www.griffith.edu.au/humanities-languages/school-languages-linguistics/research/natural-semantic-metalanguage-homepage).

Thus, cross-linguistic evidence strongly suggests that alongside huge diversity there is also a shared, universal core of human thinking and knowing. This shared core includes, in effect, what Leibniz called “the alphabet of human thoughts”, i.e., a fairly small set of universal semantic primes out of which an infinite number of complex meanings and ideas can be built. This set, as it has emerged from decades of NSM-based research, is presented in Table 5.1. Along with semantic primes (“atoms of meaning”), there is also a set of “semantic molecules” built out of primes. Semantic molecules, marked in explications (i.e., NSM-style definitions) with the symbol [m], function as units in the meaning of more complex concepts. All molecules can be explicated in terms of universal semantic primes.

Evidence suggests that some of these molecules (a few dozen) are universal. Universal semantic molecules relevant to the field of kinship include, above all, ‘men’, ‘women’, and ‘children’ (cf. Goddard and Wierzbicka 2014a). Crucially for the field of kinship studies, they also include ‘mother’, ‘father’, ‘wife’, ‘husband’ and ‘be born’ (cf. Wierzbicka 1992; forthcoming).
Jointly, these two universal sets of word-like building blocks constitute a basis of human cognition, which can be accessed through the lexical core of English, or any other language.

4 The Key Issue: Lexical Universals

Donald Brown’s 1991 book *Human Universals* is a milestone in the study of what he calls “the Universal People” or “UP”. The reason for this is that unlike many writers on the subject of “human nature” or “human mind”, Brown linked his ‘human universals’ with ‘universal words’, that is, “words or meanings [that] cut across all cultural boundaries and hence form a part of UP language” (p. 132). Some of his examples, such as ‘face’ and ‘hand’, are consistent with empirical cross-linguistic research, whereas some others, such as ‘black’ and ‘white’, are not; but Brown’s overall insight that lexical universals provide evidence for conceptual universals (how people think) is of great historical significance. The fact that Brown sought to apply this insight to the domain of kinship – pointing out, for example, that all languages appear to have different words for ‘mother’ and ‘father’ – makes his vision particularly relevant to the present chapter.

It must be said, however, that Brown’s attempt to link ‘human universals’ with lexical universals did not go so far as to attempt to fully anchor the former in the latter. This led to an Anglocentric bias in his broad picture of ‘who we (humans) are’ and how we understand our connectedness with other people. For example, he wrote:

> Certain semantic components are found in UP language, even if the terms in which they are employed are not. For example, UP kin terminology includes terms that distinguish male from female (and thus indicate the semantic component of sex) and some generations from others.

> Brown (1991: 133)

The inherent Anglocentrism of this passage can be easily missed, yet it is so essential in the present context that it needs to be pointed out.¹

As I have discussed in detail in *Imprisoned in English* (2014), the concept of ‘sex’ embedded in the English word *sex* (in the relevant sense) belongs to the English universe of meaning, not to the conceptual framework shared by all people. To attribute such a component to speakers of languages that do not have a word corresponding to *sex*, is to impose on them an Anglo/English perspective. For example, the fact that Russian has the words *mužčina* ‘man’, *ženčina* ‘woman’,

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¹ For a discussion of this issue, see my *Imprisoned in English* (2014).
petux ‘rooster’ and kurica ‘hen’ does not mean that it has the semantic component ‘sex’ or the semantic components ‘male’ and ‘female’. From a cross-cultural perspective, it is a peculiarity of modern English that both men and roosters can be conceptualised in it as ‘male’, or both women and hens, as ‘female’. From a Russian ‘common sense’ point of view, the difference between a man and a woman is not the same as that between a rooster and a hen. It is not an accident that Russian does not have words corresponding to ‘sex’, ‘male’ and ‘female’. Rather, it is a reflection of how Russian speakers habitually think (and how they don’t think) (Wierzbicka 2014).

Likewise, the fact that Russian has words matching the English words brother and sister, or son and daughter, does not establish that there is in Russian “the semantic component sex” (cf. Goddard and Wierzbicka 2014a). In fact, rigorous semantic analysis of the English words brother and sister shows that their meanings are not related through a hypothetical component ‘sex’, or hypothetical components ‘male’ and ‘female’, either. The presence of the words sex, male and female in modern English does show that the concepts embedded in them are part of the Anglo/English universe of meaning, but not that, in English, sister is, semantically, ‘a female sibling’ or mother, ‘a female parent’. To the extent to which the traditional analysis of kinship was based on such fictitious “semantic components” it was out of kilter with ordinary human thinking – even in relation to English, let alone to languages in which the putative “semantic components” in question are not named at all.

To illustrate how meanings seemingly differing by the “semantic component sex” can be explained using ordinary and cross-translatable words, I will present here NSM explications of ‘mother’ and ‘father’ (in the primary meaning of these words):

someone’s mother
a woman, before this someone was born
this someone’s body was for some time inside this woman’s body

someone’s father
a man, some time before this someone was born
this man did something with a part of the body to a woman’s body
something happened inside this woman’s body because of this
because of this, this someone was born

As these explications illustrate, the concepts of ‘man’ and ‘woman’, which we find as words in all languages, can serve, directly or indirectly, as prototypes for contrasts that, from a modern-English point of view, may appear to be based on the semantic component ‘sex’, or on putative semantic components ‘male’ and ‘female’ (see Goddard and Wierzbicka 2014a).

5 “Things That Are Common to All Mankind”

In a passage from his book Description and Comparison in Cultural Anthropology quoted by Read (2001: 80), Goodenough (1970: 97) writes:

We anthropologists have assumed that kinship is universal, that all societies have kinship systems. If we are correct in this assumption, if every society does have some set of relationships whose definition involves genealogical considerations of some kind, their genealogical space must be constructed of things that are common to all mankind (emphasis added by Read).

The key question is: what are those “things that are common to all mankind”? Goodenough himself speaks of “parenthood”, “social recognized sexual unions”, and of “parent–child
relationships”, but what is demonstrably common to all mankind is not abstract concepts like “parenthood”, “socially recognized sexual unions”, and “parent-child relationships” but more concrete ones: ‘mother’, ‘father’, ‘husband’, and ‘wife’, which we find lexically embodied in all (or nearly all) languages of the world. (The fact that these words often exhibit language-specific patterns of polysemy does not undermine the semantic equivalence of the basic meanings; cf. Shapiro 2008; Wierzbicka 1992). Crucially, we also find in all (or nearly all) languages words corresponding to “be born” and “give birth,” on which the universal concepts ‘mother’ and ‘father’ build.

The angst that anthropologists like Schneider expressed in relation to kinship as a valid area of study had at its roots a healthy desire to avoid imposing categories derived from European languages on other languages and cultures. Empirical cross-linguistic studies have shown, however, that while concepts like ‘reproduction’, ‘genealogy’, ‘descent’ and ‘sibling’, or even those like ‘brother’, ‘sister’, ‘son’, and ‘daughter’, are indeed far from universal (there are no such words in most languages), the domain of kinship can be grounded in genuine conceptual and linguistic universals.

In his Description and Comparison in Cultural Anthropology, Goodenough (1970: 2) wrote, “We have to find some set of terms that will enable us to describe other cultures with minimal distortion from ethnocentric cultural bias. And we need some set of universally applicable concepts that will enable us to compare cultures and arrive at valid generalisations about them”. Evidence suggests that such a set of universally applicable terms includes, along with ‘man’, and ‘woman’ and ‘child’, two foundational kin terms: ‘mother’ and ‘father’ (as well as their conceptual fundament, ‘be born’). As noted earlier, the presence of words with meanings ‘mother’ and ‘father’ (in the primary, biological sense of ‘birth-giver’ and ‘begetter’) in languages can be hidden from view because of the endemic polysemy of such words. However, careful semantic analysis shows that, polysemy aside, these word-meanings can indeed be found in all (or nearly all) languages.

If we do not want to fall into the trap of using “the constructions of European cultures as tools for description, comparison, and analysis” (Schneider 1984: 185), we need to articulate the putative human universals of kinship in universal human concepts, rather than in culture-specific English words (whether colloquial, like uncle or brother, or technical, like collateral and male ego).

Referring to the componential analysis of kinship terminologies as it was practiced in the 1960s, D’Andrade (1995: 30) wrote, “It is difficult to explain the beauty which a semantic analysis of kinship terms held for some anthropologists in the 1960s. In the present intellectual milieu, this type of analysis seems specialised, arcane and formalistic.” It is now apparent, however, that the “specialised, arcane and formalistic” character of the analyses discussed by D’Andrade was not due to the inherent nature of the meanings of kin terms, but rather to the methodologies with the help of which these words were analysed.

Unlike the formalisms of yesteryear, NSM explications (such as those presented in section 6) allow us to bring hypothesised conceptual structures into the orbit of recognisable human ways of speaking and to present them as learnable and accessible to ordinary mortals, who, after all, rely on them in their everyday thinking and in their basic relations with other people.

In his book Dying Words, in which he speaks of endangered and dying languages of the world and discusses, inter alia, the semantics of kinship in the endangered Australian language Dalabon, Evans (2010: 159) says, quite poignantly, that once a language like Dalabon dies, “no one’s mind will again have the thought-paths that its ancestral speakers once blazed.” But if so, it is all the more important to try to understand those thought-paths as best we can; and I do not think we can understand them through academic English or through algebraic modeling. Arguably, however, we can through “things [words] that are common to all mankind.”
6 Current Contributions and Research: Understanding the “Thought-Paths” of a Distant Culture

Can speakers of English understand the thought-paths of speakers of Australian Aboriginal languages in the area of kinship? Can these thought-paths be explained to non-Aboriginal Australians, and if so, how? In what follows, I will illustrate the problems involved with some examples from one language (or dialect chain) of Northern Australia.

**Kinship Verbs**

Australian linguist Murray Garde opens his recent book on the language of kinship in Aboriginal Australia with a remarkable vignette. When in October 2009 the Arnhem Land plateau in the Northern Territory of Australia was declared an Indigenous Protected Area, journalists and politicians gathered on the land of the Mok clans and the 81-year-old patriarch Lofty Baradyal Nadjamerrek presided over the proceedings. Murray Garde acted as an interpreter during an interview that a journalist conducted with one of the young indigenous land management rangers.

**Journalist**: So is old Lofty your grandfather?

**Young ranger**: Yimarnek doydoj nga-yimeninj dha nauw ngabbard nga-yime bene-modjarrk-dorrinj wanjh mungka na-kolbanj kabi-korlonhme nauw ngabbard. Wanjh mungkah Wamud ngaye mawuh nga-yime.

I should call him my ‘spouse bestowal’ great-grandfather (MMMB), but my father is a cross cousin [of the old man] and through a [Crow-style] skewing relationship [expressed via the metaphor of ‘they strike each other’s nose’] that old man calls my father ‘son’ [literally, he ‘sons’ him]. Therefore [through transitive extension], I call Wamud [i.e. Lofty] my father’s father.

When Garde tried to explain the intricacies of the young man’s reply, the journalist was clearly bewildered and after a brief silence asked, “so is that a yes?”.

Evidently, in glossing the young Aboriginal man’s words in the way he did, Murray Garde was acting not only as a (cross-linguistic) interpreter, but also as a cross-cultural commentator and anthropologist. As the journalist’s confused reaction indicates, however, the explanation was not entirely effective.

The vignette illustrates some profound differences between European and Aboriginal Australians. For the journalist, the key question is this: what is the (objective, knowable) relationship between Lofty and the young ranger (given who his, the ranger’s, mother and father are). For the young ranger himself, on the other hand, the key question concerns different ways in which (given who his mother and father are) he can think about Lofty and what he can call him.

The young Aboriginal man’s answer does not fit the journalist’s question because the assumptions are in each case different. In both the question and the answer, mother and father are the major points of reference for human connectedness, but for the journalist, there is in principle only one way to articulate the connectedness between the young man and the old man, whereas for the young man there are several different ways, linked for him with different possible ways of thinking about the old man.

One important lesson from this vignette is that in trying to describe the meaning of kinship words in a language like Bininj Gunwok we often need to refer to certain ways of thinking, whereas this is seldom the case in a language like English. The so-called “kinship verbs” in Bininj Gunwok discussed by Garde are a good case in point.
Like other Australian languages, Bininj Gunwok has some nouns that can serve as what Garde calls “basic kin terms”. These nouns include *karrard* ‘mother’ and *ngabbard* ‘father’. As in other Australian languages, these nouns, which can be used for ‘mother’ and ‘father’ in the primary, biological sense, can also be used in extended senses. To distinguish between the primary and the extended senses, a variety of strategies can be used, as discussed by both Garde (2013) and Evans (2003). As the use of the symbols F and M by these authors indicates, the whole system relies on the availability of the distinct senses ‘mother’ (‘birth-giver’) and ‘father’ (‘begetter’). This dependence on the meanings ‘mother’ (‘birth-giver’) and ‘father’ (‘begetter’) applies, in particular, to so-called “kinship verbs” like *-bornang* in Bininj Gunwok, of which Garde (2013: 60) writes:

The verb *-bornang* rather imperfectly overlaps with the archaic English verb ‘beget’. It is an imperfect translation because it is not restricted to the father–child relationship as it also includes the relationship between an individual and their father’s siblings, male or female. It indexes an upper generation subject and a lower adjacent patrilineal generation object. Thus a man can refer to his son with the expression *nga-bornang* ‘I am father to him/her’, but a woman can refer to her brother’s children with the same term. The same term can also be used by a man to refer to the children of his brother. Various subject-object pronominal prefixes on the verb are possible.

Garde cautiously chooses the verb “to index” (rather than “to mean”) here: the Bininj Gunwok word in question “indexes” an upper generation subject and a lower adjacent patrilineal generation object. But what does this word mean? And what does it mean when a woman says *nga-bornang*, referring to her brother’s children? In his English glosses, Garde uses the verbs “to father” and “to beget”, and in a table presenting a “Summary of Bininj Gunwok kinship verbs” (p. 70) he describes the meaning of *-bornang* (beget – PP [Past Perfective]) as “be in successive patriline, beget”. In the translations of particular examples, he provides, inter alia, English sentences such as “She/he fathered me” (p. 61) and “she begat me” (p. 55).

To speakers of English, such glosses as used in relation to women are deeply mystifying and appear to suggest that Bininj Gunwok ways of thinking are so exotic as to be simply beyond comprehension (they may even be taken to show that these ways of thinking are inherently illogical). From this point of view, technical explanation couched in academic English such as “she is my ascending patriline” (p. 55) may be safer: since they are not comprehensible they will not seem illogical. But clearly, such technical labels cannot serve the purpose of cross-cultural understanding. Nor do they articulate the conceptual content that speakers have in mind (‘think with’). They are just place-holders. The question is: what do these words mean?

The gloss “she is my father’s sister”, which is also used by Garde (p. 55), may seem the least problematic, since it is neither incomprehensible nor illogical. It is, however, too restrictive, because *-bornang* could also refer to one’s father’s brother – not to mention the further complication that, as Garde’s table of Bininj Gunwok “basic kin terms” (p. 32) shows, the language does not have words matching, straightforwardly, *brother* and *sister* (see also Evans 2003: 43).

Trying to devise interpretations which would avoid all the pitfalls mentioned above, I would propose trying to base the analysis of words like *-bornang* and its female counterpart *-yawmey* directly on the two solid fundamentals of ‘father’ and ‘mother.’ For instance, in Garde’s examples (3.9) and (3.10) reproduced below, I would replace Garde’s interpretations 1 and 2 with my own [1] and [2], as follows:
(3.9) nga-borna-ng

1>3-beget-PP
1 my child (speaker is a male)
2 my B’s [brother’s] child (speaker is a female)
“I fathered him/her”

[1] I can think about this someone like this:
“I am this someone’s father”

[2] I can think about this someone like this:
“I am someone like this someone’s father because my father is this someone’s father’s father”

(3.10) nga-borna-ng

1>3-beget-PP
1 my F [father]
2 my FZ [father’s sister]
“she/he fathered me”

[1] I can think about this someone like this:
“this is my father”

[2] I can think about this someone like this:
“this is someone like my father because this someone’s father is my father’s father”

One intriguing question arising from Garde’s discussion is how sentences such as his (3.9) and (3.10) should be interpreted when they refer to a person’s actual father (begetter). Garde quotes Evans (2000: 14) as saying that the term nga-bornang “can distinguish from within the classes of classificatory fathers known by the nominal term ngabbard, one’s actual father”, and he agrees with Evans that “in some contexts, use of this term could possibly disambiguate one’s actual father from others classed as ngabbard”. At the same time, he emphasises that “the term nga-bornang can definitely be used to refer to one’s father’s brothers and sisters, and that such reference is quite common.” (Garde p. 65)

It would seem that the only way to reconcile the observations on the common use of nga-bornang to refer, specifically, to the begetter, but also, in its common use, to refer to the begetter’s brothers and sisters, is to posit two distinct meanings for this word, roughly 1. a person’s actual father, 2. someone (other than one’s father) whose father is one’s father’s father.

It is not my main goal, however, to argue for a polysemy-based interpretation of kinship verbs in languages like Bininj Gunwok here. Rather, it is to show that whether or not they are analysed as polysemous, they can be plausibly interpreted through intelligible ordinary English – without sentences such as “she begat him”, without phrases such as “they are in successive patriline”, and without multiple disjunctive glosses. This can be done if we do two things: first, note the importance of the concepts ‘father’s father’ and ‘mother’s mother’ in such languages, and second, recognise an important and lexically encoded way of thinking based on these concepts that consists of the idea of viewing a person as someone whose father is one’s father’s father.

Arguably, it is precisely this idea that underlines Garde’s locutions such as “successive patriline”. Similarly, Garde’s glosses with the technical term “ascending generation matriline” (p. 53) can,
I would suggest, be interpreted as referring to a person viewed as someone whose mother is one’s mother’s mother.

In his “Summary of Bininj Gunwok kinship terms” Garde glosses the verb -bornang as “be in successive patriline, beget”, and -yawmey as “be in successive matriline, conceive (literally, ‘child-get’)”. In the approach proposed here, both these verbs would be portrayed as polysemous, but only two-way (rather than three-way) polysemous. Roughly, one meaning refers to the biological father, and the other to someone “like the father” (because of the specific relationship). A parallel analysis would of course apply to the “matriline term” -yawmey.

In sentences in which the verb -yawmey (or -bornang) is used about two people who are in “matrilineal” (or “patrilineal”) relationship to somebody else, that is, sentences with a dual or “unit-augmented” subject, only the second meaning of the verb can be involved. This can be illustrated with Garde’s sentence (3.16) (p. 62 this volume) (for abbreviations see note 2):

(3.16) ben-yawme-y

3 uaP-conceive-PP

That woman and her sibling (male or female) are ‘mother’ to obj
(literally: they 2 ‘mothered’ obj)

My proposed gloss:

these two people can think about someone [OBJ] like this:

“my mother is this someone’s mother’s mother”

As these paraphrases show, what matters in Bininj Gunwok thinking is not only the distinction between a father’s father and a mother’s mother, but also the idea of a “shared father’s father”: if my father is your father’s father, then I will think about you in a special way, and you will think in a special way about me. Similarly, if my mother is your mother’s mother, then I will think about you in a special way, and vice versa. Such a way of thinking is foreign to speakers of English, but it is not something that they could not grasp.

Consider also the phrase ngane-yaw, glossed by Garde as “we two are children of our ascending generation matriline” – a gloss that can hardly be understood through ordinary English. Garde comments, somewhat more helpfully, that this locution “could possibly be translated as ‘we two are her children’, the propositus (i.e. the person from whose perspective the relationship is viewed) being the mother of the first-person unit-augmented referents.” However, he goes on to comment that “the propositus could also be a male, i.e. brothers (sic) of one’s mother, which is why I have glossed the term as ‘we two are children of our ascending generation matriline” (p. 53).

As already noted, however, this last paraphrase is incomprehensible, and leaves the readers with the impression that Bininj-Gunwok ways of thinking are completely inaccessible to outsiders. Such an impression would not be right, because once it is recognised that the sentence in question has two meanings, both these meanings can be stated in ordinary English, and moreover, in words cross-translatable into Bininj-Gunwok itself, along the following lines:

1  we can both think about this someone like this:
   “this is my mother”

2  we can both think about this someone like this:
   “this is someone like my mother
   because this someone’s mother is my mother’s mother”
And one more example: the phrase *ngandi-yawmey*, which Garde glosses as ‘they conceived me’ or ‘they from whom I descend matrilineally’ (p. 70). I would suggest that in ordinary English, the meaning of this seemingly strange sentence can be rendered as follows:

*ngandi-yawmey*
they can (all) think about me like this:
“my mother is this someone’s mother’s mother”

To sum up, what these kinship verbs show is that there are, in the shared conceptual vocabulary of the speakers of languages like Bininj Gunwok, some important concepts that are absent from the conceptual vocabulary of English speakers and that build on the concepts of ‘(someone’s) father’s father’ and ‘(someone’s) mother’s mother’. These concepts are, potentially, understandable to English speakers, but they are not part of their shared conceptual currency.

In his paper “Kinship Verbs”, to which Garde refers, Nicholas Evans (2000: 117) writes about two other languages of Northern Australia, Ilgar and Iwaidja:

Consider the kinship verbal root *wulaŋ*, which is used in paraphrasing the nominal roots *gama* ‘mother, mother’s sister’, *yaja* ‘(maternal) uncle’, and *gaɲuɲ* ‘sister’s child (male speaker), child (female speaker)’. On the assumption that ‘mother’ is the core meaning (since it is genealogically the closest to ego), I shall gloss it as ‘be mother to’.

This is illustrated, inter alia, with the following two sentences:

(a) ŋan-ŋa-wulaŋ
1sg.obj-3sg.fem.erg-be.mother.to: non.past
‘my mother’ (she is mother to me)

(b) nga-ni-wulaŋ
1sg.obj-3sg.masc.erg-mother: non.past
‘my maternal uncle’ (he is (as a) mother to me)

These glosses suggest that the meaning of *wulaŋ* as used in relation to a man (one’s mother’s brother) is different from the meanings of the same word used about a woman (one’s mother), and that the two meanings can be represented as follows:

(a) ‘mother to me’
(b) ‘as a mother to me’

This analysis makes a lot of sense, but presumably it was intended only as an approximation: the man in question is “as a mother to me” for a particular reason, namely, because his mother is my mother’s mother. This brings us to the following NSM-based glosses for (a) and (b):

(a) I can think about her like this:
“this is my mother”

(b) I can think about him like this:
“this is someone like my mother because his mother is my mother’s mother”
These glosses are of course in line with the analysis that I presented earlier in relation to Murray Garde’s examples from Bininj Gunwok.

**Dyadic Terms**

Importantly, what applies to kinship verbs applies also to so-called “dyadic terms”, such as those described by Garde (in relation to Bininj Gunwok) in the following passage:

- **kunakko** ‘a husband and wife pair’ (literally: ‘two of the [same] fire/hearth’)
- **beyko** usually ‘father and child pair’ but a more comprehensive definition is ‘adjacent patrilineal generation pair’ (F/FB/FZ and mC/fBC’ or ‘person and F[Z or B]’).
- **yawko** usually ‘mother and child pair’ but a more comprehensive definition is ‘M/MZ/MB’ and ‘wCm’ZC’ or ‘person and M(B or Z)’ (p. 59)

It seems unlikely that, for example, **beyko** has a unitary meaning, covering both the biological father and the biological father’s brothers and sisters. As Garde says, **beyko** usually stands for an actual father-and-child pair, and it parallels actual pairs such as husband-and-wife. At the same time, it can be used in a different sense, with reference to the “adjacent patrilineal generation pair”. Assuming that the dyadic term is indeed polysemous, I would propose the following interpretation, which avoids both disjunctive analyses such as ‘person and F[Z or B]’ and technical and semi-technical terms such as “patrilineal”, “adjacent” and “generation”:

**beyko**₁
- two people
- people know that one of these people can think about the other like this:
  - “this is my father”

**beyko**₂
- two people
- people can know that one of these people can think about the other like this:
  - “this is someone like my father
  - because this someone’s father is my father’s father”

Obviously the same approach would apply to the “matrilineal” dyadic term **yawko**:

**yawko**₁
- two people
- people can know that one of these people can think about the other like this:
  - “this is my mother”

**yawko**₂
- two people
- people can know that one of these people can think about the other like this:
  - “this is someone like my mother
  - because this someone’s mother is my mother’s mother”

I have included in these paraphrases the framing component ‘people can know that’ in order to show that the dyadic term presents the relationship between the two members of the pair as a social fact. Whereas in the case of kinship verbs the speaker appears to be informing the
addressee about the nature of the relationship, in the case of a dyadic term the speaker appears to be indicating how he or she is thinking about the pair (namely *sub specie* of the known relationship binding its two members).

**The Notion of ‘Patriline’**

Finally, it is worth noting that while the literature on languages such as Bininj Gunwok is heavily dependent on the use of the technical terms *patriline* and *matriline*, these terms never seem to be defined. The adjectives *patrilineal* and *matrilineal*, from which these nouns are derived, are normally defined in dictionaries of anthropology in complex and metaphorical terms such as “descent which is traced through the male line” (Seymour Smith 1986: 218). Using NSM, we can propose the following explanation of the thinking that, as I understand, these nouns are intended to capture:

*someone’s patriline*

many people, all these people are like one something
some of these people are men, some are women, some are children
this someone can think about these people like this:

“I am one of these people because it is like this:
my father is one of these people,
my father’s father is one of these people”

all these people can think like this

**7 Retrospective**

The importance of the concepts of ‘mother’s mother’ and ‘father’s father’ in many Australian languages is often emphasised by Australianists. Evans himself writes in his grammar of Bininj Gunwok (2003: 44), to which Garde also refers:

As in virtually all Australian languages, there is a fundamental distinction between parallel grandparents (ff, mm), in which the same type of filiative link (e.g. father-child) is repeated for two generations, and cross-grandparents (fm, mf), in which there are two types of filiative link.

The semantics of kinship verbs in Bininj Gunwok fits in well with this generalisation, as arguably does also the semantics of some “dyadic terms” described by Evans (2003) in relation to Bininj Gunwok in the following two sentences (p. 163; “Dj” stands for the dialect called Gun-dednjenghmi):

5.158  *guni-yau-go*

Dj 2a-child.of.female-dyad
‘you two, mother and child (or mother’s brother/sister’s child)’

5.159  *bani-bei-go*

Dj 3ua-child.of.male-dyad
‘father and child, father’s sister and nephew/niece’

To avoid a multiply disjunctive analysis, we could assign to each of these sentences two readings, glossing them as follows:
5.158(a)
you two
people know that one of you can think about the other like this:
“this is my mother”

5.158(b)
you two
people know that one of you can think about the other like this:
“this is someone like my mother
because this someone’s mother is my mother’s mother”

5.159(a)
two people
people know that one of these people can think about the other like this:
“this is my father”

5.159(b)
two people
people know that one of these people can think about the other like this:
“this someone’s father is my father’s father”

Presumably, no English speaker would think about a pair such as Prince William and Princess Anne, or Prince William and Prince Andrew, in terms of “father’s father”, so obviously the way of thinking embedded in the meaning of dyadic terms like –beyko or beigo (as in 5.1.59b) is deeply unfamiliar to speakers of English. It is not inherently incomprehensible, however, and to articulate it in English we do not need to have recourse to arcane technical language inacces-
sible to non-specialists, or to bend ordinary usage in peculiar ways and to say that, for example, Princess Anne either “begat” or “fathered” Prince William. What we can say is that William can think about Anne (and Andrew) like this: “this someone’s father is my father’s father”. On the other hand, about Earl Spencer (Princess Diana’s brother) William can think like this: “this someone’s mother is my mother’s mother”. Accordingly, Prince William and Princess Anne together can be viewed as a –beyko or beigo (a pair anchored in William’s father’s father and Anne’s father), whereas a pair composed of Prince William and Earl Spencer could be viewed as a yawko or yauko (a pair anchored in William’s mother’s mother and Earl Spencer’s mother).

The fact that Princess Anne’s mother is also the mother of Prince William’s father, or that Earl Spencer’s father is also the father of Prince William’s mother, would not be of inter-
est from a Bininj Gunwok speaker’s point of view: what matters is the identity of a person’s father’s father and their mother’s mother, not of their “cross-grandparents” (father’s mother and mother’s father).

The concepts of ‘father’s father’ and ‘mother’s mother’, which are not named in (ordinary) English, clearly don’t have the same role for speakers of English as they do for speakers of Bininj Gunwok – just as the concepts of ‘brother’ and ‘sister’, which are not named in Bininj Gunwok, don’t have the same role for speakers of Bininj Gunwok as they do for speakers of English. But the concepts of ‘father’ and ‘mother’ are named in both these languages and can be used as stepping stones for what Jean Harkins in the title of her 1994 book about Aboriginal Australia called Bridging Two Worlds.

It is worth noting here that many languages outside Australia distinguish lexically between mother’s mother and father’s father (e.g., Mandarin does, and so does Danish), and that some languages in Australia do not (e.g., Pitjantjatjara and Pintupi; cf. Elkin 1940; Myers 1986; Goddard 1985). What is more unusual about languages like Bininj Gunwok is their way of
aligning people through their fathers and fathers’ fathers (or mothers and mothers’ mothers). Thus, while a person’s father’s father (mawah) is distinguished lexically (and conceptually) from this person’s mother’s mother (kakkak), one word (and one concept), bornang, can align a person with all the people who have the same father as this person’s father; and one word (and one concept), yawmey, can align him or her with all those who have the same mother as this person’s mother. Such ways of thinking are unfamiliar to speakers of English but they are not totally impenetrable.

8 Concluding Remarks and Future Directions: Technical Language and Human Understanding

Given a measure of mental discipline, effort and experience, unfamiliar concepts embodied in kinship terminologies can be explained to outsiders through ordinary language. To grasp them, one does not require a tutorial in kinship studies or in arcane formalisms of any kind. One does need, however, an explanation. If this explanation is free of any technical terminology, if it is couched in words that one can understand, and if one is prepared to make an effort to get out of one’s accustomed ways of thinking, then with the help of such an explanation, authentic understanding can be reached.

The issue of technical terms as an obstacle to understanding is, I think, a very serious one, as well as a very old one, and yet it is often dismissed, as well as ignored, in human sciences. Let me therefore address it here upfront, recalling some strong statements made three and a half centuries ago by Leibniz, who wrote:

Technical terms are . . . to be shunned as worse than a dog or snake. . . . The greatest clarity is found in commonplace terms with their popular usage retained. There is always a certain obscurity in technical terms. . . . Our judgments are thus rendered more reliable by this process of analyzing technical terms into merely popular ones; hence a perfect demonstration merely carries out such analysis to the ultimate and best-known elements.

Leibniz (1969 [1670], p. 123)

Leibniz recognised, of course, that technical terminology can often allow greater brevity, but he insisted that when it is used it must rely on previous explanations offered in ordinary words used in accordance with ordinary usage. He did not accept that there are insights in human sciences that can only be expressed through technical language: “. . . we have established the fact”, he wrote, “that there is nothing which cannot be explained in popular terms, and that the more popular the terms, the clearer the discourse . . .” (p. 125). He called this “one of the fundamental rules of philosophical style”, and he lamented that it is “violated frequently, especially by metaphysicians and dialecticians” (p. 125). The subjects that they deal with “occur commonly in the utterances, writings, and thoughts of uneducated people and are met with frequently in everyday life”. Accordingly, ordinary people can talk about such subjects with their own ordinary words. “When such words are available, it is a sin to obscure matters by inventing new and mostly more inconvenient terms (to say nothing of the awkwardness often shown in manufacturing such words)” (p. 125).

It seems clear that what applies to the broad spectrum of human interests that Leibniz called “philosophy” applies also to linguistic anthropology in general and to kinship studies in particular. Here as elsewhere, technical discourse should be avoided, and when and where it is used, it needs to explain itself in ordinary language. When the subject matter concerns other people’s ways of thinking, then it needs to explain itself in words and phrases that those involved could
understand. When meanings are explained through simple and “ordinary” words, authentic understanding can be achieved – both inside groups of people bound by the same language and between such groups. This is not about a “reader-friendly style”, but about clear thinking and genuine understanding.

Accordingly, cross-linguistic semantic analysis that translates complex and unfamiliar ideas into combinations of simple and familiar ones can be more than an academic exercise in linguistic anthropology: it can also serve the purposes of cross-cultural understanding and communication. In some situations, it may even serve the purposes of cross-generational education and language revitalisation.

Innumerable languages of the world are dying out and the ways of thinking embedded in them are becoming irretrievably lost to cultural outsiders, and even to the children and grandchildren of the insiders. Paradoxically, while Global English is becoming an unprecedented force for world-wide understanding, in many areas it is also becoming an instrument of conceptual and cultural homogenisation of the world. The ever-growing domination of academic English in social sciences, including anthropology and linguistics, is a good case in point.

There is a further paradox here: the fact that academic English is increasingly taken for granted as the instrument of scientific understanding for any domain means that at a time when linguistics and anthropology emphasise, as never before, the enormous cultural diversity of languages, it is also widely assumed that the ways of thinking embedded in all these diverse languages can be explained by being translated into academic English. Given the ever-growing prestige and power of English, including technical English, in international science, right across the spectrum, many anthropologists and linguists appear to be more, rather than less, inclined to assume that, for example, words like ‘patrilineal’ and ‘matrilineal’, ‘ascending’ and ‘descending’, or ‘sibling’ and ‘generation’ can be used to explain how speakers of endangered languages in Australia, Oceania and Africa think.

Apart from the inherent Anglocentrism and scientism of such approaches, they clearly exclude native speakers from the conversation. By contrast, the approach illustrated in the present paper treats indigenous speakers as potential consultants – not as the word ‘consultants’ tends to be used in current scholarship (as a polite euphemism for the outdated ‘informants’) but in a real sense, which presupposes a common language and a set of shared concepts (Goddard and Wierzbicka 2014b). Such a reinterpretation of the key notion of ‘consultant’ opens a space where linguistic anthropology can meet with inter-cultural communication. Arguably, in the area of kinship studies, authentic ‘consultation’ with native speakers would require setting aside, at least part of the time, some of the technical and academic English in which linguistic anthropology has for a long time been entrapped, and trying to think, above all, with words like ‘mother’ and ‘father’, ‘be born’, ‘wife’ and ‘husband’, and ‘man’, ‘woman’, and ‘child’.

**Related Topics**

- 2 Semantic Categorization and Cognition (Dimmendaal)
- 9 Language Socialization (Paugh)
- 10 Studying Language Acquisition in Different Linguistic and Cultural Settings (Stoll)
- 22 Language in the Age of Globalization (Jacquemet)
- 29 Language Maintenance and Revitalization (Cowell)
- 30 Language Endangerment and Revitalization Strategies (Brittain and MacKenzie)
- 31 The Politics of Language Endangerment (Meek)

What links this chapter with Dimmendaal’s is the focus on semantic categorisation considered from a cognitive point of view. The chapter is related to those by Paugh and Stoll in that it considers meanings from the point of view of their learnability; its concerns are close to those discussed in the chapters by Cowell, Brittain and MacKenzie and Meek in that it links
cross-linguistic semantics with the themes of language endangerment and revitalisation, which are inseparable from what is arguably the central challenge facing anthropological linguistics today: that of overcoming Anglocentrism in exploring languages and cultures.

Notes

1 It should be noted that in addition to its half-heartedness, Brown’s commitment to lexical universals had another problem: a lack of attention to lexical polysemy. One cannot establish that all languages have words meaning ‘mother’ and ‘father’ if one mistakes polysemic meanings of the relevant words for unitary ones. Brown was not unaware of this problem, but he did not bear it in mind consistently.

2 The abbreviations used in the interlinear glosses cited in this paper are as follows: 1: first person; 2a: second person augmented; 3: third person; erg: ergative; fem: feminine; masc: masculine; obj: object; p: past; pp: past perfective; past: past; sg: singular; ua-: unit augmented.

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### Further Reading


