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Workshop

**Escaping Morgan's Typological Cage: Alternative approaches to the form, meaning and social implications of kinship terms**

**11-12 April 2019**

**Organisers:** Patrick Heady (MPI for Social Anthropology),

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**OUTLINE**

In most European languages the words for ‘brother’ and ‘sister’ are quite distinct, but in a few languages – notably Spanish (*hermano, hermana*), Portuguese (*irmao, irma*), and Greek (*adelfos, adelfi*) they share a common root and differ only in the gendered ending. The idea for this workshop arose from an email discussion between the organisers about whether the distinction between the two morphological patterns (*hermano, hermana* vs. *brother, sister*) had a social meaning. Partly on the basis of previous work (Kronenfeld 1991; Heady 2013) we thought there should be some connection with social practice, but if so, what was it?

An obvious suggestion, following Radcliffe-Brown, is that using (almost) the same term implies that relationships to one’s male and female siblings are similar, while the use of radically different terms implies that the relationships are very distinct. But this comes to grief over the fact that the ‘similar’ sibling terms are found in southern European countries where cultural ideas of ‘honour and shame’ traditionally led to particularly sharp distinctions between same-sex and cross-sex relationships. We tried a number of other hypothetical terminology-practice connections, and as we explored their implications the discussion broadened out to include the terms for other primary and secondary relatives and turned into a general review of patterns of gender-marking and kin-term morphology in European languages. Although the conclusions of the review are rather tentative, the material does suggests a number of associations – both with aspects of social practice and with the grammars of European languages.

The details of the argument are presented in the concluding dialog in the distribution packet for the workshop. The reason we think they matter is that the associations we tentatively identified cut across the criteria which define the classic set of terminological types.  In one guise or another, these types (including Morgan’s distinction between Descriptive and Classificatory terminologies, and the main varieties of each kind: Eskimo, Sudanese, Hawaiian, Dravidian, Iroquois, Crow, Omaha, and Cheyenne) have provided a common framework for almost all ethnological (i.e., comparative) approaches to kinship terminology – starting with Morgan himself and including Murdock, Levi-Strauss, and Lounsbury – especially approaches that involve relating the kinship terminology to features of social organization.  There is no doubt that the research carried out within this framework has been highly productive – generating robust empirical generalisations which will stand the test of time.

Even so, the trouble with frameworks is that they can easily become cages: by directing attention towards some aspects of a phenomenon they inevitably downplay others which may be equally important. Typologies have a further disadvantage: refining the typological categories and extending them to allow for special cases can become an end in itself – and this focus on “butterfly collecting” can distract from the central task of identifying the underlying causal principles that structure the field as a whole.

We are aware of at least three important aspects of terminology, which are reflected in our example, but which mainstream typological analyses have tended to overlook:

* The morphological form of kinship terms themselves. For instance, are they stand-alone lexemes, lexemic roots with grammatical inflexions, or composites of two or more equally meaningful elements? To the extent that the terms themselves are structured, they suggest the possibility of systematic meanings that go beyond the simple distinctions and equivalences required for the Morganian typologies.
* The ways in which kin terms or their usage encode information that is not strictly genealogical, particularly the relative age and gender of *Ego* and *Alter*.
* The relationships referred to. The standard Morganian typologies are mainly defined by their treatment of various kinds of cousins, aunts and uncles—or more recently by formal algebraic systems which are able to generate these distinctions. Sibling terms are not specifically treated, despite forming several clearly defined structures of their own. Other relationships which are drawn on to define particular types, but not comparatively analysed in their own right, include affinal, grand-parental, and parent-child links.

We invite papers that deal with any or all of these aspects of kinship terminology – relating them to cognition and to social behaviour. The analyses can be ethnographic, historical or comparative and can relate to any part of the world (including critical assessments of our own account of European kinship). We are particularly interested in empirical insights, regularities, and relationships not captured by the traditional types identified by Morgan, Murdock and their successors.

By way of explaining the background to our thoughts and providing a common base-line for the workshop, we are including a small packet of our own papers: (a) Kronenfeld’s 2013 overview of the semantics and pragmatics of kinterms and their usage (both literal and figurative), kinterm systems, and the tension between ethnographic description and ethnological comparison; (b), Kronenfeld’s 1974 reanalysis of Nerlove and Romney’s 1967 paper on sibling typology; (c), Kronenfeld’s 1991 exploration of the morphological means by which types of siblings are distinguished in different systems¸(d) Heady’s 2017 new morphology-based typology of European affinal and grandparental terms, including the cognitive, historical and socio-economic factors which underlie the types; (e) Heady’s 2013 conference paper, giving an earlier formulation of this typology and presenting additional information about the KASS study data on which it is partly based; and (f) the email dialog referred to above which led us to pose the problems to which this workshop is addressed.

Speakers will be invited by the organisers.

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1991 Fanti Kinship: Language, Inheritance, and Kingroups. *Anthropos* 86:19-31. Reprinted and emended in Kronenfeld 2009 *Fanti Kinship and the Analysis of Kinship Terminologies*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press], pp. 301-318,

2013 Kinship Terms: Typology and History. In *Kinship Systems: Change and Reconstruction*, edited by Patrick McConvell, Ian Keen and Rachel Hendery. Pp. 19-42. Salt Lake City: The University of Utah Press.

Heady, Patrick

2013 The respective influence of biological relatedness and linguistic classifications on European kinship patterns. Paper presented at annual meeting of the *Society for Anthropological Sciences,* Mobile, Alabama.

2017 A “Cognition and Practice” approach to an aspect of European kinship. *Cross-Cultural Research* 51(3): 285–310.

Heady, Patrick; Kronenfeld, David B.

2018 Kin terms and gender roles in Europe – a dialog. Paper *prepared for this workshop* on the basis of an earlier email correspondence.