

Kinship: Morphological Change, Kintax, and a Typology of Human Reference

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Kinship is a major organizing principle for many of the world's societies. People know who their kin are and have expectations, obligations, rights and responsibilities for and from kin. This talk looks at the interaction between kinship and language at two levels. First, I describe a quantitative corpus approach to understanding morphological change in kinship possession in Matkar Panau (Oceanic, Papua New Guinea). Second, I describe a quantitative corpus typology approach to understanding human reference, showing that the frequency of kinship terms divides 23 languages into two major groups. I then look at the impact of kintax, the obligatory encoding of grammar relating to kin (cf. Blythe, 2013; Evans, 2003), on kinship frequency in these languages.

Nomenclatures for kinship systems are not stable. As societies evolve, so do their conceptions of relationships and the consequent words for those relationships. Periods of change lead to variation in nomenclature. Although Matkar Panau (Oceanic, Papua New Guinea) shows a great deal of variation in its kinship terminology in the last 80 years (referencing reported kinship words in Kaspruś, 1942 collected in the 1930s), there is very little change in the overall organization of the core kinship system. Rather replacement terms have come in for core concepts. In this talk, I will present the variation in the kinship system and show that it is due to address terms entering the referential system and semantic change of generic terms for people and sizes to take on a kinship meaning when possessed. Traditional terms are possessed directly, and replacement terms for the same relationships are possessed indirectly. These new kinship terms also have a consequence for the semantic boundaries of (in)alienability (cf. Chappell and MacGregor, 1989). I show that the use of replacement terms is due to sociolinguistic factors such as speaker gender, but also the relationships themselves. Spousal and child relationships are more likely to be indirectly possessed than other kind of relationships. The findings indicate that there is an overall shift towards indirect possession for kin terms (also cf. Meakins and O'Shannessy, 2005; Meyerhoff and Truesdale, 2015) and that the greatest variation is in the domain of intimate relationships likely to be part of a single household (cf. Tyler, 1966), a sphere of increasing influence in Papua New Guinea (Beer, 2015).

Expanding out to corpora for cross-linguistic typology, I describe a stimuli task that generates spontaneous, naturalistic, comparable data (San Roque et al., 2012) used in over 23 languages as part of the Social Cognition Parallax Interview Corpus (SCOPIC) Project (Barth & Evans, 2017). I look at broad semantic types of human reference and cluster languages by the kinds of semantic categories they use, finding proportions of kinship terms and generic terms to be the most variable across languages. I then show how having kintax significantly increases the use of kinship terms, along with narrative genre and particular contexts. We see yet another instantiation of DuBois' 1987 observation that grammars code best what speakers do most.

This talk will explain the approach behind quantitative corpus typology, a relatively new field aiming to capturing variation both between and within languages. In corpus typology, languages are grouped by their profiles of variation and conditioning factors are compared across languages. This approach better characterizes language use than traditional typological approaches and is an exciting place where descriptive linguistics, corpus linguistics and typology come together.