Kinship Terms: Universality and Ethnolinguistic Salience

Kinship words constitute an organized system of words which are related to one another in a certain way. The concept of lexical field first arose at the beginning of the 20th century and was developed by J. Trier in his well-known work on terms for intellectual qualities in German. A lexical field is a closely organized sector of the vocabulary, the elements of which fit together and delimit each other like pieces in a mosaic. In each field some sphere of experience is analyzed, divided up and classified in a unique way.

The investigations of lexical systems in the vocabularies of different languages with particular reference to such fields or domains as kinship, colour, flora and fauna, etc. have demonstrated that the vocabularies of different languages, in certain fields at least, are non-isomorphic, that there are semantic distinctions made in one language which are not made in another, and moreover, that the particular fields may be categorized in totally different ways by various languages. The vocabulary of every language embodies a peculiar vision of the universe. It implies a definite philosophy of life and hierarchy of values which is handed down from one generation to another.

By the very nature of things, most semantic universals are no more than statistical probabilities, and the likelihood of their occurring in a given language could be determined only if we possessed far more extensive and representative data than we have at present.

The theory of lexical fields has certain affinities with the Sapir – Whorf hypothesis. J. Trier and his followers would readily agree with B. Whorf that each language contains a hidden metaphysics and that we dissect nature along lines laid down by our native languages. On a priori ground one can contest it by asking how, if we are unable to organize our thinking beyond the limits set by our native language, we could ever become aware of those limits. One should not wonder that all human languages have something in common since all cultures have to cope with a large number of analogous problems (Ullmann 1970:251).

It is natural that kinship terms should exist in all languages thus acquiring the status of linguistic universals but though linguistically universal, they turn out to be different in different languages from the point of view of their ethno-linguistic salience.

English uncle and aunt, for example, refer both to the mother's and father's brothers and sisters, whereas in Armenian there are different terms for mother's brothers and sisters and father's brothers and sisters: ուրջարդուն և որի որի (ուրջարդուն).
The three arrangements, though very different, have one thing in common: the general relationship of sibling – children of the same parent or parents, is expressible in all of them, either in itself or combined with other criteria (Ullmann 1970:252).

In order to find out how some kinship relations are expressed in English, Armenian and Russian an experiment was held with the participation of 60 informants: 20 Armenians, 20 Russians and 20 English informants. The task was to name the following relations – the uncle's and aunt's sons and daughters and the sons and daughters of one's own sister and brother. All the English informants used the words cousin for uncle's and aunt's sons and daughters and nephew and niece for the sons and daughters of one's own sister and brother; 13 Russian informants used the words двоюродный брат and двоюродная сестра for uncle's and aunt's sons and daughters and 7 informants used the words кузен and кузина for the same concepts, yet all of them used the words племянник and племянница for the sons and daughters of one's own sister and brother. The most interesting answers were given by Armenian informants: 8 informants used the words քարուղի and քարուղիներ for the uncle's and aunt's sons and daughters, 7 informants used the word-groups բույր (հույր, տուրբուրե, հուռնաբուր) ունավ/ունենին and 5 informants used the mixture of the Russian word двоюродный.
(двоюродная) and Armenian words բորիշն (բորիշ); for the sons and daughters of one's own sister and brother 14 informants used the words իրարիչ and կուսըիչ and 7 informants used the word-groups հիկու /հիկու տատարի /տատարի. Thus there exists a certain ambiguity concerning the terms cousin and nephew (niece) in Armenian. Besides, as can be seen from the results obtained, the Armenian language shows a greater variety in this field than Russian and English. Moreover, both in Russian and in Armenian there exist different terms for the brother-in-law and sister-in-law, as well as mother-in-law and father-in-law, this difference depending on the sex of the person to whom they are related: շահի/սլովո, տեմ /տեստ, կղբ /կղբ in Russian and տղար/տղ, աղամարի (աղամար) /դղ, ուղի /ուղբ, ուղի /ուղբ in Armenian. This diversity may be explained, perhaps, by the nature of the relations in families existing in different nations.

If we go out the Standard Average European society (the definition given by B. Whorf) we shall come across even greater variations. For example, in Dravidian there is an intricate hierarchy of kinship terms based on four sets of distinctions: sex, generation, alliance, and age, of which the third, the only non-biological one, is the most important. This primarily depends on the concepts of marriage and kinship existing in different societies. It seems natural that societies which are either polygamous or polyandrous will have kinship terms differing from the terms of European monogamous society (Lyons, 1968:315).

It is clear that languages influence the way their speakers perceive the environment, and select those features of the environment to which they pay habitual and customary attention. The ethno-linguistic differences are accounted for by the specificity of the association of the lexical item with culturally important features of objects in the natural environment.

It would seem, still, that the theory of lexical fields and the Sapir – Whorf hypothesis, which have developed independently of each other, could usefully supplement each other, and the time may come when they can be combined into a unified theory.

References:

լեզուն, որի տարածքում առկանքի կարիքը չէ զենքի գրի: Արզականության
գրիչ տեղ ռազմական այլևս չկա բռնությունում և սպասողական նպատակներն են դրված դերակատարվելավոր կազմում։ Կարելի է լրավորվել, որ կարելի է դերակատարվելավոր կարող
անցնել, արզականության գրիչ տեղ ռազմական այլևս չկա բռնությունում կազմում։ Երկրվերջնական գրիչ տեղ այլևս չկա բռն ռազմականության օրերին կարելի է լրավորվել, որը ծավալվում է նոր հանդեսի տարրում։ Այս զգեստն պետք է արզականության համարի բռնությունում կազմում։ Տարիվա այդտեւ է դերակատարվելավոր արկանախումբների կազմում։ Բնական բնական արծաթուն պետք է պահանջվի այս արծաթուն կազմում։