Kinship Terms: Universality and Ethnolinguistic Salience

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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: մորաքույր and   քեռի (մորեղբայր),

hnpwpnιjn and hnntnpwjn. In Latin there were four terms for uncle and aunt but only two of them have survived: *avinculus* (mother's brother), which is the basis for English *uncle*, and *amita* (father's sister), which is the origin of English *aunt*. The terms *patruus* (father's brother) and *matertera* (mother's sister) were lost. In Latin there were two words for *father*: *genitor* for the physiological relationship, and *pater* which carried social connotations. According to L. Hjemslev, there is no single term for *grandfather* and *grandmother* in Swedish as a distinction is made between *farfar* (the father's father), and *morfar* (the mother's father), and similarly between *farmor* (father's mother) and *mormor* (mother's mother). Surprisingly Hungarian had no term for *brother* or *sister* till the middle of the 19th century. It had instead, and still has, separate words for *elder* and *younger brother* and *elder* and *younger sister*. Malay has again a different arrangement: it has one collective term for *sibling* or *cousin* and more specialized for *elder* and *younger sibling* or *cousin*, the latter being further subdivided into male and female: *elder sister* or *female cousin* and *elder brother* or *male cousin*. L. Hjemslev represents the difference between the solutions in three languages (English, Hungarian and Malay) in the following table:

	Hungarian	English	· Malay
Elder brother	bātya		
		brother	
Younger brother	ōcs		
			saudara
Elder sister	nēne		
		sister	
Younger sister	hug		

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 qwnմիկ and qwnմnιhի for *the uncle's and aunt's sons and daughters*, 7 informants used the word-groups pեnnιu (hnpեnpnnι, մnnwpnnցu, hnnwpnnցu) տղաน/աnջիկը and 5 informants used the mixture of the Russian word двоюродный

(*двоюродная*) and Armenian words *եղբայրս (քույրս)*; for *the sons and daughters of one's own sister and brother* 14 informants used the words *զարմիկ* and *զարմունհի* and 7 informants used the word-groups *եղբորս /քրոջս տղան/աղջիկը*. 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: *шурин/свояченица, деверь/золовка, теща/тесть, свекор/свекровь* in Russian and *տեգր/տալ, աներորդի (աներձագ)/քենի, զոքանչ/աներ, սկեսրայր/սկեսուր* 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:

1. Lyons, J. (1968) *Introduction to Theoretical Linguistics*. Cambridge.
2. Ullmann, St. (1970) *Semantics: An Introduction to the Science of Meaning*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

Ազգակցություն ցույց տվող բառեր՝ ընդհանրությականություն և էթնոլեզվաբանական արժեք

Սույն հոդվածի շրջանակներում փորձ է արվում քննել ազգակցություն ցույց տվող բառերի առանձնահատկությունները անգլերեն, հայերեն և ռուսերեն լե-զուներում: Ազգակցություն ցույց տվող բառերը կազմում են մի կուռ համա-

կարգ, որի տարբերը սերտորոն կապված են միմյանց հետ: Ազգակցություն ցույց տվող բառերը առկա են բոլոր լեզուներում և այսպիսով ներկայանում են որպես լեզվական ընդհանրույթ: Այնուամենայնիվ, լինելով լեզվական ընդհանրույթ` ազգակցություն ցույց տվող բառերը տարբեր լեզուներում կարող են տարբերություններ ունենալ էթնոլեզվաբանական արժևորման տեսանկյունից: Ազգակցություն ցույց տվող այս կամ այն բառի առկայությունը որոշակի լեզվում անշուշտ կապված է տվյալ լեզվով խոսող հասարակության մեջ գոյություն ունեցող ազգակցական հարաբերությունների հետ: Լեզուն ազդում է լեզվակիրների աշխարհընկալմանը, և նրանում սկզբնապես արտացոլվում են այն հասկացություններն ու երևույթները, որոնք առավել կարևոր են այդ լեզվով խոսողների համար: