Kinship terminology – classificatory and descriptive

Introduction:

All societies recognize kinship relationship which may be broad range or narrow range. Kinship relations of these diverse systems of kinship are reflected in their respective kinship terminologies, particularly kinship terms of reference. The degree of kins – primary, secondary and tertiary are referred by specific kin terms or equated to certain focal terms. The primary kin is the person who is related to ego directly, secondary kin is the kin related to ego through a primary kin whereas tertiary kin is the person who is related to ego through a secondary kin. For referring and addressing the kins, certain kin terms are used. Term of reference means the term expressing the actual relationship whereas term of address means the term used for addressing that relative. One may address by his/her name but can not refer the relation by his/her individual name. The kin terms function to classify kins into different categories. First, they classify particular kinds of persons into single specific categories; second, they separate different kinds of persons into distinct categories. Generally, two or more kin are merged under the same term when similarity of status exists between the individuals. These similarities are then emphasized by the application of one term to both individuals (Trautmann, T.R. 1981).

Language of kinship terms:

Kinship terminologies obviously form a sub-language that classifies the kinship universe. In other word, kinship terms are lingual expressions of differentiations and classifications of kinsmen. The term ‘kin’ was adopted by Andrew Lang and F. G. Frazer and it means relatives. Henry Lewis Morgan was the first anthropologist to see that the terminology was a method of classification and as such its study led to the understanding of kinship systems.

To accomplish inert concept, a kinship term is to be translated into English as exactly as it can. It may not be translated simply by the common or
garden variety of English kinship terms. For instance, among the Meitei of India, the term *itei* is both English cousin and brother-in-law, and not yet exactly either. It is required, a dialect of English specifically constructed to specify the semantic scope of the Meitei category referred as *itei* by means of terms that stay within its bounds and do not overlap them. Among the people, it means women’s speaking term for mother’s brother’s son older than ego, father’s sister’s son older than ego and husband’s elder brother. For this, a notational dialect is necessary, Murdock introduced a set of two-letter abbreviations. Another single letter set, developed by Rhodes–Livingstone is also gaining acceptance. The notations are given below.

**Kinship terminological notation.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fa/F</td>
<td>Father</td>
<td>Parent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pa/P</td>
<td>Parent</td>
<td>Son</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>So/S</td>
<td>Son</td>
<td>Da/D Daughter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mo/M</td>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>Br/B Brother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hu/H</td>
<td>Husband</td>
<td>Wi/W Wife</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Si/Z</td>
<td>Sister</td>
<td>Si/G Sibling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sp/E</td>
<td>Spouse</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*e*, elder e.g. MeZ = mother’s elder sister; e(MZD) = mother’s sister’s daughter, older than ego.

*y*, younger, employed in the same manner.

♂, male, used to specify the sex of ego, eg. ♂BS = Male ego’s brother’s son.

♀, female, employed in the same manner.

**Kinship terminology and global taxonomy of terminological system:**

Morgan who studied kinship terms from all parts of the world, coined the still –used nomenclature for the two broad categories of kinship terms, viz, classificatory and descriptive systems of kinship terms. In addition, to the two categories of kin terms, G.P. Murdock added another category as denotative term. Lowie independently invented a fourfold taxonomy of kinship as Generational, Bifurcate merging, Bifurcate collateral and Lineal types of kinship terminological systems. Murdock, the statistical anthropologist recognised six major terminological systems of different societies in the world – Hawaiian, Iroquois, Omaha, Crow, Sudanese and Eskimo.
Classificatory and descriptive terms:

Under a classificatory system several people, lineal as well as collateral, and often even affinal, are all referred to by the same term of designation. The term classes them as similar. A descriptive term of designation describes the speaker’s exact relation towards him / her whom he / she is referring to or addressing.

In his study of the Iroquois, Morgan discovered that a kinship term may be used to designate a number of persons. Thus, one’s own father, his brothers and cousins, and even more remotely related men of his generation are called by the common term, which means father. The same thing happens with the other side of the family; the mother, her sister cousins on her side, and so on, are mothers. Since a term is used to refer a number of persons, Morgan termed such kinship systems as ‘classificatory’. It is also known as Dakota type of nomenclature after the name of the people among whom it was first discovered (Jha, M. 1994). Among the Maori, all the grandparents’s generation are grandparents, all of the father’s generation are fathers, all of the mother’s generation are mothers, all persons of ego’s generation are brothers and sisters and all of the children’s generation are referred to as ‘own children’. The general system of Hawaiian type merges the three genealogical kintypes F, FB, MB under a single term and kins such as FZD, MBD, FBD, MZD, Z under one kin term. Lowie recognised such systems as ‘generational’. Bifurcate merging systems of Iroquois, Omaha and Crow types, merge the father and father’s brother under a single term but employ a different term for mother’s brother.

The number of societies with descriptive kinship terminological system is rarer in comparison to that of classificatory system. In this type of kinship system, the terms expressing blood relationship are distinguishable from that of collateral lines. Bifurcate collateral systems of the type called Sudanese (following Lowie) distinguish the three kintypes i.e., F, FB and MB by
employing three distinct terms. In ego’s generation, the Sudanese also have different terms for FZD, MBD, FBD, MZD and Z.

In classifying various societies, Morgan schemed kinship terminological systems as follows.

**Classificatory systems of kinship:**
- Ganowanian (American Indian)
- Turanian (Dravidian, Gaura or North Indian, Chinese, Japanese)
- Unclassified Asiatic (Burmese, Karen, etc)
- Malayan (Hawaiian, Maori, various Micronesian and, oddly enough, Zulu)
- Eskimo.

**Descriptive systems of kinship:**
- Aryan
- Semitic
- Uralian (Ugrain, Turkish, Esthonian, Magyar)

As studied by Morgan, the descriptive and classificatory terminologies bring forth three distinct meanings. First, the difference was purely lexical. Classificatory terminologies consist simple phrases only, under which many genealogical kin, near and far are classified whereas descriptive terminologies consist a set of primary terms for close kin and these primary terms generate compound or phrasal terms to denote more distant kin. Second, they bear a semantic sense. In classificatory systems genealogical nodes are accumulated into a small number of large classes while in the descriptive systems, the nodes of the genealogical trees are distinguished in the terminology. Third, the contrast bears a sense of dispersion of blood line. In classificatory systems several collateral lines, near and remote, are merged into the lineal line, thus theoretically, if not practically, preventing a dispersion of the blood. On the contrary, the descriptive system has the collateral lines distinct and perpetual divergent from the lineal, which results, theoretically as well as practically, in a dispersion of the blood. Thus, the three contrasting senses define the two systems as follows.
**Conclusion:**

In all societies in the world there are terms to refer or address different persons who may or may not be a kin. Based on their terminological system, global taxonomy of kinship systems are prepared. Morgan was the first to work in this area. He distinguished two kinship terms – classificatory and descriptive. Later on, other classifications have also been attempted. They classify particular kinds of persons into single specific categories or separate different kinds of persons into distinct categories. Generally, two or more kin are merged under the same term when similarity of status exists between the individuals. For example, in societies where father and father’s brother are treated equally, a single kin term is used to refer them. Such a term is called classificatory term. There are also societies with the kinship system in which the terms expressing blood relationship are distinguishable from that of collateral lines just like the bifurcate collateral system of the Sudanese. In this way kin terms are classified or described.