THE MORAL AND TACTICAL MEANING OF KINSHIP TERMS

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In spite of its general title, the reason for writing this article is quite limited. It is intended as a methodological preliminary to an ethnography of the various peoples of Madagascar considered within a single framework. This seemed necessary because of one feature of the ethnographic situation in Madagascar. This is a familiar problem in an acute form. While the kinship terminology is, with minor variations, uniform throughout the island, the social organisation and the kinship systems which employ these terms vary to an extreme degree. The peoples of Madagascar have in some regions an economy based on irrigated rice cultivation, in others they are swidden agriculturalists; some are pastoralists, others are hunters and gatherers. In some areas they have a unilineal descent group organisation; in others a caste-like structure of ranked kinship groups with a high tendency towards endogamy. Despite these extreme variations in kinship organisation, however, all these people speak the same language and use virtually the same system of kinship terminology, thus apparently denying all connexion between terminology and social organisation.

This kind of problem, too often ignored within a functionalist framework, has recently been illuminatingly tackled by Professor Yalman (1967) for the similar situation existing in Ceylon and south India. Yalman’s solution is to see certain structural principles, evident in the terminology, as basic conceptually organising principles in the different phenotypic manifestations which are the forms the social organisation assumes in various places. This solution although not entirely different from the one I propose here, cannot be so readily applied to Madagascar. The reason is that the much simpler Malagasy terminology does not reveal sufficiently specific structural principles: it stresses only the differences between the generations, the sex of speaker and person referred to, and immediate affinity. In such a system a specific type of alliance is not defined, and the kind of analysis undertaken by Yalman is almost impossible. In contrast I would argue that the type of solution proposed below would facilitate the understanding of the Sinhalese systems as much as it does the Malagasy.

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All accounts of kinship terms given in anthropological writing rely basically on the notion of denotation of persons. At the first stage of analysis, at least, these studies are concerned with who can be called by what term. This however becomes something of a paradox when we realise that no honest ethnographer is ever really satisfied that he has produced an accurate list of all the types of people who can be described by all the kinship terms in any society. For some of these terms,
like the English term ‘husband’, he may well feel satisfied, but with others—like the English term ‘cousin’ he will despair. I mention these English examples deliberately, for if we find it nearly impossible to give the role denotation for the word ‘cousin’ in our own language, we can scarcely blame the ethnographer if he cannot do it for a totally foreign culture. In this article I want to argue that in fact the difficulty will not be resolved by further, more careful fieldwork. On the contrary we have to recognise that certain words, including many kinship terms, are best looked at: 1) in terms of the place they hold in the system of values; and 2) from the point of view of which tactical uses they can serve—in other words what transformation in the social situation they can achieve. Kinship terms do not denote kinship roles; rather they are part of the process of defining a role relation between speaker and hearer and they also imply much more than the mere establishing of a kinship-line of communication. They are part of a much wider tactical characterisation which may have little to do with kinship in any strict sense of the word.

This requires that we assume that kinship terms are tools defined by their place in the system of tools. Kinship terms always do much more than label individuals, and most can be used by a skilful speaker of a language to refer to an almost unlimited number of people given the right situation and sufficient ability. The operational potential of kinship terms derives from the fact that they have a moral meaning originating in the general belief system of the culture independent of tactical use, and tactical use itself covers much more than the denotation of kinship roles. I am here using the term moral in the way Firth uses it: ‘quality from the standpoint of right and wrong. Morality is a set of principles on which such judgements are based’ (Firth 1961: 183). This means that as value judgements, kinship terms may contain elements of great significance which have nothing to do with what we normally think of as kinship and need to be defined in a much wider framework.

The kinship terms I have most immediately in mind are those round which the controversy over extension centres. As is well known, like many before and after him, Malinowski considered that when a kinship term can apply to both close relatives and remote relatives (or even non-relatives) the meaning of the term primarily refers to the close relatives and is only used for other individuals ‘by extension’. For example, the primary meaning of a term which can be used both for father and also for FFBS is father, and the second use is metaphorical or at least in some way secondary. Malinowski’s notion is overtly psychological and has been critically discussed and criticised by Fortes (1957: 175). A frontal attack on Malinowski’s theory came in an article by Leach which uses Malinowski’s own material to demonstrate that ‘kinship terms are category words’ (Leach 1958: 143). In other words, Leach argues that in the same way as it would be ridiculous to say that the word ‘table’ means ‘my table’, it is unjustified to argue that the term ‘x’ used for ‘my father and other individuals’ means primarily ‘my father’. The term refers equally to all the people so addressed unless there is clear evidence otherwise. Leach himself has been answered by Lounsbury (1965), who returns to the hypothesis of Malinowski with the aid of componential analysis. He sees the primary meaning of kinship terms as that of reference to all the closest genealogical kinsmen, but this meaning is seen as consisting of several components of meaning some of which can be altered to operate various extensions.
This controversy is at the very heart of anthropology but is also of great significance for semantics in general, and it has continued unabated in many places. Nonetheless, the whole difference of opinion seems to me to spring not so much from a conflict of views between Leach and Lounsbury on the meaning of kinship terms but rather from the similarity of their positions. Both writers in the articles referred to concentrate exclusively on denotation of already existing roles and again ignore strategic uses. Leach is obviously right in pointing out the ethnocentric and hypothetical character of the Malinowskian theory. But, in stressing the unitary meaning of category he makes us forget the many facets of meaning of terms differentially stressed by every situation. This potential is implied in the notion of extension and so Lounsbury is clearly right in stressing the polysemic nature of kinship terms and their multiplicity of extensions, but he seems to me to see the process of extension as an automatic process, the result of impersonal rules, rather than human choices. His theory requires us to subscribe to a totally hypothetical ‘origin’ belief. My dissatisfaction with both sides of the argument is basically that Leach’s criticism of Malinowski seems logically unfaulted by Lounsbury’s reply, but that Lounsbury’s attitude is in the end more fruitful. I want to retain much from both ideas and I suggest that a modification of one’s preconceptions about meaning along the lines already suggested enables one to do this. For once the notion of the inevitable primacy of denotation of roles is removed from the understanding of kinship terms the stumbling block to the existence of two types of meanings, ‘primary’ and ‘secondary’, disappears without necessarily being replaced by monosemic ‘categories’ of people.

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I can briefly suggest the relation of tactics and moral meaning in two examples relating to kinship terms used by the Merina of central Madagascar. Accounts of Merina kinship terminology have already been published (Sibree 1879; Rahari-jaona & Vérin 1964) and further accounts are in preparation. For the purposes of this article the published accounts are sufficient and I refer the reader to them.¹

The first example I want to discuss concerns the Merina word havana. I have already struggled with the translation of this word (Bloch 1967; in press). The word havana has been translated by many writers including myself as meaning kinsmen (though we should qualify even this statement by saying that the word means both kinsman and affine); but what does this type of translation refer to? In my experience the word is actually used only occasionally to refer to people with whom one has genealogical ties of kinship or affinity. In practice the word is used for anybody with whom one is claiming a relationship based on what Fortes has called ‘prescriptive altruism’ rather than on contract. Thus co-villagers will address each other by this term, participant observation leads the anthropologist to be called havana by his informants, people on whom one relies for agricultural co-operation may be called havana; even the Malagasy radio, in adopting the bonhomic tradition to announcers, addresses its listeners by this word. In sum, to deny to someone’s face, whoever he may be, that he is a havana, is a declaration of open hostility. Should we then conclude that the traditional translation of the word is misleading—that the ‘category’ havana has no primary genealogical or
affinal meaning, that it means something like 'person to whom I have an obligation'? The difficulty with such a position is that if we retranslate such a phrase into Malagasy it is hotly denied by informants that this is the meaning of the word. Furthermore, anyone listening to ordinary conversation in a Merina village will hear continual discussions about whether people are true kinsmen (tena havana) or havana (mpifankatia) kinsmen 'because they are loved' (this is a folk etymology of the phrase). The word qualifying havana as 'true' may be accompanied by the slapping of the lower abdomen to signify a link having something to do with female procreation.

This distinction between 'true' havana and what I have elsewhere called kinsmen 'by extension' is clear where people who are not present are being discussed. Are we justified, then, in saying that the term havana when it is used to refer to people who are not kinsmen or affines is an extension in the Malinowskian sense, or that it is used in a metaphorical way? With either of these explanations we run up against another paradox. Although the distinction between 'true' kinsmen and kinsmen 'by extension' is clear in elaborated reference, the picture is again complicated when we look at the uses of the word in address. As a term of address the word is in fact normally used for people whom one would not describe as 'true' kinsmen. One would not normally address genealogical kinsmen or affines by the word havana. Indeed, the many instances when I have noted the word havana being used extensively and emphatically are cases of great social ambiguity, precisely because of the absence of genealogical or affinal links (e.g. see Bloch 1967a). During fieldwork it was those people with whom I had only occasional contact who called me havana on every possible occasion, while those with whom I had daily contact hardly ever used the word. Similarly, the contexts in which the word was used most emphatically were those involving interaction between descendants of free and those of slave Merina. The significant fact in this relationship is that there is a greatly emphasised ban on intermarriage between descendants of slaves and descendants of freemen. Descendants of freemen cannot be genealogical or affinal relatives of descendants of slaves, yet the word havana as a term of address is being continually used across these categories. This, however, is not all. Again and again the situation occurred when, during fieldwork, I was with someone of free Merina descent who addressed as havana a man of slave descent. As soon as the latter was out of earshot, however, the man of free descent would not lose a moment to explain that the man of slave descent was not 'really' (tena) his havana.

Now all this is really quite understandable but what is its significance for the theory of the meaning of kinship terms? The first point to note is that an attempt to list the people who can be referred to as havana would only be misleading. The second point is that it is by contrast relatively easy to list the tactics that the word havana can perform in a given social situation. It can: 1) exclude non-genealogical kinsmen; 2) include non-genealogical kinsmen; 3) exclude genealogical kinsmen; and 4) include genealogical kinsmen. The nature of the tactic in other words is entirely dependent upon context but what is constant is the concept itself. The word is a judgement on people rather than a label—it is a moral concept. Now if, from the start, we consider the word as a moral judgement, all the earlier difficulties disappear. We do not normally try to discover the meaning of such a word as wicked by attempting to list all the people who can be so described. Rather
we fit words into the linguistic and moral scheme of a particular language and, having thus defined them, view their use as strategies. I suggest that this is the way we should consider such a word as *havana*.

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It might be argued that the kind of argument presented above fits the kind of kinship term discussed but does not fit so well more specific kinship terms which have been the primary concern of formal analysis. To show that this is so only in a special sense I want very briefly to look at examples, also from the Merina, which concern such terms.

I take two terms and try to give the list of relatives to whom they can refer. For this I base myself on the terminology as given by Raharijaona and Vérin (1964), adding to and clarifying some of their information but keeping as closely as possible to their study. The two words are among the most frequently used Merina kinship terms.

*dadatoa*  FeB, MeB, FFBS (Older than ego’s father), FMBS (o.t.e.f.), MFZS (o.t.e.f.), MMZS (o.t.e.f.), FZH (o.t.e.f.), MZH (o.t.e.f.), MH (o.t.e.f.),

*WF (o.t.e.f).*

*dadafara*  FyB, MyB, FFBS (Younger than ego’s father), FMBS (y.t.e.f.), MFZS (y.t.e.f.), MMZS (y.t.e.f.), FZH (y.t.e.f.), MZH (y.t.e.f.), MH (y.t.e.f.),

*WF (y.t.e.f.).*

This list of genealogical referents compares well with similar ones in other studies, but what does it mean? In one sense it is totally inaccurate. The relations that exist between ego and people actually addressed as *dadatoa* or *dadafara* are much greater. To take the example of *dadatoa*: I have heard of several cases when FyB was addressed by the term, I have one case when a much older FFFZSDS (a man of ego’s generation) was so addressed, I have endless cases of individuals with no genealogical connexion to ego who were so called (I myself being often called in this way by all the children of a particular hamlet). Indeed I could list such ‘abnormal’ uses of the word so that if we kept to the notion of denotation of individuals we would have to give as the meaning of the word a vague statement of the kind: older male than ego. This would obviously be unsatisfactory and also unnecessarily imprecise. Before trying to suggest an alternative, let us examine one situation which lies at the back of a few of these uses. Fig. 1 shows the genealogical composition of a small hamlet (a satellite kinship village (see Bloch in press)).

Given the figure reproduced below and the kind of list of terms supplied by Raharijaona and Vérin, it ought to be possible to work out what every individual in the genealogy calls every other. In fact this would be totally misleading. If we take the man marked with a ring, we find that he is referred to by all the members of the hamlet, most of the time, as *dadafara*, although in some contexts other more ‘suitable’ terms were used. The reason for this usage is not difficult to find. It is that there is something about the position of this man in relation to the hamlet as a whole which has enough *dadafara*-ishness to have him so described; that is, he belongs in age to the active managerial group, but he is junior in influence to the head of the hamlet (marked by an asterisk). If we want to define the meaning
of the term I suggest we should turn to the meaning of dadafara-ishness and not get ourselves bogged down in trying to see who can be called by the term. There is, however, a difference here from the way the word havana was treated. Clearly dadafara cannot be seen as the same kind of word as ‘wicked’, since essential to the meaning is some kinship relation. I asked many informants who is called dadafara out of any personalised context and always I got one clear and simple answer. Dadafara is ego’s own father’s own immediately younger brother and ego’s own mother’s own immediately younger brother. This answer was clear and automatic and there was no variation. When I pointed out further that the word could be used for other people, some listed by Raharijaona and Vérin, and some not, informants would just answer that: yes, you could call many other people dadafara, but seemed to see no contradiction with their earlier statement. One informant who began to see the cause of my puzzlement added that this was indeed so, but that then one need not actually call one’s dadafara ‘dadafara’; and this is in fact so.

![Figure 1. Genealogical composition of a small hamlet.](image)

N.B. Because of the high in-marriage rate this diagram only shows the closest links between the people involved.

It seems to me essential that we respect such informants’ statements. Nonetheless, there is no need to postulate that informants extend the primary meaning to other relatives. The fact that one need not call one’s own FyB dadafara makes nonsense of such a position. Rather one can simply first define the moral concept and then observe the tactical uses as was suggested for the word havana. Here, however, it could be argued that the concept is just FyB, but this is not so. It seems essential to retain Loumsbury’s notion of polysemy. But even from the little that I have said above it is clear that the polysemy of such a term as dadafara does not lie in different ways of referring to people, and here we can use Leach’s wider notion of meaning. The referential aspect I am dealing with here is a moral concept and need have nothing to do with the uses the word is put to for the purpose of reference. The conceptual relationship is part of the tool; the relationship between speaker and hearer are uses of the tool. Not only is it part of the tool, it is only one of the notions constituting the tool. Equally important are notions which have nothing to do with denoting people according to genealogical criteria. These are notions which can be described by such phrases as second-in-command, the friendly insignificance of an adult, or joking. Obviously fitting such a word into the whole scheme of Merina values would require much more information about
Merina kinship but significantly this would not be sufficient. We need more information on Merina moral values in general. This is because the non-kinship components are as important as the kinship components in understanding a word’s moral meaning and hence its tactical uses.

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By way of conclusion I want to consider possible objections to the kind of position taken above.

The first objection is that I have been suggesting different ways of handling different manifestations of the same phenomena, viz. kinship terms. In fact, however, this is precisely what I have tried to avoid doing and this point forms the basis of my criticism of much work on kinship terminology. The tactical perspectives I have suggested here can not only be applied to all kinship terms, but to other terms qualifying people in various ways. Indeed, to my mind, all category terms referring to people should be defined as moral terms and their use should be seen as tactical. Although some attempt at denoting genealogical relations can be seen to have some sense in the case of such terms as dadafara and dadatoa, it makes no sense at all with such a term as havana. If we followed Rivers and most other anthropologists we should be obliged, therefore, to use entirely different techniques for dealing with the two kinds of term. However, if we stop considering a kinship term as simply those who can be designated by it, and think of it as a moral concept, the fact that one word’s moral meaning contains a greater element of genealogical denotation and another less, or none at all, presents no difficulty. In his extraordinarily clear study of the diagnosis of disease among the Subanum of Mindanao, Frake (1961) lists four diagnostic questions for the identification of ‘sores’ relating to depth, distality, severity and spread. For some sores some criteria are more significant than others, but this does not mean that he has to change his types of analysis in order to explain the components of various types of sore. In a similar way we can see that amongst the Merina there are several aspects to the concepts specified by any one kinship term and a kinship relationship is only one of these aspects and may in some cases be almost totally irrelevant.

The second possible objection to the point of view presented here is of a different kind. The position taken above relies on distinguishing between concept (moral meaning) and use (tactical meaning) and it could be argued that we cannot justify a notion of meaning which is distinct from use. In answer to such a criticism I would again point to Frake’s study of disease. There we can see that the clarity and value of the results he obtains depend on his distinction between actual diagnosis and the principles underlying the classification of diseases. This is similar to the distinction I have made between tactics and moral meaning.

A third point is really the second point put in another way. If we say that the moral meaning of the word can be separated from its uses how can either an anthropologist or a child deduce the meaning from what can only be observation of uses? Before answering this question it is important to stress again that contrary to what some anthropologists seem to believe, ‘use’ itself has more features than simply the genealogical relationship between speaker and hearer; but I would go further than this. Let us consider that side of this objection which concerns the child. Malinowski (1932), Leach (1958) and Lounsbury (1965) all imply or state a
theory about how children learn the meaning of kinship terms in spite of the fact that none of their theories is based on psychological studies. It suffices, therefore, for me to show that the points of view presented above can accord with a theory of learning. Such a hypothesis does, of course, exist and indeed is in great favour among linguists. It seems possible that the child does more than merely recognise uses in order to reproduce them when the occasion arises. For some evidence suggests that children first observe uses, and then make deductions from them, so that they can place the meaning deduced from the uses in a system which may in turn generate both those uses which have already been observed and, if necessary, others. The distinction I make between moral meaning and tactical meaning would correspond to one between generative concept and operation.

That side of the objection which concerns the way in which the anthropologist elucidates meanings is in some ways irrelevant. The anthropologist may learn cultural elements in a very different way from that of the native. However, if the distinction between moral meaning and tactical meaning is valid, then the anthropologist should distinguish how he obtains his information with respect to these two aspects. At the moment anthropologists tend to merge together information obtained in discussions with informants about the meaning of a term, answers to genealogical problems set by the anthropologist (cf. Rivers 1910), and observation. It seems to me that the moral meaning can be obtained from general discussion with informants, and by a process of deduction and systematisation of the observed use on the part of the anthropologist which is similar to the way a child learns meaning. However, observed uses refer to the realm of tactics, and it should be kept in mind that no list of observed tactics can either be exhaustive or satisfactory. I think that answers given to anthropologists playing 'genealogical games' also probably belong to the realm of tactics, but I am not sure and therefore doubt their value. It is clear that the Malagasy could give no right answers to these questions. Asking people about hypothetical tactics outside situational contexts is at best misleading, at worst nonsense.

Finally we can return to the discussion about 'extension'. In this respect it only requires pointing out that by distinguishing between moral meaning and tactical use the problem disappears. No particular use of a term need be more or less problematical since, given the concept, the use is seen always as a particular attempt to use a tool for transforming a social situation. The notion of extension at its most useful implies manipulation of a new social situation by using a term which has been given meaning in a previous context. In the perspective that I have stressed here all uses are, in the terms of the extensionists, 'secondary' and the meaning as a moral concept is an aspect of a culture's moral scheme.

The particular value of separating uses and moral content of kinship terms in the kind of situation described for Madagascar becomes evident. I can well understand how similar basic moral concepts can be held in many situations but how the variety of situations means that the uses to which these moral concepts are put will vary extensively. Again I am close to the point of view of Yalman but the differences are significant. By replacing values as the constant rather than structural principles, in this way going back to a point of view more in line with Firth's distinction between social organisation and social structure, we avoid the difficulty that the 'structural principles' necessary for the type of analysis favoured by Yalman only
seem to be evident in systems where the terminology implies a special form of marriage. Since moral principles are clearly evident in all cultures we avoid the fact that all pervasive structural principles seem to be the feature of only some cultures. Finally, it may be noted that, by returning to the older idea of moral values, we also return to an area where we can understand the source of the strength of the concepts for the individual concerned—a fact which is not clear when we talk of structure.

NOTES

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1 The terms I use as examples are terms both of address and of reference. I feel that this distinction has not been useful in anthropology since most terms can be used for both address and reference in this way. I would prefer to consider the term as having one moral meaning and a use of the term for either address or reference as one of many tactical possibilities. Those terms which can in no circumstance be used for both address and reference (and they are rare) can be considered as having a moral meaning which restricts their tactical possibilities in this way. After all, all meanings both allow for and restrict possible tactics. This point of view is clearly implied and illuminatingly discussed in Milner’s work (e.g. 1968).

2 It is irrelevant here whether kinship terms form a verifiably closed set.

3 A similar point was made by Professor D. Schneider in discussion at the meeting of the American Anthropological Association in Seattle in October 1968.

REFERENCES


