

Seneca Kinship
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Semantics

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February 26, 2012

1 Universal semantics

Semantic features do not differ from language to language, but are rather part of the general human capacity for language, forming a universal inventory used in particular ways in individual languages. Bierwisch (1970)

One of the goals of this exercise is to see what challenges this view faces.

2 Componential analysis

Componential semantics can be seen as having its roots in anthropology, more specifically in that kind of cultural anthropology known as **structural**. In structural approaches to anthropology, a key part of an **ethnography** is to describe how a culture organizes its understanding of some domain — botany, zoology, musicology, cooking, kinship — in terms of a set of basic components or **categories**, axes along which we can divide up the categories, which provide the basic dimensions along which objects in the domain are classified. Every term used in the domain can be understood in terms of these basic categories.

When Bierwisch talks about semantic features, he is including semantic components. His notion of feature may be somewhat broader than the classic idea of what a semantic component is.

But a serious problem for his view is how to deal with cultural differences.

2.1 The Semanteme

Here is the program. Make semantics like the other linguistic tiers. If the basic components of the sound tier are phonemes, and the basic components of the morphological tier are morphemes, and the basic components of the syntactic level are words, then the basic components of the semantic tier are these semantic components. They are **primitive**. Bierwisch's assumption:

All concepts should be constructible from the semantic **primitives**.

So they are sometimes given a more grandiose name **semantemes**.

The idea that meanings can be decomposed into primitive or **minimal** components is independent of the idea that those minimal components are universal. Each language might have its own minimal meaning units, just as each language has its own morphemes and phonemes.

3 Components of kinship

Let's start by looking at English kinship:

We will represent kinship relations using the following basic notation: mother (M), father (F), sister (S), brother (B), son (s), daughter (d), wife (w), husband (h). Relations are always computed from the "Ego" (self) on outwards. We write these in sequence to pick out a particular relative. So MFSd means

mother's father's sister's daughter.

Using this notation, here are some example relatives that can be picked out by basic English kinship terms.

brother	B
sister	S
mother	M
father	F
uncle	FB, FSh, MB, MSh
aunt	FS, FBw, MS, MBw
grandfather	FF, MF
great-grandfather	FFF, FMF, MFF, MMF
(first) cousin	MSs, MSd, MBs, MBd, FSs, FSd, FBs, FBd

Although we have dealt with *grand-*, and a little with *great* (we haven't done *great uncle* or *great aunt*), we haven't dealt at all with *in-law*, *step-*, *half*, *first*, *second*, *once-removed*, *twice-removed*, and so on.

What we've just done could be thought as the result of some very preliminary "field work", where we asked informants for examples of each of the most common terms. A lot of complexity has been left out. For example, only the *first cousin* meaning of *cousin* is shown. In its meaning of *first cousin*, *cousin* includes only the children of uncles and aunts; but more generally *cousins* can include other descendants of uncles and aunts, and other descendants of great uncles and aunts, etc. So there's a general sense of *cousin* we're ignoring in the table above, and we would find this out with careful fieldwork.

Let's say the careful fieldwork is done. The next step is to seek out the structural components. What are the BASIC concepts of the kinship system? What concepts lead you to the most economical description of how the kinship terms are actually used? More ambitiously, we'd also like to come up with accounts of the kinship *affixes* like *great-* and *grand-*, giving economical accounts of the meaning. Remember: The goal is to discover **the basic components of meaning** in the kinship system. We're going to call those components the **semantic features** of the analysis.

For example:

1. Mother and father are both parents, female and male respectively.
2. Parents, grandparents, great grandparents, etc. are ancestors in various generations.

So we have three potential conceptual features:

PARENT, SEX , ANCESTOR, GEN

But the second observation suggests PARENT should be decomposed into

$$\text{parent} = \begin{bmatrix} \text{ANCESTOR} & \text{yes} \\ \text{GENERATION} & -1 \end{bmatrix}$$

Now this means grandparent would be:

$$\text{grandparent} = \begin{bmatrix} \text{ANCESTOR} & \text{yes} \\ \text{GENERATION} & -2 \end{bmatrix}$$

But there's something a little funny about combining an ANCESTOR feature and a GENERATION feature, because after all, being an ancestor means being some member of a generation less than 0. This concept is REDUNDANT with GEN; they overlap in content; and the basic concepts of our analysis should NOT be redundant with each other.

So let's take a page from the anthropology text (Kroeber 1909) and have one feature LIN , with two different values: DIRECT and COLLAT , where those related to ego by DIRECT lineage either have ego as an ancestor (sons, daughters, grandchildren) or are ancestors of ego (parents, grandparents, greatgrandparents) or share ALL their ancestors with ego (siblings).¹ Those related to ego by COLLAT lineage are not related by direct lineage and yet share some subset of their ancestors with ego (cousins, aunts, uncles, great aunts, great uncles, and so on).

This gives us the following analysis of the simple English terms above, based on only 3 features, LIN , GEN, and SEX .

¹Anthropologists call the sibling case where ALL ancestors are shared being COLIN , but if we posited COLIN as a third value of the LIN feature, it would always be GEN0, and again, it would be partially redundant with the generation feature.

mother	$\begin{bmatrix} \text{LIN} & \text{DIRECT} \\ \text{SEX} & \text{FEMALE} \\ \text{GEN} & -1 \end{bmatrix}$	father	$\begin{bmatrix} \text{LIN} & \text{DIRECT} \\ \text{SEX} & \text{MALE} \\ \text{GEN} & -1 \end{bmatrix}$
grandmother	$\begin{bmatrix} \text{LIN} & \text{DIRECT} \\ \text{SEX} & \text{FEMALE} \\ \text{GEN} & -2 \end{bmatrix}$	grandfather	$\begin{bmatrix} \text{LIN} & \text{DIRECT} \\ \text{SEX} & \text{MALE} \\ \text{GEN} & -2 \end{bmatrix}$
sister	$\begin{bmatrix} \text{LIN} & \text{DIRECT} \\ \text{SEX} & \text{FEMALE} \\ \text{GEN} & 0 \end{bmatrix}$	brother	$\begin{bmatrix} \text{LIN} & \text{DIRECT} \\ \text{SEX} & \text{MALE} \\ \text{GEN} & 0 \end{bmatrix}$
aunt	$\begin{bmatrix} \text{LIN} & \text{COLLAT} \\ \text{SEX} & \text{FEMALE} \\ \text{GEN} & -1 \end{bmatrix}$	uncle	$\begin{bmatrix} \text{LIN} & \text{COLLAT} \\ \text{SEX} & \text{MALE} \\ \text{GEN} & -1 \end{bmatrix}$
cousin	$\begin{bmatrix} \text{LIN} & \text{COLLAT} \\ \text{SEX} & \\ \text{GEN} & 0 \end{bmatrix}$		

4 Seneca

This assignment is based on the analysis of the kinship system of the Seneca Iroquois Indians by Floyd Lounsbury 1964. This is already an old article, but, in fact, it continues a tradition of componential analysis of kinship terms that goes back at least to Kroeber (1909).

Your job is to come up with a componential analysis of your own based on the two data sets below. The data follow Lounsbury, who has made life a lot easier by arranging and dividing the terms into revealing patterns.

In thinking about appropriate features, make sure you think about the **contrasts** in the data. For example, the term glossed as “my elder brother” in the data below picks out a different set of relatives than the term glossed as “my cousin”. It is true that an “elder brother” has to be older than ego and a cousin does not, but there’s more to it than that, as Lounsbury’s data shows. Because the two terms pick out disjoint sets of relatives, *you must assign them different features*. They **contrast** in meaning.

Finally, be sure to go back and carefully test your features with some examples from Lounsbury's lists, as well as with some examples you've generated on your own. It is possible that you will not be able to come up with an analysis that works. If so, I'd like you to present an analysis that partially works and explain what examples it does not correctly classify.

To get full credit you need only present an analysis; but if the analysis does not work, you must explain how it falls short. Full credit will not be given for an analysis claimed to be complete when it is not. It must also be the case that your features should be explicit enough so that it is clear how to apply them to every example, and there should be enough of them so they choose exactly one kinship term for any given example. **Finally you must define your features clearly.**

You may reuse features assumed in the mini-analysis of English kinship given above, and if you do so, you do not have define them. But if you reuse English features, be cautious. The concepts that play a role for English may or may not play a role for Seneca.

Seneca Kinship: data set 1

1.	haʔnih	my father	F, FB, FMSs, FFBS, FMBs, FFSs, FFFBss, etc.
2.	noʔyēh	my mother	M, MS, MMSd, MFBd, MMBd, MFSd, MMMSdd, etc.
3.	hakhnóʔsēh	my uncle	MB, MMSs, MFBs, MMBs, MFSs, MMMSds, etc.
4.	ake:hak	my aunt	FS, FMSd, FFBd, FMBd, FFSd, FFFBsd, etc.
5.	hatsiʔ	my elder brother	B, MSs, FBs, MMSds, FFBss, MFBds, FMSss, MMBds, etc. (when older than ego)
6.	heʔkē:ʔ	my younger brother	(same, when younger than ego)
7.	ahtsiʔ	my elder sister	S, MSd, FBd, MMSdd, FFBsd, MFBdd, FMSsd, MMBdd, etc. (when older than ego)
8.	kheʔkē:ʔ	my younger sister	(same, when younger than ego)
9.	akyá:ʔse:ʔ	my cousin	MBs, FSs, MMSss, FFBds, MFBss, FMSds, MMBss, etc. also: MBd, FSd, MMSd, FFBdd, MFBsd, FMSdd, MMBsd, etc.

		Seneca Kinship: data set 2	
10.	he:hawak	my son	(a) s, Bs, MSss, FBss, MBss, FSss, MMSdss, etc. for male ego; (b) s, Ss, MSds, FBds, MBds, FSds, MMSdds, etc. for female ego
11.	khe:hawak	my daughter	(a) d, Bd, MSsd, FBsd, MBsd,FSsd, MMSdsd, etc. for male ego ; (b) d, Sd, MSdd, FBdd, MBdd, FSdd, MMSddd, etc. for female ego
12.	heyé:wō:tě?	my nephew	Ss, MSds, FBds, MBds, FSds, MMSdds, etc. for male ego
13.	hehsó?neh	my nephew	Bs, MSss, FBss, MBss, FSss, MMSdss, etc. for female ego
14.	kheyé:wō:tě?	my niece	Sd, MSdd, FBdd, MBdd, FSdd, MMSddd, etc. for male ego
15.	khehsó?neh	my niece	Bd, MSsd, FBsd, MBsd, FSsd, MMSdsd, etc. for female ego

It may be useful to work on the first data set alone, and then revise and extend your solution to deal with the next set of cases, the younger generation words. However you do it, the solution you turn in should be a proposal considering all 15 cases.

References

- Kroeber, A.L. 1909. Classificatory systems of relationship. *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland* 39:77–84.
- Lounsbury, F.G. 1964. *The structural analysis of kinship semantics*. Mouton.