

Research Article

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Semantic Meanings of Selected English Kinship Terms among Basotho L2 Speakers of English

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Abstract

Kinship terms are said to be fundamentally arbitrary categories because different cultures group their relatives differently into a wide and varying indefinite number of classifications. Anthropologists have observed that almost every culture has constructed a system of terms that loosely conforms to one of the following widely occurring basic patterns: Sudanese, Hawaiian, Eskimo, Iroquois, Omaha, Crow and the Dravidian. Based on their organisation of kinship terms, Basotho and English cultures fall under the categories of Dravidian and Eskimo systems respectively. The paper therefore exploits this clear delineation provided by kinship classification to investigate how cultural differences affect the understanding and use of English expressions. The results show that the selected kinship terms have unique semantic meanings.

Keywords: World Englishes, Cultural Linguistics, Conceptualisations, Kinship terms, Sesotho

Introduction

The consideration of the cultural aspect of language is particularly significant in research on language use and variation, where people influenced by different cultural contexts may use the same language. However, the trend in linguistics has been to concentrate on the morphosyntactic elements and to barely examine the cultural component of a language even if the focus is on use of one language across cultures. Two factors appear to have contributed to the neglect of cultural elements in study of the use of language across cultures. One, the cultural elements are not on the surface level and cannot be fully analysed without the scholar involving tools from other fields such as anthropology (cf. Sharifian [1]). Two, the majority of the models used in study of language were developed in the cultural homogeneity of Indo-European languages (Sharifian [1]). As a language spoken by millions of people across different cultures, English is one language that has been explored

mainly on the basis of the morphosyntactic elements with minimal focus on influence of the cultural elements in which the language is used in. As a result, there is a paucity of information on how the cultural in which English is used in have influenced the structure of the language in that particular context.

This study aims to advance the literature on the influence of culture in use of English across different cultures by examining the semantic meanings of English kinship terms in Lesotho. The paper examines the cultural conceptualisations of English kinship terms, deemed to be grounded in the cultural experience of the speaker, by Basotho speakers. English was introduced in Lesotho in 1879, when Lesotho became a protectorate of Britain – a situation that makes Lesotho to belong to the Kachrurian outer circle. After 1966, the year in which Lesotho gained independence, English operated alongside Sesotho as an official language and the 1994 Constitution

makes this proclamation: "From standard four onwards English is a language of teaching in Lesotho". With a bias on written language, Lesotho models itself on British English, though there is an exposure to South African and American types of Englishes due to the dominance of South African Television and pervasiveness of American culture on South African Television.

Methodology

The study used purposive sampling, where the participants for the study were purposively selected to provide the required data. The participants were third year students in the Faculty of Humanities at the National University of Lesotho who major in English Language and Linguistics. The participants are not only at an advanced level in studies but they also major in English language. Students at this level are expected to have a native-like proficiency in English.

The data was collected by using questionnaire, which is attached to the study as an appendix. The questionnaire contained open-ended questions that required students to show their schemata and categorisations of English kinship terms. One set of the questions required the participants to use the English kinship terms and another set required the participants to provide their definition and understanding of kinship terms.

After collecting the data, which showed the participants' conceptualisation of English kinship terms, we crisscrossed how far they were based on Sesotho conceptualisations of kinship relations by checking if they aligned or contravened the principles of the Dravidian-type of kinship system, under which the Sesotho kinship system is classified. Similar to other Dravidian-type kinship system, the Sesotho kinship system is unilineal and patrilineal, emphasising descent from the side of the male parentage. Rules of inheritance of property are based on the relationship with male parentage, and the usual practice is for property to pass from father to son. As in other unilineal systems, there is the principle of bifurcate merging, where the same term of reference is used for father's brother as father; and the same term of reference is used for mother's sister as mother. The sisters of Ego's father and the brothers of Ego's mother are referred to by non-parental kinship terms. Similarly, it distinguishes between parallel cousins and cross-cousins. Parallel cousins are treated as siblings and marriage with them is prohibited. However, non-kin terms are used to refer to cross-cousins, and marriage between cross-cousins is allowed and encouraged. In Sesotho kinship system, there are distinctions between kin of Ego's age, kin of Ego's parents' generation and kin of Ego's immediate offspring. For the kin above Ego's parents' generation and the kin below Ego's immediate offspring, there are no distinctions except by gender. This type of analysis enabled us to see how far Sesotho culture has contributed in the way the participants conceptualised the English kinship terms.

Following this, we crisscrossed the differences and similarities between the participants and the native English speakers in their conceptualisations of the selected English terms by comparing the participants' definitions and uses of the expressions with those

found in MacMillan English Dictionary for Advanced Learners (Rundell, [2]) (henceforth MacMillan). MacMillan is corpus-based; it defines and gives examples of the use of English terms based on how native speakers used those (English terms) in real life situation (Steen et al., [3]). The information provided by MacMillan can reveal how native speakers conceptualise the kinship terms.

As the English kinship system is an Eskimo-type of kinship classification, we also checked if the participants' conceptualisations matched the Eskimo type. In Eskimo-type of system, both patrilineal and matrilineal parentages are used to establish relations. The system emphasises bilateral descent, treating kin based on the distance from the nuclear family. In a practice known as Collateral Merging, more distant relatives are grouped together on the basis of distance from Ego.

Results

Definitions of words referring to parents

Sentences (1)–(4) are examples of how some of the participants defined father.

1. A specific term referring to one's paternal parent.
2. Can be one's male parent whether biological or not biological.
3. A specific term referring to one's male biological parent
4. A general term referring to the head of the family.

The definitions given above align with the Eskimo kinship and match the definitions and understanding of the expressions by English native speakers as reflected by MacMillan. However, the emphasis on a father being the 'head' of the family seems to be influenced by Basotho cultural schemata where in a family a man has more powers than his wife.

Sentences (5) and (6) show that for some Basotho the expression 'father' may be also be used to refer any male. The condition given is that one should be married. This matches the use of Sesotho kinship term *ntate* (father), which is used as a reference term for any adult male, especially those who are married. Seemly, the Sesotho culture influenced some of the participants in their conceptualisation of the English expression 'father'.

5. A specific term to refer to male parent. A general term referring to any male.
6. Refer to any male who is married regardless whether old or smaller than the speaker.

Examples (7) – (8) are some of the ways in which the participants defined mother.

7. A specific term referring to one's maternal parent.
8. One's female parent whether biological or not.

The definitions given in (6) and (8) match the definitions and uses of the word 'mother' by native speakers.

However, (9) to (11) show that to some Basotho the word

mother can be used to refer to any adult female person. One of the conditions put forward is that one should be married. Alternatively, having children and being older than the speaker can lead to one being given a title of a 'mother'. Since these conditions apply when an equivalent Sesotho term, mme ('mother') is used, it can be concluded that in this case to the participants' conceptualisations of the English term 'mother' is influenced by their cultural experience.

9. A specific term used to refer to the female parent – a general term referring to any female person who is older than the speaker.
10. Refer to any married female either formally or just having children out of wedlock.
11. A specific term referring to a married female with a kid and a husband.

Definitions of words referring to siblings

Sentences (11) and (13) are examples of how some of the participants defined 'sister'.

12. A specific term for a female child born of the same parents as the speaker.
13. One's female siblings whether biological or not.

The definitions align with those of English native speakers as provided by MacMillan.

However, some of the participants provided definitions that show that the word 'sister' is also used to refer to a person who is not a sibling. As can be seen in (14) and (16), the use of the term 'sister' can be influenced by the age of the referent.

14. A specific term referring to a female child born with the same parents as the speaker. A general term referring an African girl of a certain age.
15. A specific term to refer to a female child born of the same parents as the speaker. A general term referring to close friends and family members who are female and of around the same age as the speaker. A general term referring to the female person older and then the speaker.
16. A general term referring to close friends and family.

The conceptualisations of 'sister' as a term that can also be used to close relatives and friends seems to be influenced by Sesotho culture, where the equivalent expression to 'sister', *ausi* is used to females who are not siblings as a way of indicating respect, especially to people of around one's age or above

Examples (17) and (18) illustrate how some of the participants defined brother.

17. A specific term for a male/female child born of the same parent with the speaker parent.
18. One's male's sibling whether biological or not.

The definitions given in (17) and (18) match those given by the

Macmillan.

However, examples (19) and (20) reveal that for some Basotho the English expression 'brother' can be to close friends and family members, especially if they are 'around [the same] age as the speaker'.

19. A specific term to refer to a male child born of the same parents as the speaker. A general term referring to close friends and family members who are male and of around same age as the speaker.
20. A general term referring to close friends and family.

This seems to be influenced the use of the Sesotho expression, *abuti* ('brother') which is used to refer to both one's siblings and to relatives and friends, especially those around the same age as the speaker, as a form of respect and affection.

Words Referring to Members of the Extended Family

As can be seen in examples (21) and (22), some of the participants regard an 'uncle' as term referring to a sibling younger than one's parents.

21. A specific term for a male who share the parent with the speaker's parent and he is younger than the speaker's parent.
22. A general term referring to the younger brother of one's mother of father

The perception of 'uncle' as denoting age among others, is reflective of Sesotho kinship system, which distinguishes parents' siblings according to whether they younger or older than one's parent. This means that in cases such as (21) and (22) the participants were influenced by the Sesotho cultural conceptualisations.

Another influence of Sesotho kinship system is seen in definitions given in (23) to (24).

23. One's mother's brother.
24. The mother's brother.
25. A specific definition of one's mother's brother.

Whereas the English kinship system does not differentiate between the mother and the brother's sister, the participants definitions in (23) and (25) show that to some Basotho 'uncle' is used to differentiate between such relatives. This aligns with Sesotho culture where, in addition to their age and gender, parents' siblings are distinguished according to whether they are a relative of one's mother or a relative of one's father.

Examples (24) and (27) show that some of the participants understanding of mother-in-law matches that of native speakers, which is that of that of a mother of one's husband or wife.

26. A specific term for a woman who is the mother of the husband of the speaker if the speaker is a woman or mother the wife if the speaker is a husband.

27. The mother of one's wife or husband.

However, the majority of the participants provided definitions that reflect Sesotho cultural conceptualisations.

28. A specific term referring to the mother of one's husband.

29. A specific term which explains the mother of one's husband.

30. A specific term to refer to the biological mother of the speaker's husband- a general term referring to female adults who are members of the speaker's husband

As can be seen in (28) to (30), the participants' definition of the word matches Sesotho kinship system, where a kinship term used for one's husband is different from a kinship term used for one's wife. The participants restrict mother-in-law to one's husband, contracting what happens in native speakers' context.

The definitions of family

Mainly, the participants defined family as the extend family rather than nuclear family, as can be seen in examples (31) to (33).

31. All the people I am related with.

32. Anyone I am related to.

33. My parents, blood sisters and all my relatives.

Also, some participants defined family in the way that shows that it is based on paternal ancestry, as can be seen in (34).

34. When I use the expression family, I mean all people I share a surname with.

The use of surname, which is acquired only through paternal ancestry, as one of the determinants of whether one is a member of a family or not, reflects the unilineal and patrilineal features of Sesotho kinship system. It appears that, when it comes to family, the participants cultural conceptualisations are predominantly those of Sesotho culture.

Discussion

The findings reveal that the in some cases the participants' definitions of the expressions match those of native speakers provided by MacMillan. However, in many cases, there is variance between the participants and the native speakers' definitions of the kinship terms. The major differences seem to occur in the case of words referring to members of extended while the words referring to one's parents are defined in a similar way in the majority of instances. Although generally there are instances of variance between the Basotho L2 speakers

The conceptualisation of family as based on paternal ancestry seems exhibited in a situation in which the participants are invited to respond to a scenario involving kin relations. The participants were asked if they would discipline an employee for taking leave on grounds that a relative was dead even though the relationship between the two was so distant and cannot be easily traced. To this question, all the participants indicated that as managers of

a company, they would not perceive as having been lied to by an employee who asked for leave of absence on the basis that their 'brother' had passed away, even if they discover that the relationship between the two was so distant that it cannot be easily traced, in as long as the two share a surname. The participants showed that, regardless of the distance of the relationship, the deceased is the brother of the employee due to the common surname. Since a surname in Sesotho culture is bestowed on the basis of male parental decent, the participants' response show schema of a patrilineal system. It is possible that a person from a different culture would respond differently to the above-cited scenario and would go to the extent of punishing the employee. This seems to support the point raised by Sharifian [1] that the issues of schema and conceptualisation underlying the morphosyntactic elements of a language have implications for intercultural communication.

The use of grandmother as a parent of a cousin seems to parallel that of Sesotho where an equivalent term '*nkhono*' is used to refer to an older sister of a mother. Similarly, in a way that echoes the situation in Sesotho, the participants use some English terms to categorise relatives of Ego's generation not only by gender but also on the basis on whether they are older than Ego. According to some of the participants, the words 'sister' and 'brother' can be used in reference to an older female and male sibling and relative of one's generation respectively. Sesotho shows this classification through the use of the expressions '*ausi*' (borrowed from Afrikaans *Ou Sissy* meaning big/older sister) and '*abuti*' (borrowed from Afrikaans *Ou botie*, meaning big/older brother) to refer to an older female and male respectively. Also, as a form of respect, the expressions '*abuti*' and '*ausi*' are used in the vocative sense when referring to non-relatives, especially when they are older than the speaker. Almost all the participants show that they use the equivalent English expressions in the same way.

The findings show that in the cases in which Sesotho and English cultures overlap, especially in their arrangement of kin relations, the L2's conceptualisations of English kinship term is similar to that of English L1. However, in some instances the participants conceptualisations of some English terms contrast with native speakers', instead of aligning with the Iroquois-type kinship system.

Despite the emergence of the system of cognition from the participants' answers, the findings have shown that the conceptualisations were not equally shared by the participants. The findings show the quality of heterogeneous distribution in a cognitive system; not all elements of the culture are equally shared between the members of a culture group as the members keep negotiating and renegotiating the representation of cultural elements.

The negotiating and renegotiating of cultural elements makes the system of culture to be emergent in the sense that it keeps changing. This attribute is also seen in the patterns of answers given by the participants. When invited to evaluate a situation in which two cross-cousins married each other, the participants showed

that they regarded a marriage between cousins to be a form of incest that could even result in 'disabled children'. The participants' conceptualisations do not seem to have association with the Sesotho schema and categorisation of the concept of cousin. In Sesotho culture, there is a distinction between cousins and there are different terms for cross-cousins and parallel cousins. In the past, marriage between cross-cousins was encouraged. However, due to the dynamic nature of culture, such conceptualisations seem to be dying, since it was only two participants that justified the marriage of cross-cousins on the basis that it is part of Sesotho culture. Also, the participants show that the word 'uncle' is used in a way that does not meet any conceptualisations in either Sesotho or English, which might have evolved out of its own. Apart from a specific use to refer to a male sibling of mother or mother of Ego, in a way that matches the Sesotho words 'rangoane' and 'malome', some participants show that uncle can be used as a form of address for any adult male.

Conclusion

The findings reveal that in the cases in which Sesotho and English cultures overlap, especially in their arrangement of kin relations, the L2's conceptualisations of English kinship term are similar to that of English L1 speakers. However, due to possibly the marked differences between the two cultures in some instances, the findings reveal sharp contrast between native speakers and the participants' conceptualisations of the selected English kinship terms in some instances. For example, in the English L1 usage, none of the kinship terms show whether a relative of Ego's parents'

generation is older than Ego's parents, and whether a relative of Ego's generation is older than Ego. Sesotho, on the other hand, has different categories marking relatives in terms of whether they are older or younger than Ego's parents and older or younger than Ego's relatives. Based on this, the English kin terms in L1 usage do not cater for concepts such as relative's age to the speaker or the speaker's parents.

The paper concludes that indeed cultural differences affect the understanding and use of English expressions, and that there is a unique Sesotho way of conceptualising English terms which is an indication that there is what can be called Sesotho English.

Declaration of Interest

None

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None

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