

Changes in the Core Kinship Terminologies: A Case Study of Hindu Kinship Terms in Kerala

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Abstract

Kinship terminologies are considered to be that part of the core vocabulary resistant to linguistic changes. Dravidian language Malayalam, has a classificatory set of kinship terminologies in which the terms for the secondary kin, i.e., father's brother or mother's sister is a derivative of the term for father and mother respectively. The goal of the present paper is to examine the changing patterns in the native Hindu kinship terms in the in Kerala. In the contemporary urban social organisation the generic terms in English which is generally used for addressing relations not related by blood 'uncle' and 'aunt-ie' seem to have started replacing the native kinship terms. Undoubtedly, this change in the use of kinship terminology is not a case of internal linguistic changes. The kinship terms are not just a string of letters which constitute a lexicon, but encapsulate expressions of human relationships, how these relationships are organised, how they interact with one another, the roles they play. They are the true indicators of how the kin roles are enacted and maintained. It implies that the kinship terms cannot be abstracted from actual living experiences and entails that when there are transformations in the nature of relationships in a family or in society in wider context, the semantic content of the kinship terminologies starts shrinking, and consequently in course of time, they are replaced or lost. Any transformation in the use of kinship terminology essentially indicates transformations in the very nature of these family relationships it embodies.

Introduction

The pattern of Dravidian kinship dates back to two thousand years and is attested to be extremely durable and resistant (Trautmann 1981). *Studies on kinship terminology suggest that the structures of kinship terminology are slow to change and resistant to the effects of changed political, economic or*

social circumstances. The lesson of history is that kinship terminology is very conservative and resistant to the effects of other levels. (Trautman 2001:270)

Malayalam has an extensive system of lexicon as part of the kinship terminologies, the reason being that language follows a classificatory system of naming the kins. The basic organising principle of the Hindu Dravidian kinship system has been identified as two. The father's brother is equivalent to father and mother's sister to mother. So father's brother is called 'big' or 'little' father *valiyachchan* or *ilayachchan*, the mother's sister 'big' or 'little' mother, *valiyamma* or *ilayamma*¹, mother's brother is *ammavan/ maman*². *muutta* 'elder' and *valiya* 'big', refer to older or senior siblings; *ilaya* 'younger' and *ceriya* 'small' refer younger or junior siblings of ego's father in the first ascending generation.

Therefore, if we do a componential analysis, the terms of uncles and aunts are portmanteau words derived from the terms for father and mother. The second principle of Dravidian system is the principle of cross-cousin marriage. Here, father and mother in law are uncle and aunt, spouses and spouse's siblings become cousins. Hence it is the same terms for ego's mother's brother and father in law, and father's sister and mother in law.

Fa	acchan
Mo	amma
FaBr(e)	valiyacchan/valyacchan
FaBr(y)	ceriyacchan/ ilayacchan
FaSi(e)	ammaayi/valyamma
FaSi(y)	ceriyamma
MoBr(e)	valiya ammaaman
MoBr(y)	ceriya ammaaman
MoSi(e)	valiyamma
MoSi(y)	ceriyamma/ilayamma/koccamma/elemma/ilayamma

Asher and Kumari (1997:450-51)

² Maman is a common address/reference term for maternal uncle. It could be said that, it is derived from 'ammaman' which used to be a popular term for maternal uncle in early Kerala.

When we say that the kinship term for father's brother is derived from the term for father, it means that, father's brother is considered with the same reverence as of the father, and he has similar duties and responsibilities toward the nephews and nieces as father . On the contrary, in the contemporary urban society of Kerala the borrowed³ English kinship terminologies 'uncle' and 'aunt-ie' are seen to replace the native vernacular terminologies which exist for the respective kinship relations in the family. This paper examines the transformations in the use of these terminologies and attempt to identify the factors which are responsible for the changes.

Kinship: History and Creation

All of the Indian languages, including Malayalam have borrowed 'uncle' and 'aunt-ie' from English as generic terms of reference or address for the people of one's parental age and not biologically related. This paper argues that when the contemporary urban society, especially the younger generation replaces the native vernacular classificatory kinship for close blood relations terms with English generic 'uncles' and 'aunt-ies' it is not certainly a change of form, but strongly indicates an undercurrent of change in the family ties over the time. One could observe significant changes in the nature of family relationships in the contemporary society. Kinship relations are highly negotiated in the constant flux of changes in the family, and largely in a society. It is not possible for us to understand the transformations in the kinship relations unless we look into the history and construction of the kin relations.

The kinship relations contained in the kinship terminologies of 'uncles' and 'aunts' date back to the very establishment of family life. The community of Kerala has been an agrarian community, and used to live as extended families. The people living under the same roof in a traditional family set up were bound with mutual love, care, duties and responsibilities. In such traditional family setting, the relations of 'uncles' and 'aunties' had specific important functional areas. It used to be a very powerful relation. The role of uncles and aunties in these families were as important as one's father and mother for the children. They have close relationships with their siblings and siblings' children.

³ In Indian languages, 'uncle' and 'auntie' are no longer identified as non-native vocabulary

Malinowski (1930) points out that in most primitive communities also, the households of the mother's sister and father's brother plays a considerable part and in many ways become substitute homes for the child. In a similar line, Milardo (2009) rightly finds out, aunts and uncles in the traditional family set up foster the next generation's development along with the parents. In extended families especially, they support their siblings in parenting by providing child care, thereby complementing the work of parents. Uncles and aunts support parents, buffer the relationships of parents and children, act as family historians, and develop life-long friendships with parents and their children. Also, they act as mentors to nieces and nephews, they express support and are occasionally critical. Therefore, in a traditional society the kinship relations of uncle and aunt were an equally important relation as one's parents. They have been assigned specific roles in a family, during the growing up of children, and the roles have been performed without any compromise. They had authority as well as responsibilities. Vice versa, the children treated them like their own parents.

Every important decision in a child's life has had the influence of *ammavan* and *valiyachachan* 'ego's parents' siblings', including decisions on one's education and marriage. Also, it was a common thing to take care of one's parent's siblings in their old age with a sense of duty.

On the other hand, the families in the contemporary urban society, consisting mostly of nuclear families, are isolated and independent. They are in most of the cases shut down from their extended families. Parents raise their children independently or entrust them to the care of paid caretakers. Aunts and uncles no longer play such significant and inevitable roles in life of children and their parents as they were in the traditional families. They are mostly visitors during the festivities. Their roles are reduced to the attendees in family functions such as weddings and funeral.

Marumakkathayam

Yet another reason for the importance of this collateral relation is the matrilineal system which existed in Kerala. A distinctive feature of the social organisation of Kerala was the prevalence of

Marumakkathayam or matrilineal system⁴ among several caste groups. The relation of maternal uncle and his wife hence become one of the most important relations in a family, to an extent that he held an important position in relation to a child, more than one's own father. The cross-cousin marriages which used to be so prevalent in the society resulted in the importance of this relationship, as uncle and aunt become father-in-law and mother-in-law. In today's society the cross-cousin marriages are extremely rare. Hence *ammavan* 'mother's brother' and *ammayi* 'mother's brother's wife' are no longer a prominent relation as it used to be in a traditional family setup. (On the other hand, in the communities like Ezhava, where *makkathayam* 'patrilineal system' was practiced, father and father's siblings were prominent relationships.)

Siblings

Siblings in a traditional family assisted each other all throughout their lives. Assistance has been in the form of financial help, seeking advices, emotional mentors, helping bringing up each other's children, helping with the marriages of each other's children. A number of reasons are pointed out which lead to the transformation in the relationship of the siblings: family issues over the hereditary assets, sibling rivalry over looking after one's aged parents, all of these contribute to the drift in the family.

Present Study

The present study looks into the case of Hindu kinship terminologies in Malayalam. The sample population is the middle class urban population. Twenty families are considered for the study. The study is not homogenous across the state. As obvious, among the rural population the relationships are much rigid when compared to the urban population.

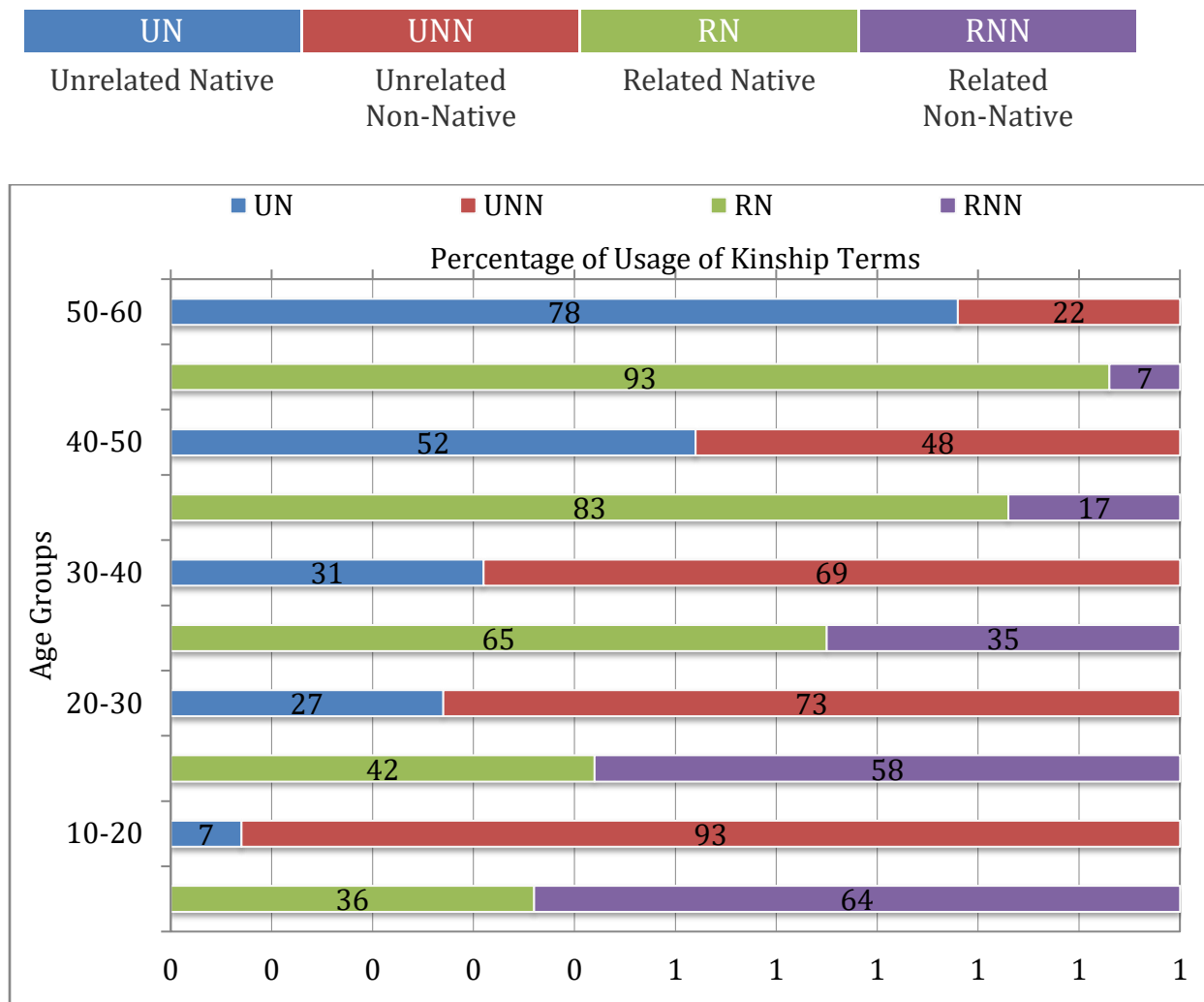
The study does not overlook the general trend of *anglicisation* which exists in the urban societies⁵.

⁴ M.P Joseph The Principles of Marumakkathayam Law 1926

⁵ Attention is given to choose families where there is no prominent use of English in the home domain. English substitutes 'daddy' 'papa' 'mummy' 'mamma' for *achan* 'father', *amma* 'mother' are considered as a tendency towards favouring the English terminologies. Such families are omitted from the study.

Domain Analysis

The method of ‘domain analysis’⁶ designed by Fishman (1972) is adapted to find the ‘domains of participation’ as well as ‘domains of use of the terminologies’. The domains of use of terminologies are categorised as ‘family’ and ‘non-family’. The data shows that



⁶Domains are defined in terms of institutional contexts or socio-ecological co-occurrences. They attempt to designate the major clusters of interaction situations that occur in particular multilingual settings. Domains enable us to understand that language choice and topic. (Fishman 1972: 19).

45% of the informants have substituted the English generic terms for the members of the family. There are % who address a non-family, biologically unrelated person with a native term for the reason that they share an intimate relation equivalent to family.

The domains chosen for analysing the domains of participation, where the members participate in activities together like decision making, giving emotional and physical support, sharing responsibilities - child upbringing, education, marriage, sickness.

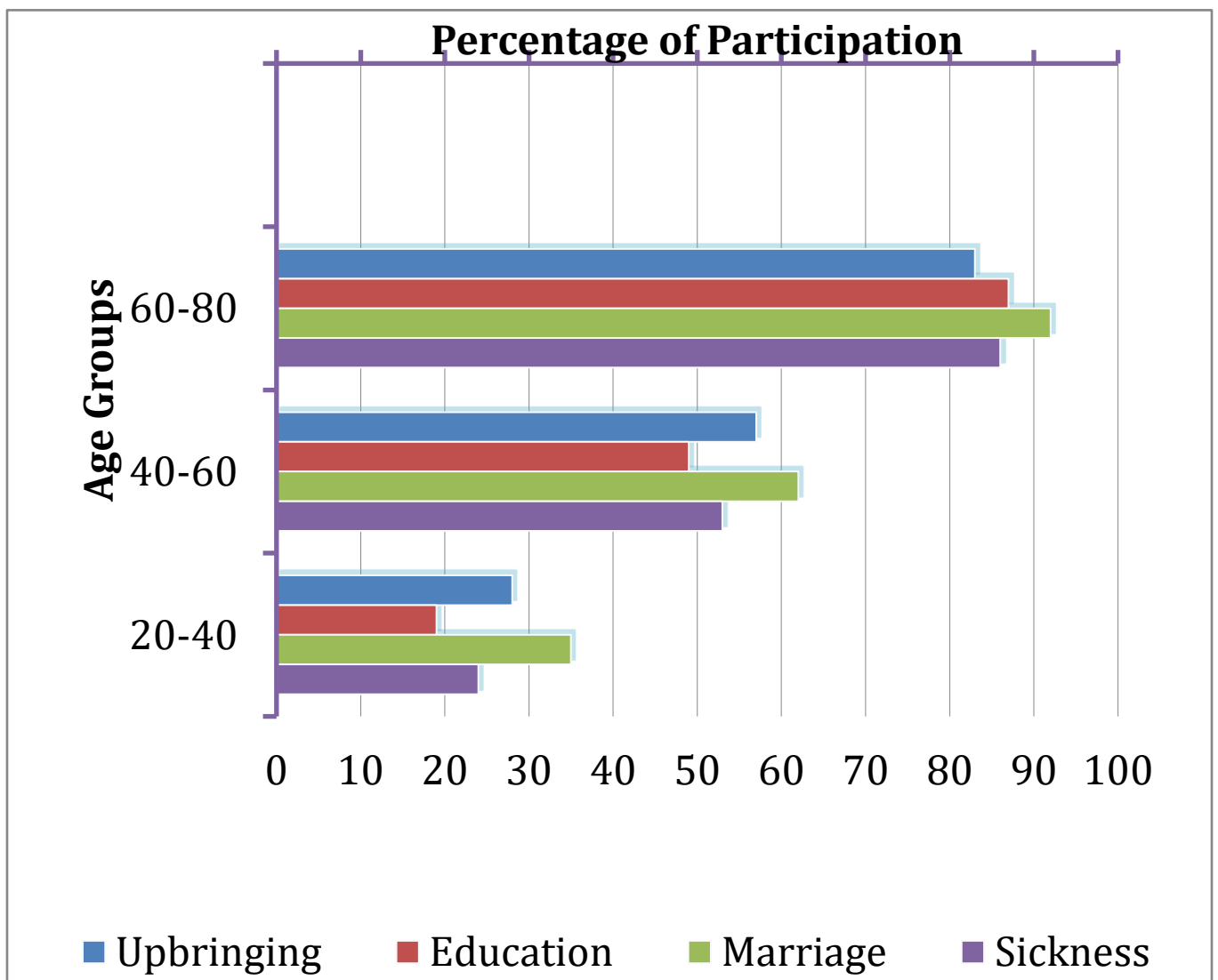
With respect to the age of the informants, the domains of participation seems to be shrinking

Sample Cases

Here five representative cases from the primary study are discussed.

1. Vasudevan (68) is a retired government employee. He fondly remembers his deceased brother who was more of a father for him. His brother sacrificed his education after high school and joined as a mechanic in a work shop in order to support his younger brother's education. Now Vasudevan leads a comfortable life and he is indebted to his brother for all his achievements. Vasudevan has asked for his brother's decisions in all the important aspects of his life, including his marriage, names of the children. He says he made sure his children also pay due respect and love to *valiyachan*. In the last days of his brother, he looked after him with utmost care, and still in tears when he remembers him.

Deepak (32) and his brother Sandeep (28) share a good relation. The case of Vasudevan and his



brother was narrated to him and, asked whether Deepak would have done the same sacrifice for his brother had he been in the same situation. Deepak said that he would have never left his education for the sake of his brother though he cares for him. May be, he would have figured out a way in which both of them could have earned their education.

2. Sumathy (86) is a widow. Sumathy was looked after by her sister's son and family. Recently, her sister's son who was looking after Sumathy informed her that he would not be able to take care her any longer. The reason being his son and daughter-in-law who was away has come back home and they have expressed their displeasure in accommodating a 'relative' in the family. He further said that the cardiac problem he had later could be because of leaving his aged *ilayamma* at such a helpless stage of her life.

Radhika (26) and Rahul (26) are husband and wife. They were presented the case of Sumathy and asked them what they would have done in his situation. Both of them confessed that under their present circumstances of a hectic life schedule, they are not even sure if they would be able to take care of their parents and in such a situation taking care of parents' siblings are not even possible remotely. They also admitted that for them being in such a busy job, they do not have time for themselves and whatever little time they get, they would like to spend it together and would prefer not having a 'relative' in the house.

3. Neelima (27) is a software designer. She says that she made it a point during her 'engagement' that instead of *ammavan* her father should perform the ritual of *jaathakam kaimaral*, though it is traditionally done by mother's brother. She says that though her ammavan stayed so close to her house, he never performed his 'duties'. During childhood, they were going through a tough financial crisis, and her ammavan never bothered to help her mother or her. So she says, all through these years he failed to perform his duty, and why should he be given any privileges.

4. Dhanush's (4 months) parents have already decided that Dhanush is to call them *Achan* and *Amma*, and not *papa*, *daddy* or *mummy*, *mamma*. When asked about this decision, they said they 'somehow feels the English terminologies 'lack the warmth'. Though they are quite sure about what they prefer to

be called by their son, they seem to be fine if Dhanush calls his father's brother and his wife, *uncle* and *aunt-ie* respectively. His brother stays in England with his family, and he could not even make it to Dhanush's parents' wedding or Dhanush's naming ceremony as he was held up with work.

5. Pranav (4 years) is the son Rohit and Sneha. They preferred *Achchan* and *Amma* over *daddy* and *mummy*. They insisted that Pranav addresses Sneha's sister as *elemma*, as "*the siblings are very close to each other and she is equally a mother*". There is "something emotionally missing".

It is the kinship roles they perform sustain a relationship. Schneider emphasises that "performance, forms of doing, various codes for conduct, different roles" (1984: 72) as the most important aspects of kinship. Additionally the concept highlights ethnographic findings that, in a wide swath of human societies, people understand, conceptualize and symbolize their relationships predominantly in terms of giving, receiving and sharing nurture.

Finch (1989) and Finch and Mason (1993) as part of the Family obligation project in UK was the first to point out that family obligations and responsibilities are not 'given', whereas it is negotiated and achieved between the members of the family. The various case studies presented in the study showed how kins negotiates their responsibilities in the family, among siblings, parent and children, between in-laws and, ascertained that the support offered between the kins in terms of financial assistance, emotional support, physical support do not come as a right or rules of obligation, they are 'created commitments' and are the product of human agency.

"It is a two (or more) way process of negotiation in which people are giving and receiving, balancing out one kind of assistance for another... responsibilities are thus created rather than flowing automatically from specific relationships (Finch and Mason 1993: 167)."

Conversely, the instance of kin relation presented in the study here presents an alternate case. The study of Finch and Mason (1993) seem to be significant in the changing roles and relationships in the contemporary society as opposed to the ones 'given' or imposed through certain traditional cultural practices.

Along with Finch (1989) Finch and Mason (1993), various studies have emphasised that the kinship roles in a family has to be continuously enacted, as it is not bound by rules of responsibilities and obligations (Giddens 1992, Beck 1992, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995, Jamieson 1998, Silva 1999, Smart and Neale 1999). In the case of Kerala Hindu Kinship system, the history shows that, unlike the Western kinship system, the kinship system of Kerala Hindus, which is investigated here has been more or less rule bound due to the existing cultural practices for a long time, lately because of the current trends in the families, the system is on the process of falling apart. And here in the case of Kerala Hindu kinship terms, the paper argues that the degeneration is because of the lack of practice of the kinship roles, regardless of the rule bound extensive kinship system laid out for the community. And, the survival of a kinship terminology depends on the survival of the kinship relations which in turn depends on 'kinship roles' one practice.

Survival of kinship terminology \longleftrightarrow Survival of kinship relations \longleftrightarrow Performance of kinship roles.

Any disturbances or negotiations in the kinship roles bring in changes in the kinship relations, which in turn result in changes in the kinship terminologies over a period of time. Or to put it in another way, any transformation in the kinship terminologies are resulted from the changes in the kinship relations which in turn are caused by the changes in the kinship roles. If we look at the case of the native kinship terms *valiyachachan/ ilayachchan and valiyamma/ ilayamma* , the failure to perform the roles played by these kinship relations resulted in the negotiations in the use of the terminologies. As we seen above, the traditionally assigned roles to these kinship relations are no longer performed in the contemporary urban society. The roles performed by these kinship relations have been compromised , resulting in the transformation in the terminology.

Conclusion

Kinship terms can talk about the evolutionary nature of family organisation. On the contrary, the present study argues that kinship terminologies are capable of providing insights into the family ethos of an age. Kinship terminologies were created in order to label the kinship relations which exist in a family as a result of consanguinity or affinity .These terms captures in it the nature and state of human family

relationships, and so are the changes. Therefore, the transitions and restructuring in the terminologies can inform us about the undercurrents of changes in human relationships within the family. In the present study, the divergent kinship terminologies have merged into one.

It could be argued that it is the result of general trend of *anglicisation* among the urban families. Attention has been given in the samples of the families chosen in order to avoid the

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