2024. *Proc Ling Soc Amer* 9(1). 5722. https://doi.org/10.3765/plsa.v9i1.5722.

Kincretism in crosslinguistic perspective

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Abstract. Traditional anthropology in the vein of Morgan (1871) distinguishes between descriptive and classificatory kinship terms. Mainstream US English *father* functions as a descriptive term, as it conventionally only indicates one relationship type: 'EGO's begetter'. In contrast, Aboriginal English *father* functions as a classificatory term, as it conventionally indicates both 'EGO's begetter' and 'EGO's begetter's brother'. We propose that it is possible to study classificatory kinship in the same manner that we study morphological syncretism in nominal and ver-bal paradigms. We propose toy features for kinship and demonstrate that Murdock's (1949) classical hexapartite typology of kinship patterns is best thought of as a set of metasyncretisms (Harley 2008) generated by impoverishment. In theoretical terms, we contribute to the broader research program of Crossmodular Structural Parallelism (Nevins 2008), in that we argue that kintactic features may interact and be modified in ways homologous to phonological and morphological features. In empirical terms, we provide a genealogically diverse sample of underdescribed language-specific kincretisms outside of the broader Murdockian typology, with an emphasis on kincretisms that involve affinal terms.

Keywords. kinship; syncretism; typology; distributed morphology; impoverishment

1. Introduction. Kinship systems constitute a universal of natural language (Greenberg 2020). Kinship has been studied from the perspective of social and cultural anthropology for hundreds of years, to so detailed an extent that the so-called 'death of kinship studies' (Schneider 1984) has been pronounced, albeit not uncontroversially so. Although kinship continues to be an object of enduring concern within political, legal, Marxist, and feminist anthropology (Peletz 1995), the early structural(ist) focus of Morgan and his contemporaries has been largely de-emphasized. Linguists have in recent decades returned to the theoretical analysis of kinship, with seminal works by Jones (2003, using Optimality Theory) and Wierzbicka (2016, using the Natural Semantic Metalanguage approach). Although we differ greatly in terms of assumptions and methodologies from these authors, we are grateful to them for providing a proof of principle that linguistic theory can still do much to defibrillate, if not invigorate, the comparative and crossdisciplinary study of kinship.

More concretely, we propose that the distinction between DESCRIPTIVE vs. CLASSIFICATORY kin terms in traditional anthropology is highly amenable to analysis within realizational framework such as Distributed Morphology (Halle & Marantz 1993). By way of example, consider the following point of variation between Mainstream US English (MUSE) and Australian Aboriginal English (AbE):

* We would like to express our sincerest thanks to those who provided feedback on earlier instantiations of this work at Exo-Words, the 98th Annual Meeting of the Linguistic Society of America, the Young Language Science Scholar Poster Session, and the Morphology Circle at the Pennsylvania State University. All errors and shortcomings that remain are our own. Authors: Tran Truong (tpt5331@psu.edu) & Nathan Thompson (nmt5368@psu.edu), the Pennsylvania State University.

(1) **Classificatory kinship as syncretism** (Eades 2012)

a. *father* 'EGO's begetter' (MUSE; descriptive)

b. *father* 'EGO's begetter; EGO's father's brother' (AbE; classificatory)

c. *properly one's father* 'EGO's begetter' (AbE; disambiguating)

For a first approximation, we follow Wierzbicka (2016) in conceiving of the core meanings of *father* as 'begetter' and *mother* as 'birthgiver', although the facts from language to language (or family configuration to family configuration) are doubtless much more complex. Under stereotypical conditions, MUSE *father* indicates only one referent, the begetter, making it a DESCRIPTIVE TERM. As a result of language contact with Australian languages in which the notion of crossness plays a strong role in determining section belonging and marriageability (McConvell et al. 2018), AbE *father* indicates either the begetter or any of his brothers, making it a CLASSIFICATORY TERM. AbE speakers can use the adverb *properly* 'genuinely' to rule out the possibility of referring to a paternal uncle. In (1b), we observe the association of a single form with two or more contextually or functionally distinct occurrences—in other words, syncretism.

The organization of this paper is as follows. In §2, we argue that syncretisms within kin terms, or KINCRETISMS, can be generated by means of underspecification and impoverishment of formal kintactic features. In §3, we describe four of Murdock's six systems of kinship—Hawaiian, Sudanese, Inuktitut, and Iroquois—and propose the impoverishment rules associated with them. In §4, we provide an interim summary of our theoretical work before introducing the empirical side of our project, in which we attempt to assess the possibility space of kincretisms. In §5, we provide a selection of kincretic rara, with an eye to future featural decomposition. §6 concludes.

2. Kintactic features & syncretism. At this time, we are not wedded to any particular theory of kintactic features, but we will assume the proposal in (2), adapted from Truong (2022), for the purposes of this study.

(2) a. **Sex** [±feminine]: If +, referent is female; if −, referent is male.

b. **Sex of linking relative** [$\mathbb{L}$: ±feminine]: If +, linking relative (i.e., the person through whom EGO is related to ALTER) is female; if −, linking relative is male.

c. **Laterality** [±matrilateral, ±patrilateral]: If ++, referent is related both patri- and matrilaterally (e.g., a sibling); if −+ or +−, referent is related either patri- or matrilaterally (e.g., a cousin). *−− is a logical impossibility.

d. **Lineality** [±lineal]: If +, referent is lineal; if −, referent is collateral.

e. **Generation** [$\mathbb{G}$: ... − 2, −1, 0, 1, 2, ...]: If +1, referent is in the first ascending (i.e., parental) generation relative to EGO, etc.]

At this time, we may attempt an analysis of the English data in (1).

(3) **A Vocabulary microfragment**

a. [−feminine, +patrilateral −matrilateral +lineal, $\mathbb{G}$: +1] ↔ /fɑːðɻ/

b. Aboriginal English Lineality Impoverishment: Delete [−lineal] in the context of [−feminine +patrilateral] and input the default value of [+lineal].

The rule in (3a) expones as *father* a feature bundle specific to a male ([+feminine]) direct ancestor ([+lineal]) in the parental generation ([$\mathbb{G}$: +1]). By definition, EGO is related to the begetter through the father's side ([+patrilateral]) and not through the mother's side ([−matrilateral]) Given that AbE *father* can also refer to paternal uncles, who are collateral instead of lineal relatives, rule (3b) deletes the lineality feature. Restricting this rule to the environment of [−feminine +patrilateral] ensures that AbE *father* never refers to maternal uncles (i.e., EGO's mother's brothers). Note that (3b) assumes that + is the default value for [±lineal], and that the system permits the insertion of default values after impoverishment. Another way to implement this would be to change (3a) by underspecifying *father* for lineality. In so doing, impoverishment of lineality on a feature bundle appropriate to a paternal uncle alone would make it compatible with *father*. Given that these toy features are new to the reader, this study will prefer fully specified representations where possible.

The microfragment (3) is merely intended to give the reader a bird's-eye view of methodology used in this investigation. It is woefully undesirable in that it treats the syncretism between 'father' and 'paternal uncle' as an incidental connection between two meanings, and not one instantiation of a larger, more systematic pattern of neutralization.

2.1. METASYNCRETISM. There are two reasons for which we prefer to derive the difference between MUSE and AbE using impoverishment instead of underspecification. The first is that we want to maintain the possibility of disambiguation, as in (1c), by supposing that *father* is fully specified for its features in both varieties, and that the prototypical interpretation of *father* can be called forth in particular contexts. The second is that the rule in (3b) is not incidental to AbE: rather, all languages of the so-called Iroquois type (§3.4) systematically treat paternal uncles as fathers; maternal aunts as sisters; and parallel cousins (i.e., descendants of paternal uncles and maternal aunts) as siblings. We argue that these larger basic patterns of kinship constitute examples of METASYNCRETISM (Harley 2008). These are general patterns of neutralization that obtain across paradigms throughout the language, regardless of the phonological shape of the exponents involved.

(4) **Metasyncretic gender neutralization in English nominative pronouns**

a. *he, she, it* (masculine-feminine-neuter contrast in third person)

b. *you; I* (no gender contrasts in first & second person)

c. Gender Impoverishment: Delete [±feminine, ±neuter] in the context of [+participant].

Note that the dynamic in (4a,b) obtains for other paradigms in the language as well (e.g., *him/her/it* vs. *you* and *me*). Rule (4c) ensures that there can be no Vocabulary item in English that combines non-third person features with gender features—or that if one did exist, it would be repaired. The absence of gender contrasts in non-third persons is widespread crosslinguistically, and thus metasyncretisms are often not merely syncretisms across paradigms within a language, but also syncretisms across many languages.

3. Murdock's typology of kinship. Building on Morgan's descriptive-classificatory binary and Lowie s (1928) quadripartite model, Murdock (1949) proposes a hexapartite typology of basic patterns of kinship. To our knowledge, we are among the first to frame his theory as a set of metakincretisms derived by impoverishment. As a result of time and space constraints, we will

only focus on four of the types: Hawaiian, Inuktitut, Sudanese, and Iroquois (see Trautmann & Whiteley 2012 and Truong 2022 for the complexities that attend the Crow and Omaha systems).

3.1. HAWAIIAN. Hawaiian is a Hawaiian-type language in which kin terms distinguish only generation and sex as axes of kintactic contrast. In (5), *makua* 'parental generation kin' and *kaikua* 'child generation kin' (*keiki* is an allomorph) can be modified by sex-indicating suffixes, but lineality (i.e., being a direct descendent of or ancestor to EGO) vs. collaterality (i.e., being related to EGO through a non-direct line of descent) are not contrasted. We propose that languages of this type are associated with rule (6).

(5) **Hawaiian kin terms with respect to a male EGO**

a. *makua-kāne* 'father, uncle'
b. *makua-hine* 'mother, aunt'
c. *kaikua-'ana* 'brother, male cousin'
d. *kaikua-hine* 'sister, female cousin'
e. *keiki-kāne* 'son, nephew'
f. *kaika-mahine* 'daughter, niece'

(6) Hawaiian Lineality Impoverishment: Delete $[\pm\text{lineal}]$ in the context of $[\mathbb{G} : n]$.

3.2. SUDANESE. Sudanese-type languages, such as Latin or Vietnamese, are maximally descriptive. Kin terms in these languages tend to describe only one relationship. The Latin data in (7) suggest the necessity of one additional feature: given that *consobrinus* 'mother's brother's child' and *matruelis* 'mother's sister's child' are distinct, the sole use of $[\pm\text{patrilateral}, \mp\text{matrilateral}]$ no longer suffice. The sex of the linking relative *in addition to the linking parent* has emerged as yet another axis of contrast, which we implement as $[\mathbb{L} : \pm\text{feminine}]$. When this feature is $+$, the non-parental linking relative is female; when it is $-$, he is male. This feature permits us to generate parallel vs. cross distinctions in Iroquois-type systems (§2.5). We imagine that laterality and linking relative features represent elaborations of gender features and may be organized in the form of a feature geometry (cf. Harley & Ritter 2002) with respect to one another, but we leave these complications to future work.

(7) **Latin kin terms**

a. *pater* 'father'
b. *patruus* 'paternal uncle'
c. *avunculus* 'maternal uncle'
d. *mater* 'mother'
e. *amita* 'paternal aunt'
f. *matertera* 'maternal aunt'
g. *soror* 'sister'
h. *frater* 'brother'
i. *consobrinus* 'mother's brother's child'
j. *matruelis* 'mother's sister's child'
k. *patruelis* 'father's brother's child'
l. *amitinus* 'father's sister's child'

Note that the terms in (7) appear to be morphologically complex (beyond the obvious number, gender, and case alternations). For instance, *avunculus* is decomposable into *avus* 'grandfather' and a diminutive suffix, and *consobrinus* contains *sobrinus* 'sister's son'. We intend to write a Vocabulary fragment that captures the complexity of exponency observed here at a higher level of granularity in future work. We leave these matters aside for now, as our focus in the current study is the use of impoverishment to derive metakincretisms, and by definition, Sudanese-type languages lack metakincretisms.

Of course, it is not the case that Sudanese-type languages *never* exhibit kincretism. Indeed, individual languages may have incidental syncretisms to be dealt with by means of underspecification. For instance, Southern Vietnamese is broadly a Sudanese system (i.e., it works similarly to Latin but additionally observes an age contrast for the parental generation), but it does have one instance of a highly classificatory term, *bác* 'parent's older sibling; parent's older sibling's spouse'. This term syncretizes laterality (i.e., the kin can be related to EGO through either the mother or father), sanguinity (i.e., the kin may be a blood relative or an in-law), and sex (i.e., the kin can be either male or female). In other words, *bác* is only specified for generation and higher relative age to the parent of EGO.

3.3. INUKTITUT. English uses an Inuktitut-type system, in which nuclear relatives have more descriptive terms, and more distant relatives have more classificatory terms. More concretely, patrilateral vs. matrilateral is not active as an axis of contrast in the parental generation (e.g., *uncle* can refer to both 'mother's brother' and 'father's brother'). Likewise, parallel vs. cross is not active as an axis of contrast in cousin terms: *cousin* could refer to any of 'father's brother's child; mother's brother's child; father's sister's child; mother's sister's child'. Two possible implementations of Inuktitut-type systems are possible. First, we can assume that the [$\pm$patrilateral, $\mp$matrilateral, $\mathbb{L}$: $\pm$feminine] features are inactive in English, and no kin term is ever specified for them. Second, we can propose rule (8).

(8) a. English Laterality & Crossness Impoverishment: Delete [$\pm$patrilateral, $\mp$matrilateral, $\mathbb{L}$: $\mp$feminine] in the context of any kin term.

We prefer the use of the metakincretism-generating rule (8) over underspecification. Old English showed signs of constituting a Sudanese system, as shown in (9), and we believe that the acquisition of new impoverishment rules could be a useful way of conceptualizing of incremental language change.

(9) **Old English kin terms** (Dupinović 2014)

a. *fædera* 'father's brother'
b. *faðu* 'father's sister'
c. *eam* 'mother's brother'
d. *modrige* 'mother's sister'

3.4. IROQUOIS. We have left the most complex system for last. Seneca is an Iroquois-type language in which the parallel vs. cross distinction is active. As with AbE, there is kincretism between 'father' and 'paternal uncle' as well as 'mother' and 'maternal aunt'. Parallel cousins (i.e., cousins through the paternal uncle and maternal aunt) are grouped with siblings and observe a contrast in age. Cross cousins (i.e., cousins through the maternal uncle and paternal aunt) are

grouped together and neutralized for age, sex, and linking relative. This is a highly classificatory system that we generate with the two rules in (11).

(10) **Seneca kinship terms**

a. *haʔnih* 'father, paternal uncle'

b. *noʔyẽh* 'mother, maternal aunt'

c. *hakhnóʔsẽh* 'maternal uncle'

d. *akeːhak* 'paternal aunt'

e. *hatsiʔ* 'elder brother, elder male parallel cousin'

f. *heʔkẽːʔ* 'younger brother, younger male parallel cousin'

g. *ahtsiʔ* 'elder sister, elder female parallel cousin'

h. *kheʔkẽːʔ* 'younger sister, younger female parallel cousin'

i. *akyã́ːʔseːʔ* 'cross cousin'

(11) **Metakincretism in Seneca**

a. Sex, & Age Impoverishment in Cross Cousins: Delete [±feminine, ±older] in the context of [±patrilateral, ∓matrilateral, $\mathbb{L}$: ±feminine, −lineal, $\mathbb{G}$: 0].

b. Cousinhood Impoverishment in Parallel Cousins: Delete [∓patrilateral, ±matrilateral, $\mathbb{L}$: ±feminine] in the context of [±feminine, −lineal, $\mathbb{G}$: 0, ±older] and insert [+patrilateral, +matrilateral]

A cross cousin is a matrilateral relative who is related to EGO through a man or a patrilateral relative who is related to EGO through a woman. Rule (11a) ensures that cross cousin terms are always underspecified for sex and age. Rule (11b) turns parallel cousins into siblings by impoverishing features related to laterality and linking relatives and inserting default features associated with siblinghood. As previously mentioned in §2, it may be possible to simplify (11b) by underspecifying sibling-related Vocabulary items for laterality features, but we include the default feature insertion here for didactic reasons.

4. Interim summary & moving beyond Murdock's typology. By now, we have exemplified that a) kinship terms can be modeled in terms of formal features, b) these features are subject to co-occurrence restrictions repaired by impoverishment, and c) typologies of kinship from traditional anthropology may be conceived of as metakincretisms, or systematic neutralizations across paradigms and languages. It is worth emphasizing that Murdock's typology is essentially a typology of cousin systems, as schematized below:

(12) a. Sudanese: 4 cousin types (paternal parallel, maternal parallel, paternal cross, maternal cross)

b. Iroquois: 2 cousin types (parallel, cross)

c. Inukititut: 1 cousin type (no parallel-cross distinction)

d. Hawaiian: 0 cousin types (no cousin-sibling distinction)

To that end, we would like to add a typological dimension to this study and provide a genealogically diverse sample of kincretisms that are outside the ambit of the Murdockian system. Over time, we hope to identify both new metakincretisms as well as kincretic rara: patterns of kincretism that are unusual and language-specific.

5. Supra-Murdockian kincretism in crosslinguistic perspective. A selection of kincretic curiosities follows, albeit heavily abridged for reasons of space.

(13) **Mavea** (Guérin 2011): *tupu-* 'grandchild; grandparent'

Mavea (Oceanic) has a syncretism between second ascending and second descending (i.e., $[\mathbb{G} : \pm 2]$) kin. In general, it is relatively common to see generational cyclicity effects in Australasian (i.e., Australian and Pacific; a geographic term, not a genealogical one) kin systems.

(14) **Kokota** (Palmer 2008): *naŋo* 'parent-in-law; child-in-law'

Kokota (Oceanic) has a syncretism between first ascending and second descending affines (i.e, $[\mathbb{G} : \pm 1]$ in-laws). In general, kinship research, be this in the context of traditional anthropology or contemporary descriptive linguistics, has given relatively short shrift to the elicitation of affinal terms. We wonder if there are broader patterns and typologies in this domain to be discovered.

(15) **Sierra Popoluca**: (Boudreault 2018) *kaapaj* 'sister-in-law to male EGO; brother-in-law to female EGO'

Sierra Popoluca (Mixe-Zoquean) has a syncretism between what we can only describe as a cross sibling-in-law. Sex of EGO is likely to emerge as an important axis of contrast in the formal analysis of this type of syncretism.

(16) **Aguarana** (Overall 2017)

a. *ahiku* 'son of sibling-in-law; son of cross cousin'

b. *nuwasu* 'daughter of sibling-in-law; daughter of cross cousin'

c. *awɨ* 'nephew related to EGO through opposite-sex sibling; child-in-law'

Given that cross cousins are often marriageable in language groups that contrast them, we expect to see many syncretisms between cross cousins and affines, as observable in Aguarana (Chicham). We observed **zero** syncretisms between parallel cousins and affines in our data set—this is expected, as languages that contrast crossness will syncretize parallel cousins with siblings.

(17) **Ingush** (Nichols 2011)

a. *deacii* 'paternal aunt; second cousin'

b. *moxcha* 'second cousin; first cousin once removed'

We find the syncretism between 'paternal aunt' and 'second cousin' in Ingush (Northeast Caucasian) to be highly mysterious. The syncretism between 'second cousin' and 'first cousin once removed' is less unusual, and English speakers often interchange these meanings as well.

(18) **Pengo** (Burrow 1970)

a. *bopa* ‘son; wife’s younger sister’s husband’

b. *koki* ‘father’s younger brother’s wife; mother’s younger sister’

c. *koṛiya gāṛ* ‘son’s wife; younger brother’s wife’

d. *jõvay* ‘son-in-law; younger sister’s husband’

e. *ama* ‘father’s elder sister; wife’s mother’

f. *baṇji* ‘sister’s daughter, daughter-in-law’

Affines and sanguines (i.e., blood-related kin) can syncretize in unusual, even generation-mismatched ways in Pengo (Dravidian). For instance, sons and sons-in-law are in the descending generation, but EGO’s younger brother’s wife and EGO’s younger sister’s husband are expected to be isogenerational to EGO.

(19) **Mian** (Fedden 2011)

a. *biém* ‘mother; mother’s sister; maternal uncle’s wife’

b. *nokâi* ‘maternal grandfather; maternal grand-uncle; maternal grand-aunt’s husband; father-in-law to male EGO’

c. *ayàl* ‘paternal grandfather; paternal grand-uncle; paternal grand-aunt’s husband; father-in-law to female EGO’

d. *afok* ‘grandmother; grand-aunt; grand-uncle’s wife’

Mian (Trans–New Guinea) is a Iroquois-type language in which affinal terms also syncretize with sanguinal terms.

(20) **Tariana** (Aikhenvald 2003)

a. *ná:ka* ‘mother; mother’s brother’s wife’

b. *núsiɪi* ‘husband’s brother; sister’s husband’

c. *núsaɪu* ‘husband’s sister; sister’s husband’s sister’

d. *paiphéka* ‘father’s elder brother; grandfather’s elder brother’s son’

e. *nu-wasádo* ‘male EGO’s sororal nephew; son’s wife’s brother’

f. *tethú* ‘son’s wife; male EGO’s sister’s daughter; male EGO’s wife’s sibling’s daughter’

g. *tesí* ‘male EGO’s sister’s son; son’s wife’s brother’

We end with these data from Tariana (Arawakan) and re-emphasize that we know of no large-scale study that has done work in the Morgan-Lowie-Murdock tradition in a way that systematically investigates the typology of affinal terms, and we see our work as laying the groundwork for one such.

6. Conclusion. We situate our work in the research program of Crossmodular Structural Parallelism (Nevins 2008). Typological patterns and constraints observable in domain of kinship have been remarked upon for hundreds of years, and we propose that at least some of these should be the result of operations on abstract kintactic features that are ontologically and processually similar to what operates on phonological and morphological features. Certainly, on the theoretical side, there remains much to be done to substantiate this proposal of phonology-morphology-kintax isomorphism. On the empirical side, we look forward to continuing to collect and categorize syncretisms within the kinship subdomain of affinal terms.

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