

ALL IN THE FAMILY:  
KINSHIP LEXICALIZATION ACROSS SIGN LANGUAGES<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract.** Native signs used as basic kin terms in 20 sign languages from several sign language families are examined. The distribution of the kin terms in these 20 languages shows similarity to that of kin terms in spoken languages and also presents some interesting implications both linguistic and socio-cultural that warrant further exploration.

**Background.** Sign languages offer unique insights into the nature of language, because they present views of language codes in the manual-visual channel. For linguists, however, it is particularly important to be able to know what characteristics of sign languages have developed because of the channel they use and what characteristics are borrowed from oral languages or may have resulted from the imposition of the language and the culture of the hearing majority on the deaf. To be able to make this distinction linguists must examine a large number of sign languages and must include in this examination both

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sign languages that have been influenced by oral languages (usually in educational situations) and sign languages that have not had direct contact with or influence from oral languages.

Unfortunately, sign language research has been concentrated almost exclusively on one language, American Sign Language (ASL); Wilbur (1976) reviews much of this research. A few papers have been written on other sign languages (e.g. Peng 1974, Sallagoity 1975, Yau 1977), but except for Kuschel (1973), these sign languages (of course including ASL) have been used in countries that possess educational systems for teaching the deaf and thus have been directly influenced by oral languages, usually in a diglossic kind of language situation (cf Stokoe 1971, Woodward 1973).

More rarely there have been comparative studies of lexicon (Stokoe 1973), morphology (Woodward & DeSantis 1976), and syntax (Fischer 1975, Yau 1977). Until now these comparative studies have considered two, or at most three, sign languages.

This study attempts to take these comparative studies further by comparing terms from the lexical domain of kinship across 20 distinct sign language varieties. These 20 sign language varieties include examples of several major groups of sign languages. Five of the languages have not been used for education, and at least two have definitely been only minimally influenced by the oral language of the majority of the culture among which they are found or not influenced at all.

One of these last languages, Providence Island Sign Language, is the catalyst for this investigation. Providence Island in the Caribbean provides the best example to date of an isolated group of deaf people utilizing an indigenous sign language with no apparent outside influence and no direct pressure from hearing people to conform to the majority language. Providence Island Sign Language is used by the members of a tightly closed community. Washabaugh, Woodward, and DeSantis (1976: 3) have pointed out that this sign language "seems to be particularly context-dependent.

Some of the ways this context dependence is manifested in Providence Island Sign Language are through extensive

use of indexing, extensive use of channels like facial expression, and also through scanty categorization in ethnosemantic domains, such as kin terms, color terms, and wh- questions (1976: 3; cf Washabaugh 1977).

It would be interesting to know whether this context dependence is unique to Providence Island Sign Language or whether it occurs in and because of special sociolinguistic situations. The only way to find out is to compare a number of unrelated sign languages, especially in the same lexical domains, in which context dependence occurs with Providence Island Sign Language. This study takes a first step by examining lexicalization in kinship terms. Later papers will examine color terms and wh- questions, and will examine indexing and the degree of facial expression used in lexicalization.

In this preliminary study of lexicalization of basic kin terms across sign languages, definitions are needed: First, only native signs will be considered; these are signs that do not show "initialization" (from fingerspelling influence) or any other evidence of borrowing from a language spoken in the community—for obvious reasons naturally developed and not borrowed signs are the focus. Second, a basic kin term is taken to be a native sign, monomorphemic or polymorphemic, that refers to a consanguineal kinsperson.

Data. For this study data on basic kin terms are taken from 20 different sign languages. Table 1 shows the languages, their social or regional occurrence, the sources, and the size or number of informants of the sample. A number of these sign languages, or sign varieties, are fairly closely related; each one listed, however, has a slightly different kinship-term system from the sign languages that it is related to. Table 2 shows a hypothesized relationship among the sign language varieties by dividing them into six basic groups: French Sign Language Group, British Sign Language Group, Asian S L Group, South American S L Group, Unknown affiliation, and Indigenous.

The French Sign Language Group is the best researched of these groups of sign languages. Old French Sign Language was used until about 1880, at which time it was forced underground by enforced oral education and the banning of

SIGN LANGUAGE	DISTRIBUTION	SOURCE	SAMPLE SIZE
1. Adamorobe	All	Frishberg	large
2. Old ASL	White, North. U.S.	Long, film, informant	large
3. Mod. ASL	All researched varieties	Field res'h	large
4. Formal Aus.	Sydney	Informant	one
5. Inf. Austr.	Sydney	Informant	one
6. British	London	Informant	one
7. Colombian	Bogota	Informant	one
8. Costa Rican	San Jose	Infor., field	several
9. Danish	Copenhagen	Informant	two
10. Egyptian	Cairo	Informant	one
11. Old French	Paris (Inst. St. Jacques)	Lambert	large
12. Mod. French	Paris, Toulouse, Albi, Marseilles	Field study	sixty
13. Hong Kong	Hong Kong	Informant	one
14. Indian	New Delhi	Informant	one
15. Japanese	Tokyo	Informant, Peng	small
16. Malaysian	Kuala Lumpur	Informant	one
17. Providence I.	All	Field	large
18. Old Catholic Scottish	Glasgow	Informant	one
19. Modern Scot- tish	Glasgow	Informant	one
20. Taiwanese	North & South	Informant	one

Table 1. Sign languages used in the study, their distribution, source, and sample size.

deaf persons from teaching and other positions in deaf education in France and in Europe generally. Modern French Sign Language is a highly restructured version of Old FSL. Old American Sign Language was used until the 20th century; old ASL is historically related to Old FSL, but there is evidence to support the supposition of a mixture of languages and the possible creolization of Old FSL with indigenous varieties of ASL in the United States after about 1817 (Woodward 1977). Modern ASL shows much more influence from (fingerspelled) English than does Old ASL (Battison 1978, Fischer 1975). Nevertheless Old ASL shows an expected rate of cognates (99%) with modern ASL (Woodward 1977). Von der Lieth (1967) has pointed out that Danish Sign Language is related to Old FSL; however, modern FSL, ASL, and Danish SL are not mutually intelligible (Battison & Jordan 1976).

The British Sign Language group may have a tenuous connection with FSL, but it is here viewed as a group of historically related languages distinct from the FSL related group. Stokoe (1965) reports much more difficulty in establishing communication with British as compared with French signers. [It is important here to keep in mind the distinction between communication of signers with signers and mutual intelligibility of sign languages. Communication between signers of unrelated sign languages may occur not because of mutual intelligibility of their languages but because of a general flexibility on the part of deaf people to modify their own signs to create spontaneous hybrids or pidgins or to resort to pantomime—which is not a sign language (cf Battison & Jordan 1976, and Jordan & Battison 1976).] Formal Australian Sign Language is used with hearing persons such as teachers and incorporates much more fingerspelling and other borrowings from English than does Informal Australian SL. Formal Australian would be an H variety on a diglossic continuum with Informal Australian SL as an L variety. In the past in Scotland, the Catholic and the Protestant Sign Languages were very different in lexicon; now the two varieties appear to be merging.

Japanese, Taiwanese, and Hong Kong Sign Languages have been grouped together, although it appears from kinship and other data that Taiwanese is considerably closer

## French Sign Language Group:

Old French SL  
 Modern French SL  
 Old American SL  
 Modern ASL  
 Danish SL

## British Sign Language Group:

British SL  
 Formal Australian SL  
 Informal Australian SL  
 Old Catholic Scottish SL  
 Modern Scottish SL

## Asian Sign Language Group:

Japanese SL  
 Taiwanese SL  
 Hong Kong SL

## South American Sign Language Group:

Colombian SL  
 Costa Rican SL

## Affiliation Unknown:

Egyptian SL  
 Indian SL  
 Malaysian SL

## Indigenous Sign Language Group:

Adamorobe SL  
 Providence Island SL

Table 2. Hypothesized relationships among twenty sign language varieties.

<sup>2</sup> It should be emphasized that because a sign language does not have a non-compound native sign for a term does not mean that sign languages are lacking. Sign languages may adopt compounding or may borrow through initialization (if a finger-spelling system is used with them). In this paper the concern is only with simple, single native signs for kin terms

to Japanese than either Japanese or Taiwanese is to Hong Kong Sign Language. Hong Kong signs used in formal educational signing also appear to have a few minor influences from British Sign Language and possibly from American Sign Language.

Colombian and Costa Rican signs have some similarity in kinship signs; otherwise it is not known how close these two sign languages may be.

The distinction between sign languages with unknown affiliation and indigenous sign languages is that the latter have been much more isolated than the former. Adamorobe is used in a village in Ghana where a very large proportion of the community is deaf. Providence Island, although it is administratively part of Colombia, has a different sign language from mainland Colombia. In addition, Providence Island is physically very isolated and has three to four times the expected deaf population (Washabaugh, Woodward, & DeSantis 1976).

Although Egyptian, Indian, and Malaysian are less well researched than are the indigenous sign languages (themselves only beginning to be studied), they have had more contact with and influence from other sign traditions, because deaf people from these places have visited parts of Europe and America. All the sign languages shown with unknown affiliation, however, have had considerably less outside contact than have Asian Sign Languages or those in the British or French Sign Language groups.

**Analysis.** Table 3 shows that all the sign languages in the 20-language sample for this study have native sign, lineal kin terms for offspring.<sup>2</sup> There are no distinctions in sex in offspring terms. Formal Australian, British, and Modern Scottish SLs have no additional lineal kin signs. Indian SL has one term for parent that refers to father or mother equally. Informal Australian and Old Catholic Scottish have basic signs for mother but not for father.

The remaining 14 sign languages have terms for father and mother both. These 14 fall into two basic groups. One group—Adamorobe, Old French, Modern French, Hong Kong, Malaysian, Providence Island—have no basic sign for parents of parents; the other group does. Within the second group, Colombian and Costa Rican do not distinguish

Nonlinear kin terms | Lineal kin terms

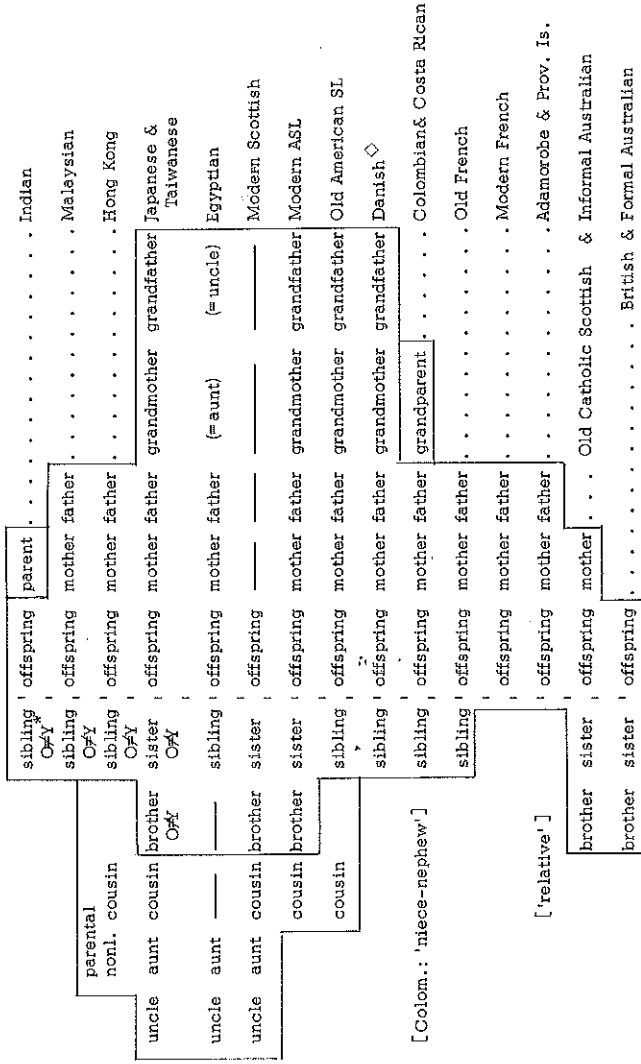


Table 3. Ordered basic native kinship term data (with special thanks to Lloyd Anderson for developing this chart displaying lineal and nonlinear kin terms in one array).

\* Term for older sibling differs from term for younger sibling. ◊ Danish also has terms for great grandmother and great grandfather.



sex in their terms for grandparents; Egyptian distinguishes sex in grandparent terms but also uses the same signs for male and female non-linear relatives who are not siblings as for grandfather and grandmother; and Old ASL, Modern ASL, Danish, Japanese, and Taiwanese have native signs used exclusively for grandparents in which sex is distinguished. In addition, Danish has native signs for great grandmother and for great grandfather.

Table 3 also shows that only one of the sign languages in the study, Modern FSL, has no native signs for non-linear relatives. Adamorobe and Providence Island Sign Languages have one sign each for nonlinear relatives.

The remaining 17 languages have signs for nonlinear kin terms for siblings. Nine of these 17 sign languages do not distinguish sex in the sibling term. Of these nine, Indian, Malaysian, and Hong Kong distinguish siblings by age (elder and younger); in addition Hong Kong SL has a term for the parental generation of nonlinear kin, and a term for cousin. There is no distinction for sex in these two terms.

The six other sign languages that do not distinguish for sex in sibling terms do not distinguish for age either. Of these six, Egyptian has terms for uncle and aunt; Colombian has a term for 'niece-nephew'; Old ASL has one term for cousin; and Costa Rican, Danish, and Old FSL have a single sign for sibling in nonlinear kin.

Of the remaining 8 sign languages, six distinguish siblings by sex but not by age. Formal Australian, Informal Australian, British, and Old Catholic Scottish Sign Languages make this distinction and no other for nonlinear kin. Modern ASL makes a sex distinction in siblings, and some varieties of ASL have one term for cousin. Modern Scottish SL has terms for uncle and aunt and a single term for cousin.

Finally, Japanese and Taiwanese distinguish sex and age in sibling terms and sex in terms for the parental generation of nonlineals; each also has a single term for cousin.

Implications. The following discussion is divided into two parts, generalizations from the linguistic data, and discussion of some possible socio-linguistic implications of the data.

The following statements are true for basic native kin terms in all 20 of the sign languages studied:

1. All sign languages have terms for lineal relatives.
2. No sign language has a term for nonlinear relatives unless it also has terms for lineal relatives.

Within lineal kin terms, the following statements apply:

3. All sign languages have a term for offspring.
4. No sign language distinguishes offspring by sex or age.
5. Terms for grandparents imply terms for parents which imply terms for or a term for offspring.
6. If a sign language has a basic term for father, it will also have one for mother, but not conversely.
7. Sex distinctions cannot be made for grandparents unless they are also made for parents.

Within nonlinear kin terms, these statements apply:

8. The existence of an ablinal (cousin) term implies at least one colinal term, but not conversely.
9. The existence of a term for parental (uncle/aunt) generation (or niece/nephew) implies a term for sibling.
10. Sex distinction does not occur for ablinals (cousins) or for offspring generation colinals (niece/nephew).
11. If sex is distinguished for parental generation colinals (uncle/aunt), there will be a sex distinction for siblings.

The following statements also hold:

12. All sign languages (except Indian) distinguish sex of parents.
13. All sign languages (ex. Modern French) have at least one term for nonlineals.
14. No sign language (ex. Egyptian) has a term that can refer to both lineal and nonlinear relatives.

15. No sign language (ex. Colombian) has a term for offspring generation colineals (niece/nephew).
16. No Sign language (ex. Danish) has terms for great grandfather and great grandmother.

Most of these generalizations have been found true for oral languages. Generalizations 1 and 2 relate to the relative markedness of nonlineals as compared with lineals. Greenberg (1966) points out that:

(T)he specific hierarchy of categories in English kinship terminology such as lineal (unmarked) vs. collateral (marked), consanguineal (unmarked) vs. affinal (marked) are very widespread... (1966: 72)

More generally, Greenberg has pointed out that "less distant (from ego) are unmarked in relation to more distant kin" (1966: 51). And Ross has remarked:

Typically the closer a pair of kin terms is to Ego, the more distinctions (with respect to age, sex, etc.) can be made. Thus no language should make a sex distinction in terms for cousins but not for sibling or in terms for grandparents but not in terms for parents, etc." (Ross 1976: 1).

Generalizations 3, 5, 7, 8, 9, 10, & 11 above bear out for sign languages the statements of Greenberg and Ross about languages in general.

Generalization 4 follows only in part the following principle outlined by Greenberg:

For the first ascending as against the first descending generation it is fairly common to find systems in which the marked character of the latter is evidenced by neutralization for sex reference, whereas, as has been seen, the distinction of father and mother is universal (Greenberg 1966: 76; underlining added).

Generalization 12 makes one exception to Greenberg's hypothesized "factual universal" that "all systems distinguish

male and female parent by separate terms even though very frequently other kin types are included in referents of both" (Greenberg 1966: 74). It should be noted, however, that Indian sign language follows logically from the generalizations discussed earlier about proximity and amount of distinction. Indian sign language makes no sex distinction for any kin. Thus Greenberg's postulated universal might be revised to state: If sex distinctions are made in a kinship system, then sex distinctions must be made for parents. By stating Greenberg's universal in this way, we are still able to include Indian sign language and have a universal without exceptions. In effect all we have done is fill out the last null row of an implicational arrangement. If we do this, however, we will also have to modify Greenberg's statement that "all systems make some use of generation, consanguineal vs. affinal distinctions, and sex of relative" (1966: 81) by deleting the last four words.

Generalization 6 also presents some problems, because Formal Australian, British, and Modern Scottish Sign Languages have no native sign for mother or father, and because Informal Australian and Old Catholic Scottish have only a native sign for mother, none for father.

**Sociocultural** While we are far from having ethnographic implications. graphsies of deaf communities, there is still sociocultural information that appears to be related to some of the differences on the structure of the various kinship terminologies in sign languages.

As we have seen, the British Sign Language Group can be divided into those languages that have no native sign for parents (Formal Australian, British, and Modern Scottish), and those languages having a sign for mother but not for father (Informal Australian, Old Catholic Scottish). One possible reason for this situation is the strong influence of the spoken language on British Sign Language; where there is not a native sign term a fingerspelled word or initialized sign (an abbreviation of a fingerspelled word) of course shows clearly influence from the spoken and fingerspelled language. Moreover, strong insistence on oral education and little scope for deaf persons in the world of work after school has its effect. In Britain deaf persons have rarely if ever headed organizations that serve

the deaf. The situation in Scotland has not been much better. One recent graduate of Gallaudet College was asked why he wanted to go to college, since the only job he could get in Scotland was a janitor's position. It is interesting to note that this man never returned to his homeland.

Informal Australian Sign Language is not used with hearing people, and the Old Catholic Scottish SL has had less influence from British SL than has Old Protestant Scottish Sign Language. This may account for the fact that these two languages borrow only the term for father, and not the term for mother, from the oral language by way of initialization. [This is not the place to discuss the mechanisms by which sign languages borrow lexical items from oral languages; Battison (1978) has a thorough and detailed treatment of this kind of borrowing and its effect on phonological and morphological structure in the borrowing language.]

The situation in the French group of sign languages is somewhat easier to explain. Old French SL and Old ASL had similar kinship terminologies, but unlike old FSL, ASL had a single native sign for grandfather/grandmother, and some varieties of Old ASL also had a sign for ablineals that persists to this day. Modern FSL was forced underground in 1887, seven years after it was pronounced to be of no use in education of the deaf by the Congress of educators of the deaf in 1880. Deaf teachers were forbidden to teach between 1887 and the last part of 1976, in France (Markowicz 1976). Modern FSL dropped the Old FSL sign for sibling and has initialized (from fingerspelling) signs for brother and sister. Although ASL was also forbidden for most pupils in U.S. schools for the deaf from the 1890's until the early 1960's, there were always a few deaf teachers in the upper grades of the older residential schools. The ASL sign SIBLING became more and more frequently used with male and female. The modern ASL signs for brother and sister are completely fluid assimilated compounds (cf Frishberg 1975). Many young signers who have the newest forms of these signs are not aware that they were originally compounds. For these younger signers of ASL, BROTHER and SISTER have become lexicalized as individual signs.

Finally there is the situation of the terms for non-linear relatives in the indigenous sign languages. Both Adamorobe and Providence Island Sign Language share some interesting characteristics. Both of these language communities are isolated and comparatively closed communities; neither has formal education for deaf persons; neither form community structures as described by Meadow (1972) in the United States; in both the deaf individuals are fairly well integrated into the majority culture; and in both societies many hearing people also know the sign language.

All this has led in the case of Providence Island, and perhaps also in Adamorobe, to the situation that Washabaugh, Woodward, and DeSantis (1976) have termed the context dependency of the sign language. The sociolinguistic situation presents no need for the maintenance of distinctions in sign language between insiders and outsiders. Unlike the situation in Modern FSL and other sign languages in industrial nations, there is no borrowing from the oral language into the sign language:

Since almost everyone on the island [Providence] knows the kin of almost everyone else, there is little need to specify relatives. If ambiguity arises, a name sign or a descriptive adjective can be used with the kin term. Kin terms in Providence Island Sign Language are thus context dependent, since they require participants to know the relatives the signer has (Washabaugh, Woodward, & DeSantis 1976: 7).

The fact that the same kind of non-expansion of kinship terms is found in both Providence Island and Adamorobe Sign Languages and the fact that both of these sign languages exist in very similar sociolinguistic situations with respect to the majority culture seems to indicate that context dependence is itself not unique but strongly dependent on sociolinguistic environment (cf Washabaugh 1977).

Comparative investigations in other areas of sign language lexicon, e.g. color terms and wh- question words (cf Washabaugh, Woodward, & DeSantis 1976) as well as a wider comparison of kinship terms across other sign languages will be important for a better understanding of context dependence and societal influences on lexicalization. It would be well, if possible, that a large part of this research focus on indigenous sign languages, as these have minimal or no effect from contact with oral language. Thus it will be easier to know what characteristics of sign languages occur because of specialization in the manual-visual channel and what characteristics may be borrowed from oral languages or may have resulted from the imposition by the majority culture of its language patterns on the deaf subculture.

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[Professor Woodward has called our attention to an editorial error made while he was on Providence Island and unable to correct proof: The word pidgin was inadvertently used for the correct term creole in two places in his Attitudes toward Deaf People on Providence Island, in Sign Language Studies 18, on pages 50 and 52. The Editor sincerely apologizes to the author and to the speakers of Providence Island Creole.]