

A Diachronic Study of Kinship Terms in Persian

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All languages have different terms for expressing kinship relations and it seems that beyond these differences one can find similarities in the different systems of kinship terms. Morgan (1871) is the first anthropologist who studied kinship systems in different languages and came to this conclusion that kinship systems reflect social systems. Mordoch (1949) another anthropologist, distinguished 6 different patterns in kinship systems. Most anthropologists put their emphasis on studying members of a canonical family including father and mother, sister and brother, son and daughter, wife and husband.

On the other hand, Kroeber (1909) believed that kinship systems are linguistic systems, so they must be studied using linguistic methods. His concern was finding semantic categories that were expressed by kinship terms. He distinguished 8 semantic categories and believed that by using them one can describe kinship terms and their meanings. This was a preface to componential analysis.

Greenberg (1966) used the concept of markedness to study the cognitive-linguistic system of kinship terms. By studying kinship terms in more than 120 languages, he suggested kin terms markedness hierarchies, namely the following: “an ascending kin term is unmarked] against a descending kin term of equal genealogical distance from the anchor ; a kin term descending lineal kinship is unmarked against the one denoting collateral kinship; and a kin term denoting a kin type of a generation more remote from the anchor is marked against a kin term denoting a kin type of a generation less remote from the anchor.”

According to Hage (1999) the importance of Greenberg’s work lies in these: a. He paid attention to the effect of social and cognitive factors in forming kinship systems, b. He provided a method for diachronic study of kinship terms, and c. By studying the prototype effects on forming kinship systems, he created a link between anthropology and cognitive sciences.

In the second part of this paper I am going to describe and explain the historical development of kinship terms in Persian and show the effects of the loss of gender inflection on these terms.

In Old Iranian period, all members of a canonical family including father, mother, sister, brother, daughter, son, wife, and husband have distinct terms:

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napāt (grandson), pitar (father), pussa (son), (puθra Avs.), brātar (brother), mātar (mother), hamātar (having one mother) hamapitar (having one father) (Kent, 1950).

Since in Old Iranian period there is a patrilineal descent system (a system in which an individual is considered to belong to the same descent group as his or her father), father's sisters and brothers have also distinct terms, their difference is marked by gender inflection: *tūrya* (father's brother), (father's sister) *tūryā*. There are no such terms in the texts for the maternal side.

Middle Iranian period is characterized by the reduced inflection of the noun and verb, so the gender distinction in kin terms must have been marked in a different way. There are no records of terms related to father's and mother's sisters and brothers in middle Iranian period. There are only records of the canonical family kin terms:

xvāhar (sister), pitar (father), mātar (mother), pus (son), duxt (daughter), duxtār (daughter), brātar (brother), zan (wife), (Frahvashi, 1378)

In new Persian period again we have canonical family kin terms. Besides,, distinct terms for father's and mother's sisters and brothers (i.e. *xāle, dāyi, amme, amu*) are borrowed from Turkish and Arabic. These terms mark gender and generation distinctions.

As for the non-canonical kin terms, we have paternal kin terms in Old Persian on the one hand and the paternal and maternal kin terms in New Persian borrowed from Arabic and Turkish on the other hand. There is a gap in the development of these kin terms in Middle period. It seems that investigating Iranian dialects and having a closer look at Middle Iranian texts may help us recover these terms.

This state of affairs shows that for Persian speakers gender distinction in kin terms is crucial. After the language has lost its inflectional gender system, Persian speakers have compensated this loss by borrowing from a language which already had this gender distinction, but the borrowed words show the gender distinction lexically.

In the end, it must be added that from a typological point of view, kinship terms in Persian correspond to markedness hierarchies suggested by Greenberg.

Key words: kinship terms; typology; historical linguistics.

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