

Are you my mother? Learning to discern who's who within a universal kinship system

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In the Australian language Murrinhpatha, kinterms may be universally extended to all and sundry. For Murrinhpatha speakers, the abstract mergers underpinning genealogical or polysemic theories of kinship (Scheffler 1978; Scheffler 1972; Scheffler & Lounsbury 1971) are not purely theoretical constructs. These are procedures that can be observed within social interaction. Knowing how to merge same-sex siblings, on the fly, appears to be a necessary requirement for cultural competence within Murrinhpatha speaking society. While acquisitional studies of kinterms have been able to identify developmental stages in kinterm cognition (e.g., Piaget 1928; Danziger 1957; Haviland & Clark 1974; Greenfield & Childs 1977), these psychological studies are mostly concerned with a select few types of relationships, and are usually limited to genealogy close kin. In this paper I examine the developmental consolidation of the entire system of kinship relations – genetically close kin as well as more distant classificatory relationships. In particular, we find that adult-like competence develops slowly into the late teens, which is evidenced through psycholinguistic tasks targeting both the kinship lexicon and the sibling-inflected grammar (Blythe et al. 2020). In this respect, the social learning required for mastery of kinship is, in all likelihood, similar to the acquisition of literacy, in which life-long learning enables certain individuals to develop genuine expertise.

Less is known about *how* children are socialised into systems of classificatory kinship. In data from the LAMP (Language Acquisition of Murrinhpatha) corpus, we find that small children receive explicit instruction on kinship matters from both caregivers and older siblings. The mapping of kinterms onto the personal names of close relatives is instilled through pretend prompting routines in which toddlers are told what to say to whom. Caregivers use gesture and gaze to map genealogical relationships onto the participation frame. Overgeneralised kinterms are corrected when the mapping is inappropriate, yet the classificatory term *mama* (which includes one's biological mother) is frequently overgeneralised, but not always inaccurately. This makes the process by which broader kinship categories emerge from focal referents something of an enigma.

Bio

Joe Blythe is an interactional linguist specialising in Australian Indigenous languages. He conducts field research on the Murrinhpatha language of the Northern Territory and on the Gija and Jaru languages from northern Western Australia. He is interested in the relationships between linguistic structure and social action, and what these relationships reveal about social cognition and culture. His research interests include gesture, spatial cognition and language evolution. He is particularly interested in social identities and kinship concepts, particularly as instantiated within everyday conversation, and as acquired by children.

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