The Atom of Kinship, Filiation and Descent: Error in Translation or Confusion of Ideas?

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The article entitled “Réflexions sur l’atome de parenté” (Lévi-Strauss 1973) first appeared in L’Homme, 1973, XIII (3), and was reprinted in the same year as Chapter vii of Anthropologie structurale deux. It is now available in translation in the two English language editions of that work.

In a footnote which appears at pages 105-106 of Anthropologie structurale deux, Lévi-Strauss dismisses with contempt a criticism I had made of his earlier discussions of l’atome de parenté. He accuses me of failing to check my references in that, in alleging that he had confused the concepts of filiation and descent (Leach 1970: 101), I had relied on an erroneous text and had failed to notice that where Lévi-Strauss had originally written filiation his translator (Claire Jacobson) had written descent.

The matter is not so simple and fairness both to myself and to Claire Jacobson calls for further clarification.

Lévi-Strauss originally introduced the notion of atome de parenté at page 18 of his justly celebrated and highly seminal paper “L’Analyse structurale en linguistique et en anthropologie” (Word, 1945, i (2)). The same article, in revised form, appeared as Chapter ii of Anthropologie structurale (1958). In the details mentioned below, the 1945 and 1958 versions are the same. Chapter ii of the English language Structural Anthropology (1963) is a translation of the latter.

In both French versions of the article the word filiation appears rather frequently. This term is consistently translated by Claire Jacobson as English descent. Close attention to the text shows that in most cases this is a correct anthropological interpretation of what Lévi-Strauss originally wrote though there are certainly some points at which it would have been more appropriate to translate the French filiation by English filiation. This is precisely the point that I wished to convey in my condensed 1970 criticism: Lévi-Strauss' original text confuses under a single term (filiation in the French text and descent in English translation) two quite separate technical anthropological concepts which are, in English, filiation and descent.

As evidence that Claire Jacobson’s translation is, broadly speaking, correct,
I would ask the reader to consult pages 50-51 of Anthropologie structurale (1958). It will be seen that at the top of page 51 it is said that the social organization of the natives of the Trobriand Islands in Melanesia "se caractérise par la filiation matrilineaire". Two paragraphs earlier in a summary of Radcliffe-Brown's well-known argument about the privileged status of the sister's son vis-à-vis the mother's brother in certain patrilineal societies in South Africa, the text has:

"... la filiation détermine, en dernière analyse, le sens de ces oppositions. En régime patrilineaire où le père, et la lignée du père, représentent l'autorité traditionnelle, l'oncle maternel est considéré comme une 'mère masculine'..."

The corresponding passage in the English version comes at page 41 of Lévi-Strauss (1963) and reads:

"In the final analysis, it is descent that determines the choice of oppositions, where the father and the father's descent group represent traditional authority, the maternal uncle is considered a 'male mother'..."

Now although it is true that the English text here has descent where the French text has filiation (which Lévi-Strauss now says is a mistake) Claire Jacobson's version correctly represents Radcliffe-Brown's argument. Had she used the English term filiation rather than descent in her translation the result would have been nonsense.

In English anthropological usage a child is equally filiated to both parents and it makes no sense to write of a society being characterised by patrilineal or matrilineal filiation.

Correspondingly, in the English usage, descent is a meaningful concept only in the context of systems of unilineal descent. In such a context it makes sense to talk, in the manner of Fortes, of "complementary filiation". Where descent is patrilineal a child is linked by complementary filiation to its mother; where descent is matrilineal a child is linked by complementary filiation to its father. But in both these cases the child is linked by filiation equally to both parents. Thus to say, as in Claire Jacobson's text, that the "social organization of the Trobriand Islanders of Melanesia is characterized by matrilineal descent" makes sense; to have said that it is "characterized by matrilineal filiation" would have been nonsense.

Thus, despite Lévi-Strauss' comment that my criticism cannot be taken seriously, I still insist that both in the original French text of Lévi-Strauss (1945) and in its successor (id., 1958) there is a radical confusion which stems from the fact that the single French term filiation is made to cover two quite separate concepts which in English language anthropological writing are now distinguished as filiation and descent. The issue is not just a matter of mistranslation or Anglo-Saxon obtuseness.
REFERENCES

LEACH, E.

LÉVI-STRAUSS, C.