Genealogy and Category: An Operational View
Robert J. Parkin
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Introduction

Genealogical reckoning is not merely convenient but almost unavoidable in kinship analysis, including that of terminologies, and is used in practice even by those who would argue that it does not necessarily correspond to the way particular peoples see their own kinship systems. However, this in no way alters the fact that any kinship terminology is by definition a set of categories. In this article, I wish to revive the debate over the distinction between genealogy and category in the belief that however exhaustive it may have seemed, it has actually failed to come to grips with the essential difference. I will do this partly in general terms, and partly by referring to the debate between Scheffler and Dumont, who can be taken as representative supporters of genealogy and category respectively.

Very often, this distinction is seen in terms of an epistemological gap between “them” and “us”, in which “they” (i.e. members of non-Western societies) use category in thinking about kinship, whereas “we” (i.e. Westerners) use genealogy (e.g. Hocart 1937; Needham 1962: 225, 259; Leach 1967: 136). In fact, “we” in this context means primarily not “we Europeans” but “we anthropologists”, plus other academics and professionals with an interest in kinship, such as human biologists, historians and inheritance lawyers. In other res-

Robert J. Parkin, Genealogy and Category: An Operational View.—The basic argument of this article is that although much discussed, the distinction between category and genealogy has still not been articulated as it should be, due partly to its too close association with other agendas. The distinction is seen to relate not to different sorts of society, as is frequently assumed, but to different sorts of situation in any one society regarding the use of kin terms and kin reckoning. The argument is illustrated with reference to the work of Harold Scheffler and his debates with Louis Dumont.
pects, it is clear that category is by no means irrelevant in ordinary discourse in the West. Further, it can be argued that the differential uses of category and genealogy are at root not related to different societies or types of society but to different sorts of situation that are likely to arise everywhere, and as a consequence, to different modes of acquiring and using knowledge. A qualification is that unlike category, genealogy may have competitors in the situation it is most likely to be used in. Category, however, is not one of them, for it belongs in a different sphere of discourse, one, moreover, which it occupies alone. In fact, it can be considered one of the few truly human universals, like the possession of language, through which it achieves expression.

Category and Alliance Theory

The priority of category over genealogy has frequently been advocated before, but usually in relation to a specific, non-Western body of ethnography (e.g. Leach 1958; Needham 1962; McDougal 1964; Beattie 1964: 101; Vatuk 1969: 95-96). Some criticism of Western genealogical thought has restricted itself to its limitations in respect of analysing the "moral", "tactical" or "affective" uses of kinship terms (e.g. Bloch 1971; Kemp 1983). More general statements in favour of category as a universal have usually taken the form of a casual assertion (e.g. Leach 1961: 51; Korn 1973: 3) or a tentative suggestion that some revision may be needed (e.g. Maybury-Lewis 1965: 212). But above all, the crucial arguments have been obscured because of the intimate association of the notion of category with the supporters of alliance theory in their debates with descent theorists in the 1950s and after. Alliance theorists depended on this notion in disproving their detractors' frequent assertions that "cross-cousin marriage" was impossible for demographic reasons and that in some cases where it was supposed to take place, the genealogical cross cousin was rarely if ever married.

Out of this developed the further argument that if this were the case, then kinship terminology could not have anything to do with affinal alliance systems (or prescriptive alliance; e.g. Scheffler 1972). Alliance theorists replied that this was inevitable if one took a narrow genealogical view of the matter and that such systems could not work if they were based on a purely genealogical specification (Needham 1958: 80-3, 1960b: 105). The genealogically closest cross cousins were actually just part of a wide category of kin, any of whom would normally suit the marriage prescription. The main exception to this was that although the prescriptions were stipulated in terms of category in the first instance, genealogy could be used to fine-tune them (Needham 1960a: 284, 1966: 142-3), ruling out some kin types covered by the category (e.g. Needham 1962) or expressing a preference for one kin type within it (e.g. Dumont 1957; Good 1981). This was a special use of a general ability to qualify any kin term genealogically if required (Needham 1968: 317, after Van
Suchtelen). This led to counter-charges that despite themselves, alliance theorists still depended on genealogical methods in conducting their analyses (e.g. Tyler 1969: 77; Schneider 1972: 54-5; Ganzer 1979: 138ff.). Since prescriptive alliance was invariably associated with non-Western societies, it was in relation to them that the notion of category was especially stressed. Indeed, there was a certain feeling that category was especially suitable for societies which recognized all their members as kin and tried to incorporate even complete strangers into their kin networks, societies which again tended to be non-European, even if they did not have cross-cousin marriage (e.g. north India; Vatuk 1969).

**Address and Reference**

Outside this restricted sphere of controversy, the case for category has still not been made sufficiently, despite decades of controversy. More particularly, there is no adequate theoretical account of exactly how category articulates with genealogy and with other ways of placing relatives in categories. One problem has been the habitual distinction of address terminologies from reference terminologies, the latter usually being regarded as providing the “true” definitions and therefore generally being preferred as the basis for typological analysis, whereas the address terminology is often seen as being more suitable if the interest is in how terms are actually used. This reification of the reference terminology for purposes of analysis should not lead us to neglect the fact that kin terms are used in face-to-face interaction in reference as well as in address, especially where the reference is to a third person. This means that both, not merely the address terminology, are subject to a degree of contextualization and calculation as to which terms are actually chosen. Certainly this may apply more to address than to reference terminologies. The address terminology ordinarily groups a larger number of kin types under a smaller number of terms. It also has to compete with other forms of address, such as names and titles. But direct address is not the only conversational use of kin terms. When it comes to deciding which kin categories particular individuals should be placed in, or how exactly a particular alter is related to ego, the mode is one of reference even in conversation.

Such usages are frequently the subject of anthropological enquiry in themselves, and they have also been incorporated into typological analyses of terminologies on occasion, in an effort to arrive at a more exact meaning for individ-

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1. In at any rate one place, Needham (1964: 310-311) seems to regard the inclusiveness of kin classifications as a feature of prescriptive alliance only, which societies without prescriptive alliance lack. North India is only one of many countervailing examples.

2. What would normally be considered the address terminology may also crop up in reference usage. For example, someone the reference terminology would class as a cousin might be referred to in conversation with a third party as a brother, indicating a more suitable degree of closeness (e.g. Poland, Parkin 1995).
dual terms. This frequently means taking metaphorical usages into account, rather than just concentrating on the range of kin types each term covers. However, it is the commoner analyses of what might be called the "true" classification that have influenced mainstream anthropological theory the most. Here is one location of debates not only about descent theory and alliance theory, but also about the social and historical significance of kinship terminologies in general. In all these cases, the terminology will normally have been collected through specific and detailed questioning of informants with that purpose in mind. Observing behaviour and listening to conversations may be used for checking purposes, but these techniques are really territory for those who are interested in the ways terms are actually used in day-to-day interaction. There is sometimes a suggestion that anthropology has so far lost its way that it should follow only this path from now on (e.g. Zeitlyn 1993). Certainly an over-concentration on the former approach may have obscured the distinctions between genealogy and category, thus wrongly helping to raise the former to the same analytical level as the latter. In the present context, however, it is clear that formal analysis and some mode of examining kin-term use are both required. A clear view of the true classification (the realm of category) is as essential as an idea of how particular individuals are fitted into it (the realm of genealogy and its analogues). The latter is quite different from either ordinary address usage or the frequent metaphorical use of kin terms: it is reference usage as conversational product.

**Genealogy, Category and Modes of Analysis**

Support for category or genealogy depends to a large extent on the analytical approach chosen in the examination of kinship terminologies. In broad terms, it is possible to identify three such approaches. One of these can be considered mainstream, while the others take matters in specific but opposite directions away from it.

At one end of the spectrum, there are various sorts of formal analysis. These range from purely mathematical approaches to the componential and formal semantic analyses associated with Goodenough on the one hand and Lounsbury and Scheffler on the other. Componential and semantic analyses both originated in linguistics, and neither is in fact restricted to kinship (e.g. Goodenough’s 1965 componential analysis of roles on Truk). The main distinction between these two approaches is that in the former, the analysis generally incorporates consideration of something akin to Kroeber’s (1909) principles (age, sex, generation etc.), while the latter puts the basic data through various rewrite rules (expansion, reduction or equivalence rules), with the aim

3. In view of the discussion of some of Louis Dumont’s work later on, it should be pointed out that the word “level” in this paper is to be understood as normative and not to refer to his notion of “ideological level” in connection with his model of encompassment and hierarchical opposition.
of identifying one supposedly core kin type. Mathematical approaches are more varied, and it is not proposed to discuss them here. Computer-generated modelling, despite its obvious use in such methods, also has to be kept distinct, not least because some more recent modellers have explicitly moved away from a strictly genealogical view of kinship terminology in favour of the notion of categories (e.g. Read & Behrens 1992).

The basic characteristic of both componential and semantic analyses is their concentration on the elements to the neglect of the system as a whole, in contrast to the structuralist or holistic tradition (cf. Dumont 1983: 34, contra Scheffler). Indeed, very frequently they never even reach the whole, analysing not kinship terminologies as such but the actual terms, merely giving a statement of the meaning of each term in its elemental form: little or no account is given of the ways in which the terms themselves are related. This hostility to the structuralist approach also leads to indifference to the possibility of correlating certain terminological types with systems of spouse exchange: for example, Scheffler (1972: 127-128) explicitly refuses to see prescriptive terminologies (i.e. those with extensive cognate-affine equations) as a separate class. And although genealogical formulae are often replaced in such work by algebraic formulae, rewrite rules and so on, the basic idea remains that of reducing kin terms and the categories they label to their basic elements.

These methods thus depend on the same mode of thought as genealogical reckoning. Indeed, the Scheffler-Lounsbury approach argues precisely that kin categories are regularly seen as a set of genealogical specifications, whatever indigenous glosses might be super-added to them. The prioritization of one genealogical specification, by definition always the closest, over the others in relation to any particular category leads to these others being seen as "extensions". The source of this can be traced ultimately to Malinowski, who gave an absolute priority to the nuclear family as a social group, because he saw it as the basic and universal unit of all human society. One corollary of this view for Malinowski was that some examples of kin terms covering a number of different kin types were really sets of homonyms, a view that soon ceased to be taken seriously. The other main corollary has survived better. This is that ego learns to recognize kin types outside the family by extending relationships outwards, as a mental operation, from the close circle of kin within the family. Lounsbury (1964: 243-244) in particular justifies the genealogical approach partly on these grounds.

However true and interesting this argument might be in itself, it tells us nothing about how adults define, much less use (for there is a difference), kin categories in their own society (cf. Goody 1959). In whatever way the composition of a category, i.e. the meaning of the term that labels it, is learnt, for the learner it becomes thereafter just one more item in the vocabulary of the language: its use, like that of any other word, is occasioned nearly automatically by the appropriate stimulus, without the need for much if any reflection. The learning process itself can hardly begin until there exists a classifi-
cation to learn, and this will be under the control of those who have already learnt it. It is scarcely likely that the ways in which children learn have a bearing on the genesis of pre-existing classifications. The freer associations a child makes when compared with those of adults are typically directed progressively, by adults, towards the conventions of the society the child is growing up in, meaning that learning entails a considerable degree of forgetting. At root, the learning process is a red herring in the present context, its sole importance having been that it has directly encouraged the persistence of a one-sided view of the way kin terms are used.

The position of the nuclear family is another false lead. There is no doubt that the kin types linked to ego by only one genealogical step are also those that make up the nuclear family. However, not all terminologies have terms isolating these kin types from, say, their same-sex siblings and other equivalents (for example, where the equations F = FB or M = MZ occur). In the context of terminologies, therefore, this makes irrelevant both the objection that the nuclear family is not universal, and the counter-argument that it is. Whatever the composition of society in terms of families and other groups, ego is always going to have some kin types related by just one genealogical step. The question is whether or not these are combined in the actual terminology with other kin types that are not. Both arguments, but especially the Malinowskian one, are ultimately rendered superfluous by the consideration that a classification is not a social group, nor are there any groups it directly reflects the composition of (cf. Dumont 1962: 92). Terminology and social morphology are unlikely to contradict one another, but that is not to say that they have to correspond (cf. Good 1981).

At the opposite end of the spectrum is what I will call the “translations-in-words” approach, exemplified by some of Leach’s work. One example is his article on the Jinghpaw terminology (1961, chap. 2). Malinowski’s lingering influence is still detectable here in that Leach gives the terms for near kin a certain priority, but he goes on to use them as the basis for defining the others by treating them as one side in a reciprocal relationship. This stresses the relationships, not the fixed points, in the structure, and it avoids using any sort of genealogical specification to denote terms. It therefore remains noticeably closer to the ethnographic context than the earlier approach. Leach’s (1958) reanalysis of Malinowski’s Trobriand material is a more sure-footed example of the same tendency, showing, using Malinowski’s own material, that kinship terms are “category words”, not genealogical specifications extended from a core position within the nuclear family. As a result, Leach explicitly adopts a translation-in-words approach to the designation of kin terms as an alternative to Malinowski’s method (see especially ibid.: 123, 131-132 and fig. 2, 140). Thus the term tama, for example, is not reduced to any sort of genealogical formula but translated as “a domiciled male of my father’s sub-clan hamlet”, not, as with Malinowski (and Lounsbury 1965: 150), as “father”. The same technique is employed, rather more intermittently, in his paper on “The Language
of Kachin Kinship (Leach 1967). In this shift, Leach has been followed at various times by Bloch (1971), Southwold (1971), and occasionally Hicks (e.g. 1983: 77), and was preceded by Hocart (1937) and Beattie (1957, 1958; it seems to be especially common among Africanists, at least of the latter’s generation). It is perhaps an attitude rather than an approach, too much systemization being against the spirit of the thing, and certainly each ethnographer is free to use his own descriptive means. But it definitely exists as a significant tendency. What characterizes it is a belief that even basic genealogical formulae distort the indigenous view of the classification. It should therefore not be confused with Goodenough’s version of componential analysis, for although some of the translations are set in a similar form of words, Goodenough’s essentialist abstractionism is missing.

The mainstream brings together a number of approaches which differ greatly in detail, but nonetheless certain common and very simple principles can be discerned. Analyses are normally made singly, so that the ethnographic context is not lost, but free use is made of genealogical formulae (there are a number of different systems), so that comparison with the kinship systems of other societies is made possible. This is not to deny the ultimate priority of category over genealogy: it is simply a standard formula facilitating comparison. The raw material is written up in such a way that one can go in either of two directions, towards a deeper understanding of the society concerned (assuming this has not been acquired already), or towards a global, regional or typological setting involving other systems of like or unlike kind. However, one normally arrives at a view of the terminology as a whole system, something the formalists neglect.

This, essentially, is the tradition of Morgan, who began with the Iroquois and other North American groups before extending his comparisons to south India and elsewhere. Much followed, it remains fruitful because it is convenient and flexible, and one is not over-burdened with a programme that is concerned to demonstrate and justify either a method or a lack of method. It is humanistic, not either scientistic or relativistic. Above all, one can incorporate a historical dimension if one wishes. This is not so easy with the other two methods, which, despite their radical differences, are similar in being (in practice, at least) synchronic in application.

For present purposes, however, what needs stressing is the difference in attitude of these two more extreme approaches towards the notion of genealogy. For the formalists, genealogy is the very basis of kinship, including the way kin are classified. For the non-formalists, its relevance is purely contingent, its significance having to be established in each case. For them, in any case, it is not ordinarily the way one translates kin terms. The mainstream, by contrast, can only be described as ambivalent. This partly reflects its size and the variety of approaches that it incorporates. Many within it are sympathetic to Leach’s view that kin terms are category words but still use genealogical formulae to translate them. As already noted, their arguments
concerning the difference between category and genealogy tend to reduce it to
differences in social type and to ignore the claims of different sorts of social sit-
tuation. Their arguments should really be generalized to the whole of human-
ity if the difference is to be put into its proper perspective.

An Operational View of Genealogy and Category

First, we need to be clear just what we mean by these two terms before
going on to decide how they relate to one another. It is perhaps easiest to start
with category. Though used in a number of different ways (cf. Barnes 1978:
475), it is most profitably treated as the unit of definition in an indigenous kin-
ship terminology, i.e. as the semantic content of a particular indigenous kin
term, which is in principle translatable into genealogical terms by the analyst.
It may cover more than one genealogical position: for example, a term isolating
FB would cover as many brothers as ego’s father had. Perhaps more impor-
tant analytically, it may cover more than one kin type: for instance, English
“uncle” covers a category unifying FB with MB, which, although at equal genea-
logical distances from ego, are related to him through different genealogical
paths. Alternatively, so-called “classificatory” categories bring together kin at
differing distances from ego but related to him similarly in that the category
consistently exploits same-sex sibling links (e.g. FB = FFBS = FFFBSS).
A third possibility is the linking of certain classificatory and/or non-classif-
icatory kin types in prescriptive equations, where potentially the same indivi-
dual might stand in more than one relationship to ego (e.g. MB, FZH, EF). In
all these cases, it is open to the analyst to use genealogy to determine the com-
position of indigenous kin categories in order to be able to compare them cross-
culturally, i.e. in order to determine which kin types the category specifies.
This is the normal method of what I have called above mainstream forms of
analysis. Operationally, componential and semantic analyses are really no
different in this respect: they simply use different forms of notation. It is in their
underlying assumptions and their neglect of the whole system that they differ
radically.

Categories which consist of the kin types which are closest to ego, i.e. those
kin types linked to ego by just one genealogical step, may seem to be an excep-
tion to the above. Certainly, this means that it is not really possible to tell
whether category or genealogy is operative in these cases. However, this in
its turn means that it is not relevant either: they are simply the limit case.

Fox (1971: 220) has neatly summed up the nature of genealogy: “genealogy
serves as a crucial native means of locating individuals within categories” (also
Goodenough 1951: 98, 1956: 210, on Trukese). Its relevance in this respect
cannot be disputed, but it is not the only such method. The ethnographic liter-
ature is full of discussions of how, when two people meet for the first time, they
set about determining their relationship to one another (e.g. Vatuk 1969: 96).
Initial options include their respective membership of particular descent groups, their villages or totems, followed by some assessment of the generation or relative age of each ego. It is in such methods of thought, not in category itself, that the true analogues in other societies to the genealogy of our own are to be found. The distinction is really between category as a semantic unit in language on the one hand, and various methods of establishing, when desired or necessary, the more exact nature of a relationship on the other. It is also between definition and calculation, between the automatic realization of meaning through having learnt the semantic content of a category as a part of normal socialization and language learning, and the need occasionally to trace links stepwise or to calculate the exact nature of relationships in some other way.

This is primarily how genealogy is used among ourselves in the typical Western society. Even here, its use is restricted to those circumstances when we want to determine more accurately than category can, exactly how a certain individual is related to ourselves or to someone else. The category “cousin” is a semantic unit in English, and like all other such units, its meaning is learnt as part of one’s general language acquisition. However, though its use and meaning as such are unproblematic, it cannot tell one exactly how a particular cousin is related. Although the circumstances in which this is important are comparatively rare, it is here that genealogy comes into its own, for unlike category it can determine whether (for example) a cousin is related to one through one’s mother rather than through one’s father, or that he or she is a second, not a first or third cousin, and of the same generation, not once removed, etc. In the same way, genealogical considerations enter the determination that (for instance) a certain cousin is more closely related than another. However, again this does not affect the status of “cousin” as a linguistically determined category, which, within the range specified by the society, is applicable regardless of genealogical distance from ego.

Using genealogy means that the internal composition of categories is generally being determined by using terms for closer kin than that of the basic category. A person belonging to the English category of cousin may be further specified genealogically as, for instance, a father’s brother’s son: yet father, brother and son are themselves all independent categories in the English terminology (i.e. not merely analytically). This process need not entail the exclusive use of primary kin types: for example, a phrase like “my uncle’s son” may be sufficient where ego is known to have only one uncle (cf. Allen 1989: 175-176). But in either case, cousin is the relevant category in English, a category which is broken down in analysis, whoever carries this out—anthropologist, or ordinary individual wishing to explain this particular relationship for some particular purpose—and then built up again as a chain of genealogical links. Conversely, ego might establish the nature of his or her relationship to another person by building up a series of steps through particular third parties with whom both ego and alter can establish relationships (cf. Good 1981: 113).
In neither case is the method anything more than an exceptional and expedient event.

Kin terms are therefore also used in this further determination, not, however, to denote the basic category, but in combinations so as to arrive at the exact relationship (e.g. FB as against MB). Essentially, this “relative product analysis” is available to any ego. It does not involve extensionism: on the contrary, there is contraction, from the category itself to one of the kin types into which it can be broken down. Category links ego directly to alter via kin term, genealogy and its analogues only indirectly. It is true that certain terminologies exist that seem to have nothing else for remoter kin types than combinations of terms for primary kin, for example, in Scandinavia or north-east Africa (e.g. Norwegian morbror MB; Arabic bint ‘amm D of FB). These too, however, are a limit case. For them, in effect, the remoter categories are coordinate with each kin type, which is already defined analytically. Moreover, the absence of the usual terminological equations rules out extension of meanings here.

The case of a classificatory kin term uniting father and FB, etc., is somewhat different. Here, there will normally be some way of identifying the real father from the other kin types the term unites with him. But this too involves contraction, not extension. Contraction applies equally when it is the more remote kin type that needs specifying (cf. Allen 1989: 176). Levinson (1977: 457-458) gives a Tamil example, the term makan son, ssGS, EssGS. When remoter kin types than one’s real son are intended, the term is qualified as makan morai “in the relation of a son”. Levinson himself supposes that this is an example of extending meanings, in that makan as “son” is the essential meaning of the category, remoter kin types attracting the marked form. But as he himself says, “informants emphasized that either usage was correct” (ibid.: 457, emphasis removed): the marked form simply removed ambiguity.

One would like to know whether there is also a marked form for “own son”, on the analogy of Tamil taymamaa “actual MB”, as distinct from mamaa “MB”, FZH, EF (Dumont 1957). Dumont also records another marked term, maminar, meaning “actual EF” as distinct from the consanguineal specifications of the main term (-yar being a Tamil affinal marker). What is at issue in the comparison of these four terms is not the extension of meaning but its finer discrimination through subsidiary markers. In both cases, particular kin types within a category labelled with a kin term and containing several kin types are identified by marking. In one case, the marking identifies the remoter kin types covered by the category or, in Schefflerian terms, the “extensions” (ssGS, etc.), but not the core specification. In the other, it identifies variously the closest consanguineal kin type (MB) and the affinal specification (EF). Despite the high hopes Scheffler places in the example of maama/taymaamaa in his battles with Dumont (see Scheffler 1984: 563-564), it directly contradicts the doctrine of extension.

The fact that genealogy and its analogues must sometimes be resorted to
when one needs to determine a relationship more exactly than category is able
to do means that category does have practical limits. However, this does not
mean, as is sometimes suggested, that there is no such thing as category or that
it is irrelevant. In any case, these limits are only reached in relatively rare cir-
cumstances, and there is no guarantee even then that genealogy will be the chosen
means of overcoming them. More importantly, the two contexts are not on
the same level, and there is therefore no logical hierarchy between them
such that either can be based on, or reduced to, the other.

In that genealogy is often claimed to be primarily a Western preoccupation,
its importance now seems even more restricted than was formerly thought. Given that category and genealogy can be seen to belong not to dif-
ferent sorts of society but to different contexts even in the typical Western
society, there is perhaps less objection to admitting that the parallel may be
found elsewhere too. Those who are unhappy with the hard and fast distinc-
tion between category and genealogy have often claimed as much. The use of
genealogy often occurs in response to questioning by the Western anthropol-
ologist, from which the suspicion sometimes arises that his or her way of thinking
is influencing the situation, or that a genealogical way of thinking that is essen-
tially Western has somehow been introduced to the society through previous
contacts (e.g. from Christian missions). These suspicions hardly seem neces-
sary. Even Good, one of the chief adherents of category over genealogy (as
can be seen from his defence of Dumont against Scheffler, Good 1985), men-
tions that his informants sometimes had to work out relationships in stepwise
fashion, linking certain intermediate categories they were already aware of in
order to work out their relationships to unknown alters (Good 1991: 57). It is
not entirely clear how justified it would be to call this genealogical reckoning
as we know it in the West, and one does not need to decide the matter in these
terms. What is significant is that in such situations, category is insufficient to
determine a particular relationship exactly, and a method of stepwise calcula-
tion is temporarily resorted to instead. Whether the calculation is based on
genealogy or on some other criterion, such as membership of alliance or other
groups, residence, totemic affiliation, relative, age, etc., is certainly ethnograph-
ically significant, but also ethnographically contingent.

**Genealogy and Extensionism in the Work of Harold Scheffler**

The apparent inability of many anthropologists to recognize this dichotomy
for what it is can be related to their particular definitions of both genealogy and
category. A prime example here is the work of Harold Scheffler. In one
paper describing his general approach, his idea of genealogy emerges from his
definition of a kin term (Scheffler 1972: 113): “A kin term is employed to
designate a category of kinsmen; a kinsman is an individual to whom one (Ego)
is related by genealogical connection; and genealogical connections are those
culturally posited relations among individuals which are assumed to be established by processes of conception and birth and which are held to be inalienable and congenital.” In this passage, the term “genealogy”, though suggesting the idea of a grid, also comes very close to the meaning normally given to “consanguinity”, i.e. kin relations as opposed to marriage relations. Scheffler accepts the cultural dimension in the definition of these relationships, so he cannot be accused of any biological reductionism. But a bias is immediately apparent in the lack of recognition given to any relationship of marriage. No doubt this accords with the normal meaning of “kin” in English, but it is not helpful when it comes to analysing classifications in other parts of the world. Scheffler’s approach is more than a quibble over what “kinship” means, however: it seriously distorts his whole approach.

The notion of category in Scheffler’s work is also problematic. His form of words in the passage quoted above (1972: 113) leaves the impression that he regards each kin term as designating a single indigenous category, which if true would correspond with my definition of it. However, towards the end of this same paper we read: “kinship terms often label more than one category each”. Here, kin terms are being considered as often though not invariably polysemous—the more familiar Schefflerian doctrine. At one place (ibid.: 133, 3), this is explicitly linked with the derivation of the various meanings a single term may have and therefore implicitly with the principle of extension.

What Scheffler really seems to mean by category, then, is something equivalent to what I have defined above as a kin type: for example, in the English terminology, “father’s brother” is for him a category, while “uncle” is not. In other words, in his approach a category is always analytical, never indigenous, or rather, for him the two coincide, because kin types are defined genealogically, and genealogy, however defined indigenously, is primary. This accords with the primacy given to the elements of the classification rather than to the classification as a whole. But it also involves a further confusion, in that it implicitly conflates kin type and genealogy. This distinction can again be underlined with reference to the English category and kin term “uncle”, divisible into different kin types, i.e. FB and MB, which are, it is evident, denotable by genealogical formulae. This does not, however, make them positions on a genealogy: ego may well have two or more FBs and no MB, or vice versa, or more of one than of the other, or none of either. Making this distinction is significant, because without it there is a further incentive to see everything in genealogical terms. The analysis into kin types is not wrong as an analytical procedure: indeed, as I have already pointed out, it has ethnographic authority in particular circumstances, as well as convenience for the academic. But while positions on a genealogy have reality, kin types are abstractions.

In short, we must distinguish four concepts: a) the terminology, i.e. the classification as a whole; b) the categories, i.e. the semantic units into which the classification is divided; c) the abstract kin types into which some or all of
these categories can be analysed; and d) actual positions on a genealogical grid. Scheffler in effect conflates b), c) and d), then singles out one kin type as basic, on which all others to which the kin term relates (i.e. all others in the category as I have defined it) are predicated. He ignores a), the classification as a whole, entirely. Certainly this choice is not arbitrary, in that the core kin type is always that which is closest to ego (in so far as it is possible to make such a preference). However, not only does this involve eliding three separate concepts, it also means attaching the indigenous kin term to the wrong one, c), which may itself represent only one of many kin types covered by the same term, the rest being ignored. Kin terms are connected with b) alone. Further, this is the only level of distinction within a), the classification proper: pace Dumont, there are no sub-classes. The categories identified by kin term can only be analysed further into kin types, which, whether used indigenously or academically, are abstractions from the classification and are in no way coordinate with it.

Thus Scheffler’s definition of category differs from the view that it forms a unit of meaning often though not invariably analysable through genealogical reckoning or some other form of calculation. Scheffler’s approach leaves no room for a possible use of kin terms, even in reference, that is different from genealogical reckoning: that is, he dismisses thinking in true categories. In effect, this is to assume that whenever ego specifies a relationship in either thought or conversation, he or she invariably calculates all the genealogical links involved. This would be a pretty tedious procedure if followed consistently, and in any case it would come up against the cognitive difficulties informants are sometimes reported as having in stringing together genealogical chains consisting of even three elements (Shapiro 1982: 274; cf. Allen 1989: 180). It also implies that the kin term itself surfaces in speech but not in thought. This is not how either language or classification actually work in real societies. Human classificatory ability would be useless if it did not order experience into manageable categories, which are always going to be smaller in number than the range of possible perceptions. And while these categories are not unanalysable and have to be learned, once they are learned they become the product of automatic processes of thought and speech in ordinary adult discourse. Scheffler’s whole approach fails to recognize how a classification works, because he sees sub-classes formed of kin types where there are really only classes (i.e. the categories), and forgets that there is a difference between perception and conception. Scheffler argues as if only perception, in this context the recognition of genealogical links, existed. In effect, this replaces the concept of one’s kin universe as a set of culturally determined categories, even though this is formally acknowledged to exist.

Scheffler’s attitude to category is especially evident from this passage in a much later paper (1984: 653, n. 2): “By using the expression category to talk about expressions or words, rather than about their meanings, anthropologists often fall into the trap of assuming that there is a category which embraces all
the diverse uses of a word.” Here, Scheffler is opposing Dumont’s attempt to see the English kin terms *father, grandfather, father-in-law* and *step-father* as one category in the English terminology, whose separate parts are only distinguished secondarily through affixes. Most native speakers of English would, of course, see the first three as entirely separate categories and would normally only subsume the fourth under *father* as a concession. As Scheffler says, “there is no FATHER class which includes these four classes as subclasses” (ibid.: 561). However, he then goes on to turn the whole thing round and argue that the four ideas are linked, but only as extensions of *father* as the basic term. Similarly, in an earlier paper, Scheffler suggests that all grandkin in the English terminology are extensions, not laterally this time, but lineally, up or down the generations, and he adds twice (1972: 117, 122): “the extensions are obligatorily marked by the prefix ‘grand-’”. The justification for this (ibid.: 131, n. 17) is the morphological form of the terms, not informants’ statements: he admits that most native speakers would not immediately see things that way and even reports having had to struggle with his own feeling that it is counter-intuitive. The only justification in the end is a usage Lounsbury has brought to his attention, which upon examination is clearly metaphorical, despite Scheffler having put such distractions aside.

The question of polysemy, often introduced by Scheffler, is thus another red herring. A kin term like “father” is generally recognized to be polysemous because of the metaphorical uses it has in addition to its primary use as “male parent” (e.g. father of the nation; father as priest; also fathers as ancestors—who might well include grandfathers). Here certainly is extensionism of a sort, but from kin term to metaphor. Although Schneider (e.g. 1972), in his culturalist, symbolic approach, specifically advocates taking these further uses into account, Scheffler excludes them, on the perfectly acceptable grounds that they are not essential to the analysis of a terminology in the strict sense. It is the extensionism peculiar to him and his allies, which is different from Schneider’s, that presents the problem. In effect, Scheffler identifies a primary meaning within the primary meaning proper, i.e. the meaning which is not metaphorical. Although accepting the idea of a kin classification as a privileged semantic domain (meaning free from metaphorical uses), he regards further discriminations as being on the same level of both discourse and analysis, not on a different level entirely.

**Scheffler and Dumont**

Scheffler calls his extensionism polysemy by sense generalization and contrasts it with polysemy by sense specialization. The difference consists in whether “the broadest sense is derivable logically from the narrowest or most specific” (Scheffler 1985: 547) or vice versa. In his debates with Dumont in particular, Scheffler has charged his adversary with exploiting the former while
ignoring the latter in his discussion of Tamil terms. Good has already questioned the relevance of the distinction as such for synchronic kinship analyses (Good 1985: 546). One can go further and argue that neither notion of polysemy is in itself of much relevance in the present context. A kin category cannot be broken down into its further units of meaning, i.e. its component kin types, and still remain on the same epistemological level. Once the division into these units is effected, the level changes, as can be seen from the circumstances in which each is used and the different thought processes that use of each involves. We may therefore question whether categories, and the kin terms by which they are marked, are strictly speaking polysemous. Really there are no sub-classes or sub-categories, only categories, each marked by kin term and sometimes divisible into different kin types, which may be marked lexically or be analysable through combinations of terms for primary kin. Although the division frequently takes place, it does so on a completely different level of discourse. As for the categories themselves, they can be linked to form a system but are basically autonomous from one other.

The problem comes in cases where some terms are clearly lexically dependent on others. It can only be a matter of judgement sometimes, especially with languages without a written history (of which, of course, Tamil is not one), whether the link is etymological (thus indicating terminological change) or a matter of lexical marking (in which case subsidiary meaning becomes a possibility). The two Tamil examples given earlier would seem to be of the latter type, despite their differences in respect of which kin types, near or far, are being marked. But in neither case is an extension of meaning involved, because both marked meanings are also subsumed under the main term. For Dumont, for example, maama, taymaama and maminar are basically the same category, the latter two having subsidiary markers for narrower meanings. For Scheffler, the specification MB is basic, even though it is actually marked, while the other specifications are extensions. Here, in Scheffler’s terms, we have an example of polysemy by sense specialization (from maama as male gen. + 1 affine to maama as MB, through addition of the particle tay-). In fact, however, taymaama is clearly a special term for mother’s own brother and is redundant to maama, since both denote MB but the latter is the more inclusive term.

If, by contrast, the link appears to be etymological, then we are almost certainly dealing with two different terms. For example, Anglo-saxon faedera FB may well be a derivation historically of feader F, but in Anglo-Saxon they were already different terms, as can be seen from their morphology and from their belonging to different grammatical declensions (Bosworth 1898: 262-263). This in itself rules out any extension of meaning being involved in the actual Anglo-Saxon terminology. What it indicates is that an earlier equation between the two has been broken (probably well before Anglo-Saxon was a separate language; cf. Parkin 1993: 313-314).

Scheffler (1984) spends a great deal of time discussing the Tamil term
appa, which he says Dumont glosses as F, the marked forms ciNNappa FeB and periyappa FyB being subsidiary classes. For Scheffler, these actually mark extensions of meaning from F to FeB and FyB respectively (see Dumont 1983: 33; Scheffler 1984: 563-564). This, for Scheffler, is an example of polysemy by sense generalization (from appa as F to appa a FB via markers). However, his discussion of these terms is severely undermined by his misreading of Dumont’s original ethnography. Here is how Dumont (1957: 276) defines appa and the other forms associated with it: “appa, aiya père, frère du père, mari de sœur de la mère, etc. Le père, plutôt appa (vocatif) et aussi tagappaN (référence) est distingué des autres parents, toujours précédés d’un adjectif indiquant l’âge relatif, l’aîné étant periyaiya (pour periya-aiya), plutôt que periyappa ‘père grand, aîné’, le cadet çiNNaiya, çiNNeya (pour çiNNa-aiya) ‘père petit, cadet’, ou nallaiya ‘père bon’.”

Scheffler interprets this paradigm as APPA F, FB, MZH; appa F; ciNNappa FeB, etc.; periyappa FyB, etc. In fact, a careful reading of Dumont reveals APPA, AIYA F, FB, MZH, etc.; tagappaN F; periaiya FeB, MeZH (“rather than periyappa”, NB, though Hocart (1987 [1928]) gives this too for Sri Lankan Tamil); çiNNeya (from çiNNa-aiya) FyB, MyZH. It is a minor if insignificant indication of Scheffler’s carelessnes that he has reversed the relative-age designations of ciNNa- and peri-4. More importantly, we can see from Dumont’s paradigm that appa on its own does not mean “father” (except in address), the reference term being tagappaN. This presents us with a choice: either all three marked terms are subsidiary to the basic category appa (Scheffler’s APPA), or all four are basic categories, autonomous from one another. Taking the first view would be consonant with the idea that categories need to be broken down into finer distinctions on occasion, even though those occasions occur on a different level of discourse than that pertaining to the categories. If this is so, then this affixation is only one of the possible ways in which the kin types of a category are specified among Tamil speakers. We know this from Dumont’s own declaration that among his informants, “the analytical description of a particular relationship [...] is distinguished from the ascription of a broad categorical status... “ (1983: 33, where the category appa is clearly being used as an example; also 1957: 273, where the general point is made; and ibid.: 279, on the discrimination of cross cousins out of the wider category to which they belong). Less likely on balance is the view that all four classes are of equal status, since it is possible to group some of them under others. Ultimately, however—and this is the crucial point—the fact that tagappaN is derived from one global term for “father”, while the terms for FeB or FyB are derived from the other, actually sabotages both hypotheses. At the very least, this indicates some divergence, and therefore a degree of independence for the collateral specifications. Thus there is no way in

which any one of the sub-classes (if that is what they are) can unambiguously be seen as basic to all the others.

In one sense, the arguments between Dumont and Scheffler over whether or not, for example, Tamil *taay-maama* MB is or is not part of the same category as *maama* MB, EF, etc., are irrelevant in the present context, since the data involved cannot affect the more general argument over the nature of a kinship terminology. Dumont’s notion of a terminology as a set of categories, some of which contain more than one kin type, would not be adversely affected by accepting *ciNNeya* and *periaiya* as separate terms and therefore as denoting separate categories from each other and from *appa F*, nor by accepting *tayma-maa* as separate from *maama*, objectionable although this would be in principle. The most it could possibly do is to lead us see the Tamil terminology itself as typologically different from what had previously been thought. As far as Scheffler is concerned, on the other hand, bringing the phenomenon of marking into the discussion cannot save a theory which is based on false premises to begin with.

The same charge of irrelevance can be laid against Scheffler’s claim that Dumont’s problem lies fundamentally in the fact that he is a structuralist and that like all structuralists he is wedded to an approach that starts from the whole, not from the elements: in other words, where Dumont breaks down a category, Scheffler builds it up. For Scheffler, this is because of the fascination of binary opposition for structuralists, which they originally took over from the work of linguists interested in the conjunction of phonemic and semantic contrasts. However important in one particular sort of structuralism, and however much Dumont himself was influenced by it at an early stage of his career, this is a very impoverished description of structuralism in general, since in effect it reduces it to the writings of Lévi-Strauss. In its wider sense, structuralism is not at all dependent on binary opposition but entails the arrangement of elements in a constant relation, such that the structure is maintained despite the transfer of attention from one example to another (a very succinct account is Allen 1990). The structures of myth and their transformations, in which Lévi-Straussian binarism plays a key part, are only one example. Medieval hagiographies also have a structure, in that standard elements stand in a constant relation to one another, despite the difference in the saint’s identity and actual biography. The structure of social classification as interpreted in the work of Dumézil, Granet and Allen provides other examples, which do not even require the number two (three, four and four respectively are important for these authors. Kinship terminologies, especially if of the same basic type (e.g. two- or three-line prescriptive), are also candidates, for they retain one of a number of basic structures regardless of the language in which they are set. Dumont’s own later work, based largely on the notions of encompassment and hierarchical opposition, is another example, actually moving away from the narrowly binary schemes associated with Lévi-Strauss. However, a consideration of these differences is ruled out for Scheffler by his very concen-
tration on elements at the expense of the whole classification. Really, his approach is not concerned with the terminology as such, precisely because he does not see it as a whole classification divided into discrete categories in regular relationships with one another. Analysis starts and ends with the categories themselves (as I have defined them). These are broken down into their elements, which are seen as being on the same level as the categories from which they are taken. The very idea of a classification is rejected in the process of tearing its elements apart.

As Dumont himself (1983: 34) has hinted, the main objection to this view of structuralism is once again its irrelevance: it is holism we should really be talking about. It is the whole classification and its internal relationships that are significant, not binary opposition, let alone polysemy in any shape or form. Although Scheffler (1984: 567-568) indicates his agreement in principle, it is clear that his idea of holism is bound up with the doctrine of reciprocal sets, i.e. that opposing areas of all terminologies must have exactly the same configurations. It has already been pointed out (e.g. Barnes 1978: 475ff.; Good 1978, 1985) that this hardly bears examination as a general principle: real terminologies, including Dumont’s, too often prove recalcitrant to the models on which they are based. Scheffler can only state it by resorting once again to his genealogically based approach, as can be seen in this passage: “There can be no coherent system in which some of the principal terms are subject to extension and yet others which have similar genealogical ranges are not” (Scheffler 1984: 570). Without this, he cannot begin to take advantage of the lack of fit between the Tamil -1 level and its +1 level in attacking Dumont. For the latter, this is an embarrassment principally because it compromises the distinction between consanguines and affines that he had proclaimed to be the basis of the terminological structure: whereas in +1 the distinction is radical, in -1 it is marked solely by affixes. But we have seen that the latter need not mark a dependent semantic relationship, which is how Scheffler sees it. Yet even in terms of his own fondness for reciprocal sets, the theory does not work. For it to do so, there would have to be an equivalent “dependent” relationship in +1: yet not even Scheffler has tried to reduce MB, etc. to F, etc. In fact, the problem is the common one of a mismatch between model and reality which neither Dumont nor Scheffler need lose any sleep over. In Scheffler’s case, however, this is obscured by his insistence in reducing all terminologies to a set of genealogical relationships.

Concluding Remarks

It has been a theme running through this paper that despite the ultimate priority of category, a genealogical way of thinking is useful if not essential in analysis, whether this is carried out by the academic anthropologist on paper or by ordinary people in their heads during ordinary discourse. In both cases, the
ordinary genealogical notation is good enough. All formal semantic analysis does is to convert into another mode that which ordinary notation is perfectly capable of dealing with. More seriously, however, in grounding themselves in a view of genealogy which reduces kin terms to the specifications coordinate with the nuclear family, not only do its adherents neglect both affinal specifications and the notion of a terminology as a semantic whole, the very way in which a terminology is ordinarily used comes to be radically misunderstood. Indeed, thanks to the lack of any proper semantic theory, terminological use is consistently mistaken for what is really only the mode of analysis. It is not a mistake any alliance theorist is likely to make, for the simple reason that the nature of affinal alliance is normally such as to impose a recognition of the importance of category. Not even alliance theorists, however, have gone far enough in this direction. Category as a linguistic principle is not restricted to societies with systems of affinal alliance but appears to be a universal attribute of human thought and speech. Genealogy is a culturally determined mode of analysis which is restricted in both the number of human societies that use it and the circumstances of its use.

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Robert J. Parkin, Généalogie et catégorie : une perspective opérationnelle. — Bien que objet de nombreux débats, la distinction entre généalogie et catégorie n’a pas été posée de façon satisfaisante, en partie en raison de son imbrication dans d’autres prises de position. Cette distinction renvoie non pas à différents types de société, comme il est fréquemment admis, mais à des situations différentes dans chaque société quant à l’usage de la terminologie et à la façon dont sont tracés les liens de parenté. Nous nous appuierons dans cet article sur les travaux de Harold Scheffler et sa controverse avec Louis Dumont.

RESUMEN

Robert J. Parkin, Genealogía y categoría : una perspectiva operacional. — Debido en parte a su imbricación con otros puntos de vista y ser objeto de numerosos debates, la distinción entre genealogía y categoría todavía no se ha planteada de manera satisfactoria. Esta distinción no remite a diferentes tipos de sociedad, como se considera frecuentemente, si no a situaciones diferentes a cada sociedad, en lo que concierne al uso de la terminología y a la manera con que se trazan los lazos de parentesco. En este artículo nos apoyaremos sobre los trabajos de Harold Scheffler y su controversia con Louis Dumont.