



# Academic Journal

UiTM Johor

Volume 10

2011

ISSN 1675-9141

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A Publication of  
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## **The Use of Kinship Terms in Language Learning: A Perspective from Language Instructors**

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*This study investigates the use of kinship terms by ESL learners under the framework of componential analysis. Componential analysis imposes binary aspects to meanings to language with semantic implications. Three respondents from specific cultural backgrounds, namely, Chinese, Indian and Malay were asked to fill in a table and to complete a tree diagram. They were also interviewed and specific questions related to kinship terms to help facilitate the study were developed. The findings showed that (i) the differences in kinship terms could influence acquisition in terms of semantic notions and (ii) cultural diversity influences language use. The implication to classroom learning is the knowledge of interference from the mother tongue when transferred to language teaching. Exploring this area of semantic notions and cultural diversity should also help in bridging the gap of understanding in language use and culture.*

**Keywords:** *kinship terms, componential analysis, culture, language*

### **Introduction**

Nida (1979) refers to kinship as a contrastive component in meaning that is combined in a domain of "blood relations". In other words, kinship terms are family oriented and based on blood relations. The family hierarchy would therefore be observed by means of the different levels of relations between the first person and the other family members. According to Schwimmer (2001), kin terms constitute a culture's kinship vocabulary, a catalog of the names that are assigned to relatives, example: father, mother, uncle, grandson. Different societies of course use different labels to designate their kin; "uncle" is "oncle" in French and "tio" in Spanish. However, there are more important differences in classification, as cultures frequently go beyond mere labeling differences to group relatives into completely different categories. Biology-Online.org, 2007, Farlex, 2007 and Schwimmer, 1998 (cited in Yusoff, R., 2007) explained that kinship terms are words that are used to designate a family member who is connected to other family members by blood, marriage, adoption, or fostering. Huang and Jia (2000) states that through kinship terms, it is possible to

understand a culture’s power structure, particular interpersonal communication patterns, and normative elements of the family system, structure, and functions. In relations to this, this study intends to find out if all kinship systems are the same. We will also look at the differences in kinship terms and its influence on culture. In order to do this we will consider the following research questions: i.) Are there differences in kinship terms in different languages? ii.) If there are differences in kinship terms, how do they affect the language classroom?

**Componential Analysis and Kinship Relations**

Kinship relates to the relations of kins in a systematic order of lineage. The predicate relations in all kinship systems can be described in 4 primitive features:

- [parent]                      [offspring]              [sibling]              [spouse]

Nida (1979: 32-35) argued that when we attempt to determine the componential features of the central meaning *father* (the name of one’s biological progenitor), it can only be done by contrasting this central meaning of *father* with related meanings of other forms which occur in the same semantic domain, in the sense that they share certain aspects of meaning as in kinship terms. *Father* therefore, contrasts with that of *mother* in that *father* is male and *mother* is female. Also, the meaning of *father* contrasts with those of *son* and *grandfather* in referring to different generation, though it shares with *son* and *grandfather* the component of male sex. The same meaning of *father* also contrasts with a related meaning of *uncle*, with which it shares components of male sex and generation. The meaning of *father* can be known only by means of contrast with the meanings of words that share certain components with it. The related meanings of *mother*, *son*, *daughter*, *brother*, *sister*, *uncle*,  *aunt*, and *cousin* all combine with that of *father* to form a domain of primary kinship. The resulting relations constitute a systematic cluster, in which the three sets of components – sex, generation, and linearity – serve to define the basic distinctions. These relations are illustrated in diagram 1 below:

	lineage 1		lineage 2		lineage 3
	M	F	M	F	M or F
+1 generation	father	mother	uncle	aunt	cousin
0 generation	ego		brother	sister	
- 1 generation	son	daughter	nephew	niece	

Diagram 1: Kinship Relationships  
(Adapted from Nida, 1979)

The listing of the features can simply be arranged in the form of a tree diagram or matrix. The structure should cover the following theoretical features for each meaning (terms) as shown in diagram 2 below before we consider our tree:

	a	b	c	d	e	f	g	h	i	j	k
1. male vs. female	m	f	m	f	m	f	m	f	m	f	m/f
2. generation: +1, same, -1	+1	+1	+1	+1	s	s	-1	-1	-1	-1	+1 /s/ -1
3. lineality: direct, +1,+2	d	d	+1	+1	+1	+1	d	d	+1	+1	+2

Keywords: a=father; b=mother; c=uncle; d=aunt; e=brother; f=sister; g=son; h= daughter; i=nephew; j=niece; k=cousin

Diagram 2: Features Related to Kinship Systems  
(Adapted from Nida, 1979)

In English and European languages in general, the difference between male and female is marked only with regard to the person indicated, which is in relations to the importance of gender in kinship systems. There are 3 relevant features:

- i.) the sex (m/f) of the referent
- ii.) the generation of the referent (ascending/descending) which is relative to the individual who is the reference point (EGO)
- iii.) the collateral distance (nearest common ancestor) between the referent and the reference point.

The 11 basic English kinship terms are shown in the tree structure in diagram 3 below:

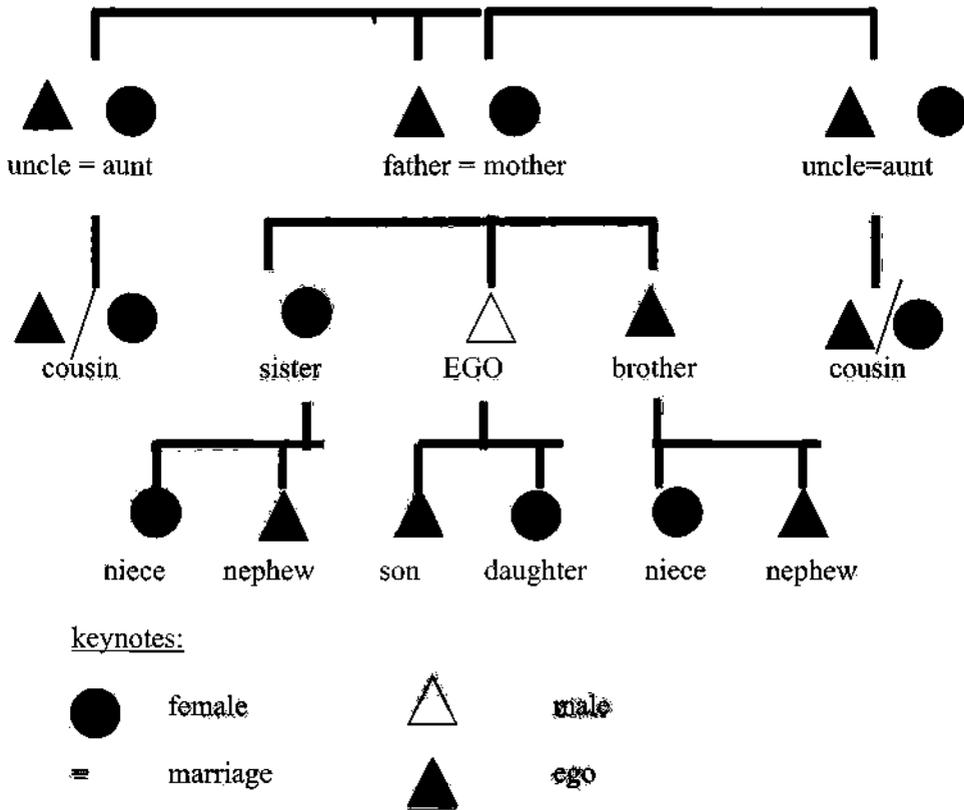


Diagram 3: English Kinship Terms

Gestation, impregnation, domination, and the avoidance of incest, lie at the root of all social organization. Basically, these are the norm of a marriage where women are given the task of child bearing and rearing while men worked, fought the enemies, and made the decisions. In modern living today, more is involved in kinship relations, as most women tend to share the role in decision making and working for the family. Culture tends to evolve with time to adapt to the present conditions. Huang and Jia (2000) stated that an understanding of the unique cultural meanings and communicative functions of kinship system would not only help us better understand Chinese people and other peoples, but also help us improve

intercultural communication. If we look back at the history and traditions of the Chinese, Indian, and Malay community, we can understand Huang and Jia's view. In the oriental home, family values are highly regarded. The family is a close unit where they tend to stay together in one big community or village. This means that a village can be made up of people that are all related to one another by genealogy or lineage.

### Methodology

This study uses the qualitative case study method to provide information on kinship terms of different languages for comparison and contrast for analysis of the semantic domain of words with regards to their relations. In order to do this, 2 instruments were designed. Firstly, the researcher used a blank filling table. This is a table of names to indicate the terms used in the mother tongue in contrast to the English terms cited. By identifying the appropriate terms, the researcher was able to make comparisons of the three different language terms used for kinship. Next, an interview was conducted. The respondents were interviewed on what they felt were the meaning of words used to refer to family members and the implications to their language teaching. The subjects were chosen based on their knowledge of the respective language and culture. They were all female graduate teachers who at the age of 35 to 45 years. They were either bilingual or multilingual.

### Data Analysis

The data collected for the Chinese, Tamil and Malay kinship terms were tabulated into tables. The Chinese kinship terms (Mandarin language) collected can be seen in table 1 below:

RELATION TO EGO (MALE)	CHINESE TERM	RELATION TO EGO (FEMALE)	CHINESE TERM
Paternal grandfather	<i>zu fu</i>	Paternal grandmother	<i>zu mu</i>
Maternal grandfather	<i>wai zu fu</i>	Maternal grandmother	<i>wai zu mu</i>
Father	<i>Fu qin</i>	Mother	<i>Mu qin</i>
Son	<i>Er zi</i>	Daughter	<i>Nu er</i>
Son's son(Grandson)	<i>Sun zi</i>	Son's daughter (Granddaughter)	<i>Sun nu</i>
Daughter's son(Grandson)	<i>Wai sun</i>	Daughter's daughter (Granddaughter)	<i>Wai sun nu</i>
Father's elder brother(Uncle)	<i>Bo fu</i>	Father's elder brother's wife (Aunt)	<i>Bo mu</i>
Father's younger brother (Uncle)	<i>Shu fu</i>	Father's younger brother's wife (Aunt)	<i>Shu mu</i>
Father's sister's husband (Uncle)	<i>Gu fu</i>	Father's sister(Aunt)	<i>Gu mu</i>
Mother's brother (Uncle)	<i>Jiu fu</i>	Mother's brother's wife (Aunt)	<i>Jiu mu</i>
Mother's sister's husband (Uncle)	<i>Yi fu</i>	Mother's sister(Aunt)	<i>Yi mu</i>

Elder brother	<i>Ge ge</i>	Elder brother's wife(sister-in-law)	<i>Sao zi</i>
Younger brother	<i>Di di</i>	Younger brother's wife(sister-in-law)	<i>Di mei</i>
Elder sister's husband (Brother-in-law)	<i>Jie fu</i>	Elder sister	<i>Jie jie</i>
Younger sister's husband (Brother-in-law)	<i>Mei fu</i>	Younger sister	<i>Mei mei</i>
Father's brother's older son (cousin)	<i>Tang ge</i>	Father's brother's older daughter (cousin)	<i>Tang jie</i>
Father's brother's younger son (cousin)	<i>Tang di</i>	Father's brother's younger daughter (cousin)	<i>Tang mei</i>
Father's sister's older son (cousin)	<i>Gu biao ge</i>	Father's sister's older daughter	<i>Gu biao jie</i>
Father's sister's younger son (cousin)	<i>Gu biao di</i>	Father's sister's younger daughter (cousin)	<i>Gu biao mei</i>
Mother's brother's older son (cousin)	<i>Jiu biao ge</i>	Mother's brother's older daughter (cousin)	<i>Jiu biao jie</i>
Mother's brother's younger son (cousin)	<i>Jiu biao di</i>	Mother's brother's younger daughter (cousin)	<i>Jiu biao mei</i>
Mother's sister's older son (cousin)	<i>Yi biao ge</i>	Mother's sister's older daughter (cousin)	<i>Yi biao jie</i>
Mother's sister's younger son (cousin)	<i>Yi biao di</i>	Mother's sister's younger daughter (cousin)	<i>Yi biao mei</i>
Brother's son (nephew)	<i>Tang zhi</i>	Brother's daughter(niece)	<i>Tang zhi mu</i>
Sister's son(nephew)	<i>Wai sheng</i>	Sister's daughter (niece)	<i>Wai sheng mu</i>
Wife's sibling's son (nephew)	<i>Biao zhi</i>	Wife's sibling's daughter (niece)	<i>Biao zhi nu</i>

Table 1: Chinese Kinship Terms

From the readings of the data for Chinese kinship terms, we find that there are differences in the terms used for the male and female gender. For example, the paternal grandfather is called *zu fu* while the paternal grandmother is called *zu mu*. The grandson (the son's son) is called *sun zi* while the granddaughter (the son's daughter) is called *sun nu*. This means that if one is proficient in the Mandarin language, by listening to the terms used, one could identify and differentiate the male and female gender and learn the culture and way of life of the Chinese people in general. There are also differences placed on the maternal and paternal side of the family. For example, the paternal grandfather is called *zu fu* and the maternal grandfather (sharing similar sex = male) is called differently, *wai zu fu*. We find that there is a pattern in the terms where the maternal side is concerned. The word *wai* is added to the word concerned. For example, the grandson from the daughter's side

(which does not carry the father's family name), is called *wai sun* while the granddaughter is called *wai sun nu*. The sister's son, the nephew, (which also does not carry the father's family name) is called *wai sheng* and the niece, *wai sheng mu*. In the Chinese family, when the daughter is married out, she will take after her husband's name and therefore, the term *wai* is allocated to her new family. It is customary in the Chinese community to show respect for the elders and this can be seen the the respectful terms appropriated to the older ones in contrast to the younger ones in the family. The Chinese differentiate this as shown in the data, where the older brother is called *ge ge* while the younger brother, *di di*. The older sister is called *jie jie* while the younger sister, *mei mei*. The father's elder brother (the uncle), is called *bo fu* while the father's younger brother (the uncle), is called *shu fu*.

The Indian kinship terms (Tamil language) is shown in table 2:

RELATION TO EGO (MALE)	TAMIL TERM	RELATION TO EGO (FEMALE)	TAMIL TERM
Paternal grandfather	<i>Appapa</i>	Paternal grandmother	<i>Appavi</i>
Maternal grandfather	<i>Appachi</i>	Maternal grandmother	<i>Ammayi</i>
Father	<i>Appa</i>	Mother	<i>Amma</i>
Son	<i>Magan</i>	Daughter	<i>Magal</i>
Son's son(Grandson)	<i>Peran</i>	Son's daughter(Granddaughter)	<i>Pethi</i>
Daughter's son(Grandson)	<i>Peran</i>	Daughter's daughter (Granddaughter)	<i>Pethi</i>
Father's elder brother (Uncle)	<i>Periya Appa</i>	Father's elder brother's wife (Aunt)	<i>Periya Amma</i>
Father's younger brother (Uncle)	<i>Citta Appa</i>	Father's younger brother's wife (Aunt)	<i>Cinna Amma</i>
Father's elder sister's husband (Uncle)	<i>mama</i>	*Father's elder sister (Aunt)	<i>Periya Attai</i>
Father's younger sister's husband (Uncle)	<i>mama</i>	*Father's younger sister (Aunt)	<i>Cinna Attai</i>
Mother's elder brother (Uncle)	<i>Thai mama</i>	*Mother's elder brother's wife (Aunt)	<i>Periya Attai</i>
Mother's younger brother (Uncle)	<i>Thai mama</i>	*Mother's younger brother's wife (Aunt)	<i>Cinna Attai</i>
Mother's elder sister's husband (Uncle)	<i>Periya Appa</i>	*Mother's elder sister (Aunt)	<i>Periya Amma</i>
Mother's younger sister's husband (Uncle)	<i>Citta Appa</i>	*Mother's younger sister (Aunt)	<i>Sitti</i>
Elder brother	<i>Annan</i>	Elder brother's wife (sister-in-law)	<i>Anni</i>

Younger brother	<i>Tambi</i>	Younger brother's wife (sister-in-law)	<i>Koluntiyar / Nattanar</i>
Elder sister's husband (Brother-in-law)	<i>Machandar</i>	Elder sister	<i>Akka</i>
Younger sister's husband (Brother-in-law)	<i>Koluntanar</i>	Younger sister	<i>tangai</i>
Father's brother's older son (cousin)	<i>Annan</i>	Father's brother's older daughter (cousin)	<i>Akka</i>
Father's brother's younger son (cousin)	<i>Tambi</i>	Father's brother's younger daughter (cousin)	<i>Tangai</i>
Father's sister's older son (cousin)	<i>Murai Maman</i>	Father's sister's older daughter	<i>Anni</i>
Father's sister's younger son (cousin)	<i>Koluntanar</i>	Father's sister's younger daughter (cousin)	<i>Koluntiyar</i>
Mother's brother's older son (cousin)	<i>Murai maman</i>	Mother's brother's older daughter (cousin)	<i>Anni</i>
Mother's brother's younger son (cousin)	<i>Koluntanar</i>	Mother's brother's younger daughter (cousin)	<i>Koluntiyar</i>
Mother's sister's older son (cousin)	<i>Annan</i>	Mother's sister's older daughter (cousin)	<i>Akka</i>
Mother's sister's younger son (cousin)	<i>Tambi</i>	Mother's sister's younger daughter (cousin)	<i>Tangai</i>
Brother's son (nephew)	<i>Annan Magan</i>	Brother's daughter(niece)	<i>Annan Magal</i>
Sister's son (nephew)	<i>Akka Magan</i>	Sister's daughter (niece)	<i>Akka Magal</i>
Wife's sibling's son (nephew)	<i>Mama Magan</i>	Wife's sibling's daughter (niece)	<i>Mama Magal</i>

Table 2: Indian Kinship Terms

In the data for the Tamil kinship terms, we find that the male and female terms are differentiated too. The paternal grandfather is called *appapa* while the paternal grandmother is called *appayi*. The father is called *appa* while the mother is called *amma*. The son is called *magan* while the daughter is called *magal*. The readings for the maternal and paternal sides for the Tamil kinship terms show that there are some differences in the terms used. The paternal grandfather is called *appapa* while the maternal grandfather (similar sex =male), is called *appachi*. The paternal grandmother is called *appayi* while the maternal grandmother is called *ammayi*. However, there are cases where the data readings show similarities for the maternal and paternal terms used. For example, the grandsons (both the son's and daughter's)

uses the same term *peran* and are not differentiated. The granddaughters are also referred to by the same term *pethi*. This is probably because the customs and traditions in the Indian society is different from other communities. In terms of older and younger ones in the hierarchy of the family tree, there seem to be differences in the readings where certain terms are appropriated for older and younger ones in the family while others are not. For example, the term for the father's elder sister's husband and the father's younger sister's husband are the same, *mama*. The mother's elder brother and the mother's younger brother have the same term too, *thai mama*. This is in contrast to *Annan* for elder brother and *tambi* for younger brother; *Akka* for elder sister and *tangai* for younger sister.

The Malay kinship terms (Malay language) can be seen in table 3:

RELATION TO EGO (MALE)	MALAY TERM	RELATION TO EGO (FEMALE)	MALAY TERM
Paternal grandfather	<i>datuk</i>	Paternal grandmother	<i>nenek</i>
Maternal grandfather	<i>datuk</i>	Maternal grandmother	<i>nenek</i>
Father	<i>Ayah</i>	Mother	<i>Ibu</i>
Son	<i>Anak lelaki</i>	Daughter	<i>Anak perempuan</i>
Son's son (Grandson)	<i>cucu lelaki</i>	Son's daughter (Granddaughter)	<i>cucu perempuan</i>
Daughter's son (Grandson)	<i>cucu lelaki</i>	Daughter's daughter (Granddaughter)	<i>cucu perempuan</i>
Father's elder brother (Uncle)	<i>Pak long</i>	Father's elder brother's wife (Aunt)	<i>Mak long</i>
Father's younger brother (Uncle)	<i>Pak Su</i>	Father's younger brother's wife (Aunt)	<i>Mak Su</i>
Father's sister's husband (Uncle)	<i>Pak Cik</i>	Father's sister (Aunt)	<i>Mak Cik</i>
Mother's brother (Uncle)	<i>Pak Cik</i>	Mother's brother's wife (Aunt)	<i>Mak Cik</i>
Mother's sister's husband (Uncle)	<i>Pak Cik</i>	Mother's sister (Aunt)	<i>Mak Cik</i>
Elder brother	<i>Abang long</i>	Elder brother's wife (sister-in-law)	<i>Kak long</i>
Younger brother	<i>Adik</i>	Younger brother's wife (sister-in-law)	<i>Adik</i>
Elder sister's husband (Brother-in-law)	<i>Abang</i>	Elder sister	<i>Kakak</i>
Younger sister's husband (Brother-in-law)	<i>Adik</i>	Younger sister	<i>Adik</i>
Father's brother's older son(cousin)	<i>Sepupu lelaki</i>	Father's brother's older daughter (cousin)	<i>Sepupu perempuan</i>
Father's brother's younger son (cousin)	<i>Sepupu lelaki</i>	Father's brother's younger daughter (cousin)	<i>Sepupu perempuan</i>



Comparison between the paternal and maternal sides	Kinship Terms		
	Mandarin	Tamil	Malay
Grandfather	x	x	0
Grandmother	x	x	0
Uncle	x	x	0
Aunt	x	x	0
Cousin	x	x	0

Keynote: *x* indicates differences  
*0* indicates similar terms

Table 4: Comparison between paternal and maternal sides

Comparison of the kinship terms between the male and female gender for the three different languages can be seen in table 5 below:

Comparison between the male and female gender	Kinship Terms		
	Mandarin	Tamil	Malay
Grandfather vs. Grandmother	x	x	x
Father vs. Mother	x	x	x
Son vs. Daughter	x	x	x
Grandson vs. Granddaughter	x	x	0
Uncle vs. Aunt	x	x	x
Brother vs. Sister	x	x	x
Brother-in-law vs. Sister-in-law	x	x	x
Male Cousin vs. Female Cousin	x	x	0
Nephew vs. Niece	x	x	0

Keynote: *x* indicates differences  
*0* indicates similar terms

Table 5: Comparison between the male and female gender

Table 5 shows that for all three languages compared to, there seem to be gender differences in the kinship terms. In the Malay kinship terms however, gender feature was not specified for in the kinship terms referring to grandson and granddaughter (i.e. the Malay term being 'cucu'. The Malay language also does not specify for

gender difference between the male and female cousin and between nephews and nieces. Comparatively, the Mandarin and Tamil kinship terms have differences of gender for these items.

The interview questions were developed to get an idea of what the respondents, who were from different races and cultures, think about kinship terms and whether there are differences in the terms for the different languages. It was also meant to find out how this affected teaching in the language classroom especially in topics that are related to family members and stories that involve family relations in the ESL classroom.

### Results and Discussion

In terms of componential analysis, we find that the three case studies show that there are some differences in the meaning of words in terms of relational opposites when it comes to gender differences but this is not always the case. For example, the use of the younger siblings (i.e. *adik*), grandchildren (i.e. *cucu*) and cousins (*sepupu*) are not specified for gender. Thus, the results show that componential analysis does not always apply in kinship terms especially when we look at the point of view of relational opposites.

The results also show that there are actually similarities in the use of kinship terms between oriental cultures to a certain degree. It also showed that the use of kinship terms is strongly related to the culture and background of their origin. When compared to languages from Western origins like the English language, it would seem that there are marked differences. This goes to show that while there are rich cultural heritage in the use of kinship terms among the Chinese, Indian and Malay kinship terms, a marked demarcation of diversity is obvious between these kinship terms with that of the English kinship terms.

Comparatively, the Chinese and Indian kinship terms show more similarities than the Malay kinship terms. When we compare the terms used by the three languages to English however, we find that the English kinship systems are not as complex as that of the three case studies. The Malay kinship terms seem less complicated to the Chinese and Indian kinship terms when it comes to the maternal and paternal sides of the ego. The maternal and paternal sides in Malay do not have different kinship terms given to them. Analysis of the gender feature shows that there are kinship terms that do not mark differences of gender (e.g. *adik*, *cucu*, *sepupu*).

Thus, the results suggest that the difference in kinship terms may influence the learners' perception and use of them in the language classroom. For example, in one of the interviews, the respondent commented that she found that the concept of

cousins, nephews and nieces seemed problematic to her L1 Chinese students as the Mandarin language has different degrees of kinship relations for them as can be seen in table 1. The same problem is found to be prevalent for L1 Malay students who found the use of uncle and aunty and in-laws problematic. Thus, the analysis seem to indicate that there is a relationship between language and culture in terms of semantic applications. In the Indian kinship terms, for example, the data shows no difference in the kinship terms for the maternal side uncles (i.e. *Thai mama*) but there are differences for the terms given for the paternal side uncles (i.e. *periya appa, citta appa*). The reason for this could be because it is customary for them to give preference to the paternal side of the family. In the same context, the Malay kinship terms do not differentiate the maternal and paternal side of the family. Hence, in the Malay language, the maternal and paternal sides of the family do not subdivide the meaning for uncles and aunts.

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