HSR (LONDON),
HOUGHTON STREET REVIEW JOURNAL
ISSN: 2058-5519|Impact factor-15.9
http://houghtonstreetreview.com/index.php/hsr

SEMANTIC DIFFERENCES IN KINSHIP TERMS IN ENGLISH AND MALAY

Ziyayaeva Muhayyo Usmonjonovna
Uzbekistan State World Languages University
Senior teacher in the Department of Integrated course 3
Muhayyoziyaeva646@gmail.com
Egamkulova Shakhruza Khamidullo kizi,
Nurgeldiyeva Dilnura Amanmat kizi,
Komekbaeva Nilufar Rashid kizi,
Saidjonova Parvina Maksudjon kizi
Students of Uzbekistan State World Languages University
Doi: https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.21514439

Abstract: Kinship terminology reflects the way societies categorize family relationships and social structures. Different languages encode family ties through distinct semantic systems that reveal cultural values, social expectations, and patterns of interpersonal interaction. This study examines the semantic differences between kinship terms in English and Malay, focusing on the classification of relatives, generational distinctions, and the linguistic representation of age and social hierarchy. Through a qualitative comparative analysis, the research demonstrates that English kinship terminology tends to generalize family relations by using broad categories, while Malay kinship terminology provides more detailed distinctions based on age, lineage, and social respect.

Key words: kinship terms, semantic differences, terminology, linguistic representation, cultural value.

Introduction. Kinship terms constitute an essential part of every language because they enable speakers to identify and describe family relationships. These terms are not merely lexical items but also cultural indicators that reveal how societies perceive family structure, social roles, and interpersonal obligations. In semantic studies, kinship terminology is particularly important because it illustrates how languages categorize human relationships differently. While some languages employ broad and generalized categories, others develop highly specific systems that encode age, lineage, gender, and social status. The comparison of kinship systems therefore offers valuable insights into the relationship between language and culture.

English and Malay provide an interesting basis for semantic comparison because they belong to different linguistic and cultural traditions. English, which has developed within predominantly Western societies, generally employs a relatively simple kinship system. Terms such as “uncle,” “aunt,” and “cousin” cover a wide range of relationships without specifying age, parental side, or birth order. Malay, on the other hand, uses a more elaborate kinship system that distinguishes relatives according to seniority, family branch, and social respect. Terms such as “pak cik,” “mak cik,” “abang,” “kakak,” and “adik” carry semantic information that is absent in English equivalents. As a result, direct translation between the two languages often leads to a loss of meaning.

The purpose of this study is to investigate the semantic differences between English and Malay kinship terms and to explain how these differences reflect broader cultural patterns. By analyzing common kinship expressions in both languages, the research seeks to identify the semantic components that distinguish each system and to demonstrate the role of culture in shaping linguistic meaning.

HSR (LONDON),
HOUGHTON STREET REVIEW JOURNAL
ISSN: 2058-5519|Impact factor-15.9
http://houghtonstreetreview.com/index.php/hsr

Methods. This study employs a qualitative descriptive approach based on semantic analysis. The data consist of commonly used kinship terms in English and Malay collected from dictionaries, linguistic literature, and authentic language usage. The selected terms include words referring to immediate family members, extended relatives, and age-based relationships. The analysis follows a componential semantic framework in which kinship terms are examined according to features such as gender, generation, age hierarchy, lineage, and social function.

The comparative method is used to identify similarities and differences between the two kinship systems. Each English kinship term is compared with its Malay counterpart to determine whether equivalent semantic components exist in both languages. Special attention is given to cases where one language contains distinctions that are absent in the other. The findings are interpreted within a sociocultural context in order to explain how linguistic differences correspond to cultural values and social organization. This methodological approach enables a systematic examination of semantic structures while highlighting the cultural motivations underlying linguistic variation.

Results and Discussion

The comparative analysis of English and Malay kinship terms reveals substantial semantic differences that extend beyond simple lexical variation. These differences demonstrate how each language conceptualizes family relationships according to the cultural norms and social structures of its speakers. The findings indicate that Malay kinship terminology possesses a greater degree of semantic specificity than English, particularly in the areas of age distinction, family lineage, social hierarchy, and interpersonal relationships. While English kinship terms generally provide basic information regarding biological relationships and gender, Malay kinship terms often encode additional social and cultural meanings that allow speakers to identify a person's position within the family structure more precisely.

One of the most significant findings concerns the semantic distinction of age among siblings. In English, the terms "brother" and "sister" are semantically neutral with regard to age. These words indicate only gender and sibling relationship, leaving age unspecified unless additional modifiers such as "older" or "younger" are added. For example, the sentence "My brother lives in Kuala Lumpur" does not reveal whether the brother is older or younger than the speaker. In contrast, Malay explicitly encodes age differences through separate lexical items. The term "abang" refers specifically to an older brother, "kakak" refers to an older sister, and "adik" refers to a younger sibling regardless of gender in many contexts. This distinction demonstrates that relative age is considered an important semantic feature in Malay society. Through the use of these terms, speakers immediately communicate hierarchical relationships within the family. Such distinctions are not merely descriptive but also influence patterns of interaction, as younger family members are generally expected to show respect toward older siblings. Therefore, the semantic richness of Malay kinship terms reflects broader cultural values emphasizing seniority and social order.

Another major difference appears in the categorization of extended family members. English employs broad kinship categories such as "uncle," "aunt," and "cousin," which encompass numerous relationships without distinguishing family branch, age order, or seniority. For instance, the word "uncle" may refer to a father's brother, a mother's brother, or the husband of either parent's sister. The term itself provides little information regarding the exact nature of the relationship. In Malay, however, kinship terminology often specifies not only the family connection but also the relative position of an individual within the parental generation. Terms such as "pak long" indicate the eldest uncle, "pak ngah" refers to a middle uncle, and "pak su" designates the youngest uncle. Similar distinctions exist among aunts, including "mak long," "mak ngah," and "mak su." These semantic distinctions provide information about birth order and family hierarchy that is absent in English. Consequently, Malay

HSR (LONDON),
HOUGHTON STREET REVIEW JOURNAL
ISSN: 2058-5519|Impact factor-15.9
http://houghtonstreetreview.com/index.php/hsr

speakers can infer a significant amount of social and familial information from a single kinship term. This detailed classification system reflects the importance of extended family relationships in Malay culture, where knowledge of familial roles contributes to social cohesion and respect.

The findings also show that Malay kinship terms frequently function as honorific forms of address beyond the family domain. In English-speaking societies, kinship terms are generally restricted to actual family members or relatives by marriage. Although occasional metaphorical uses occur, such as referring to close friends as "brother" or "sister," these usages remain relatively limited. Malay, by contrast, extends kinship terminology into everyday social interactions. Older men may be addressed as "pak cik," older women as "mak cik," and slightly older individuals as "abang" or "kakak," even when no biological relationship exists. Such forms of address serve as markers of politeness, solidarity, and social respect. They help establish an atmosphere of familiarity while simultaneously acknowledging age differences and social expectations. This semantic extension demonstrates that kinship terminology in Malay functions not only as a means of identifying family relationships but also as a broader mechanism for organizing social interaction. The language therefore reflects a cultural tendency to view society through familial frameworks, strengthening interpersonal bonds among community members.

A further semantic difference concerns the treatment of cousins and other relatives within the extended family network. English employs the single term "cousin" to refer to children of aunts and uncles regardless of age, gender, or family branch. The term is highly generalized and provides minimal information about the specific relationship involved. Malay often supplements kinship references with age-based distinctions such as "sepupu tua" (older cousin) and "sepupu muda" (younger cousin), especially when relative age is socially relevant. Furthermore, cousins may sometimes be addressed using sibling terms such as "abang," "kakak," or "adik" when family closeness and age hierarchy are emphasized. This practice illustrates how Malay kinship semantics are interconnected with broader social values concerning respect and family solidarity. The flexible use of kinship terminology enables speakers to reinforce social relationships through language, thereby maintaining harmony within the extended family network.

The study also reveals important differences in cultural conceptualization reflected in kinship vocabulary. English kinship terminology largely mirrors the social organization of modern Western societies, where the nuclear family typically serves as the primary social unit. As a result, the language tends to focus on immediate family relationships while providing fewer lexical distinctions among extended relatives. Semantic simplicity in English kinship terms may therefore be understood as a reflection of social structures that place greater emphasis on individual identity and personal autonomy. Malay kinship terminology, on the other hand, reflects a collectivist orientation in which family relationships occupy a central position in social life. The detailed distinctions found in Malay kinship terms correspond to a cultural environment where extended family members maintain close interactions and where age and hierarchy continue to play important social roles.

Conclusion. This study has examined the semantic differences between kinship terms in English and Malay through a qualitative comparative analysis. The findings demonstrate that although both languages possess lexical systems for identifying family relationships, they differ significantly in the amount and type of semantic information encoded within their kinship terminology. English kinship terms generally provide broad categorizations based on gender and family relationship, whereas Malay kinship terms incorporate additional semantic features such as age hierarchy, birth order, family lineage, and social status. As a result, Malay kinship terminology offers a more detailed representation of family structure and interpersonal relationships.

HSR (LONDON),
HOUGHTON STREET REVIEW JOURNAL
ISSN: 2058-5519|Impact factor-15.9
http://houghtonstreetreview.com/index.php/hsr

References

1. Aitchison, J. (2018). *Linguistics: An Introduction* (9th ed.). London: Routledge.
2. Cruse, D. A. (2011). *Meaning in Language: An Introduction to Semantics and Pragmatics* (3rd ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
3. Finegan, E. (2020). *Language: Its Structure and Use* (8th ed.). Boston: Cengage Learning.
4. Leech, G. (1981). *Semantics: The Study of Meaning* (2nd ed.). Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.
5. Lyons, J. (1995). *Linguistic Semantics: An Introduction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
6. Nida, E. A. (1975). *Componential Analysis of Meaning: An Introduction to Semantic Structures*. The Hague: Mouton.
7. Saeed, J. I. (2016). *Semantics* (4th ed.). Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.
8. Wardhaugh, R., & Fuller, J. M. (2021). *An Introduction to Sociolinguistics* (9th ed.). Hoboken, NJ: Wiley.
9. Wierzbicka, A. (1997). *Understanding Cultures Through Their Key Words: English, Russian, Polish, German, and Japanese*. New York: Oxford University Press.
10. Yule, G. (2020). *The Study of Language* (7th ed.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.