9.3.1 Kinship terminologies

Terminological systems were the first elements of kinship systems to attract anthropologists' attention, starting with Lewis Morgan's *Systems of Affinity and ↳ Consanguinity of the Human Family* (1997[1871]) as one of the major starting blocks for a new discipline. Morgan, who collected terminological systems through corresponding with people from different parts of the world, concluded that despite the diversity in the ways cultures and languages describe a person's genealogical environment, there are important structural similarities that seem to be systemic. He produced a first typology that has since been amended many times by various anthropologist (e.g. Murdock 1949), but that remains widely in use today. What this typology does is present a few basic ways—today one would say algorithms—of mapping the genealogical grid into classes and terms. Nowadays, anthropologists distinguish five such basic systems they call—unsatisfactorily but explicably from a historical point of view—by the names of the groups in which these systems are supposed to be found: Dravidian, Iroquois, Hawaiian, Sudanese, and Eskimo, with some further subtypes such as Crow, Omaha, Aluridja, etc. I shall now, in a very summary way, present particular features of each of these systems.

The **Dravidian** is a very widespread system. It is found on all continents and among the most diverse cultures, even though it is usually associated with small-scale societies. The main feature of this system is what is called 'bifurcate merging'. Bifurcate merging means that categories are bifurcated one generation above Ego (his or her parent's generation) according to gender, but their children are merged again in Ego's generation. What may here sound complex is in fact a very straightforward procedure of distinguishing fathers, mothers, uncles, and aunts following a different principle from that we find in Euro-American terminologies. Ego (the speaker) distinguishes the 'father' from the 'mother', for which one uses two distinct terms. The father's brother, however, since he is of the same gender as the father, is called 'father' as well. The mother's sister, since she is of the same gender as the mother, is called 'mother'. The father's sister, on the other hand, since she is of a different gender from the speaker's father, is called 'aunt' (or FZ, father's sister). Similarly, the mother's brother, since he is of a different gender from the speaker's mother, is called 'uncle' (or MB, mother's brother). In other words, only the mother's brother is an 'uncle' and only the father's sister is an 'aunt' if we use the English words. This is the basic feature from which all other features are derived in so-called Dravidian systems.

Dravidian terminologies are usually extended in such a way that every person with whom one has a relationship of any kind needs to be addressed or referred to by a kinship term. This extension to people other than close genealogical relations follows a very precise algorithm, always according to the principle of bifurcate merging mentioned above. My mother's mother's sister is a mother's mother, but my father's father's sister is of a distinct class.

The number of classes available to designate all the people in a group, tribe, etc. is obviously limited. For example, in Ego's parents' generation, there are usually only four terms available ('mother', 'father', 'father's sister', and 'mother's brother'), which means that each individual knows many people he or she calls 'mother', ↳ 'father', etc. Since your 'mothers' marry people you call 'father', fathers' sisters (FZ) obviously marry mothers' brothers (MB). And since all children of people you call 'mother' or 'father' are obviously your siblings, all children of people you call FZ or MB must be called differently, 'cousins' or, as anthropologists say in this case, cross-cousins. The terms for siblings and for cross-cousins are, in a Dravidian system, all that are available to name people of the same generation as yourself. Since one needs to marry someone of the same generation, and since everyone needs to be positioned in a kin category, and since you cannot marry a sibling for reasons of incest prohibition (see below), all you have left as partners are obviously people from the cross-cousin category, i.e. children of people you call 'uncle' and 'aunt'. Once you understand these principles, you can easily extend them to any other person of the society. If I call someone cross-cousin and this person calls someone else cross-cousin as well, I know that this other person is a sibling of mine: the cross-cousin of a cross-cousin is a sibling, while the cross-cousin of a sibling is a

p. 218

p. 219