9.3 The Basics of Kinship

Investigation into kinship again means distinguishing different fields of interconnected social realities. These may be summed up as follows: terminological systems; systems of descent and filiation (as already seen); marriage rules; and a connected domain, discussions on shared and transmitted bodily substances. I
p. 217 will discuss each of these individually, since they also reflect the evolution of ↳ anthropological investigations into the domain of kinship itself. It is, however, crucial to understand that the separation of these domains is an epistemological artefact and that in social interaction all four play combined roles. Let me start by investigating terminological systems—usually also the first step that the researcher in the domain of kinship studies undertakes in the field.

As we have seen in the introduction to this chapter, kinship is a mass of networks of relatedness which radiate from each individual, and this network expresses itself in a biological idiom (Tonkinson 1991[1978]). The biological idiom we are talking about is a set of words or expressions—kinship terms—that are largely attributed through what Fox (1996) called the basic facts of life: conception and birth. What is meant here is that whatever the local term that stands for 'mother' may be and whatever other relationships or things may be expressed by this term, at its very basis it describes the unique relationship between a person and a woman from whose womb he or she was born. Every language and, in some cases, even every dialect has its own set of such words that distribute the network of relationships around the individual we take as our starting point (called Ego): mother, father, uncle, brother, sister, cousin, and so on. However, the structure of this network or terminological map (the list of categories) is culturally ascribed and unique while also following a few universal rules. 'Categories' of people, sometimes also called 'classes', mean here all possible genealogical positions around Ego. For example, in English, the word 'uncle' designates in fact four categories and not just one: one's mother's brother, one's father's brother, one's mother's sister's husband, and one's father's sister's husband. In other languages and cultures, this may be very different. The terminological map—the list of categories that are locally distinguished—constitutes a terminological system. The number of such basic terminological systems invented by human societies is limited. Indeed, identical or very similar such terminological systems are found in societies as far apart as lowland Amazonia, India, China, Australia, or North America; others are of the same type, as among the Inuit peoples of Northern Canada and the European continent. The existence of a limited number of types of terminological systems makes some prediction possible, though this always needs to be carefully confirmed. It is because of the (incorrect) prediction I made that the sentence *Kungkankatja, minalinkatja* became relevant: they were calling each other brother and sister where, because of some systemic rules derived from these universal terminological systems, I was expecting a term for cousin. Let me now move on to those universal rules and systems.