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FICTIVE KINSHIP NAMES IN JORDANIAN ARABIC

Abstract

Kinship names in Jordanian society are either real or fictive, both of which may be used reciprocally. The purpose of this paper is to investigate the fictive extension of blood kinship names and the fictive use of reciprocal kinship names in Jordanian Arabic. Reference is made to affect control theory to explain the fact that blood relations are fictively extended to non-relatives to promote solidarity and show respect, while reciprocal kinship names are used fictively to promote emotiveness. The paper proposes an extension of the definition of fictive kinship relations to include blood relations that are used reciprocally. Accordingly, any kinship term that is semantically invalid is being used fictively.

1. Introduction

Kinship terms are defined as “category words by means of which an individual is taught to recognize the significant groupings in the social structure into which [the individual] belongs” (Leach 1958: 143). In most societies, kinship terms are not only an important part of communication, but also a very important strategy for establishing and maintaining social relationships. These terms, furthermore, are important for social recognition as they function in a way similar to the act of naming which carries considerable social significance for social actors (Trenholm/Jensen 1992). In addition, fundamental affective meanings are attached to kinship roles and an important component of feelings toward kin is influenced by convention (Malone 2004: 203). These social roles of kinship terms, however, differ from one social grouping to another, depending on the social, cultural, and religious assumptions of each society. Each society has different expectations for a particular kinship term, and such expectations are influenced by these assumptions. Accordingly, studying kinship terms in a particular society provides insights into that society’s power structure, interpersonal communication patterns, and normative elements of family system (Huang/Jia 2000).

Kinship terms may further reveal underlying cultural meanings and values. According to Romney and D’Andrade (1964: 168), social actors “respond to kinship terms as if each term contained a bundle of distinct meanings”. These meanings are largely influenced by the particular culture in which the kinship term is used. As Holmes (2001: 331) points out, kinship terms “illustrate the complexities of the relationship between language and culture” and reflect “important cultural relationships”. For example, the kinship system may reflect the importance of the extended family as an important social unit and the mutual rights and obligations of different members of the family toward each other (Holmes 2001: 331).

Kinship terms, as Bonvillain (2003: 55) points out, “reflect societal attitudes toward one’s relatives. Individuals called by each kin term are understood by speakers to stand in particular social relationships and to have certain rights and obligations vis-à-vis speakers”. However, kinship terms are characterized by their metaphoric extension when they are used to refer metaphorically to non-relatives to express “informality and intimacy of a relationship without being rude” (Bonvillain 2003: 66). Their use can also be extended to signal social meanings of solidarity or deference toward co-participants, to demonstrate and manipulate status and attitudinal relations, and to accomplish acts of either flattering and honoring or insulting and

denigrating (Bonvillain 2003: 86). This metaphoric extension, or fictive use, of kinship terms across different cultures and languages has attracted the attention of researchers in fields like linguistics, anthropology, sociology, and social psychology (Witherspoon 1975; Bean 1975; Casson 1981; Hong 1985; Malone 2004; Mashiri 2004).

Despite the social significance and stratification of kinship terms in Arab society, they have received relatively little attention. An early study of Arabic kinship terms (Khuri 1981) examined the meaning and usage of Arabic status and kinship terms in daily face-to-face interaction. Khuri concluded that kinship terms in the Arab world are essentially “corporational”, that is, they focus on group formation, the collective action of groups, and with group alignment, recruitment, or opposition. In another study, Shimizu (1989) examined the vocative use of kinship terms among Arab Muslims through a case study of a village in the northern part of Jordan. Therefore, the present study attempts to shed more light on the social meanings and functions of Arabic kinship terms by studying how kin terms are used and manipulated in Jordanian society.

The study is a result of several brainstorming sessions by the authors who sought the help of friends and family¹. A qualitative approach is thus followed rather than a quantitative one.

2. Theoretical Background

The distribution and use of kinship terms depends on the *role* assigned by society to each individual kin term. As Malone (2004: 203) points out, such roles “are part of a social grammar that makes action predictable and meaningful. Just as people use words and rules shared by their language community, they act in the context of roles and conventionally defined situations that provide choices and meanings”. An important component of these roles is affect, which refers to the feelings and sentiments displayed by social actors. The importance of affect in social interaction is captured by what is known as affect control theory, which is based on the idea that social roles and situated actions are influenced by emotion (Heise 1979, 1985, 1988, 2002). A basic assumption of this theory is that “particular interaction sequences are routinized in a role relationship, becoming the standard events that characterize the relationship” and that the standard events lead to “the formation of sentiments that could generate those events” (Heise 1979: 140, also cited by Malone 2004). Furthermore, affect control theory claims that “social action is designed to maintain fundamental sentiments about selves and others. When these sentiments prove incongruous, people engage in re-identifications” (Malone 2004: 205).

Affect, then, works side by side with cognition in language use. As Verschueren (1999: 90) argues, “the mental world activated in language use contains cognitive and emotive elements.” For Verschueren, the cognitive element “provides a bridge between the mental and the social in the form of conceptualizations in terms of which social interaction is interpreted”. The emotive element, in contrast, provides a bridge in the form of “affect and involvement, the attitudinal prerequisites for engaging in, sustaining and ‘coloring’ interaction” (Verschueren 1999: 90). The affective dimension of communication is patently relevant to the study of kinship terms as using one term rather than the other will be strongly motivated by affect, that is, speaker’s emotions and sentiments toward the addressee in a particular kinship relation. Malone’s (2004) discussion of American kinship terms illustrates this interaction between cognitive and affective elements. Malone found that the cognitive distinctions employed in American kinship terminology correspond closely to sentiments held toward those social locations.

¹ The authors are grateful for all the feedback and comments by family, friends, and colleagues.

3. Real and Fictive Kinship

Real kinship relations are defined in terms of biology and marriage. Such relations often involve social and legal obligations for the two parties involved in the relationship. Accordingly, one is born into a family without conscious choice. However, real kinship only establishes the base of what individuals think of as family. Family relations are often extended to include people who are not related by blood or marriage. Such fictive kin relationships have a basis different from bonds of blood and marriage.

Briefly defined, fictive kinship involves the extension of kinship obligations and relationships to individuals specifically not otherwise included in the kinship universe. Godparenthood is the most commonly cited illustration (Foster 1967; Kemper 1982). Similar relationships exist in many other societies (Halpern 1967; Hammel 1968; Magnarella/Turkdogan 1973). In many societies, people have “aunts” or “uncles” who are merely their parents’ closest friends. Members of religious groups often refer to each other as “brother” or “sister”. Nontraditional family forms such as gay and lesbian unions may be defined in traditional kinship terms (Wagner 1995). Fictive kin ties among U.S. African-American urban communities and their effects on everything from child care to educational achievement have been increasingly attracting the attention of researchers (Fordham/Ogbu 1986; Johnson/Barer 1990). Some researchers even describe ethnicity as being an elaborated form of fictive kinship (Yelvington/Bentley 1991).

4. Real Kinship Terms in Jordan

Social life and identity in Jordan are centered on the family. The household is composed of people related to one another by kinship, either through descent or marriage, and family ties extend into the structure of clans and tribes. The rapid socio-economic developments in the country do not necessarily conflict with existing family affiliations. Jordanians rely on extended kin relations for a variety of purposes, which can be described as exchanges. Exchanges might include financial support, job information, social connections, access to strategic resources, marital partners, protection and support in the event of conflict, child care and domestic services, and emotional sustenance (Metz 1989).

Like most Arab societies, the Jordanian kinship system is highly descriptive assigning a separate kinship term for each distinct relative based on gender, lineage, and side of the family, i.e., patrilineal vs. matrilineal. This is known as the Sudanese kinship system where the words for father and mother are reserved not only for parents, but also for patrilineal and matrilineal uncles and aunts and their male and female offspring each have their own kinship term. Other kinship systems include the Hawaiian system, which is the least descriptive and merges many different relatives into a small number of categories. Relatives are distinguished only on the basis of sex and generation. Thus there is no “uncle” term; (mother’s and father’s brothers are included in the same category as father). All cousins are classified in the same group as brothers and sisters. The Eskimo system is marked by a bilateral emphasis—no distinction is made between patrilineal and matrilineal relatives—and by recognition of differences in kinship distance - close relatives are distinguished from more distant ones. The Iroquois system is based on a principle of bifurcate merging. Relatives are distinguished on the mother’s side of the family and those on the father’s side (bifurcation) and merges father with father’s brother and mother with mother’s sister. Accordingly, father’s brother’s children and mother’s sister’s children (parallel cousins) are merged with brother and sister. The Omaha system is similar to the Iroquois and is in fact a bifurcate merging system. The same categorizations for father, father’s brother and mother’s brother are used as in an Iroquois terminology. However, there is a significant difference in cousin terminology. Parallel cousins

are merged with siblings; however cross-cousin terms are quite peculiar and cut across generational divisions. Finally the Crow system is a mirror image of the Omaha. A bifurcate merging pattern is used but relatives within the father's matrilineage are lumped together. Thus father's sister's son gets the same term as father and father's sister's daughter, the same term as father's sister. This system is generally found in societies with strong matrilineal kinship emphasis².

Use of blood kinship terms as address forms in Jordan is a social requirement governed by type of kinship relation and social context. In private or in social events where only close relatives are present, brothers and sisters use their personal names and so do cousins. The word *cousin* in English corresponds to eight different kinship phrases in JA depending on gender and side of the family, i.e., paternal vs. maternal. Accordingly, the Arabic word for E. *cousin* may refer to any of the following kinship relations:

1. 'son of my paternal uncle'	<i>ʔibin ʕammi</i>	إبن عمي
2. 'son of my paternal aunt'	<i>ʔibin ʕamti</i>	إبن عمتي
3. 'daughter of my paternal uncle'	<i>bint ʕammi</i>	بنت عمي
4. 'daughter of paternal aunt'	<i>bint ʕamti</i>	بنت عمي
5. 'son of my maternal uncle'	<i>ʔibin xaali</i>	إبن خالي
6. 'son of my maternal aunt'	<i>ʔibin xaalti</i>	إبن خالتي
7. 'daughter of my maternal uncle'	<i>bint xaali</i>	بنت خالي
8. 'daughter of my maternal aunt'	<i>bint xaalti</i>	بنت خالتي

Older brothers and sisters and older cousins tend to use the relevant kinship term or, if married with children, then the use of *ʔabu* أبو 'father of ___' or *ʔum* أم 'mother of ___' plus the name of their eldest son or daughter³. Parents, grandparents and uncles and aunts use their children's, grandchildren's, and nephews' and nieces' personal names respectively or, otherwise, a special type of fictive kinship terms is used (section 6). The terms for uncle and aunt may be patrilineal or matrilineal and thus:

1. 'brother of my father'	<i>ʕammi</i>	عمي
2. 'sister of my father'	<i>ʕamti</i>	عمتي
3. 'brother of my mother'	<i>xaali</i>	خالي
4. 'sister of my mother'	<i>xaalti</i>	خالتي

On the other hand, if non-relatives are present there is a strong tendency to avoid addressing females using their personal names. In such situations, the relevant kinship term is used instead (Shimizu 1989) or the speaker makes a conscious effort to avoid using his sister's or female cousin's personal name. The strategies that may be employed in such situations vary depending on the type of kinship relation and type of the non-relatives present. An investigation into these strategies is not the main concern in this paper.

5. Fictive Kinship Terms in Jordan

Though often described as a voluntary relationship (Blickenstaff 2005, Kastenbaum 1993, Malina 1993), use of fictive kinship terms in Jordanian society is a social requirement. Based on age and gender, blood relations may be extended to show respect and/or promote solidarity (cf. Sections 5.1 & 5.2).

² Cf. <http://www.umanitoba.ca/anthropology/tutor/kinterms/>

³ Name of the daughter is used only if there are no male children in the family.

Some kinship terms lend themselves to fictive use while others resist this extension. All kinship terms referring to ‘father’, ‘mother’, ‘grandfather’, and ‘grandmother’ are rarely fictively extended. These terms have multiple expressions in JA. The choice among these expressions depends on various gender, age, and social factors the details of which are irrelevant for the purposes of this research. Generally, these terms have the following Arabic vocative equivalents:

1. ‘father’	<i>yaaba</i> يابا	<i>baaba</i> بابا	<i>ʔabi</i> أبي
2. ‘mother’	<i>yumma</i> يوما	<i>maama</i> ماما	<i>ʔummi</i> أمي
3. ‘grandfather’	<i>dʒiddi</i> جدي	<i>dʒidduu</i> جدو	<i>siidi</i> سيدي
4. ‘grandmother’	<i>dʒidde</i> جدة	<i>sitti</i> ستي	<i>teita</i> تيتا

All ‘cousin’ terms resist extension as well except for *ʔibin xaalti* ابن خالتي ‘son of my maternal aunt’ which is frequently used among friends. In rural areas, however, *ʔibin ʕammi* ابن عمي ‘son of my paternal uncle’ and *bint ʕammi* بنت عمي ‘daughter of paternal uncle’ are often used as fictive kinship terms among young members of the same kinsfolk who have weak blood relationships on the father’s side. The basic function of this strategy is to intensify solidarity between the interlocutors and between their families. That is, rural Jordanians often promote friendships that are built on blood relations or marriage ties more than those which have other bases such as work, study, interests, and neighborhood. Therefore, when one uses the expression *ʔibin ʕammi* ابن عمي ‘son of my paternal uncle’ in addressing a person who is not his cousin, but only has a weak blood relationship with him, he makes an attempt to strengthen his blood relation with the addressee, hence further or maintain friendship with him.

5.1. Showing Respect

Various address forms may be used in Jordanian Arabic to show respect for the addressee. These expressions include but are not limited to the following:

1. *ʔustaað* أستاذ a term typically used to address school teachers
2. *saijid* سيدي literally means ‘master’ and is used as an equivalent to *Mr.* or *gentleman*
3. *ħadži* حجي a term reserved for a man who has performed pilgrimage
4. *madam* مدام borrowed from English *madam* and a rather prestigious form of address used with older women of a seemingly upper class with the intention to avoid hinting to the age difference
5. *sitt* ست a short form of *saijida* ‘lady’
6. *ħadže* حجة the female equivalent of *ħadži*.

These expressions are irrelevant for the purposes of this paper since they are not kinship terms. From this point on, the discussion will only consider kinship terms used as address forms.

Based primarily on age differences⁴, a non-blood-related older male is addressed *ʕammi* عمي ‘brother of my father’. Of interest here is the fact that *xaali* خالي ‘brother of my mother’ is not used to refer to unfamiliar older men. A semantic explanation of this

⁴ The exact age difference that warrants the use of this and other respect-marking kinship terms is not documented. I’m estimating a twenty year difference which may vary based on the overall appearance of the addressee. Some people look much older than they really are and vice versa.

phenomenon can be made based on the gender of the addressee. *Sammi* is by definition a male-related kinship term that involves the words ‘brother’ and ‘father’ both referring to males. This makes the potential use of *Sammi* as a fictive kinship term that refers to unknown older males plausible. In other words, real *Sammi* refers to a male who is a sibling of another male (my father), and that brotherhood relationship is naturally extended to a fictive use of the term where fraternity is established between my father and another male like my uncle. *xaali*, on the other hand, has a feminine lexical association because it establishes fraternity between a woman and a man. Because the semantic feature ‘female’ is essential in defining the term *xaali*, the possibility of extending this term to refer to unfamiliar older males is reduced. Establishing fictive brotherhood between one’s mother and an older stranger where he is called *xaali* is less natural based on the difference in genders between the stranger and the woman.

Fictive kinship terms in Jordanian Arabic are thus used to express respect and politeness. They help to achieve this goal in relation to two parameters: social power and social distance. This type of politeness is oriented to the “positive face” of the addressee. As described by Brown and Levinson (1987: 13), “positive face” refers to a person’s wish to be respected and well thought of by others. Addressing someone with fictive kinship terms like *Sammi* or *xaalti* gives the sense that the addressee is being respected as a real paternal uncle or a real maternal aunt, respectively. When the speaker is younger than the addressee, focus is on the parameter of social power while when the speaker is older than the addressee, focus is on social distance.

Thus, when the speaker is younger than the addressee, *Sammi* and *xaalti* suggest that the speaker sees the addressee as having more social power than the speaker. This power stems from the fact that these two kinship terms acknowledge that the addressee is superior in terms of age. Consequently, *Sammi* and *xaalti* indicate respect since the speaker using them is acknowledging an element of social power in relation to the addressee.

5.2. Promoting Solidarity

In a society where status may be measured by the number of people in the family be it the immediate or the extended family, and where social favors or exchanges are typical among family members, extending kinship terms to refer to strangers is a typical social practice in Jordan. The major intention is to promote solidarity when the two parties involved belong to the same age group.

Typical among young male friends in particular is the reciprocal use of *?ibin xaalti* ابن خالتي ‘son of my maternal aunt’. This is not unexpected especially since the term *xaalti* خالتي ‘my maternal aunt’ is the expected form of address for a friend’s mother as explained in Section 5.1. It is of interest that female friends do not use any kinship term as a form of address nor do males when addressing their female friends. Personal names are more often used. This might beg the question whether friendship between male friends is closer than that between female friends. Older male friends and older female friends on the other hand are not addressed by any kinship terms. They are typically married with children and thus it is more socially appropriate to address them with *?abu* أبو ‘father of ___’ or *?um* أم ‘mother of ___’ as explained in Section 4 above.

With the use of *?ibin xaalti*, the speaker intends to minimize social distance since this kinship term indicates that the speaker is treated as a relative or confidant. This expression is used when the speaker wants to indicate that he perceives the addressee as an equal in terms of power and as an intimate relative in case of the social distance parameter. In reality, speaker

and addressee might not be equal or familiar at all.

Of more interest is the use of the terms for ‘brother’ and ‘sister’ to address strangers belonging to the same age group. Younger people use *ʔax* أخ ‘brother’ and *ʔuxt* أخت ‘sister’ to refer to guys and girls respectively⁵, while older people use the variants of the same terms namely, *xajjuu* خيو ‘brother’ and *xajja* خيه or *xajta* خيتي ‘sister’. To understand the rationale behind this fictive extension of the kinship terms in Jordanian Arabic, it is important to note that this sociolinguistic phenomenon is related to both age and gender. It is an attempt by the speaker to show or seek good intentions from the addressee and thus promotes solidarity between the two parties. Despite the sense of brotherhood which *ʔax* carries as a fictive kinship term, it is usually used in formal situations between new acquaintances who haven’t met each other before. That is why this address form can function as a distancing device when one employs it in speaking to an intimate person who used to be addressed by using solidarity-related expressions such as first name, nick name, family name, or *ʔibin xaalti*. This strategy is considered an indirect announcement by the addresser that the intimacy politeness system we used in the past has just changed into a deference politeness system where we may communicate using more formal expressions and structures.

When the speaker and addressee are both either male or female, the message intended behind the use of the words for ‘brother’ and ‘sister’ respectively is something along the lines of ‘It is true that I do not know you and you do not know me, nevertheless try to help me or withstand me as you would help or withstand your brother or sister. I’m trying to be as nice as possible to avoid a confrontation’. This is particularly why such fictive extension is most typically used when the addressee seems irritated or at least not friendly. On the other hand, if the speaker and addressee belong to different genders, the fictive extension of ‘brother’ ‘sister’ is intended to deliver the following message if the speaker is male and the addressee is female: ‘Do not be afraid of me. I’m like your brother’. But if the speaker is female and the addressee is male, then the fictive extension is intended to deliver the following message: ‘Treat me like a sister. Let me feel safe talking to you’.

6. Reciprocal Kinship Terms in Jordan

Certain blood relations are naturally reciprocal. Siblings of the same gender enjoy a naturally reciprocal relation. They address one another by ‘brother’ or ‘sister’ depending on gender. In English, the term ‘cousin’ is reciprocal irrespective of gender or side of the family involved. In Arabic however, not all ‘cousin’ terms are reciprocal. Reciprocal ‘cousin’ relations hold under two conditions. On the one hand, gender of the speaker and address must be the same and, on the other hand, father of the addressee must be either a paternal uncle *ʔammi* or his mother a maternal aunt *xaalti*. Accordingly, the only reciprocal ‘cousin’ kinship phrases in Jordanian Arabic are the following, noting that gender must be the same:

- | | | |
|------------------------------------|---------------------|-----------|
| 1. ‘son of my paternal uncle’ | <i>ʔibin ʔammi</i> | إبن عمي |
| 2. ‘son of my maternal aunt’ | <i>ʔibin xaalti</i> | إبن خالتي |
| 3. ‘daughter of my paternal uncle’ | <i>bint ʔammi</i> | بنت عمي |
| 4. ‘daughter of my maternal aunt’ | <i>bint xaalti</i> | بنت خالتي |

Other than the above, no natural reciprocal blood relations hold among members of the society. However, a rather interesting fictive extension of blood relations is commonly

⁵ When calling for someone, the vocative /ja/ is added before the word and the possessive suffix /_i/ may be added as well; for example *ja ʔaxi* يا اخي means ‘hey, my brother’ and *ja ʔuxti* يا أختي means ‘hey, my sister’.

practiced by Jordanians. A term for a non-reciprocal blood relation such as that between a father and his son is used reciprocally. The kinship terms used by children to address their parents, by grandchildren to address their grandparents, and by nephews and nieces to address their uncles and aunts are reciprocated by the parents, grandparents, and uncles and aunts respectively. This reciprocal extension of blood relations is intended to show affection precisely because of the direction of reciprocation. The older member of the relation reciprocates the kinship term used by the younger member.

The semantic validity of the kinship term is lost and replaced by a pragmatic usage of the term. Accordingly, when my son or my daughter calls me 'dad', I call them 'dad' as well. This rather affectionate reciprocal extension of blood relations is also used by strangers when they are addressed by a kinship term for respect as explained in Section 5.1 earlier. Thus if I call an older unfamiliar woman *xaalti* as a sign of respect, she would also reciprocate and call me *xaalti* to show affection. This reciprocal use of the terms still retains the power indications related to age previously discussed in Section 5.1, but their dominant function now is that they are intended to minimize social distance between speaker and addressee and promote affection; that the speaker looks at the addressee as a nephew when *ʕammi* is uttered by an older male or as a niece in the case of *xaalti* uttered by an older female.

If real kinship relations are defined in terms of biology and marriage and fictive kinship involves the extension of kinship obligations and relationships to individuals specifically not otherwise included in the kinship universe, then the affectionate reciprocal extension of blood relations discussed above is real and fictive at the same time. The blood relation between a father and his son is real while the reciprocal extension is not. Accordingly, this paper proposes an extension of the definition of fictive kinship relations to include such reciprocal blood relations. As such, fictive kin is a term used to refer to any false relation between individuals. The false relation may be due to the absence of a relation through birth or marriage, or because the birth relation is not valid.

7. Conclusion

This paper has provided a descriptive view of the use of kinship terms in Jordanian society. Use of fictive kinship terms in this society is a social requirement rather than a choice. Kinship terms are extended to older strangers to show respect and to strangers within the same generation to promote solidarity. A new type of fictive kinship is introduced whereby a blood relation is extended fictively. Such extensions are intended to show affection towards the addressee and thus they are typically used by older people when addressing younger blood relatives. This extension of the fictive term is also used by older strangers reciprocally when they are addressed by a kinship term.

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Studies in Society and History 33: 158-168.

first version received 29 August 2010
revised version received 25 October 2010