

## Kinship Terminologies: Cognitive Truth or Hocus-Pocus?

### A Reply to Kronenfeld

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I want to thank David Kronenfeld for his comment. I will reply in five points.

### “Easy to Apply” or Cognitively Authentic

Kronenfeld (2017, in this issue) distinguishes definitions of kin terms that offer the best portrayal of how native speakers think (“cognitive mapping”) from definitions that provide “the cleanest portrayal of the logical structure that underlies a given kinship terminology.” He appears to be far more interested in the latter. He contrasts Gould formal analysis of kinship terminologies as able to “produce a powerful and transparent algebraic analysis,” which is “easy for anyone to apply, and it facilitates easy cross-kin term-system comparisons” with “Wierzbicka’s analysis,” which “does *not* appear to facilitate the particular kinds of cross-cultural comparisons that I spoke of.”

Well, maybe so. Clearly Kronenfeld’s goals and priorities are different from mine. My goal is to arrive at verbal explications (paraphrases) that are cognitively authentic, not to produce algebraic definitions easy for anyone to apply (cf. Burling 1969).

### Empirical Realities and Logical Fictions

Kronenfeld defends Gould’s use of the term “fatherling” as a supposed human universal. But English has no such word, whereas, like all other known languages, it does have words for “mother” and “father.” The fact that “fatherling” would be a “precise reciprocal” to “father” does not give it any empirical existence. On all available evidence, “mother” and “father” are indeed human conceptual and lexical universals, whereas “fatherling” is not.

### Cognitively Authentic Definitions and Folk Definitions

Kronenfeld speaks in one breath of “native speakers’ kin term definitions” and “a portrayal of native speakers’ cognitive mapping,” contrasting them both with algebraic approaches. If I had to choose between folk definitions produced by a talented

and experienced “folk lexicographer” (such as the Warlpiri native speaker PPJ in Central Australia [Goddard and Wierzbicka, forthcoming]) and algebraic definitions favored by Kronenfeld, I would choose the former anytime. Nonetheless, definitions of kin terms offered by native speakers are not always reliable guides to their own conceptualizations. Meanings that guide native speakers in their language use are not always immediately accessible to them without careful, rigorous analysis of their own usage.

This can be illustrated from monolingual English dictionaries, which offer different vernacular definitions for the same words. For example, Collins Cobuild (1991) defines “parents” and “father” as follows: “Your parents are your father and mother,” “Your father is the man who is one of your parents,” whereas Longman (1984) defines “parent” as “father or mother,” “mother” as “a female parent,” and “father” as “the male parent of a child.” Such definitions are circular, contradict one another, and are not based on any a rigorous methodology. The NSM (natural semantic metalanguage) approach offers such a methodology and systematically tests it in numerous publications (e.g., Wierzbicka 2013, 2016b, forthcoming; Xue 2016).

### Kronenfeld on NSM

In his 2015 paper, Kronenfeld gives the NSM theory short shrift (as quoted in my CA paper [Wierzbicka 2016a]). In his comment in this issue, he says: “My reservations about the particular NSM approach used by Wierzbicka . . . have been explained in print . . . in the most detail in my 2000 chapter (Kronenfeld 2000 . . .). There was simply not sufficient space to say anything more in my 2015 chapter (Kronenfeld 2015).” The list of references in Kronenfeld 2000 does not include any of my publications at all (whether on kinship or on NSM). Note 4 in Kronenfeld (2000), to which Kronenfeld’s commentary refers, includes no discussion of NSM—only a plea for “more explanation”—and ignores the voluminous NSM literature on the subject that offers such explanations.

### The Anglocentrism of Kronenfeld’s Approach

In his comment, Kronenfeld says that his 1980 analysis of Fanti kin terms “was directly based on Fanti statements about why someone belonged to a particular kin term category” (1980). Unfortunately, “directly based” evidently means for him recoding the statements obtained from Fanti consultants into English words with no Fanti equivalents, such as “male,” “sister,” and “child of” (hidden behind technical-looking abbreviations such as “m,” “Z,” and “C”).

Kronenfeld affirms that “the resulting analysis . . . utilized no metalanguage at all.” However, using English kin terms to analyze Fanti kin terms does not amount to using “no metalanguage at all” but to using English as a default metalanguage (i.e., to treating English as *die Menschensprache*, ‘the human language’, as an Egyptian courtier in Thomas Mann’s mas-

terpiece *Joseph und seine Brüder* called Egyptian Arabic of his time).

As I said in my rejoinder to my 2016 *CA* paper, if an anthropologist doesn't mind being Anglocentric and living conceptually "imprisoned in English" (Wierzbicka 2014), this is their choice. I agree with Kronenfeld that there is no such thing as "a single best analysis for any system." What is best depends on one's goals and priorities. For NSM researchers, understanding other people's conceptualizations is more important than devising analyses "easy for anyone to apply" (where "anyone" stands for an Anglophone anthropologist or linguist).

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