KOREAN KINSHIP TERMINOLOGY:
A SEMANTIC ANALYSIS

Han-Kon Kim

I. Introduction

This is a semantic analysis of the kinship terminology in Korean. The aim is to find out what the minimum distinctive features are and to see how they are combined in some of the terms.

The idea of componential or feature analysis in the semantic study of the kinship terminology is analogous to the phonemic concept. One characteristic of a phonemic transcription is that it “allows a smaller number of symbols in the transcription” and “provides a description of allophonic variation in a set of rules,” hence reducing the redundancy of a transcription. Such generalization inherent in the phonemic concept is analogous to generalization in componential analysis of the semantic features involved in the kinship terminology. If it is possible to employ a set of symbols denoting the semantic components from which a set of symbols may be selected to be combined and represent the meaning of a word or a morpheme, representation of the meanings of all the terms involved becomes possible in terms of the limited and hopefully smaller number of component symbols.

1 This is the second revision of the present writer’s paper read at a linguistics class Advanced Linguistic Analysis (Semantics) by Professor Fred W. Householder who was a visiting professor at the University of Hawaii in 1965-66. This is a slight revision of the first revision which was based on Professor Householder’s suggestions.

2 By the term “distinctive features” is meant semantic components or features which may be combined to define the kinship terms in a language.


4 It must be mentioned here that such semantic components are covert, i.e. each of the components is not represented by a corresponding linguistic form. It has been pointed out by Weinreich that componential analysis is “required only for the covert semantic components” while on the other hand “the complex expressions such as noun compounds, unless they are idiomatic, can be analyzed as kernel constructions,” and “their meaning can be formulated in terms of the meanings of the overt constituents and the relations of linking, nesting, and backgrounding.” Uriel Weinreich, “On the Semantic Structure of a Language,” Joseph H. Greenberg, ed., Universals of Language, p. 205, fn 65.
The procedure followed in this analysis is divided into three steps as Romney suggests:  
1. List all genealogical kin types in the notational system which we are going to see below,  
2. Reduce the range of each term to a single notational expression, and  
3. In the final step, define components in terms of significant and minimal differences among reduced ranges or expressions.

II. The Notational System

The notational symbols are mixture of Romney's, Hammel's and my own devised for the analysis of Korean.  
\[ m \] stands for a person of male sex.  
\[ f \] stands for a person of female sex.  
\[ a \] stands for a person of any sex.  
\[ x \] stands for a person of either sex, provided that it is opposite to \( y \).  
\[ y \] stands for a person of either sex, but opposite to \( x \).  
\[ : \] represents a marriage link.  
\[ 0 \] represents a sibling link.  
\[ 00 \] represents collateral of 4-step removal.  
\[ 000 \] represents collateral of 6-step removal.  
\[ 0000 \] represents collateral of 8-step removal.  
\[ + \] represents a parent link, or upward by one generation.  
\[ - \] represents a child link, or downward by one generation.  
\[ + \text{ superscript} \] represents a person older than the person represented by the preceding term in sibling relation to him or its equivalence.  
\[ - \text{ superscript} \] represents a person younger than the person represented by the term in sibling relation to him or its equivalence.

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5 Romney, op. cit., p. 129. Wallace and Atkins suggest five steps which, however, is not fundamentally different from Romney's three steps. Therefore the procedure of recording the set of kinship terms is not included in the present analysis. Wallace and Atkins, op. cit., p. 62.  
7 4-, 6-, 8-step removal, etc. will be discussed in Section IV, Rule 4.  
8 See Section IV, Rule 4 Siblings and collateral equivalence rule.
III. Listing Kin Types in the Notational Scheme.\(^9\)

The data\(^{10}\) and defining expressions are given together in this section. In order to simplify the presentation, the first two steps suggested by Romney are not clearly distinguished. Instead of a large bulk of kin-type expressions, a number of reduced or generalized expressions are given when they look so obvious that they can be presented directly.

**Group i.**

1. apeci \(a+m\)
2. emeni \(a+f\)
3. a copwu \(a+m+m\)
4. b \((\text{oy}-\text{copwu})^{11}\) \(a+f+m\)
5. a cungcopwu \(a+m+a+m\)
6. b \((\text{oy}-\text{cungcopwu})\) \(a+f+a+m\)
7. c samtay-copwu \(a+m+a+m\)
8. a cungcomo \(a+m+a+f\)
9. b \((\text{oy}-\text{cungcomo})\) \(a+f+a+f\)
10. c samtay-como \(a+m+a+f\)
11. a kocopwu \(a+m+a+a+m\)
12. b \((\text{oy}-\text{kocopwu})\) \(a+f+a+a+m\)

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\(^{9}\) Most of the cover terms in the kinship terminology have been excluded from the study for they do not seem to be of great importance for investigation of the semantic features.

\(^{10}\) Martin’s Yale Romanization is used in presenting kinship terms. Samuel E. Martin, *Korean Morphophonemics*, pp. 1-2.

\(^{11}\) Parentheses in kinship terms designate optional elements. More details will be discussed later in the paper. As the present concern is semantic analysis, only one term for each kin type is listed unless its synonym seems to have a different range of meaning. For example, halapeci for copwu, halmeni for como, and many others have been eliminated.
Korean Kinship Terminology: A Semantic Analysis

7.e
8.a
8. b
8. c
9.
10.
11. a
11. b
12. a
12. b
13. a
13. b
13. c
14. a
14. b
14. c
15. a
15. b
15. c
16. a
16. b
16. c

Group ii.

17. il-chon*¹²
18. i-chon*
19. sam-chon
20. sa-chon
21. o-chon
22. ywuk-chon
23. chil-chon
24. phal-chon

¹² * shows rare occurrence of terms. Those two terms (Nos. 17 and 18) will be discussed in Section IV.
Group iii.

25. hyeng  
|   | m0m+ (= m+m−m+) |
26. awu  
|   | m0m− |
27. nwuna  
|   | m0f+ |
28. nwuitongsayng  
|   | m0f− |
29. enni  
|   | f0f+ |
30. yetongsayng  
|   | f0f− (or sometimes m0f− cf. No. 28) |
31. namtongsayng  
|   | f0m− (or sometimes m0m− cf. No. 26) |
32. oppa  
|   | f0m+ |

Group iv. 13

33. a congkyeng  
|   | m+m0a−m+ |
33. b icongkyeng  
|   | m+f0f−m+ |
33. c sachon-hyeng  
|   | m+a0a−m+ |
34. a congcey  
|   | m+m0a−m− |
34. b icongcey  
|   | m+f0f−m− |
34. c sachon-tongsayng  
|   | m+a0a−m− |
35. a caycongkyeng  
|   | m+m+a0a−a−m+ |
35. c ywukchon-hyeng  
|   | m+a+a0a−a−m+ |
36. a caycongcey  
|   | m+m+a0a−a−m− |
36. c ywukchon-tongsayng  
|   | m+a+a0a−a−m− |
37. a samcongkyeng  
|   | m+m+a+a0a−a−a−m+ |
37. c phalchon-hyeng  
|   | m+a+a+a0a−a−a−m+ |
38. a samcongcey  
|   | m+m+a+a0a−a−a−m− |
38. c phalchon-tongsayng  
|   | m+a+a+a0a−a−a−m− |
39. icong  
|   | af0f−a |

Group v.

40. cokha  
|   | a0a−a |
41. cil  
|   | a0m−m |
42. cillye  
|   | a0m−f |
43. sayngcil  
|   | a0f−m |
44. sayngcillye  
|   | a0f−f |

13 In this group there is no kin type listed in which the ego is female except for 39. icong. Such kin types are compounded by prefixing sachon-, ywukchon- and phalchon- to the terms 29-32. See discussions in Section IV, Rule 4.
### Group vi.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Explanation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>45</td>
<td>swukpwu</td>
<td>$a + m 0 m^-$ (sometimes $a + f 0 m$ also)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>46</td>
<td>paykpwu</td>
<td>$a + m 0 m^+$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>46b</td>
<td>oyswuk</td>
<td>$a + f 0 m$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>47</td>
<td>komo</td>
<td>$a + m 0 f$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>48</td>
<td>imo</td>
<td>$a + f 0 f$</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Group vii.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Explanation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>49</td>
<td>anay</td>
<td>$m : f$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50</td>
<td>cang-in</td>
<td>$m : f + m$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51</td>
<td>cangmo</td>
<td>$m : f + f$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>52</td>
<td>checopwu</td>
<td>$m : f + m + m$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>53</td>
<td>checomo</td>
<td>$m : f + m + f$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>54</td>
<td>chenam</td>
<td>$m : f 0 m$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55</td>
<td>chehyeng</td>
<td>$m : f 0 f^+$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>56</td>
<td>checey</td>
<td>$m : f 0 f^-$</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Group viii.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Explanation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>57</td>
<td>nampyeen</td>
<td>$f : m$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>58</td>
<td>siapeci</td>
<td>$f : m + m$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>59</td>
<td>siemeni</td>
<td>$f : m + f$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60</td>
<td>sicopwu</td>
<td>$f : m + m + m$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>61</td>
<td>sicomo</td>
<td>$f : m + m + f$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>62</td>
<td>siswuk</td>
<td>$f : m 0 m$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>63</td>
<td>sinwui</td>
<td>$f : m 0 f$</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Group ix.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Explanation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>64</td>
<td>hyengswu</td>
<td>$m 0 m^+ : f$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>65</td>
<td>ceyswu</td>
<td>$m 0 m^- : f$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>66</td>
<td>mayhyeng</td>
<td>$m 0 f^+ : m$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>67</td>
<td>maycey</td>
<td>$m 0 f^- : m$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>68</td>
<td>maypwu</td>
<td>$m 0 f : m$</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Group x.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Explanation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>69</td>
<td>hyengpwu</td>
<td>$f 0 f^+ : m$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>70</td>
<td>ceynang</td>
<td>$f 0 f^- : m$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>71</td>
<td>olkhey</td>
<td>$f 0 m : f$</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Group xi.
72. swukmo \(a + m 0 m^{-} : f\)
72.b (oy-)swukmo \(a + f 0 m : f\)
73. paykmo \(a + m 0 m^{+} : f\)
74. koswuk \(a + m 0 f : m\)
75. iswuk \(a + f 0 f : m\)

Group xii.
76. myenwuli \(a - m : f\)
77.a sonpwu \(a - m - m : f\)
77.b (oy-)sonpwu \(a - f - m : f\)
78.a cungsonpwu \(a - m - a - m : f\)
78.b (oy-)cungsonpwu \(a - f - a - m : f\)
79.a kosonpwu \(a - m - a - a - m : f\)
79.b (oy-)kosonpwu \(a - f - a - a - m : f\)

Group xiii.
80. sawi \(a - f : m\)
81.a soncasawi \(a - m - f : m\)
81.b (oy-)soncasawi \(a - f - f : m\)
82.a cungsoncasawi \(a - m - a - f : m\)
82.b (oy-)cungsoncasawi \(a - f - a - f : m\)
83.a kosoncasawi \(a - m - a - a - f : m\)
83.b (oy-)kosoncasawi \(a - f - a - a - f : m\)

Group xiv.
84. kyeeymo \(a + m : f\)
85. kyeypwu \(a + f : m\)
86. ipwut-casik \(x : y - a\)
87. ipwut-atul \(x : y - m\)
88. ipwut-ttal \(x : y - f\)

IV. Reducing Range to Single Expression.\(^{14}\)

Rule 1. Rule of minimum difference within range. When a kin term represents more than

\(^{14}\) The rules and reducing procedures are modeled on Romney's. But some of the characteristic features in Korean necessitated some modifications as may be seen by comparison of the present discussion with his.
one kin types which are identical except for a difference in sex markers in the same position, the kin types are written as one with an "a" symbol to cover the range of difference in sex markers. All of the expressions for kin terms in Section III have already been through this step. But one feature we must note here is the sex of the first link in those expressions, 3, a—8, c and 11, a—16, c. For example, in the pair

\[
3, a \quad \text{copwu} \quad a + m + m \\
3, b \quad (\text{oy-})\text{copwu} \quad a + f + m
\]

the only difference is the sex of the first link and the prefix oy- is optional. When the optional element is not chosen, the two kin types are equivalenced. Then the expression for copwu may be written as a+a+m. When the terms are used as vocative,\(^\text{15}\) they are usually or more often equivalenced. On the other hand, when the terms are used for referring to kinsmen, they are usually distinguished. But this is not consistent practice, and depends more or less on the speaker's choice. This is true of all the other pairs of terms -4, a : 4, b, 5, a : 5, b, etc.\(^\text{16}\)

Rule 2. Rule of sequence difference within range. Where two expressions are identical except for one additional link with the same relation marker (+ or -), the same links may be written in parentheses. A superscript number is used in order to indicate the number of reduction made or the number of possible optional expansion. By this rule we get the following general expressions from those in Group i.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reduced from Nos.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>G1. a(+m(+a)\text{\textsuperscript{0,1,2}})\text{\textsuperscript{0,1}} + m</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G2. a(−m(−a)\text{\textsuperscript{0,1,2}})\text{\textsuperscript{0,1}} − m</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G3. a(+m(+a)\text{\textsuperscript{0,1,2}})\text{\textsuperscript{0,1}} + f</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G4. a(−m(−a)\text{\textsuperscript{0,1,2}})\text{\textsuperscript{0,1}} − f</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G5. a+f(+a)\text{\textsuperscript{0,1,2}} + m</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G6. a−f(−a)\text{\textsuperscript{0,1,2}} − m</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G7. a+f(+a)\text{\textsuperscript{0,1,2}} + f</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G8. a−f(−a)\text{\textsuperscript{0,1,2}} − f</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Rule 3. Rule of the absolute number of +−‘s. In addition to the ordinary kinship terms,

\(^\text{15}\) The term here is not employed to mean that Korean has vocative case as one of its grammatical categories. It is only to refer to the case when a speaker calls to another person by one of the terms.

\(^\text{16}\) Sometimes in order to designate the male in the first link, chin- is prefixed to copwu (hence chin-copwu) in contrast with oy-copwu. But it is used only when one's first mention of the term copwu has caused ambiguity and the speaker's clarification of the term is needed.
Korean has a numerical system. It seems that the numerical system was originally used for indicating the degree of relationship of kinsmen. But nowadays terms of the system are also used as kinship terms with restrictions which will be discussed below. It includes those terms in Group ii. The first parts of the terms are numbers: *il*—"one," *i*—"two," *sam*—"three," *sa*—"four," *o*—"five," *ywuk*—"six," *chil*—"seven," *phal*—"eight." *Chon* is the unit of the measure of the degree or distance of the relationship. As the terms and the expressions for them show, the positive or the negative qualities of the +− relationships are not taken into consideration. The only feature which matters is the absolute number of +− markers intervening between the ego and the kinsman.

The first restriction on the use of the numerical system for kinship terms concerns the range of its application. It is used most frequently within the range indicated by the bold lines in Chart I, i.e. collaterals within the range between one generation up and down. Another tendency is that this numerical system is not often used in referring to the lineal kinsmen as indicated by the dotted line in the chart. In such cases those terms in Group i designated by numbers with a’s and b’s (e.g. 3.a, 3.b, 4.a, 4.b, etc.) or those designated by numbers with c’s (e.g. 5.c, 6.c, etc.) may be used. In those terms marked by numbers with c’s (e.g. 5.c, 6.c, 7.c, 8.c, 13.c, 14.c, and 16.c), the morphemes, *samtay−*, *satay−*, etc. are used regardless of whether the kinsman is the ego’s upper or lower generations. “Upper” or “lower” are self-evident by the following terms, *copwu* and *como* (upper) or *sonca* and *sonnye* (lower). Finally both in lineal and sibling relations those designated by parenthesized numbers (in Chart I) are rarely referred to by the numerical system.17

**Rule 4. Sibling and collateral equivalence rule.** A term or a set of two terms in sibling

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17 I have a few times noticed instances in which parents or older persons were teaching the children how to use the numerical system. In such instances I heard the elders saying, “The relation between you and Father is *il-chon* (see No. 17), the relation between you and your brother or sister is *i-chon* (see No. 18), the relation between you and your uncle is *sam-chon,*” and so on.
relation can be equated with one 0, if they are immediately preceded by + and followed by -. This is actually equivalent to using the rule $a + m - a = a \cdot 0 \cdot a$ recursively. Hence,

\[ G9. \quad a + m - a^+ = a \cdot 0 \cdot a^+ \]  
\[ G10. \quad a + a + m - a - a^+ = a + a \cdot 0 \cdot a - a^+ \]  
\[ = a \cdot 0 \cdot 0 \cdot a + a^+ \]  
\[ G11. \quad a + a + a + m - a - a - a - a^+ = a + a \cdot 0 \cdot 0 \cdot a - a^+ \]  
\[ = a \cdot 0 \cdot 0 \cdot 0 \cdot a + a^+ \]  

where the number of 0's is meant to designate the number of the times of application of the recursive rule. As each 0 involves one set of + - signs, it equals every i-chon, hence 00 = sa-chon, 000 = ywuk-chon, 0000 = phal-chon, etc. This is what is meant in Section II as collateral of “4-step removal,” “6-step removal,” and “8-step removal.” Incidentally, in Korean custom, a kinsman beyond 8-step removal is not considered a relative in the real sense of the word. The sibling and collateral equivalence rule is also optional. When one calls to a kinsman, equivalence is almost obligatory. When referring to him or her, talking to another person, one either calls him or her simply hyeng “elder brother,” nwuna “elder sister,” and so on (equivalenced case) or sa-chon hyeng (also conghyeng and iconghyeng) “elder brother of 4-step removal,” ywuk-chon nwuna “elder sister of 6-step removal” and so on (unequivalenced case as in Group iv). Therefore, those terms in Group iv may be regarded as another set of terms for the same kin types which may be called by the corresponding terms in Group iii, of course, only in case of equivalence. But, for those kin types in which the ego is female, such type of designations as 33. c, 34. c, 35. c, 36. c, 37. c, and 38. c, (i.e. numerical system plus terms in Group iii as noted in Footnote 13) is only used, thus sachon-enni, ywukchon-oppa, phalchon-namtongsayng, etc. except one instance of 39. i-cong(a+f 0 f-a).

Rule 5. Step equivalence rule. Step-relations are equivalenced with consanguinal relations. Hence

\[ +a = + \quad \text{e.g.} \quad a + m : f = a + f \]  
\[ : a = - \quad \text{e.g.} \quad x : y - m = a - m \]  

This equivalence is obligatory in case of vocative, but in other situations those terms in Group xiv (without equivalence) are often used when one is asked for detailed information.

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18 Here superscript "-' is an abbreviated symbol for two contrasting terms or expressions. For example, $a^+a^-$ represents both $a^0a^+$ and $a^0a^-$. As for the equivalence symbols, another system $\bigcirc$, $\bigotimes$, $\bigoplus$ seems to be more revealing. But because of inconvenience in typing or printing, corresponding number of 0's are simply lined up instead.
V. Defining Features on Basis of Minimal Differences among the General Expressions.

On basis of the reduced expressions in Sections III and IV, we can find three main and one auxiliary types of features in Korean: (1) sex, (2) generation, (3) relative age, and (4) degree of removal from the ego.

1. Sex.

A. **Sex of the speaker**: When two expressions are identical except for the initial sex marker, sex of the speaker is a distinctive feature. For example, such pairs are 25:32, 26:31, 27:29, 28:30. Sex of the speaker in marriage link is also a distinctive variable because, with the sex of the speaker and the marriage link given, sex of the kinsman is predictable.

B. **Sex of the kinsman**: When two expressions are identical except for the final sex marker, sex of the kinsman is a distinctive feature. Some of the examples are pairs such as G1:G3, G2:G4, G5:G7 and G6:G8 in Section I; 25:27, 26:28, 29:32, 30:31 in Group iii and 76:80, 77.b:81.b in Groups xii and xiii, etc. In Groups xii and xiii the first terms of the marriage link could more naturally be regarded as distinctive (according to the present writer's own intuition as a native speaker). But as they are predictable from the sex of the kinsmen even though with a slight feeling of unnaturalness, we can do without setting up another feature.

C. **Sex of the first link**: Sex of the first link is a distinctive feature. There are two types of sex of the first link: one in + - relation and another in 0 relation. Such examples are G1 : G5, G2 : G6, G3 : G7, G4 : G8 in Section I (but only when the superscript for the outer parentheses is 1 in each of G1, G2, G3 and G4); 41 : 43, 42 : 44 in Group v; 47 : 48 in Group vi; 77.a : 77.b, 78.a : 78.b, 81.a : 81.b, 82.a : 82.b, 83.a : 83.b, etc. in Groups xii and xiii.

2. Generation.

—Both in the lineal and the collateral relations, if the sum of the + – signs in an expression is

A. Positive, the generation of the kinsman is higher than that of the ego by the number of the +’s,

B. Negative, it is lower than that of the ego by the number of the –’s, and

C. Zero, the relation is that of sibling or collateral of the same generation.

3. Relative age.
—The distinction applies only to the sibling relation and its equivalence (i.e. collateral of the same generation). Such examples are 25 : 26, 27 : 28, 29 : 30, 31 : 32 in Group iii; 33.a : 34.a, 35.a : 36.a, 37.a : 38.a as unequivalenced in Group iv; G9, G10, G11, G12 as equivalenced by Rule 4 in Section IV; 55 : 56 in Group vii, 64 : 65, 66 : 67 in Group ix, 69 : 70 in Group x; 72 : 73 in Group xi, etc.

4. Degree of removal from ego.

This auxiliary numerical feature can be used either independently or in conjunction with non-numerical word terms. Examples are all in Group ii. The number of combinations of the latter type is large and they are not listed in this paper.

Finally we notice that a large number of those terms are combinations of smaller morphemic units. We could possibly define those morphemes by feature expressions of the same kind and make up a set of semantic rules for the combination of those morphemes into larger units, kinship terms.19 The difficulty here seems to be how to take care of the phenomenon that the same morpheme often has different sets of features in different environments. In other words, in such combinatorial processes the changes in sets of features as valences of a morpheme in different environments seem often to be so varied that they complicate the analysis beyond a manageable degree. The present writer hopes to investigate the same theme in this connection and make a comparative study of the two different approaches. (Ewha Womans University)

REFERENCES


19 See Note 4.