

The nature of kinship terms: From dad and mum to god and society

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Abstract: Why do we call our parents mother and father? Why do we call ourselves these general words around children? These personal questions have not sufficiently drawn the attention of linguists and psychologists, yet any account of language and human cognition must be able to provide a good answer. Indeed, our minds have evolved and develop in a social setting that is primarily governed by norms of kinship. This article demonstrates how those norms encapsulate the relationship between language and reality, individual and society. I suggest that the use of kinship terms is characterised by a self-deceptive conflation of address and reference, which corresponds to a cognitive conflation of particular and universal meanings. This analysis requires a distinction between acts of address and reference that is consistent with a biological view of the individual. From this grounded perspective, I argue that 1) Mother and Father are elementary mythical characters, 2) myth has a basis in child-directed speech, and 3) child-directed speech is mainly a means to transmit societal norms, not so much a means to help children learn to speak or relate to others. I also discuss the conceptual issues in developmental linguistics that result from this lack of metalinguistic awareness, issues that go back to the beginnings of philosophy. Because nature is prior to nurture, and the concepts of parents and kin appear first in life, understanding the nature of these concepts elucidates central problems, from those of epistemology to the current questioning of gender and parenting roles.

Keywords: child-directed speech, evolutionary psychology, language socialisation, self-deception, definition of morality, origins of language, philosophy

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Philosophy is a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language
—Ludwig Wittgenstein

1. Introduction

The present article examines the meaning of words that are no doubt emotionally powerful. This might explain the absence of previous scientific attention to the topic.¹ I personally have considerable trouble calling my parents anything other than Mum and Dad. Yet there is a growing curiosity as to why human beings should use these words and not personal names, for instance. There is, however, a lot more questioning of why mothers or fathers should be female or male, or why should people be labelled according to gender, a practice that seems disrespectful to many. Such a focus on gender is puzzling, because being labelled a parent has even more to do with reproduction. People appear to have a more difficult relationship with the kind of biological label that is less talked about. To see it intuitively, imagine addressing your father by his proper name, in the way friends are addressed, rather than by the name *Dad*. Now picture addressing your favourite pet by the name *Dog*. Neither of these uses seems very appropriate, yet this is so for wildly opposed reasons: respect is shown to the (supposedly) more respectable one through the kind of word that disrespects the less respectable one. In other words, we call the man a dad because he is one, whereas we avoid calling the dog what it is and give it a personal name instead.

It is indeed widely acknowledged by sociolinguists that rules of address are very important in a language and carry a strong emotional content, which is made evident if they are violated. This article explains why that happens by making a key observation. Consider again the word *dad*, a variant of *father* in everyday English. This term of kinship can be used by the speaker both as a

¹ The author could not find any formal research despite having contacted leading experts. In ‘Developmental Sociolinguistics: Child Language in a Social Setting’, Johanna DeStefano (1971) noted ‘a growing awareness of the interaction between society and language’ in connection with a ‘sociolinguistic awareness’ or ‘metalinguistic awareness’ in children and adults alike. Over 40 years later, the field of developmental sociolinguistics remains ‘relatively under-researched’ (Nardy, Chevrot, & Barbu, 2013). A book such as *Language in Cognitive Development: The Emergence of the Mediated Mind* (Nelson, 1998) refers to a dialogue ‘with Father’ (p. 140), supposedly meaning the father of the child who was the object of study. The same was the case with other works in related fields. An enquiry by a popular science website on why fathers call themselves ‘Dad’ around children (Geggel, 2015) was equally unsuccessful and had to contact experts directly. I address their answers in section 2.

form of address ('Dad, are you there?') and a term of reference ('I saw Dad at the bar') without any formal alteration (not 'I saw the dad at the bar'), in the same way as the speaker would use the addressee's or referent's first name ('I saw Jack at the bar'). By contrast, the word *child* isn't normally used to address small children, but to refer to them, and in the latter case it becomes a common noun ('a child was born', not 'Child was born'). However, both *dad* and *child* refer to individuals having a biological or natural relation to each other, as do the words *sire* and *pup* in the case of dogs. In describing their expected behaviour, we refer to them as types of individuals characterised by natural traits ('there is nothing like a father's love for his child', 'sires are very protective of their pups'). Thus, the lack of formal distinction in the case of *dad* seems to register a conflation of the intersubjective or private context in which a particular individual is addressed as 'Dad' with the objective or public context in which he is referred to as a dad (fig. 1).

It is not the lack of formal distinction that is relevant in the above analysis, but its semantic aspect. Let's use a hypothetical interaction between a pup and its mother for comparison. The particular individual that the pup means to address ('Mum, will you take care of me?') is the same as the individual it confusingly references through a category of individual ('Where is Mum?') This is perhaps best illustrated by a situation at a children's playground where 'Mum' is being called and the poor mothers are left to rely on their senses. At the same time, the ambiguity seems natural. It is relatively well-known that children 'overextend' these words beyond the specific individuals who are their parents (Saxton, 2017, p. 137). It is also a common anthropological fact that a child can have more than one mother and one father in different societies. All of this happens inside a context of baby talk or pet talk, which I shall discuss next.

2. Baby talk

The distinctive way in which elders talk to young children is called child-directed speech (CDS) or baby talk. Researchers point to aspects of phonology, vocabulary, morphology and difference from adult-directed speech as its characteristics (Saxton, 2017, p. 88). Their basic assumption is that this form of speech helps children acquire social and language skills. Studies on cultures that do not use CDS, so understood, seem to falsify the claim that it is in our nature. In these cultures, language is not directed 'toward the child as information processor' and yet the children become fluent speakers on time (Ochs & Schieffelin, 2009). However, the fact that members of a distant,

traditional culture who cannot understand English are still able to recognise CDS in English (Bryant & Barrett, 2007) would seem to suggest that the phenomenon is species-wide. In this light, it seems incorrect to define it as an explicit means to help the child speak and relate to others.

As I argue throughout this article, CDS is more accurately understood as an implicit means to socialise, that is, to transmit norms of acceptable behaviour. Socialisation happens most fundamentally through a linguistic conflation of address and reference that reflects a cognitive conflation of the particular addressee with a general one. Indeed, even the more personal interactions of Euroamerican parenting are no exception to the rule of talking to-about people in their general roles. The parent may use *you* and *me* with the child, but these pronouns tend to substitute for third persons. For example, a father called Jack might ask: ‘Do you want me[Daddy] to take care of you while Mummy is sick?’ Even if we assume that the father is asking a genuine question, the child is not treated as an information processor any more than in other cultures, because his or her response as a biological individual who wants things must still adhere to a cultural narrative. These familiar psychological effects can be tested by putting oneself in the position of the child. A stranger or friend who approached the scene (let’s call her Sally) would validate the narrative, for example, by adding ‘poor Daddy, he surely would rather have a free day, but Mummy needs a day off’ (fig. 1). With this, Sally does not mean her own parents, but the child’s, though the lack of distinction is telling. She simultaneously refers to and addresses Jack from the child’s perspective in order to demonstrate that the child ought to interact with Daddy, not with Jack. In turn, this causes Jack to feel addressed and referred to, or spoken to-about, as the speaker does in her role as a friend in that situation, or as a parent or child in another. The use of biological categories suggests that the narrative should apply to all parents and children, and that the occasional use of personal names or pronouns should be a part of it. CDS thus works for the internalisation of a basic hierarchical norm by all interactants, especially by the child, who might be less able to question it.

Conflating address with reference reflects a confusion of what is particular with what is universal, or what is concrete with what is abstract. Studies report that CDS sentences favour concrete, situated referents along with the child’s interest in family members, animals or food (Saxton, 2017, p. 82). In these sentences, subjects are also agents or doers (i.e. ‘Daddy changes your nappy’ not ‘Daddy is handsome’). However, when using kinship terms instead of personal names, elders do not refer to themselves as individual doers, but as categories of doers. That is,

elders do not describe events but rational patterns of behaviour that rest on abstract principles, such as that parents want the best for their children. This kind of explanatory activity is not intentional on the part of elders and seems to be self-deceptive. For instance, an infant mental health specialist comments that parents avoid using the personal pronouns *I* and *you* because they are ‘too abstract and it’s somewhat confusing to kids’ but later on that this is to ‘help their children learn the role names and also to indicate the relationship, “mommy *and me*”’ (Geggel, 2015, emphasis added). However, the personal pronouns *I* and *you* clearly indicate a local relation between self and a specific individual, unlike the learning of roles. Mixing the pronoun *me* with the common noun *mummy* does not indicate a relationship between roles either, but between self and a role. The self is situated and biological, whereas the role is abstract and cultural. Therefore, I would submit that CDS promotes an abstract view of one’s self through the pretence that societal roles are natural.

Deception is omnipresent in nature, and self-deception can be a means of deception that is both effective and efficient (Trivers, 2011; von Hippel & Trivers, 2011). It is hard to conceive that the process of socialising children into an exclusive cultural setup would not involve this psychological trick. Indeed, in the two cultures studied by Ochs & Schieffelin (2009), the Kaluli and the Western Samoan, speakers direct their words toward the child by talking to themselves and/or others. In the first culture, an infant is ‘addressed’ and ‘addresses’ others through the mother, who speaks as if she were the infant and the infant were a competent speaker. Whereas in the case of the Samoans, the child is mainly talked about by elders who expect him to adapt to their hierarchical relations, and his sense of agency comes about also in relation to them. For example, the child reaches for an object and is shamed ‘who are you?’ meaning ‘not someone to do that’ (Ochs & Schieffelin, 2009). The use of *I* and *you* is vicarious, in order to create the impression of agency but in accordance with social norm. The former culture emphasises the practice of address and the latter the practice of reference. Members of both cultures should therefore be able to recognise CDS when used explicitly by members of other cultures, even though they reject it because they value maturity and assertiveness in the children.

A view of CDS as a universal and self-deceptive form of speech for socialisation supports the human self-domestication hypothesis (Bednarik, 2011). This can be seen directly in the way baby talk resembles or is identical with pet talk. In a noteworthy study, Ferguson (1964) found that the early form of CDS, what may be called infant-directed speech, was directed at pets as well as infants in a wide sample of six languages. Again, this stands in contrast with a view of CDS as a

form of help or accommodation. Obviously, one does not expect a dog to learn to speak. One does expect them, however, to be an acceptable part of the home. This seems to be an ambivalent feeling of loving intimidation. In Western culture, both children and pets are shown care through terms of endearment such as ‘Honey’, yet the same words would show disrespect if uttered by the child. This asymmetry is the basis for much symbolism in pornography and popular culture, remarkably, ‘who’s your daddy?’ (Farhi, 2005) and the way romantic partners are addressed as ‘Baby’. Sadomasochistic role playing may involve CDS, as well as the practice of ageplay (Aggrawal, 2008; Newmahr, 2011). These practices suggest a play with the seriousness of reproduction that has a basis in language.

All in all, CDS appears to manipulate the meaning of biological concepts, such as those of father and dog, to create a confusion between what is social and what is natural. This does not mean there is nothing positive in it. However, *child*-directed speech, as the word indicates, can be more comprehensively seen as the primary means through which kinship words acquire their ambiguity and societal norms become a dominant part of our psyche, for better or worse, in the first developmental years. Its positive, empathetic features could instead be studied under a term that focuses less on the children, includes anyone for whom ordinary speech is challenging (e.g. people in psychiatric care, the elderly) and excludes pets.

3. Address–reference

What are address and reference anyway? These concepts are commonly defined through the idea of talking. Namely, to address someone is to talk to them, and to reference them is to talk about them. However, talking is an intrinsically social activity involving some kind of collective consciousness. There is always an element of reference in a form of address insofar as the term that indicates whom I am talking to (e.g. Wendy) has a meaning that can be talked about. Correspondingly, one does not simply refer to something without addressing those who cooperatively maintain any language or system of meaning.

In order to define these concepts clearly, it is useful to differentiate between description and prescription. Suppose I state the following: ‘mothers pick up their crying babies’. If this statement is a *description*, then it doesn’t really matter whom I am talking to. My description strictly refers to a certain observable fact or pattern of behaviour that I consider natural,

independent of cultural context or the desires of people. However, if I am *prescribing*, then it is clear that I am addressing mothers and expect them to obey the norm of picking up their crying children. This analysis is valid even in a non-human context. Animal calls can be seen as a primitive way of addressing others about the presence of something *because* this will ‘prescribe’ or prompt a behaviour that is somehow mutually beneficial. Alarm calls, for instance, are individually indiscriminate, though they are still ‘addressed’ at those who are capable of interpreting them. Chimpanzee food calls have similarly been interpreted as indiscriminate (Tomasello, 2010). However, more recent research shows that they can be directed at specific members of the group (Schel, Machanda, Townsend, Zuberbühler, & Slocombe, 2013).

On the other hand, reference is mainly a descriptive act. When hominids began to communicate indirectly through symbols, it was referring to things not immediately present, as I am doing by writing this text. In a research context, it should be clear that I am describing, not telling anyone what to do with their life. However, it is unlikely that this was how primitive people described things. Talking about how people and things ‘are’ must have implied the prescription that people and things *be* that way. A well-coordinated human group would obey this prescription and talk about whether others are obeying or not, the latter of which also involves a description for purposes of prescription. This is what I have called *social rules* (Maanmieli, 2018). Social rules are descriptions that address a group of people who maintain a certain state of activity. They can be the contingent rules of explicit games (e.g. ‘the red team scores on the south goal’); or they can be more ambiguous social ‘facts’ such as ‘only doctors prescribe drugs’; or they can be rules that effectively overlap with natural patterns or instincts, such as ‘mothers pick up their crying babies’. In this way, the act of address becomes subordinate to the act of reference, that is, individuals are addressed because of how they are symbolically referenced as having a role in these games. To follow the same examples, ‘I score on the south goal if I play in the red team’, ‘I do not prescribe drugs if I am not a doctor’, or ‘I pick up my crying baby if I am a mother’. Address and reference therefore appear together, but are still not conflated.

4. Moral address-reference

HYPOLYTUS. Entrust your cares to my ears, mother.

PHAEDRA. The name of 'mother' is proud and too powerful; a more humble name is more appropriate to our feelings. Call me 'sister', Hippolytus, or 'maid-servant', preferably 'maidservant': I would bear any slavery. (Dickey, 2007, p. 110)

The origin of kinship terms is probably in the usefulness of putting individuals into categories for purposes of collective reproduction (Allen, Callan, Dunbar, & James, 2011). This means to enact a description of a state of activity (e.g. 'Igh mates with Ugh') in the manner of social rules. However, this kind of activity takes place in a context of lifetimes and, arguably, it is what defines a society. Because reproduction is not a game in the playful sense of the word, the categories involved would have to be natural and permanent. This means they would have to function as purely descriptive categories and, more specifically, categories that describe biological facts such as parenthood. For example, one can picture the rule that 'Igh mates with Ugh because they are cross-cousins', even if they are not really cross-cousins.

As Allen (2011) observes, societies 'seem always to have made some attempt to link new members of society with particular predecessors or categories of predecessors, and to have done so by building on the biological link between parents and children'. Being addressed in this way, therefore, means a lot more than feeling identified with a role. It means feeling that one naturally *is* the role, and that one follows natural laws when being a clan member or marrying. This conflation between prescription and description is what I have defined as *morality*, a cognitive phenomenon that is distinct from *ethics* or ethical behaviour (Maanmieli, J., 2018; Maanmieli, K. & Maanmieli, 2019). Morality can be scientifically understood as social *principles* instead of rules. By confusing society with nature, these principles create a paradoxically 'objective' social world or 'social reality', which is a constrained mental representation of reality that restricts individual choice. This explains why debating reality (or indeed whether people are real fathers, mothers or relatives) is usually done with great emotional intensity. The roles assigned to different individuals become cognitively equivalent to the roles of natural entities, as is the case with all forms of myth. Morality harnesses the power of rationality for the organisation of human conduct, making

individuals feel as though it is impossible to violate moral norms.

Morality is thus *pseudo-rational*. It makes the terms used for explaining how nature works interchangeable with those used for explaining how a society works. For example, the semantic overlap between *father* and *sire* can be used to provide a pseudo-justification of a father's rights and obligations toward the children that have been socially assigned to him. Myth would seem to combine natural and social elements precisely for this reason. Notably, Alan Barnard, who has studied hunter-gatherers in southern Africa and the extinct language /Xam, writes about the myth called 'The son of the Mantis, the baboons, and the Mantis':

The "people" of /Xam mythology are not really people either, but semidivine, semihuman characters who are in fact portrayed as insects, mammals, and other creatures. The baboons are collective, but the mythical animals[who are given human kinship roles] *are individual even though represented by a species name*. The same is true in many other mythological systems throughout the world. (Barnard, 2013, emphasis added)

It is not necessary to directly command anyone to marry if they can be made participant in a myth where such behaviour is naturally expected of them, or in which deviance from such behaviour 'logically' entails terrible, cosmic consequences. Command is, nevertheless, strongly implied by the fact that it is particular people who are thus addressed and assigned roles.

This assignment of moral roles has received attention at the intersection of psychology and sociology in what is called membership categorisation analysis (Silverman, 1998). Harvey Sacks originally focused on the expression 'the baby cried, the mommy picked it up', noting how it lacks any formal way of telling what is nevertheless obvious to members of the same culture: namely, that the categories of *mommy* and *baby* are linked so that the expression refers to the mother of the baby. The way in which such categories are thus inference-rich (Silverman, 1998, p. 75) resonates with the present notion of human groups as 'descriptively' or pseudo-rationally organised through language. Besides, it evidences the conflation of address and reference insofar as an utterance like 'the baby is crying' is an address to the same mother, which is not formally obvious either. Thus, one may be addressed as Dad, Jack or Doctor, or be referred to as a man, a woman, a mother, Mary or a nurse, and provided the context is moral, there would be no difference as to what is being

invoked: a view of reality in which saying or implying that one is any of these words means that one's actions are rationally ascertainable and natural. In such reality, a baby's cries are equivalent to the act of reference 'the baby cries, the mommy picks it up', which is followed by the mother picking it up. Correspondingly, if one is called a mother but does not pick up the baby, this would be seen as a shocking violation of reality, in the same way as if one is called a woman but does not behave like one.

In a manner reminiscent of Kohlberg's (1981) stages of moral development, maturity brings an awareness of such institutional realities. When the individual reaches the stage where she begins to question those institutions, she becomes aware of their *reality* (Maanmieli, K. & Maanmieli, 2019). To follow the same example, a mother could find a psychotherapist who helps her process her emotional difficulties around motherhood, so that her maternal instincts can surface after a lifetime of being morally assigned the role of a woman (Maanmieli, K. & Maanmieli, 2017). However, this is very hard to do when such roles are a basis for cognition. Learning the meaning of *mother* and *father* as a developing child necessarily involves some form of justification of how people are meant to be male or female, engage in courtship, reproduce, and raise children in a society. This may be a secular narrative, but in it the child addresses each parent just as she addresses God in the Christian narrative (fig. 2). Indeed, the term *God* functions in the same way as *Father*. In English we say 'God, why have you forsaken me' (address) and 'give praise to God' (reference); not 'god, why have you forsaken me' and 'give praise to the god' as if this were a particular god. The latter forms of address and reference are, of course, forbidden for Christians, but we don't tend to acknowledge that 'give my regards to the father' is forbidden when it is 'Father' or 'Dad' we mean.

5. Philosophy as baby talk

The use of general terms is not to enable a man to *reason*, but to enable him to reason *well*.

—Thomas Brown (1827, p. 350)

The biblical act of creation is an act of name giving: in the beginning there was the word, and the word was God, then God gave Adam the power to name all living creatures. Hence, it makes sense that the Enlightenment would bring with it a theoretical focus on language along with a rejection of God. It is not clear if Adam Smith was an atheist, and he is not known for his views on language either. However, those views must have been important to him because he had them published as an appendix to his popular *Theory of Moral Sentiments*. The monograph, titled ‘Considerations Concerning the First Formation of Languages’ (Smith, 1767), begins by discussing the case of ‘savages’, a primordial people who negotiate the words they will use to denote the only tree and cave they have ever known. Upon finding other entities that resemble the tree and the cave, the savages naturally proceed to extend the meaning of those words. However, Smith immediately equates such presumably descriptive context to the prescriptive context in which children are *taught* to know only one father and one mother:

And thus, those words, which were originally the proper names of individuals, would each of them insensibly become the common name of a multitude. A child that is just learning to speak, calls every person who comes to the house, its papa or its mama; and thus bestows upon the whole species those names which it had been taught to apply to two individuals (Smith, 1767, p. 438)

This strange argument reflects the classical problem of universals. For Aristotle, the universals of being a tree or a cave are originally instantiated in particular things, as opposed to being in the Platonic world of forms. This is akin to saying that *Tree* and *Cave* must be proper names before they can be common ones. Smith finds justification in this Aristotelian idea, so he corrects the child for its Platonic bias toward common names. He then continues with a passage of ambiguous terminology, which I clarify in brackets:

I have known a clown, who did not know the proper name of the river which run by his own door. It was *the river*[It was *River*], he said, and he never heard any other name for it. His experience, it seems, had not led him to observe any other river. The general word *river*, therefore, was, it is evident, in his acceptance of it, a proper name,[!] signifying an individual object. If this person had been carried to another river, would he not readily have called it a river[have called it *River*]?

Smith's beginning with 'the river' already hints at the assumption of his own conclusion, as does 'its papa or its mama' in the previous quote. That is, 'the river' denotes an instantiation of a universal, a particular instance of a general idea, not a proper name. He attributes the use of this word as a proper name to the clown, where his own use contradicts the concept of proper name. Perhaps at the end he should have written that the clown would have called it *River*, for consistency, or at most *a River*, but he writes 'a river' instead to contrive the general word. He goes on:

Could we suppose any person living on the banks of the Thames so ignorant, as not to know the general word *river*, but to be acquainted only with the word *Thames*, if he was brought to any other river, would he not readily call it *a Thames*?

Now he has used a proper name, Thames, though he equivocates through his avoidance of how the name actually functions. We say *the Thames*, or *the river Thames*, because it is already known to be an instance of a river. We do not say that we go 'to Thames', whereas we say that we go to London. Similarly, we say that we go to *Mexico*, not that we go to 'the mexico' or to a particular instance of 'a mexico':

The Spaniards, when they first arrived upon the coast of Mexico ... cried out, that it was another Spain. Hence it was called New Spain

Indeed the Spaniards did not refer to Mexico as 'a Spain', that is, they did not turn a proper name into a common one like the clown in the previous analogy, but gave the country a proper name. Smith's transition from the grounded concepts of *cave*, *tree* and *fountain* all the way to the

abstraction of *country* (which has been called a motherland or a fatherland by many) reveals a confusion rooted in kinship terms.

In my personal life, everyone calls me Jose, including my daughter. However, when she was two years old, she would sometimes casually call other men or pictures of similar-looking men *Jose*. Children who utter their first words seem to treat them as natural, descriptive categories. This might reward those parents who drop their proper names in favour of common ones, but not if they have to labour to get their children to ‘understand’ that those nouns are simultaneously proper, a sort of common-proper noun. In section 2, I discussed how these efforts are shared even by strangers in order to make societal norms appear as something natural. This was surely the case also in the days of Aristotle:

Now what is to us plain and obvious at first is rather confused masses, the elements and principles of which become known to us later by analysis ... Similarly a child begins by calling all men “father”, and all women “mother”, but later on distinguishes each of them (Arist., Phys I.1, 184a22-b11, trans. Hardie and Gaye).

Note how Aristotle makes it sound as though children naturally discover who their parents are, where Adam Smith wrote that they are taught. By confusing description with prescription, both thinkers find a solution to the problem of universals and the problem of meaning, respectively, in the act of addressing one’s parents, that is, in the particular. Yet the fact that my daughter now distinguishes me as *Jose* has obviously nothing to do with those ‘elements and principles’. Aristotle has simply inverted his teacher’s doctrine by using the ideal act of addressing *Father* as an argument. In using the same analogy, Plato would surely say that calling ‘all men “father”, and all women “mother”’ is a *reference* to those universals in an attempt to organise the ‘confused masses’ of early cognition. Either way, if it is morally required that the names of particular individuals be words that invoke a universal, then finding the essence of universals or the essence of meaning in those names is simply begging the question.

Current linguistic theories are similarly burdened by metaphysics. They overlook the fact that common nouns are not the best words to denote specific individuals in the first place, and that such a formality is not the same thing as knowledge. For example, some researchers believe that

the prodigious formality that ‘particles can’t go faster than the speed of light’ qualifies as a semantic standard for parents (Phillips & Knobe, 2018). Developmental linguists, in particular, understand word extension as adherence to what they call a mature semantic system (Saxton, 2017, p. 139). This is even if the business of classifying objects is the ongoing work of scientists. Scientific theories now teach us, say, that a platypus is an egg-laying mammal and not a bird, unlike the penguin, but they could say something else in the future. Does this mean that the parents of today might be making ‘category errors’ (ibid.)? Such a normative view of knowledge inevitably creates double-standards. For instance, if a child calls two different coats *coat*, this is an instance of ‘extension’, but if she calls a different person *papa*, this is an instance of ‘overextension’ (Saxton, 2017, p. 137).

Indeed, when examining word extension, developmental linguists do not seem to distinguish between prescription and description, or between nurture and nature, however interrelated the two concepts may be. A father (nurture) is a man who changes nappies and talks about the speed of light only in a particular society, whereas a tree, a penguin, or the objects we label and use as coats (nature) might not have anything to do with those arrangements. In a society, it is important to identify individuals through proper names, and not so important to identify single trees, penguins or coats. Yet because researchers mistake nurture for nature, they interpret the normative error of calling a different individual *daddy* as an epistemic error. For example, a study titled ‘Early Semantic Representations and Early Word-Usage’ refers to the words *daddy* and *Adam* as both proper names (Barrett, 1986, p. 64). The arbitrary idea that somebody’s name is Adam then becomes knowledge: he must be identified correctly as ‘Adam’ because he is ‘an adam’. Likewise, I am ‘a jose’, and by calling me only ‘Jose’, my daughter has presumably acquired knowledge. In this light, the fact that children eventually arrive at the correct distinctions might not be that they solve a major philosophical problem, but simply that they are not philosophers in the conventional sense of the word.

In my work on the nature of morality, I provide a view of knowledge as the living, non-formal result of good explanations (Maanmieli, 2018). In this view, the core of the disagreement between Plato and Aristotle is a formal false dichotomy called *holism* and *atomism*. Morality confuses the nature of knowledge by conflating two basic functions of concepts: 1) the mental representation of individual objects in the environment, such as a child’s friend or favourite coat, and 2) the explanatory representation of objects in relation to other objects, such as a human being

or a coat, in relation to things that are not human beings or coats. The moment a word is required to identify single entities that exist in the ecosystem, it cannot function as a concept in the second sense anymore. In order to associate with particular others we must conceptualise them rigidly, whereas when we describe nature we must use flexible concepts, such as that of a species. That is, cooperation dynamics require *social concepts*, whereas explaining reality requires *natural concepts*. Both types of concepts are conflated in kinship terms, which denote both a cooperative individual (or group) and an explanatory category for the purpose of creating social realities. These are pseudo-rational explanations of reality that elders convey through child-directed speech, narrative and myth (Maanmieli, 2018).

Pseudo-rationality affects the behavioural sciences to the extent that the words *society* and *individual* are not understood as natural concepts. For example, a book titled *Sociocultural Systems: Principles of Structure and Change* (Elwell, 2013) uses ‘society’ as a proper noun throughout. To be sure, the word tends to function like a kinship term in English and other languages (fig. 2). Picture someone like Thomas Jefferson, for the sake of argument, when he was in Paris during the days of the French Revolution. This person refers to the different societies of the United States and France as ‘society’, in the same way as children call different mothers ‘mama’. He advocates single norms ‘for the benefit of society’, not for the particular society in which he happens to be, and so on. His utterances bear the same ambiguity as the use of the term *mother* in the knowledge that one is surrounded by many mothers (fig. 1). As before, this form of self-deceptive speech has a socialising function. I have personally known of children who, in the presence of their own mothers, have corrected strangers because they are facing the wrong person when calling ‘Mum’. The same is the case in politics and philosophy as a matter of course:

Each person possesses an inviolability founded on justice that even the welfare of *society* as a whole cannot override ... For just as it is rational for one man to maximize the fulfillment of his system of desires, it is right for *a society* to maximize the net balance of satisfaction taken over all of its members ... Whether men are free is determined by the rights and duties established by the major institutions of *society* (Rawls, 2009, emphasis added)

In Rawls’ incoherent account, individual and society seem to have the kind of ambivalent

relationship that characterises pet talk. Society respects the individual, but if this means that he will be free, then society cannot allow it. It is also not clear who or what either of them really are. Hence, the fact that the word *πόλις* (polis) in Aristotle's *Politics* is translated by different authors as *city-state*, *state*, *country* or *society* seems appropriate, as does their use of the word *society* to mean *community*, *communion* and even *sexual intercourse*. Consider, for example, the following passages:

if the earlier forms of society[κοινωνία] are natural, so is the state, for it is the end of them (Aristot. Pol. 1.1252b, trans. Jowett)

And when they shall have finished producing children according to the laws, if the man have sexual intercourse[κοινωνῆ] with a strange woman, or the woman with a man, while the latter are still within the procreative age-limit, they shall be liable to the same penalty as was stated for those still producing children. (Plat. Laws 6.784e, trans. Bury)

All this supports a view of philosophy, at least partly, as a kind of advanced baby talk, a manner of discourse for purposes of socialisation and cultural expansion.

Unlike the story told by the Bible, in the beginning there was in fact Plato and Aristotle. For better or worse, these philosophers still confused society with nature and even with the human body:

the state is by nature clearly prior to the family and to the individual, since the whole is of necessity prior to the part; for example, if the whole body be destroyed, there will be no foot or hand, except in an equivocal sense (Aristot. Pol. 1.1253a, trans. Jowett)

Based on this unifying abstraction, Plato and Aristotle drew their own view of a single creator away from the multiple deities of Greek mythology. This innovation accompanied a period of great cultural expansion. What had once been a bunch of dispersed tribes became a single empire, a model for many an attempt to take over the world. The Enlightenment, too, brought with it

founding fathers and the greatest empire in history. The revolution of the Enlightenment, however, had the unexpected effect of replacing theology and philosophy with a scientific worldview. By the 20th Century, the analyticity of Plato and Aristotle had been relegated to the study of language, which was, in a way, the last hope of philosophy to arrive at the essence of things. Still, as we know, Wittgenstein finally had to admit that such an endeavour was meaningless (Fann, 2015). Philosophy had only been creating its own problems.

Certainly, Bertrand Russell was not a very religious man, while Ludwig Wittgenstein suffered immensely because he could not ignore the morality of the issue. How did they talk to their parents? Their personal disagreement keeps plaguing philosophy and science today. As I have argued, the question of meaning divides us because we have a strong incentive to confuse the descriptive meaning of *meaning* with the prescriptive one, due to the reproductive function of language.

6. Conclusion

All human societies find it important to call parents and kin by names and nicknames that mean they are parents and kin, even though this ambiguous practice is not necessary in principle. A view of morality as a linguistic device that conflates social meanings with natural meanings explains this previously unacknowledged human universal, along with the equally ambiguous questions of what is society or God. We are born into a social environment where language is used to establish the 'knowledge' of who our relatives are (social meanings) and what they 'rationally' must do (natural meanings). This involves the use of kinship terms that conflate these meanings and, correspondingly, conflate a form of address with a term of reference. Thus, when we say Mum or Dad as parents or children, we do not mean our embodied self or that of an elder who might have conceived us or not. We are not referring to individual persons in all their complexity and humanity. We are simply keeping the roles alive, maintaining a cultural state of activity that must have a biological reason for existing.

In this light, the relation of language to knowledge has been the subject of philosophical speculation for a good reason. It is no accident that this problem divides thinkers between those for whom knowledge is in the physical world and those who see it in human interactions. Indeed, the meaning of a kinship term is not either someone who is in the physical world or a type of

interactant. It is both. As thinkers, we tend to engage in these epistemological conflicts because our ability to tell society from nature is linguistically constrained from the moment we begin to think. This is why I have emphasised such a distinction in my own account of morality and knowledge (Maanmieli, 2018).

The cognitive distinction between society and nature depends on a clear linguistic distinction between prescription and description. This enables us to distinguish between words that intend to change the world (e.g. mothers pick up their crying children) and words that only intend to describe it (mothers[appear to] pick up their crying children). From this grounded perspective, we can see what it *means* to refer to someone in a society (as a mother) versus what it means to refer to them in reality (as the person we call Sally). The first is a form of prescription, unlike the second. In turn, we can see what it means to conflate those two intentions in speech: When one refers to Mum, it is as if one were in direct communication with Sally, prescribing her behaviour. Likewise, when one addresses Sally as ‘Mum’, one simultaneously refers to her from the perspective of a society that prescribes her behaviour. The same applies to any other term that works in a context of kinship. This intersubjective space begins with child-directed speech and extends to the complex spaces of myth, or to the religious or secular narratives that outline our greater social realities.

The only view of reality we can reliably call *objective* is that of biology and evolution. The reason for our propensity to confuse ourselves and create different social ‘realities’ must therefore be that our genes have so far endured within them. Indeed, the way a child is received into the world may be the aspect of culture that is most sensitive to evolutionary pressures. Any cognitive bias that helps individuals mother or father more copies of their own genes should be expected to become a strong part of their psyche. It is therefore understandable that the characters of Mother and Father remain such a basic, unconscious constant throughout our life. They are passed on, from generation to generation, as the sexual elements of our relation to the collective in which we unconsciously strive to maximise our reproductive success. In this way, they can be seen as elementary mythical characters insofar as myth involves the same cognitive conflation. In the hunter-gatherer myth above, the concept of animal species is conflated with that of particular individuals only in the case of elders (e.g. a grandfather called ‘Mantis’), not in the case of what are presumably children or foreigners (‘the baboons’) who are seen as unruly, dangerous and ‘people who are different’ (Barnard, 2013). Thus, individuals are either socialised or they are

dehumanised; they become either reproductive resources or a threat to reproductive success. The same is the case with the greater societal scheme of the tribe. For example, the warring tribes of pre-colonial North America would each call themselves ‘the people’ while reserving less flattering terms for their enemies, such as ‘flesh eaters’ (d’Errico, 2000). This was in spite of the fact that they did practice cannibalism (Abler, 1980). Today, the greater societal schemes of nation-states are still hungry for more, even if their own idea of ‘the people’ can address-refer to hundreds of millions.

The central psycholinguistic trait this article has added to the Darwinian equation must therefore be viewed in an ecological light. Because humans endure within groups, there is selection pressure for individuals to develop the psychological means to maintain the cohesiveness of the group in which their genes survive through the generations: namely, to ensure that their children will invest in the group, teach their own children to do the same, and so on. The best strategy for this purpose, for an animal capable of symbolic representation, is not that of cooperatively arriving at meanings that are universal, rational and descriptive. As Barnard (2010) has argued, this form of one-to-one communication does not explain the great complexity of human language. The strategy of arriving at meanings that are particular to the group is also not good enough, because those meanings are practical and negotiable. The best strategy is that of arriving at meanings that are both universal and particular to the group, thereby promoting the irrationality that one’s group should prevail because its workings are natural and non-negotiable. This is what I have defined as morality, a deceptive linguistic device that creates a competing society (Maanmieli, 2018). By exploiting our rational faculty, morality creates different social realities, from the realities of myth to those of philosophy (Maanmieli, K. & Maanmieli, 2019). As I have argued, this is a self-deceptive phenomenon due to its epistemological dimension, but primarily due to its effectiveness as a reproductive strategy.

The way in which traditional family values or gender roles are being questioned today seems to reflect the exhaustion of this ancient process of self-domestication. It also evidences the lack of good explanations in science for what are important social phenomena that are relevant to biology. As I have suggested, these phenomena cannot be scientifically understood from within society. To use Aristotle’s analogy of the city-state as the human body, it is as if a cell were trying to understand the body without being able to see and compare it to other bodies. This article has tried to transcend such conceptual limitation through the kind of metalinguistic ‘awareness of the

interaction between society and language' that Johanna DeStefano (1971) found promising nearly half a century ago. She wrote:

Scientists behave in certain "scientific", technical ways when they are in their work domain, while they may behave in quite different ways (nontechnical, could we say?) when they are in their roles as father or mother in the family domain. Spanking or baby talk are generally not considered appropriate scientific behavior. (DeStefano, 1971)

Science requires consistency across disciplines, which involves looking at our own behaviour primarily through the eyes of a biologist. This is a descriptive gaze devoid of moral assumptions, one that provides the clearest distinction between the woman who behaves instinctually as a mother, and culturally as 'Mum', or between the cooperation of people, who may be parents or not, and mere tribalism.

Finally, I would like to note how the present article touches upon the issue of children and personhood, as well as on the controversy of a biological view of societies. It is only recently in history that we are beginning to appreciate the importance of treating children as equals, by which I do not mean child-centeredness. It is also not my intention to disregard the positive, ethical aspects of relationships that are inevitably unequal, or disrespect people's choice to call themselves whatever feels good to them. I mean that a child's sense of self, insofar as it is situated and bodily, *is* equal to an adult's sense of self. Biology has much to say about our humanity because, as the term implies, it is the study of life. Studying life is not only something that some studious adults do. It is what children do when they enthusiastically learn the names of animals.

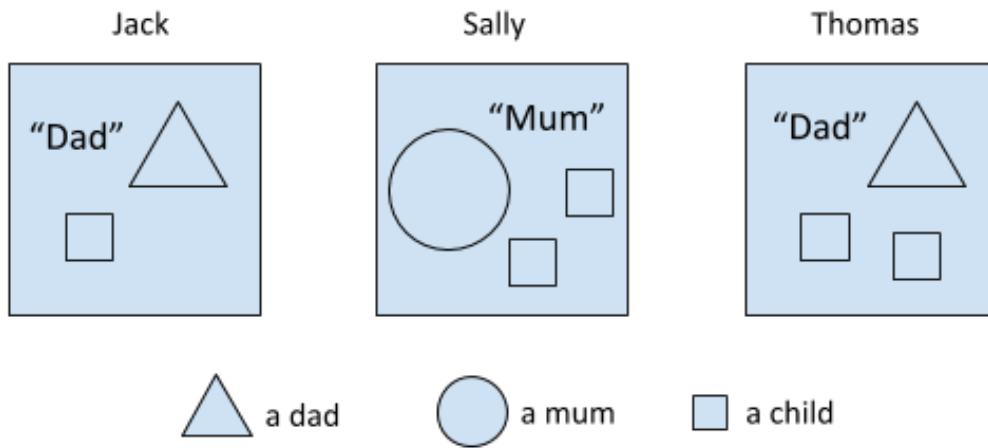


Figure 1. The big squares represent three friends who are parents (the square shape represents that they are necessarily also children). From an objective perspective, each of them is an individual identified unambiguously through a personal name, who therefore distinguishes between different dads mums and children. By contrast, the coloured space inside each square represents the intersubjective space between each parent and his or her children (small squares), where all are supposed to see only one dad or mum.

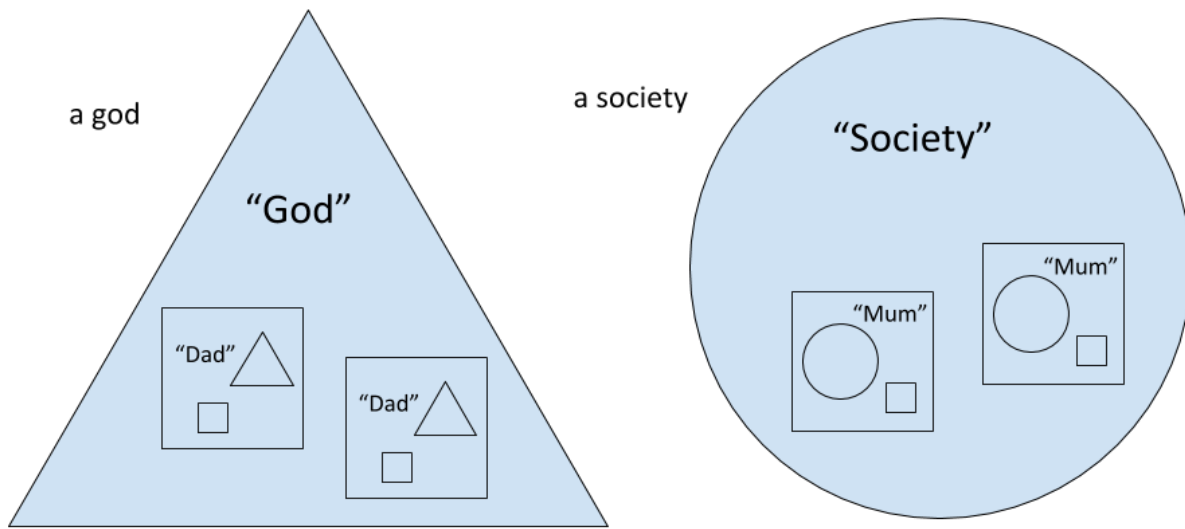


Figure 2. Individuals are socialised into seeing only one god or society through the words mother and father. Religious or secular societies thus consist of individuals who share a social reality, as represented by the coloured space within the big triangle or circle. This intersubjective ‘reality’ contrasts with the objective reality in which individuals can see that there can be many gods and societies, in the same way as they can see that there are many parents, not only ‘Dad’ and ‘Mum’.

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