Cross-Cultural Lexical Semantics: The Case of Kinship

Given any medium-sized set of items, the number of ways to organize these items into categories is vast. What are the principles that explain which categories humans choose to name?

I will present a computational approach to lexical semantics and will apply it to the domain of kinship. The account is based on two fundamental principles: good systems of categories are simple, and they enable informative communication. I will show that kinship terminologies in the world’s languages achieve a near-optimal tradeoff between these competing principles. I will also suggest that this general-purpose account helps to explain several specific constraints on kin classification proposed by previous researchers.

(joint work with Terry Regier)

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