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DISCUSSION
DESCENT SYSTEMS AND IDEAL LANGUAGE*

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This note is written in response to Gellner's "Ideal Language and Kinship Structure" (1).¹ In that article he tries to shed some light on the notion of an ideal language by constructing in outline an ideal language for what he calls "kinship structure theory". It is gratifying to see a philosopher pay attention to social anthropology, and pleasing to imagine that such an important topic as the analysis of descent systems may have philosophical application; but in this case the references to social anthropology are so erroneous that a rejoinder is called for.

Gellner acknowledges that he is not sufficiently conversant with the subject, but this is not good enough. If his argument were analytic and *a priori*, or if it were made clear that it was intended to be so, there would not be much ground for complaint; but he appears to maintain that his procedure represents the methods or results of anthropological analysis. Indeed, in the preamble to his argument he claims authority for his approach on the ground that the study of descent systems is an important and well developed part of the discipline. So it is, but the picture he gives of it is fallacious, and it cannot in any case support the ideas that he advances.

For my part, I am fairly familiar with the topic of an ideal or logical language, and I think that the terminologies of descent systems may in fact offer promising material for philosophical investigation, but I am not competent to consider such issues here. My only proper concern in this note is to say where Gellner is misleading in his representation to philosophers of what social anthropologists actually do in the study of descent systems and of what the characteristics of such systems are.

It may be most convenient if I proceed simply by dealing individually, and briefly, with points as they arise seriatim in Gellner's paper. Though my observations may thus have a rather disconnected character, they should produce cumulatively an impression of the value of the assumptions on which he works.

To begin with, it is not the case, even figuratively, that the descent system is more "tangible" and stateable with accuracy than most aspects of a simple society (p.235). Gellner appears to think this because individual human beings themselves are discrete and tangible, because these individuals have

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¹ The article contains the following misprints and omissions: p. 235, line 22, "well developed"—add "topic in" (or words to this effect); p. 236, line 21, "assert to social"—read "the social"; p. 236, lines 39-40, "such a system should be devised"—read "such a system should not be devised"; p. 237, line 43, "IGHKL"—read "IGHKL"; p. 240, line 44, "States"—read "stated".

proper names by which they are readily identifiable, and because genealogical connexions can often be precisely traced between them. But these properties, as I shall consider more closely below, are not the analytically significant features of a descent system. The ideas and categories by which the members of a social aggregate may order their relations according to the criterion of descent are not tangible in any sense, and their comprehension is not identical with ascertaining the appellations and genealogical relationships of individuals.

Descent systems do not simply regulate marriage (p. 235) but are as importantly concerned with aggregation into distinct social groups, and with the ascription of right and duties in many other spheres of social life to individuals and groups who are not primarily, if at all, connected by marriage. The regulation of marriage is certainly an important part of the constituent rules of a descent system, but it is misleading to assert that "kinship structure" *means* the specification of possible spouses (p. 236). Further, it is false to say that kinship roles are functions of the "biological kinship position" of an individual (p. 236). Biology is one matter and descent is quite another, of a different order. They will usually be concordant to some degree, but the defining character of descent systems is social. This is seen in such institutions as, for example, unilineal descent reckoning, which omits from account one of the parents from whom the individual is biologically descended; adoption, in which a child may have no biological connexion with either of his social parents from whom he is regarded as descended; leviratic marriage, in which a man marries a deceased brother's widow and raises descendants to the dead man's name; and ghost marriage, in which the social father, from whom the descent of the children is reckoned, is dead.

The appreciation of the distinction between biology and notions of descent is the *pons asinorum* of the study of descent systems. It has nothing to do with the alleged anxiety of social anthropologists about the social nature of their subject matter, or about the autonomy of their discipline in relation to physical or biological sciences, but derives from the very nature of descent systems. Briefly, a descent system is an ordered set of categories, and it is a misleading error of the most fundamental and elementary kind to suppose that these categories can profitably be analysed as though the relations they govern were biological. Also, it is simply not the case that social anthropologists are committed by functionalist theory to the explanation of descent systems by reference to "the basic needs connected with procreation" (p. 236). It is true that Malinowski derived the bonds of kinship from the fundamental biological processes of reproduction (2, pp. 101-2), but it is a travesty of the scholarly investigations into descent systems over the last seventy years to represent this approach as characteristic of social anthropology.

This misapprehension is the basic reason why Gellner's approach cannot be accepted or even taken seriously. There is another mistake, of comparable importance, which also contributes to its invalidity. This is seen in the major part of the article, where he describes what he thinks would count as an ideal language for "kinship structure theory"; and this, oddly, is all about

naming. In his proposed scheme a name is the individual designation of a single human being; but the terms of a descent system are not names of this sort, and it is almost incomprehensible that he should argue as though they were. A descent system may work with only twenty or so terms, each denoting a category of relatives, but a very large number of named individuals may be subsumed under each. For example, the Batak of Sumatra number a million but they order their social relations within the descent system by only about twenty-three terms—not a million names. It cannot be said, in some sort of defence, that Gellner simply confuses names with certain properties of descent terms, for in this context he makes no mention at all of descent categories or of the terms by which they are represented, and it is clear that when he writes of names he thinks he is in fact dealing with descent categories.

The system he devises is intended to name individuals by their relations “biologically speaking” to other individuals, and the use of the system would be to place individuals within their “biological logical space” (p. 236). But even in this notion of logical space Gellner is mistaken or misleading, for he thinks that for the purposes of social science it is a logical truth that a man has a man for a father, and that in certain contexts “mother’s son” is synonymous with “man” (p. 237). I shall consider for the moment only the second proposition. It is hardly possible to examine such an imprecise formulation in any conclusive manner, but certain general considerations may be adduced which are relevant to its theme. In many descent systems a term conventionally translated as “mother” may refer to a large class of women who in English would never be referred to, or thought of, as mothers; and in some systems such a term (sometimes, but not invariably, with a qualifier) applies to males as well as to females. These facts clearly affect the meaning of the description. Further, in many systems the term which would stand for “son” here may denote indifferently a male or a female. That is, each descent system has to some extent its own logic, and is not analysable in terms of Gellner’s “universal relations”, which are simply biological.

Biological relations are indeed universal, but descent systems are interesting in that they are structurally and conceptually different from biological necessities or possibilities. The logical space is a category within a system, the properties of which are not determined by biology; and the genealogical specifications co-ordinate with the category may be practically innumerable. Gellner’s system may be capable of naming individuals who are biologically related, but it cannot give any idea of the structure of any descent system to which it is applied. Gellner himself admits this, when he writes later that once people have been named by the system they all have names of the same structure “irrespective of what their kinship organization is” (p. 240); but to rob systems of their distinctive structural characteristics is an odd way of trying to understand them, and in fact so misrepresents them as to make useful analogy with an ideal language impossible.

Gellner sees some difficulty in the fact that there are two sexes, and suspects that it would be necessary to treat only members of one sex as individuals

proper, members of the other being only admitted by courtesy but ultimately eliminable and definable in terms of the first (p. 238). The analogy he makes in this respect is with real and rational numbers, but he would have done better to deal with the situation in known descent systems, the majority of which do in fact define descent in either the male or the female line. But by no means all systems do so, and here is another flaw in the scheme; for if only one sex counts there is no way of dealing with a cognatic society (in which descent may be traced through either a male or a female) or with a bilineal society (in which any individual is a member both of a patrilineal descent group and of a matrilineal descent group). That Gellner believes a matrilineal rule would be more convenient, on the ground that it is harder for an individual to be ignorant of the identity of his mother than of that of his father, merely reflects his identification of biology with descent. (One has to go back to the Victorians to find this argument seriously advanced in anthropological literature.)

The same confusion is repeated in another stipulation for the proposed notation, viz. that "it must be made *nonsense* . . . for a man to mate with a man. . . . Biological impossibility must be made into a logical impossibility of our notation" (p. 238). Here, as well as assuming *a priori* the connotations of European kinship terms, Gellner confuses mating with marriage. In some societies a woman may so far acquire masculine status as to marry a woman, of whose children (begotten by a proxy male lover) she is the social father and thus figures in genealogies. Individuals of the same sex may thus in fact marry and be the parents of children. There are also societies in which a man may assume feminine status and become the wife of a man, and even claim to bear children with supernatural aid. In other words, what Gellner calls the "underlying biological presuppositions of kinship" are not, as he thinks, logical truths and should not be written into any proposed descent system as though they were.

It is next claimed as an advantage that in this kinship language individuals in a logical system would for once mean individuals (p. 238), to which the response is again that in descent systems the terms characteristically denote categories of relatives and not individuals. The terms of descent systems do admittedly conform to one of Gellner's conditions for an ideal language—"one thing, one name"—but it has to be understood that the "thing" is a category which may well have no equivalent in our language or society, and that the "name" is not an individual designation but a term applied to a class of individuals defined by criteria which may be strange to us. For instance, among the patrilineal Kuki the term *tu* covers members of three generations, two distinct descent lines, and both sexes. This category makes perfect structural sense in the system of which it is a part, but it could not be dealt with by Gellner's.

I now come to a third misapprehension. Gellner wishes to add to the naming system "things that can be said of the things named" (p. 239). What is said, however, turns out to be no more than how individuals are biologically

related to each other. But in known descent systems specification, even when made by the rules of such systems and not by those of Gellner's, is only the beginning: what is important then is what such a named member of a category does. Gellner might respond that this introduces contingent facts of a synthetic nature, and that these are not his concern; but if his concern is with any imaginable sort of descent system it must include some reference to "function". He appears to think, however, that specification by name and biological relation is enough, and that jural and other properties are merely incidental variations on a universal system. This is seen in his statement that when logically necessary relationships have been shown by the notation itself, "*only synthetic factual truths*" (my italics) need actually be asserted (p. 240), which is of a piece with the utter lack of any jural structure in his scheme. What he calls "sociological predicates", though, cannot be simply contingent: the categories of the classification and the jural status of persons defined and ordered by it are inseparable parts of one and the same system.

In considering the implications of his approach for social anthropology, Gellner concedes that his scheme would almost certainly not be of any use in naming actual people (p. 241), but he still does not see that naming is not the concern of a descent system at all, and that objections to the scheme would not be aimed at its failure to perform this function. He thinks, nevertheless, that the language might be of analytical use by providing a "guaranteed exhaustive classification of possible kinship structure and even bringing out empirically unperceived similarities". It would be wearisome, and I hope now unnecessary, to examine this claim, since it is so clear that the scheme he has proposed can bear no relation to actual or possible descent systems. (Indeed, it is one conceivable merit of Gellner's paper that his unmanipulable ideal language for a descent system shows why no society adopts or could adopt such a socially impossible terminology and categorization.) Rules of inheritance, another proposed field of use for the scheme, are easily stated and compared without it, and the features of "classificatory" terminologies also. Demographic issues of the sort he indicates, finally, can certainly be tackled without a complicated and cumbersome naming system.

It is not simply that the scheme is inept for such types of problem, but that it can be of no use in any, since it is based on radically inappropriate premisses. In sum, Gellner fails to distinguish (a) biology and descent, (b) individual and category, (c) specification and function. No proposal based on such an aggregation of fundamental errors could possibly have implications for social anthropology.

There are a number of other erroneous or questionable points, but I have been concerned to examine only those which seemed basic misapprehensions relevant to the general validity or otherwise of the paper. It would be a waste of time, for example, since I consider the scheme so misdirected, to deal with its practical difficulties even as a naming system; and I can leave questions of logic and expression to philosophers.

My professional colleagues will realize that I have dealt summarily with

very large issues, and that if I had been writing for them a number of qualifications would have been necessary. But I have not been writing for them, for the very good reason that my points about the general characteristics of descent systems are common knowledge and form an early part of elementary instruction in social anthropology. On the other hand, I realize that since these points are not common knowledge to philosophers my dismissal of Gellner's undertaking may seem rather sweeping. It would not be possible in a short article to describe systems which make my points, and there unfortunately exists no satisfactory general introduction to the study of descent systems to which reference might be made, but it may be helpful if I cite three outstanding articles in this field and one of my own: viz. Hocart's "Kinship systems" (3), Dumont's "The Dravidian kinship terminology as an expression of marriage" (4), Leach's "Concerning Trobriand clans and the kinship category 'tabu'" (5), and my "Structural analysis of Purum society" (6).

Lastly, I should like it to be appreciated that it has not been my purpose merely to expose another man's mistakes. I have been perturbed by a philosopher trying to tell other philosophers what an important topic in social anthropology is about, and I fear it is probable they will be misled and that they will also conceive a wrong estimation of social anthropology.² The notion of an ideal language is of considerable interest, and so is the study of descent systems. There may be profitable analogies to be established between these two fields of thought, but it is essential that the radical features of both be mastered before comparative analysis is attempted.

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² Something of the same kind of danger is present in another article addressed to philosophers, in which Gellner deals with time and theory in social anthropology (7), and fundamentally for the same reason.

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⁴ **54. The Dravidian Kinship Terminology as an Expression of Marriage**

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⁷ **Time and Theory in Social Anthropology**

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² **Time and Theory in Social Anthropology**

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