

Human languages are as varied as our societies

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All groups of human beings everywhere in the world have the same biological relationships with one another.

Everybody has had a father and a mother. Anybody can in principle have a son, a daughter, a brother, a sister.

But the way in which these relationships are grouped together and labelled in different languages varies a lot. In English, the word uncle can apply to four different types of relation: father's brother, mother's brother, father's sister's husband, and mother's sister's husband. So it is no surprise that other languages may have as many as four different words corresponding to uncle. The Australian language Njamaal has two: the word *mama* is used for father's brother and mother's sister's husband, while *karna* is mother's brother and father's sister's husband.

Danish distinguishes between two different types of aunt – *moster* (mother's sister) and *faster* (father's sister).

Norwegians have two words for grandmother: *mormor* (mother's mother) and *farmor* (father's mother). Some languages have different words for brother, depending on whether or not the brother is older than the speaker. French has distinct



■ Family matter: English lags behind other world languages in the breadth of its vocabulary for family links. Picture: PA

words for male and female cousins – cousin vs. *cousine*. In English, *cousin* is the only term which does not indicate the sex of the person concerned. (We do have parent and sibling, but they're not part of the central system of kinship terms.)

Some of our kinship terms are reciprocal, and some are not. If I am your brother, you're my brother (if you are male). If you're my cousin, I'm your cousin. But if I'm your uncle, you're not my uncle: you're my niece or nephew.

This works differently in other languages. The Njamaal word *mabidi* can be translated into English as grandfather, great uncle, grandson, granddaughter, wife of grandson, and husband of grand-

daughter. The term is reciprocal in a way that is rather surprising to us. If I am your grandfather, and you are my grandson, we may be each other's *mabidi*: some Njamaal kinship terms do not distinguish generation, as they do in English, but generation distance – *mabidi* refers to certain relationships which are two generations removed. Similarly, a man can use a single term, *maili*, for his father's father (his paternal grandfather) and his daughter's son's wife's sister (his grandson's sister-in-law) – the person in question, again, is two generations removed from himself.

Human societies come in an amazing variety of forms; and so do human languages. Long may it continue.