

**Language in the cradle (1):
the Proto-Sapiens words PAPA, MAMA and KAKA
and the origin of kinship systems**

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ABSTRACT

Kinship terms like *PAPA*, *TATA*, *MAMA*, *NANA*, and *KAKA* are present in more than 60% of the world's languages – and in almost all of the major language families (Lubbock 1889; Murdock 1957; Bengtson & Ruhlen 1994; Ruhlen 1994*a*; Bancel & Matthey de l'Etang 2002, 2004; Matthey de l'Etang & Bancel 2005).

Their global distribution has been explained until recently in terms of sound symbolism and of convergent innovations resulting from infant-parent interaction in the first stages of language acquisition (Westermarck 1891, Murdock 1959, Jakobson 1960, Trask n.d.). In contrast with this view, we will show, through the comparison of kinship terms from more than 1,700 languages, that these words are inherited from generation to generation, just like other words.

First of all, the specific phonetic shape of kinship terms in particular language families, e.g. Semitic ?AB- 'father, dad' (Militarev & Kogan in progress), Turkic APA 'father, dad' (Starostin & al. n.d.), Dravidian APPA 'father, dad' (Burrow & Emeneau 1984), etc., preserved almost unchanged in most descendant languages, shows that they have been transmitted from the proto-language of their respective family into its daughter languages over several millennia (Matthey de l'Etang & Bancel 2005, forthcoming).

Moreover, data about language acquisition confirm that the meaning and particular phonetic shape of these words are transmitted by elders (Jakobson 1960, Brigaudiot & Danon-Boileau 2002).

Furthermore, the semantic opposition between *PAPA/TATA* 'father' and *KAKA* 'mother's brother,' valid both at the local and global levels (Bancel & Matthey de l'Etang 2002, 2004), excludes the sound-symbolic hypothesis (Jakobson 1960, Trask n.d.), since no link may be established between consonants *P* and *T* with 'fatherhood,' nor between consonant *K* and 'mother's brotherhood.'

The only acceptable explanation for the worldwide distribution of these kinship terms is that they have been inherited from a common ancestral language. This Proto-Sapiens language was spoken some 100,000 years ago in the African homeland of our species (Ruhlen 1994*a*, Bancel & Matthey de l'Etang 2004). Proto-Sapiens kinship terms add to the stock of global etymologies established by Bengtson & Ruhlen (1994).

Finally, the global semantic and anthropological study of these terms gives us a unique insight into the first *Homo sapiens*' kinship system, that reckoned sex, age status, and filiation (Matthey de l'Etang & Bancel 2002, 2005).

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