YOU AND YOUR RELATIONS

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Have you ever wondered who you really are? If you are like most people, you have probably thought of yourself as the I, or the SELF, or the EGO. (If you're into psychoanalysis, you may, of course, have preferred to identify with the ID or with the SUPEREGO - but that's another story.)

Who, however, are you from a legal or genealogical standpoint? Who are you as the individual with respect to whom the statuses of all your relatives are defined? You are the PROPOSITUS. Because the need to establish the relationships of others to you most typically arises upon your death, you are also called the DECEASED or the DECEDENT - or the DE CUJUS ("the one from whom"), to use a highly technical term. More particularly, establishing exactly who your relatives are becomes important if you have died without leaving a will, in which case you are known as the INTESTATE or INORDINATUS.

If thinking about yourself as already on the other side disturbs you, blame the society all around you - for virtually ignoring you as long as you are unfortunate enough to remain alive. You can, however, soften the blow to your self-esteem by replacing English terms with their elegant French equivalents: DÉFUNT/DÉFUNTE (a male/female decedent) and INTESTAT (an intestate).

Presenting a diametrically opposite problem are your miserable relatives - miserable because they are suffering from a malign lack of societal recognition, at least linguistically. Here, the rich bounty of names available for you has vanished. Instead, unbelievable as it may seem, the vast storehouse of English includes no words at all to designate some of your closest relatives. Here are some examples for you to mull over.

1. Your father and your mother are your PARENTS, while your son and your daughter are your CHILDREN. What, by analogy, are your uncle and your aunt, or your nephew and your niece? No comparable English words exist to identify them. The problem posited by this linguistic lacuna is, incidentally, one of infinite dimensions, not just some isolated quirk. Preceding your uncle and your aunt are your granduncle and your grandaunt, your great-granduncle and your great-grandaunt, and so on in an endless regress. Correspondingly, following your nephew and your niece are your grandnephew and your grandniece, your great-grandnephew and your great-grandniece, and so forth, also in an unending progression. The number of words missing from English is, therefore, infinite!

If, by the way, a truly infinite number of generations of your relatives requires belief in the steady-state theory (or the linked-loop theory that astronomer Fred Hoyle has recently advanced to replace it) and in ancient astronauts who arrived here from somewhere else in the universe, establishing intelligent human life on the earth, so be it. We must be flexible in our thinking!

2. Your siblings are differentiated genderwise as your BROTHERS and SISTERS. How, by analogy, are your cousins differentiated? Once again, English includes no words to tell your cousins apart! If you speak of your male cousins and your female cousins, you are merely using the definitions of terms you need but don't have. An alternative is to identify your cousins by name: "my cousin John, my cousin Mary." That tactic, however, works only if your cousins have unambiguous names - if they happen to sport names such as Alexis, Hilary, or Marion, which may be either masculine or feminine, you are driven back to the definitional approach.

This problem is another one infinite in dimension. You have first, second, third, and still more remote cousins, in a chain stretching eternally onward. You also have cousins once removed, twice removed, three times removed, and so on, also in an endless chain. Somewhere and somewhen, there is, was, or will be a 287th cousin of yours - 351 times removed. The vistas this mind-expanding idea opens up to you are truly awesome.

The failure of English to distinguish between male and female cousins is especially puzzling because most European languages do discriminate between them. Examples include both VETTER/BASE and COUSIN/COUSINE in German; NEEF/NICHT (also the words for nephew/niece) in Dutch; FAETTER/KUSINE in Danish and FETTER/KUSINE in Norwegian; COUSIN/COUSINE in French; CUGINO/CUGINA in Italian; PRIMO/PRIMA both in Spanish and in Portuguese; CEFNDER/CYFNITHER in Welsh; KUZYN/KUZYNKA in Polish; and BRATÁNOK/SESTRENICA in Slovak. Be careful in using some of these words, however - the French COUSIN also means "gnat, midge," and the Welsh CEFNDER is remarkably similar to CEFNDEDYN ("pancreas, mesentery, diaphragm" - one internal organ or membrane is apparently much like another, in Welsh).

3. If you are one of two children born at the same time to the same mother, the other child is your TWIN; or, more specifically, your TWIN BROTHER or TWIN SISTER. What, however, if you are one of three, four, five, or six such children? The others are not your triplets, quadruplets, quintuplets, or sextuplets - they are solely those of your parents, for the words denoting the larger numbers do not possess the special meaning that the word "twin" has acquired. You are forced to resort to awkward circumlocutions ("My brother, a member of the same set of quadruplets of which I am a member") if you wish to convey your thought accurately, because English has failed you again.

4. If you are one of two or more siblings, but your own birth was a single one, how do you identify a sibling who is not a member, jointly with you, of a multiple-birth group of siblings? There

is no English word capable of serving your purpose, and you are compelled to use another, extremely awkward, periphrasis ("My sister, one who does not share membership with me in any multiple-birth group of siblings"). You can, of course, use a ploy, speaking or writing of one of your siblings as "my older brother" or as "my younger sister" - wordings which make it obvious to your audience that the two of you were not born at the same time. Such phrases, unfortunately, imply strongly that you also have a younger brother, or an older sister - implications that may be utterly false. Furthermore, the members of a multiple-birth group of siblings are normally born minutes (or even hours) apart. Technically, therefore, such siblings of yours are older or younger than you are, so that the phraseology has not ruled out a multiple-birth relationship between you two - not in the mind of a thinking individual, anyway. English has failed you in a fourth situation!

5. If you are married, you have a SPOUSE; or, more informatively, a HUSBAND or a WIFE. What, however, if you are living with a member of the opposite sex, without the benefit of marriage? What do you call your partner in love then? Because the open pursuit of living-together relationships is a very recent phenomenon in the United States, an alternative to conventional marriage that has not fully taken root yet, the English language is caught short yet another time. As a consequence, a flock of terms is currently vying for selection as the future English equivalent of "spouse": COHABITANT, COHABITEE, COHABITOR, LIVE-IN, LIVE-IN BOYFRIEND/GIRLFRIEND, LIVE-IN COMPANION, LIVE-IN LOVER, MATE, and ROOMMATE. The last of these would seem to be of limited utility, becoming inapplicable in the case of individuals residing in apartments or in full-fledged homes of their own, but I have not yet seen FLATMATE or HOUSEMATE used in this given context.

How many other gaps in designations for your relatives, by blood or by marriage, may there be? What are you going to do about the ones I have pinpointed here?