

Systems of Address and Titles in the Semai Indigenous Community of Kampung Chinggong, Behrang, Perak

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ABSTRACT

Language is a core instrument in shaping identity and maintaining the social harmony of a community. This study aims to explore and analyse the systems of address and titles within the Semai Orang Asli community in Kampung Chinggong, Behrang, Perak, Malaysia. Guided by Ervin-Tripp's (1972) theoretical framework, which emphasizes alternation and co-occurrence rules, this qualitative field-based study utilized direct observation and semi structured interviews with 20 native Semai speakers aged 25 to 70. The analysis focused on four main domains: biological family relationships, marriage (affinal) relationships, relatives, and formal greetings.

The findings indicate that language maintenance of native terms (such as *aki*, *wan*, and *ami*) remains highly robust within the domestic domain and core family. Additionally, a kinship term extension strategy (such as addressing in-laws directly as *ayah* or *mak*) is employed to minimize social distance and foster solidarity. However, in extra-nuclear marriage relationships like *biras* and *besan*, as well as formal greeting domains (terms like *tuan*, *puan*, *encik*, *cik*) the Semai community demonstrates a pragmatic approach by assimilating Malay lexical items. This assimilation reflects functional diglossia and an adaptive level of bilingualism in navigating out-group interactions. In conclusion, these sociolinguistic dynamics prove the cultural flexibility of the Semai community in navigating two distinct social worlds without eroding their native linguistic identity. This documentation is crucial to ensuring that this indigenous linguistic heritage is preserved against the currents of modernization.

Keywords: Greeting systems, terms of address, Semai Orang Asli, sociolinguistics, language maintenance.

INTRODUCTION

Language is one of the most important instruments in shaping identity, preserving culture, and maintaining the social continuity of a society. Among the Orang Asli community in Malaysia, language functions not only as a medium of communication but also as a tool that preserves the community's belief systems, social structures, and collective values (Benjamin, G., 1976; Nicholas, C., 2000). Each Orang Asli ethnic group possesses a unique language and dialect, which simultaneously reflects their worldview and close relationship with the environment. In traditional societies like the Semai Orang Asli, language is more than just a communication tool; it functions as a medium to maintain social relationships, cultural identity, and societal values.

Among the important linguistic aspects are the system of terms of address and the system of greetings. The system of terms of address refers to the expressions or titles used to call or refer to someone based on family relationships, age, gender, position, and social status. The system of greetings, on the other hand, refers to the use of these terms of address in actual communication situations as a sign of respect, politeness, and recognition of a person's role in society. In the Semai Orang Asli society, both systems reflect the social structure, kinship ties, and customs inherited from generation to generation. Choosing appropriate terms of address and forms of greeting not only indicates the relationship between the speaker and the addressee, but also illustrates the values of respect, sense of community, and social harmony that form the core of community life. In addition, the system

of terms of address and greetings serves as a symbol of the Semai community's cultural identity, as its use demonstrates the uniqueness of their language and way of life. Through this practice, cultural values and social norms can be maintained and passed down to the next generation, thereby ensuring the continuity of the linguistic and cultural heritage of the Semai Orang Asli community.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Early research on the Semai kinship system of address can be traced back to the writings of Robert K. Dentan (1970). In his study, he used a componential analysis approach to describe the set of Semai kinship terms. Dentan found an inconsistency between the formal rules of terms and their actual usage within the community, thereby showing that the Semai address system is not rigid, but rather highly dependent on social context, age, and family member status. This finding emphasizes the elastic nature and flexibility in the use of kinship terms within the Semai community. Apart from forms of address, Semai greeting words were also studied by Mohamad Suhaizi Suhaimi, Izznusratina Nur Khalis Mohd Yusof, and Eris Joshan Chew (2024) in Kuala Senta, Perak, using Ervin-Tripp's Theory of Greeting Words (1972) and alternation rules. The results of this qualitative study revealed that there are 14 variations of greeting words used, showing diversity in daily communication forms. This finding indicates that the Semai greeting system functions not only as a marker of family relationships but also maintains the social structure and value of respect within the community.

Comparative studies conducted on other Orang Asli communities also provide an overview of changes in the family address system due to external influences. In the context of the Che Wong community in Kuala Gandah, Pahang, a study by Sa'adiah Ma'alip and Teo Kok Seong (2019) found that there are various forms of terms of address used during communication to call or greet their family members within the studied Orang Asli Che Wong community. In addition to retaining their traditional forms of address, they have also adopted forms of address used by the local Malay community. It is evident that the younger generation has begun to change traditional forms of terms of address to new forms like those used by the local community. Further research by Norajihah Muda (2021) using an ethnographic approach found that the younger generation now prefers to use terms of address in the Malay language due to factors such as bilingualism, migration, urbanization, and social influence. This shift clearly demonstrates a language shift where the Malay language increasingly dominates the Che Wong family system, thereby affecting their cultural identity.

Overall, the system of terms of address and greetings among the Orang Asli community, particularly the Semai, functions not only as a marker of genealogical relationships but also reflects the social structure, cultural identity, and collective values of the community. Past studies show that this system is flexible, contextual, and changes according to age, status, and external influences. Although the influence of the Malay language is increasingly apparent among the younger generation, traditional forms still play an important role in maintaining cultural continuity and social harmony. Therefore, in-depth documentation and research on the variations of terms of address and greetings among the Semai community are essential to ensure this linguistic heritage is preserved and not lost to the currents of change.

METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted in Kampung Chinggong, Behrang, Perak, Malaysia, using a qualitative field-based approach, in line with Creswell's (2014) recommendation that this method is suitable for understanding social and cultural meanings within specific community contexts. Data was collected through direct observation and semi-structured interviews with 20 native Semai speakers aged 25 to 70 years old. The data collection process was also supported by video recordings and field notes to help record intonation, expressions, and social reactions. The theoretical framework of the study is guided by Ervin-Tripp (1972), which emphasizes two main methods: alternation (the selection of one form of address in a specific situation) and co-occurrence (the simultaneous use of more than one form). This theory is used to explain how the Semai community applies terms of address not only in blood relationships but also in broader social relations, such as using the terms *apak* (father) or *emak* (mother) for individuals who are not biological parents as a sign of respect. Thus, Ervin-Tripp's theory provides an important foundation for understanding the variation, flexibility, and social function of the system of terms of address in the Semai community of Kampung Chinggong.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Table 4.1: Grandfather and Grandmother Address Systems in the Semai Orang Asli Community (N=20)

Relationship	Form of Address	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Grandfather	Aki	17	85.0
	Ket/Ked	1	5.0
	Atuk	1	5.0
	Anjep	1	5.0
	Total	20	100
Grandmother	Wan	15	75.0
	Anjok	1	5.0
	Enjob	1	5.0
	Ajok	1	5.0
	Nenek	1	5.0
	Njob	1	5.0
	Total	20	100

Based on the study findings, it was found that the terms of address for grandfathers among the Semai community in Kampung Chinggong have several variations, namely *Aki*, *Atuk*, *Anjep*, and *Ked*. The variety of these forms of address shows that the Semai community's system of terms of address is dynamic, flexible, and adaptive. This variation is not only influenced by the Semai community's own linguistic traditions but is also affected by geographical factors, dialect variations, and social relations with the surrounding communities. For grandmothers, there are variations of terms of address used to refer to a grandmother, namely *Wan*, *Anjop*, and *Enjop*. This variation shows the existence of linguistic diversity within the Semai community, which is influenced by internal factors of the Semai language itself as well as close interaction with the Malay language, particularly the Perak dialect.

In Table 4.1, the term *Aki* is the most dominant term used to refer to a grandfather, with a usage rate of 85.0%. For grandmothers, the term *Wan* recorded the highest usage, at 75.0%. This finding proves that both terms remain as traditional forms of address that form a part of the linguistic identity of the Semai community in Kampung Chinggong. At the same time, the existence of variations such as *Anjep*, *Enjob*, *Ajok*, and *Ked* highlights the lexical diversity present in the Semai community, which is likely influenced by dialect differences, family backgrounds, or settlement areas.

The use of the terms of address *Aki* and *Atuk* demonstrates the influence of the Malay language, particularly the Perak dialect, resulting from the close interaction between the Semai community in the Behrang area and the local Malay community. In the Perak Malay dialect, the terms *Atuk* or *Tok* are commonly used to refer to a grandfather, and this form has been absorbed into the daily usage of the Semai community through a continuous process of social interaction. In addition, the form *Aki* is also found in several other Malay dialects, thereby showing a sharing of lexical elements between the Semai language and its surrounding languages. For grandmother terms of address, the term *Wan* clearly shows the influence of the Perak dialect of the Malay language, which is also widely used in the local Malay community. The use of this term illustrates the occurrence of a lexical borrowing process from the Malay language into the Semai language, in line with geographical factors and social relations between the two communities. Conversely, the forms *Anjop* and *Enjop* are likely internal variations within the Semai language itself. Both refer to grandmothers in the traditional family context, but *Enjop* is seen as a phonological variation of *Anjop*, specifically an initial vowel shift that commonly occurs in dialect variations or speech between speakers. This demonstrates the flexibility of the Semai language phonological system without changing the original meaning of the word.

Table 4.2: Mother and Father Address System (N=20)

Relationship	Form of Address	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Mother	Ami	8	40.0

	Amek	4	20.0
	Amak	2	10.0
	Ambe	2	10.0
	Other combinations	4	20.0
	Total	20	100
Father	Ayah	13	65.0
	Apak	3	15.0
	Apak/Ayah	2	10.0
	Other variations	2	10.0
	Total	20	100

There are three main forms of terms of address used to refer to a father among the Semai community in Kampung Chinggong, namely *Apak*, *Abah*, and *Ayah*. These three forms show a combination of native elements of the Semai language with the influence of the Malay language, particularly the Perak dialect and standard Malay. The form *Apak* is considered closer to the traditional Semai form, which retains the characteristics of the original family address system. This term also exists in several Malay dialects, but in the Semai context, it functions as a more intimate form in the relationship between child and father. Meanwhile, *Abah* shows a clear influence from the Perak Malay dialect and the northern dialects of the Peninsula, resulting from continuous interaction between the Semai community and the local Malay community. This form reflects values of respect and intimacy within the family institution. The word *Ayah*, on the other hand, is a more modern standard Malay form and is widely used among the younger generation, parallel with the influence of formal education and media exposure.

For mother terms of address, there are variations such as *Mak*, *Ami*, *Ambek*, and *Amek*. *Mak* is clearly a loanword from the widely used Perak Malay dialect, showing a process of linguistic assimilation through social interaction. Conversely, *Ami* is considered closer to the native form of the Semai language, reflecting the ethnolinguistic identity of the community. The form *Ambek* is likely an internal variation of the Semai language, while *Amek* is seen because of phonological adaptation from *Ambek* through the deletion of the consonant /b/. Despite the different forms, all these variations still refer to the same meaning, which is mother. Overall, the findings show that *Ayah* (65.0%) and *Ami* (40.0%) are the most dominant forms, yet the existence of other variations like *Apak*, *Abah*, *Mak*, and *Amek* proves that the Semai community's system of terms of address is dynamic. This reflects the strong influence of the Malay language alongside the preservation of native Semai language elements in their family system.

Table 4.3: Relatives Address System

Relationship	Form of Address	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Aunt	wak (younger)	7	35.0
	combination of wak/mok or mok/wak	9	45.0
	mok	1	5.0
	ami / amek wak	2	10.0
	makcik	1	5.0
	Total	20	100.0
Uncle	bah	6	30.0
	combination of bah/ked/ket	9	45.0
	ked/ket	1	5.0
	ayah saudara / pakcik	2	10.0
	jug	1	5.0
	aki	1	5.0
	Total	20	100.0
Cousin	sepupu / sepupu-sedare	10	50.0
	call by name / name	4	20.0
	sedare / sedara	3	15.0
	No Answer (-)	3	15.0
	Total	20	100.0

Terms of address for aunts within the Semai community show two main variations, namely *Mok* and *Wak*. *Mok* is used for older aunts or those holding a higher position in the family, including those regarded as a mother substitute figure. Conversely, *Wak* is used for younger aunts and is more casual in daily communication without strict emphasis on hierarchy. For uncles, the main variations are *Bah* and *Ked/Ket*. *Bah* is used generally for uncles who are younger than or the same age as the father, while *Ked/Ket* refers to older ones and serves as a sign of respect. There is also the use of *Aki* for older uncles, showing a somewhat blurred boundary between the categories of grandfather and uncle depending on the social context. For cousins, the Semai community does not have a uniform specific term. Terms like *sedare/sedara* are used generally, but in most interactions, the individual's name is used more frequently. This shows that cousin relationships are more social and casual compared to formal kinship classifications.

Table 4.4: Address System Through Marriage Relationships

Relationship	Form of Address	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Father-in-law	ayah mentuhak / mentuha / metua	5	25.0
	ayah	4	20.0
	mentuhak / mentuah / kerar / keral	4	20.0
	apak / apah / bapak mentua	3	15.0
	No Answer (-)	2	10.0
	ta'	1	5.0
	amek	1	5.0
	Total	20	100.0
Mother-in-law	ami mentuhak / ami mentuha	5	25.0
	mak / emak / ibu mentua	5	25.0
	ami / amek	4	20.0
	mentuhak / mentuah / keduar	4	20.0
	abah/apak	1	5.0
	No Answer (-)	1	5.0
	Total	20	100.0
Co-sibling-in-law	biras	11	55.0
	kenen / keney / kenei	4	20.0
	No Answer (-)	3	15.0
	call by name / child's name	2	10.0
	Total	20	100.0
In-law parents	besan	9	45.0
	bisan / bisat	5	25.0
	No Answer (-)	3	15.0
	bai	1	5.0
	kenei	1	5.0
	name	1	5.0
	Total	20	100.0
Brother-in-law	kenen / keney / kenei (singular)	9	45.0
	keney kerar / keran / keral / tahek	4	20.0
	menai	3	15.0
	tenek	1	5.0
	bai	1	5.0
	name	1	5.0
	No Answer (-)	1	5.0
	Total	20	100.0
Sister-in-law	kenen / keney / kenei / kenej (singular)	11	55.0
	keney keduar / kaduwar / kedua	4	20.0
	No Answer (-)	2	10.0
	bai	1	5.0

	name	1	5.0
	menai	1	5.0
	Total	20	100.0
Younger Sibling-in-law	kenen / keney / kenei (singular)	11	55.0
	keney menang / menay / menang / menai	5	25.0
	No Answer (-)	2	10.0
	bai	1	5.0
	name	1	5.0
	Total	20	100.0

The greeting system through marriage or affinal relationships in the Semai community displays a unique sociolinguistic dynamic, where this kinship system does not build a rigid language barrier. Instead, Semai speakers tend to use kinship terms extension strategies when interacting within the domestic domain of the in-law family, while showing openness toward the absorption of external terms in secondary relationships such as *biras* and *besan*.

In the context of greeting a father-in-law and mother-in-law, this community exhibits a tendency to minimize social distance through the extension of the function of biological parents' greeting words. Speakers frequently use native combination terms like *ayah mentuhak*, *ami mentuhak*, or *ami mentuha* that retain the core family intimacy base word. In fact, the practice of directly greeting using the absolute lexical words *ayah*, *mak*, *emak*, or *ami/amek* was found to be very common in their daily communication. From a sociolinguistic perspective, the choice of these primary greeting words functions as a psycholinguistic mechanism to build social intimacy and integrate the child in law into a new nuclear family unit. The use of these terms radiates respect and solidarity equal to that given to biological parents, thereby avoiding a sense of alienation within the extended family space.

For the system of greeting siblings-in-law (brother-in-law, sister-in-law, and younger sibling-in-law), the Semai community maintains a highly systematic and established native morphological system based on the root words *kenen*, *keney*, *kenei*, or *kenej*. The use of this single root word reflects the principle of semantic economy in the Semai language, where a general lexical term suffices to refer to the status of an in-law universally. However, if the social context demands clarity regarding hierarchical positioning, speakers act creatively by inserting a modifier behind the root word based on relative age order. For example, a brother-in-law is referred to with the additional lexical term *kerar*, *keran*, or *keral* (meaning old or primary), a sister-in-law is inserted with the lexical term *keduar/kaduwar* (middle), while a younger sibling-in-law is marked with the word *menang*, *menay*, or *menai* (young or later). This classification structure proves that even in marriage relationships, awareness of chronological age position remains encoded as an important marker of social politeness.

An interesting observation can be made in the domain of secondary marriage relationships such as *biras* and *besan*. In contrast to the intimacy of the in-laws' domain, the relationship of *biras* and *besan* shows a very dominant rate of lexical borrowing from the mainstream Malay language. The use of standard terms like *biras* and *besan* (or local phonetic variations *bisan/bisat*) is widely adopted by the Semai community. Sociolinguistically, this phenomenon reflects a pragmatic language attitude through a selective cultural diffusion process. For kinship relationships that are outside the household circle or involve less intimate daily interaction, Semai speakers tend to borrow external terminology as a practical kinship system marker without needing to disrupt their own domestic power lexical structure.

Table 4.5: Formal Greeting Words

Relationship / Status	Form of Address	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Tuan (Sir)	tuhai	8	40.0
	tuan	7	35.0
	No Answer (-)	3	15.0
	jut	1	5.0
	kek	1	5.0
	Total	20	100.0

Puan (Madam)	tuhat	8	40.0
	puan	7	35.0
	No Answer (-)	3	15.0
	jut	1	5.0
	kek	1	5.0
	Total	20	100.0
Encik (Mr.)	encik	9	45.0
	tuhat	4	20.0
	No Answer (-)	4	20.0
	ket	1	5.0
	kek	1	5.0
	Total	20	100.0
Cik (Ms.)	cik	8	40.0
	No Answer (-)	5	25.0
	tuhat	4	20.0
	ket	1	5.0
	kek	1	5.0
	Total	20	100.0

Unlike the family address system which still retains traditional terms, the use of official titles shows that the Semai community adopts the national greeting system when interacting in administrative, educational, and public sectors. This illustrates a cultural adaptation process without erasing the linguistic identity of the Semai community. Analysis of the formal greeting word domain shows an important sociolinguistic meeting point between the preservation of indigenous value systems and the need to adapt to external social structures. Based on the data displayed in Table 4.5, the use of official titles among the Semai community reflects a process of functional diglossia, where this community adopts the national greeting system to face out-group interaction contexts, particularly in administrative, educational, and public sector matters.

For the greetings *Tuan* and *Puan*, both categories exhibit identical data distribution trends. The native term of the Semai language, *tuhat*, recorded the highest frequency with a rate of 40.0% (f=8). Retaining the term *tuhat* as the top choice proves that the minds of Semai speakers possess a pre-existing concept of high-status respectful greeting, which is then functionally aligned to match the concept of 'Tuan' or 'Puan' in mainstream Malay. Something different can be observed in the domain of greetings for *Encik* and *Cik*, where the influence of national language linguistic assimilation is detected to be more dominant than the native terms. For the greeting *Encik*, the loanword *encik* recorded the highest percentage of 45.0% (f=9), while the greeting *Cik* showed that the lexical term *cik* dominated by 40.0% (f=8). This indicates that greetings with the status of 'Encik' and 'Cik' are largely considered pure external language codes that are rarely applied within the domestic or intra-cultural communication ecosystem among the indigenous community itself.

Sociolinguistically, this phenomenon summarizes a pragmatic cultural adaptation process without erasing the original linguistic identity of the Semai community. The capability of speakers to balance native greetings (*tuhat*, *jut*, *ket*, *kek*) with national standard greetings (*tuan*, *puan*, *encik*, *cik*) proves an adaptive level of bilingualism. When dealing with government agents, teachers, or administration, the national greeting system is fully adopted as an external politeness strategy to smooth official matters. This dynamic shows that the Semai community does not experience absolute assimilation that erases the mother tongue but instead displays cultural flexibility to navigate two different social worlds through the selection of precise greeting codes.

CONCLUSION

This study has successfully uncovered and analyzed the system of terms of address and greetings within the Semai community based on four main domains: biological family relationships, relationships through marriage (affinal), relative relationships, and the formal greeting domain. In conclusion, the sociolinguistic dynamics of the Semai community exhibit a highly organized, flexible, and culturally rich system that reflects their worldview. The results of the study conclude that language maintenance within the domestic domain and the

core family of Semai speakers is at a very strong level. This is proven through the retention of native greeting terms such as *aki* (grandfather), *wan* (grandmother), and *ami/amek* (mother). In fact, within primary and secondary family institutions, relative age hierarchy remains rigidly encoded as main politeness markers, as clearly reflected in the differentiation of the words *Mok/Wak* for aunts, *Ked/Ket/Bah* for uncles, and the use of status-of-birth modifiers (*kerar*, *keduar*, *menang*) in the sibling-in-law address system.

In addition, this study reveals a significant phenomenon of kinship terms extension within the in-laws' domain (the direct use of the words *ayah* and *mak/ami*). This linguistic strategy functions effectively to minimize social distance between the child-in-law and the spouse's family, thereby promoting intimacy, solidarity, and the unification of the domestic space of the extended family. Conversely, for extra-nuclear marriage relationships such as *biras* and *besan*, the Semai community remains open and flexible in assimilating Malay language terms. From the perspective of language contact and bilingualism, the formal greeting domain (Tuan, Puan, Encik, Cik) reveals a very pragmatic process of cultural diffusion. The Semai community was found to successfully navigate two different social worlds: they maintain traditional greeting codes in intimate in-group interactions, yet at the same time, adopt the national greeting system to smooth out-group interactions, especially in official, administrative, educational, and public sector matters.

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