

# Learning Kinship Terms (Names for relatives)

## 1 Introduction

“Kinship” terms are words we use to refer to family members: mother, father, sister, brother, aunt, uncle, cousin, and so forth. Every language has kinship terms. In a country like Afghanistan, where family is such an important part of life, it’s important to know who’s being referred to. If you studied in the Long Course, there was probably a time when you knew a lot of kinship terms. But realistically, you’re only going to master this vocabulary when you *need* it—that is, when you’re interacting with people and talking about their families. If you feel that need, it’s a good time to study kinship terms.

Kinship terms in the languages of Afghanistan won’t line up one-to-one with the words we know from English. For instance, you can’t just learn the word for ‘uncle,’ because there will not be just one word for uncle: you’ll need to distinguish between maternal uncle (your mother’s brother) and a paternal uncle (your father’s brother). And the differences go on...

Languages of Afghanistan have very rich kinship systems. That’s a nice way of saying that you have a lot of words to learn!

## 2 How to structure your lesson

### 2.1 Preliminaries

This activity requires relatively little language ability. You do need to be able to talk about possession: my apple, his apple, Ahmad’s apple, etc.

You may want to read up on kinship terminology from an anthropological perspective.<sup>1</sup> Kinship is a bit of a mind-bender because your English background will not help very much: ‘uncle’, ‘aunt’, and ‘sister-in-law’ won’t be specific enough for the languages of Afghanistan. Instead, you’ll need to understand each term in terms of simple relationships. Some terms will correspond to simple relationships, like ‘son’ or ‘daughter’. Others will require a more detailed description, like “mother’s sister’s children”. Some terms might require more complex definitions still. For instance, you would have to define the English word ‘brother-in-law’ as “sister’s husband; wife’s brother; wife’s sister’s husband.”

### 2.2 Asking questions from the diagrams

There are two family trees you can use to learn kinship terms.<sup>2</sup> The first is a simple diagram of a large family (‘kinship-chart-big-family.pdf’). The second diagram is of a large extended family, covering three generations (‘kinship-chart.pdf’). Both are typical family tree structures. Males are indicated with a triangle; females are indicated with a circle. The names are given in Persian script and English spelling, so both you and your teacher can read them.<sup>3</sup>

Take these family trees to your lesson to practice. Start with the simple tree. You could start by placing marker on Parsa and saying, “I am Parsa. Farkhunda is my...” This will give you the word for ‘wife’. Then you can move on to other members of the family. Then you could place the marker on Farkhunda, and ask who Parsa is.

With the simpler family tree, you can learn the terms for father, brother, sister, son, daughter, etc. There may also be specific terms for older brother/sister and younger brother/sister. The more complex family tree will get you words for grandparents and grandchildren, aunts and uncles, nieces and nephews, and various in-laws (people related because of the marriage). In this tree especially, change your ‘identity’ throughout the exercise. You can get ‘grandfather’ by being one of the people on the bottom row (“Who is Hamayun?”), and ‘grandchild’ by being one of the people on the top row (“Who is Hedia?”).

Here are some suggestions of things to ask about.

#### ❖ My children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren

<sup>1</sup>For example, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kinship\\_terminology](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kinship_terminology)

<sup>2</sup>Both of these charts are modified version of this image—[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Kinship\\_Systems.svg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Kinship_Systems.svg)—released under a Creative Commons license. These family trees are released under the same license.

<sup>3</sup>An effort was made to use the more common Afghan names, and to use names that start with different sounds.

- ❖ My parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents
- ❖ My brothers and sisters, and their spouses
- ❖ The children of my brothers, the children of my sisters
- ❖ My in-laws: my spouse's parents, my spouses siblings, the children of my spouse's siblings

It may help to keep in mind as well that some kinship terms are reciprocal, and some are not. A reciprocal kinship term works two ways: in English, if you are my 'cousin', then I am your 'cousin'. Not all kinship terms work that way. If I am your 'uncle', then you are not my 'uncle': you are either my 'niece' or 'nephew'. You need to ask questions to find out if a particular kinship term is reciprocal.

### 3 Questions to Ask

For learning the basic terms, you can ask questions like these:

- ❖ From the perspective of a particular person:
  - Who is X to me?
  - Who am I to X?
  - What do I call X?
  - What does X call me?
- ❖ Who is X to Y? Who is Y to X?
- ❖ What does X call Y? What does Y call X?

Talking about kinship opens up a lot of conversation topics. You could share about your own family, for example, perhaps with pictures. You can also ask more specific cultural questions. For instance, who lives together in the same house? Who can get married? Which relations are closest?<sup>4</sup>

If you feel comfortable with your teacher and the topic, you can also ask about more complicated situations than those shown in the diagram: for instance, polygamous marriage, divorce and remarriage, and bereavement. You'll need to use your own discretion to know whether these are appropriate topics to talk about with your language teacher.

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<sup>4</sup>My impression from the Afghan cultures that I've experience is that mother's sister and father's brother are the closest aunts and uncles.