Kinship Terms as Address Forms in S'gaw Karen[1]

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1. Introduction

In many languages, such as Turkish, Gogo, and Busama, kinship terms do not just provide a taxonomy of familial relations, but also serve as address forms. The choice of which kinship term to use is often guided by a single social factor: relative age of speaker and addressee. Specifically, speakers report using kinship terms when referring to older addressees, esp. consanguineal kin, and proper names when referring to younger addressees (Fleming & Slotta, 2016).

Although these pragmatic norms are well-attested in the literature, it is unclear whether and to what extent speakers adhere to them in everyday life. Do they always address older speakers with kinship terms, as is frequently claimed, or do they flaunt the rules in interaction? This paper explores the use of kinship terms as address forms in S'gaw Karen, a Sino-Tibetan language spoken along the Burma-Thailand border as well as numerous refugee communities around the world.[2] Because the Karen speakers in this paper were recruited from a refugee community in Buffalo, NY, a further question addressed is if and how forms of address are changing as Karen speakers come into contact with American English.

In order to answer these questions, a corpus of naturally occurring conversation would be preferable. However, as this kind of data is not readily available for underdocumented languages like S'gaw Karen, and the creation of a new corpus would take a significant amount of time, this paper presents the results of a pilot study using linguistic elicitation, a

[2] Following Sarvestani (2016), this paper uses the name 'Burma' rather than "Myanmar" since it is the preferred term among community members.

questionnaire, and ethnographic interviews. Results indicate that the use of kinship terms is indeed highly conventionalized. However, the speaker-addressee relationship is not as static as it may seem: Speakers can and do deviate from the norms to create and negotiate social relationships. This suggests that speakers have a lot more agency than previous accounts would predict, and that future work should pay more attention to pragmatic variation (see also Cook, 2011; Strycharz, 2011). The study further shows that speakers frequently code-switch between S'gaw Karen, Burmese, and English address terms. This highlights the need for new approaches to language documentation in multilingual communities (Childs et al., 2014).

The paper is structured as follows: Some relevant background about S'gaw Karen and the people who speak it is provided in Section 2. Section 3 discusses the data collection methods that were used. Section 4 summarizes the results of the pilot study and provides suggestions for future research.

2. Background

S'gaw Karen belongs to the Karenic subbranch of the Sino-Tibetan language family. According to Lewis et al. (2015), there are approximately 1,480,000 native speakers, the majority of whom reside in and around Karen State in southeast Burma. Due to several decades of armed conflict, many speakers have been displaced to refugee camps along the Burma-Thailand border. In 2004, a resettlement program was introduced, which has helped approximately 88,000 ethnic Karen resettle to third countries such as the United States, Canada, Australia, Finland, and Japan (The Border Consortium, 2015). As part of this program, approximately 5,000 Karen were resettled to Buffalo, NY. While resettlement efforts have slowed down in recent years, the number of Karen people in the area is expected to keep growing due to childbirth and voluntary resettlement from other refugee communities in the U.S. (Sarvestani, 2016).

Previous work on S'gaw Karen includes a number of dictionaries (e.g. Wade & Binney, 1883/1954; Wade & Sau Kau Too, 1847–1850) and grammars (Wade 1842; Mason 1846; Gilmore 1896; Jones, 1961) as well as a small amount of work on more specific aspects of Karen phonology and grammar (please see Manson, 2010 for a comprehensive overview). The earliest description of the S'gaw Karen kinship system can be found in Morgan (1871). More recent descriptions, all based on fieldwork in Thailand, can be found in Lebar, Hickey and Musgrave (1964), Hinton (1975), Marlowe (1979), and Madha (1980). Generally, the kinship system is classified as 'cognatic' or 'bilateral' (Rajah, 2008): It has classificatory (i.e., terms that apply to more than one relation, such as *aunt* and *uncle*) as well as descriptive terms (i.e., terms that apply to only individual, such as *mother* and *father*) and distinguishes kin by sex (male vs. female) and generation (ego's generation vs. ascending and descending generations). Siblings are distinguished from cousins. Parallel and cross-cousins are grouped together.

Barron & Ranard (2007) point out that speakers of S'gaw Karen strictly avoid the use of proper names, and address each other with kinship terms. Rajah (2008) reports that the S'gaw Karen of Palokhi in northern Thailand only avoid the names of members of ascending generations. Preliminary research in the Buffalo Karen community suggests that most speakers go even further and address all speakers who are older than themselves with kinship terms, even those within their own generation. However, other speakers seem to

be moving away from the use of kinship terms altogether, and prefer to use proper names or nicknames instead.

3. Methodology

The goal of this paper is to determine the inventory of kinship terms in the Buffalo Karen community, describe how they are used, and determine if and how address norms are changing due to language contact. The following paragraphs provide a brief overview of the participants that took part in this study and the methods that were used to achieve these goals.

3.1 Participants

A total of 12 participants (6 males, 6 females) were recruited with the help of existing contacts in the Buffalo Karen community. Efforts were made to recruit participants of different ages and from different refugee camps. Similar to Henderson (2015) who carried out a number of ex-situ documentation projects in London, Atlanta, and Mombasa, I had to adjust my expectations due to the fact that members of immigrant and refugee communities lead very busy lives. Many of them work two or three jobs, and those who might be particularly good candidates for a project like this, such as community leaders, also serve as "informal social workers, helping with immigration paperwork, organizing community events, and leading religious services" (Henderson, 2015, p. 248). As a result, all but the two oldest participants were recruited from the youth group at the Buffalo Hermon Karen Baptist Church. While it would have been desirable to have a wider variety of ages represented, the young speakers turned out to be very helpful due to their extensive knowledge about Karen and American culture. For an overview of the participants that contributed to this study, please see Table 1.

Table 1
Participants

	Gender	Age	Camp(s)
1	female	61	Mae Ra Ma Luang
2	male	33	Hwaybalo, Umpium, Mae La
3	female	23	Umpium
4	female	21	Tham Hin
5	female	20	Umpium
6	male	18	Mae Ra Ma Luang
7	female	18	Mae La Oon
8	male	16	Umpium
9	male	16	Mae La
10	male	15	Umpium
11	male	15	Umpium
12	female	14	Mae La

All 12 participants have grown up in highly multilingual environments, and report different levels of proficiency in S'gaw Karen, Pwo Karen (another Karenic language), Burmese, Thai, and English, whereby younger speakers tend to be much more fluent in the latter than older speakers. While one participant, a 21-year-old female, considers Pwo to be her first language, S'gaw Karen plays a significant role in each of the participant's lives

since it serves as a lingua franca in the Buffalo Karen community, especially in the Buffalo Hermon Karen Baptist Church (Sarvestani, 2016).

3.2 Methods

First, participants were presented with a questionnaire consisting of 15 different scenarios from everyday life such as inviting a friend to a party or asking their sister for a glass of water. They were asked to determine which term(s) of address (if any) they would use to address the person in the scenario. Since one of the main goals of this study was to find out if the choice of address form is determined by more than relative age, the addressees in the scenarios represented different generations (G+2, G+1, G0), levels of familiarity (family member, friend, stranger) and sexes (male, female). The questionnaire was available in English and Karen. Most participants (N = 9) chose the English version. While this could be seen as an indicator that most of the participants do not feel comfortable reading and speaking Karen, it is most likely a consequence of the fact that S'gaw Karen is primarily a spoken language and many speakers aren't used to reading more formal texts. To allow for clarification questions, the researcher was always present when the questionnaire was administered, and walked the participants through the scenarios if necessary.

Then, more informal interviews were conducted to get a more comprehensive overview of kinship terms and how they are used. Whenever possible, speakers were interviewed in groups of two or three to facilitate discussion about terms which are rare or are falling out of use. Most kinship terms were directly elicited from the speakers, but some also came up during the discussion. During the interviews, speakers were asked to reflect on how kinship terms are used, how they are learned, and whether they have noticed any changes in address behavior.

4. Results and discussion

In the following section, the results of the study will be presented. In order to facilitate comprehension, I will begin with an overview of the kinship terms used in S'gaw Karen before discussing the reported patterns of usage.

4.1 Inventory of kinship terms

Below please find an overview of all kinship terms that were elicited during the informal interviews (see Table 2). The terms bear a striking resemblance to those provided in earlier descriptions, especially in Rajah (2008). This suggests that the inventory of kinship terms has remained relatively constant. We only find two crucial differences (see Table 3): First, Rajah states that the terms for elder male sibling and elder female sibling are preceded by the prefix wae-, which does not occur in the Buffalo Karen community. Second, he mentions a number of affinal kin terms that are absent in the Buffalo Karen community, such as *pyde* (WyB, WyZ, HyB, HyZ) and *ca'li* (yZH, HyZH, WyZH). Instead, affinal kin are treated like consanguineal kin.[3] Given that not even the oldest

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[3] Please note that Rajah's (2008) transcription is based on Jones (1961), while the transcription used throughout the rest of this paper is based on Sarvestani (2016), the first in-depth study of the Buffalo Karen community. Characters used in Rajah (2008) which differ from the IPA are as follows: <ae> = [ɛ], <c> = [dʒ], <au> = [ɔ].

speaker in my sample report this distinction, it seems safe to assume that this distinction was either lost a long time ago, or was never part of the dialects spoken in the refugee camps at the Burma-Thailand border in the first place. This suggests that the inventory of kinship terms has remained relatively stable.

Interestingly, two participants, a 61-year-old female and a 16-year-old male, report using Burmese terms for addressing in-laws (e.g., *yaukpha* 'brother-in-law'). While this may be a remnant of the elicitation situation, the interview data suggests that speakers frequently code-switch to Burmese and English during address (see section 4.2 below). In some instances, this is a conscious decision (e.g., when the 33-year old male addresses his wife and children in English to encourage them to integrate into mainstream culture), in others, it is the natural product of language use in multilingual communities (e.g. when the same speaker switches between Burmese and S'gaw Karen address terms when talking to his multilingual co-workers). Speaker reports suggest that this kind of code-switching is not an exception, but the norm in the Buffalo Karen community.

Table 2
S'gaw Karen kinship terms used as address forms[4]

Generation	Term	Usage
G+2	pʰɨ́	FF, MF (address and reference), other male collaterals and non-kin of the same generation (address)
	pʰí	FM, MM (address and reference), other female collaterals and non-kin of the same generation (address)
G+1	pá	F (address and reference), also term of address for spouse's F (address)
	mó	M (address and reference), also term of address for spouse's M (address)
	(pʰá)tí	FB, MB, FZH, MZH (address, sometimes reference), other male collaterals and non-kin of the same generation (address)
	mɨ́ɣá	FZ, MZ, FZW, MZW (address and reference), other female collaterals and non-kin of the same generation (address)
G0	dʒɔ́	Elder male sibling (address and reference), spouse's elder male sibling (address), other male collaterals and non-kin of the same generation (address)
	dékʰwà	Younger male sibling (address and reference), spouse's younger female sibling (address), other male collaterals and non-kin of the same generation (address)
	nɔ́	Elder female sibling (address and reference), spouse's elder male sibling (address), other female collaterals and non-kin of the same generation (address)
	démɨ́ʔ	Younger female sibling (address and reference), spouse's younger female sibling (address), other female collaterals and non-kin of the same generation (address)
	tə̀kʰwá	FBS, MBS, FZS, FBS (address), other male collaterals and non-kin of the same generation (address)

[4] Genealogical relationships are abbreviated as follows: B = brother, C = child(ren), D = daughter, F = father, H = husband, M = mother, S = son, W = wife, Z = sister. Compound relationships should be interpreted as follows: FM = father's mother, FZH = father's sister's husband, etc.

	kʰwápʰó	FBS, MBS, FZS, FBS (address), other male collaterals and non-kin of the same generation (address)
	tə̀mɨ́ʔ	FBD, MBD, FZD, MZD (address), other female collaterals and non-kin of the same generation (address)
	kʰwámɨ́ʔ	FBD, MBD, FZD, MZD (address), other female collaterals and non-kin of the same generation (address)
	wá	H (address and reference)
	má	W (address and reference)
G–1	pʰókʰwà	S (address and reference)
	pʰómɨ́ʔ	D (address and reference)
G–2	lɨ́	CS (address and reference)
	lɨ́mɨ́ʔ	CD (address and reference)

Table 3
Differences between Rajah (2008) and the present study

Rajah (2008)	Buffalo Karen community	Usage
waecau	dʒɔ́	Elder male sibling (address and reference), spouse's elder male sibling (address), other male collaterals and non-kin of the same generation (address)
waenau	nɔ́	Elder female sibling (address and reference), spouse's elder male sibling (address), other female collaterals and non-kin of the same generation (address)
pyde	n/a	WyB, WyZ, HyB, HyZ (address and reference)
ca'li	n/a	yZH, HyZH, WyZH (address and reference)

4.2 Usage

Since frequent use of kinship terms can lead to confusion, speakers report that they often use teknonyms (e.g., *pá Day* 'father of Day') or combine kinship terms with proper names (*dʒɔ́ Sella* 'older brother Sella') to specify who precisely they are talking to. This supports the idea that personal names are not as taboo as previous accounts would suggest. It also shows that the use of address terms can vary immensely depending on the situation.

This became increasingly clear when administering the questionnaire. Instead of offering one or two answers, as I had anticipated, most participants explained that the choice of address term did not only depend on the relative age of the speaker, but also on the presence of other interlocutors and whether or not they knew the name of the addressee and thus had the option of using anything other than a bare kinship term. Future work using naturally occurring conversation is needed to shed light on the influence of these and other contextual factors. For now, I will focus on the general usage patterns that emerged in the questionnaire data (see also Table 4).

Generally, the use of kinship terms as address forms is highly conventionalized, especially when it comes to addressing family members. Members of ascending generations are always addressed with kinship terms. The same goes for older members of the same generation such as older siblings and cousins. Most community members take this very seriously. For example, the youngest participant, a 14-year-old girl, claimed that

she always addresses her twin sister who is mere minutes older than her with the term *nɔ́* 'older sister.' With younger siblings, speakers have a choice: While they are usually addressed with nicknames, they can be addressed with kinship terms. According to most speakers, the use of kinship terms particularly common in requests. The use of proper names with family members is seen as offensive, and is usually limited to fights among siblings. Of course, some members have taken to using proper names with all family and community members. However, this is still the exception.

In contrast to addressing family members, which is highly conventionalized, there is a lot of variability when it comes to addressing non-kin. While all members of ascending generations are addressed with kinship terms, members of the same generation can be addressed using kinship terms, proper names, or nicknames (given that these are known to the speaker, of course; strangers are either addressed with kinship terms, other nouns like *tìθèkòʔ* 'friend', or not addressed at all) Some speakers, especially young females, even report using terms of endearment such as *nàʔθáʔ* 'pineapple' or *tàkɔ́ʔθáʔ* 'mango' for close friends. The choice between these different options is influenced by the speech situation, specifically the grade of familiarity (e.g., close friends vs. acquaintances), relative power of speaker and addressee, the location of the exchange (e.g., church vs. school/work vs. home), and the purpose of the communication (e.g., request vs. complaint). As a general rule, speakers are more likely to use kinship terms with intimates, or in social situations that require deferential behavior (e.g., a church service, or when asking someone for a favor). However, these are merely tendencies. In practice, speakers may be much less concerned with deference entitlements than managing social relationships (Stivers et al., 2007).[5] One of the participants, a 33-year-old male, for example, reports that some of his co-workers have taken to call him *dʒɔ́* 'older brother' even though he is a few years younger than them:

(1) Here [i.e., at work] there are also people, some people that are very older than me, they call me *dʒɔ́*, too, but I'm younger. [...] In Burmese, too, they call me *ko* [i.e., the Burmese equivalent to *dʒɔ́* 'older brother'].

By using a term that is commonly reserved for older speakers, the co-workers relinquish their deference entitlements, and thus create a relationship based on mutual respect. Interestingly, the speaker reports that the co-workers frequently code-switch between S'gaw Karen, Burmese, and English. Code-switching also seems to be the norm among younger speakers. For example, one participant, a 15-year-old male, states that he usually calls his cousin, who is also one of his best friends, *cuz* or *bro,* even when talking to him in Karen. Both of these examples suggest that speakers of S'gaw Karen are not abandoning traditional address norms. On the contrary, they are expanding their use of kinship terms by using them in multilingual interactions. As a consequence, looking at address behavior in one language is problematic because it does not reflect what speakers actually do in everyday life. This suggests that future work on documenting address terms in S'gaw Karen, like any other documentation efforts in highly multilingual communities,

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[5] More recent approaches to address and other politeness-related phenomena challenge the idea of a "static speaker-hearer relationship with no agency given to the speaker or hearer" (Cook, 2011, p. 3658). Of course, embracing a more dynamic view to social interaction does not mean that the influence of broad social categories like (relative) age should be ignored. Rather, the two perspectives should inform and complement each other.

should pay close attention to the sociocultural realities of language use, including the use of borrowings and code-switching.

Table 4
Use of address forms for different addressees

	Kin			Non-kin					
	Family			Close friends			Strangers		
	G+2	G+1	G0	G+2	G+1	G0	G+2	G+1	G0
KT	✔	✔	(✔)	✔	✔	(✔)	(✔)	(✔)	(✔)
Proper name	-	-	ϟ	-	-	✔	n/a	n/a	n/a
Nickname	-	-	✔	-	-	✔	n/a	n/a	n/a

4.3 Future work

Childs et al. (2014) provide some helpful guidelines for what such an approach might look like. They emphasize the need for detailed information on the sociolinguistic context of the situation and the speaker identities as well as "ancillary resources […] that will allow the data to be situated in the wider sociolinguistic context of a community" (p.171). For the Buffalo Karen community, this would include answering the following questions:

Sociolinguistic context:
- Where does the interaction take place (e.g., at home, church, etc.)?
- What languages are used (e.g., S'gaw Karen, Burmese, English, etc.)? Do these languages usually use comparable address terms?
- What kind of speech act is the speaker trying to perform (e.g., making a statement, giving a command, making a request)?

Speaker identities:
- Who are the speakers (e.g., age, sex, marital status)?
- What camp(s) did they live in?
- What languages do they speak? What languages do they (and potential bystanders) have in common?
- Do they have ties outside of the Buffalo Karen community?

Ancillary resources:
- What language(s) do the speakers usually use?
- What attitudes do the speakers have to these languages?

This list is not meant to be comprehensive. Rather, it is supposed to serve as a starting point for further investigation into the factors which govern language use and language choice in the Buffalo Karen community.

5. Conclusion

This paper presents the first description of the use of kinship terms as address forms in the Buffalo Karen community. The results confirm that relative age of speaker and addressee is a key factor in deciding whether or not to address someone with a kinship term. Members of ascending generations are always addressed with kinship terms,

regardless of their level of familiarity. When addressing members of the same or descending generations, there is much more variability. Family members are usually addressed with kinship terms or nicknames; for friends, there is the additional option of proper names. Strangers are either addressed with kinship terms (which is considered to be somewhat formal), nouns like 'friend,' or not at all. The inventory of kinship terms seems to be remarkably stable.

While this is in line with previous descriptions of address behavior in S'gaw Karen (Rajah, 2008), the interview data suggests that the use of kinship terms as address forms is much more dynamic than previously assumed. Kinship terms can be modified or replaced with teknonyms, and speakers frequently code-switch between the many languages they speak (especially Karen, English, and Burmese). While the younger generation may be more prone to adapting Western address norms (like the use of proper names), many of them hold on to traditional Karen values like the use of kinship terms. This suggests that future work should document the contrasting use of S'gaw Karen, Burmese, and English, rather than focus on a single language.

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