In the last issue of [Science](#) (25 May, 2012), a [plea](#) by [Stephen Levinson](#) for the study of kinship terminology, and an article by [Charles Kemp](#) and [Terry Regier](#) making a novel contribution to that study.

Charles Kemp talks about his and Regier's research

Levinson writes: "In 1860, Lewis Henry Morgan heard an Iowa man on a Nebraska reservation describe a small boy as "uncle." Fascinated, he embarked on lifelong research into the kinship systems of the world's cultures, which culminated in a typology of kin categories. Work on kinship categories flourished for a hundred years, but then became unfashionable. Yet, kinship is crucial to the transmission of human genes, culture, mores, and assets. Recent studies have begun to reinvigorate the study of kinship categories. ... Kinship is a fertile domain in which to ask a question at the heart of the cognitive sciences: Why do humans have the conceptual categories they do? ... There are more than 6000 languages, each with a different system of kin classification, at least in detail. ... What constrains this exuberant diversity of systems?"

In their [article](#) entitled "Kinship categories across languages reflect general communicative principles" (available [here](#)), Kemp and Regier argue:

"Languages vary in their systems of kinship categories but the scope of possible variation appears to be constrained. Previous accounts of kin classification have often emphasized constraints that are specific to the domain of kinship and are not derived from general principles. Here we propose an account that is founded on two domain-general principles: Good systems of categories are simple, and they enable informative communication. We show computationally that kin classification systems in the world's languages achieve a nearoptimal tradeoff between these two competing principles. We also show that our account explains several specific constraints on kin classification proposed previously. Because the principles of simplicity and informativeness are also relevant to other semantic domains, the tradeoff between them may provide a domain-general foundation for variation in category systems across languages."

It seems to me that Kemp and Regier's 'simplicity' and 'informativeness' taken together play the same role as 'relevance' defined in [relevance theory](#) as a negative function of processing efforts and a positive function of cognitive effets, and that their findings are consistent with predicitions following from the theory's 'cognitive principle of relevance'. Be that as it may, this thought-provoking paper may indeed contribute to a new start in work on kinship terminologies, and on categories systems more generally, based on sound pragmatic principles.

PS Of related interest in this issue of Science, an article by Michael C. Frank and Noah D. Goodman entitled "[Predicting Pragmatic Reasoning in Language Games](#)"