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**A COMPARISON OF THE SEMANTICS OF ENGLISH AND TURKISH  
FAMILY MEMBERS**

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**ABSTRACT**

This paper attempts to compare and contrast English-Turkish nouns specifically the words for family members using semantic features. The similarities and differences of the group of words used for family members in both languages and express the possible errors that Turkish speakers might face while learning English words are illustrated. This will help Turkish speakers to learn the different meanings of these words and use the language more efficiently when taught in the classroom.

**Keywords:** semantics, family members, contrastive linguistics, hierarchy of difficulty

**1.0 INTRODUCTION**

Semantics is the study of the meaning of words, phrases and sentences. In the semantic analysis, there is always an attempt to focus on what the words conventionally mean, rather than on what a speaker might want the words to mean on a particular occasion. This technical approach to meaning emphasizes the objective and the general. It avoids the subjective and the local. "Linguistic semantics deals with the conventional meaning conveyed by the use of words and sentences of a language." (Yule, 1996, 114).

The word family has some meanings such as: "a) a fundamental social group in society typically consisting of one or two parents and their children or two or more people who share goals and values, have long-term commitments to one another and reside usually in the same dwelling place. b) A group of persons sharing common ancestry etc." (The freedictionary.com) However, when we consider the word family and the members of that family we immediately think of our mother, father, siblings, grandmother, grandfather, cousins etc.

**TURKISH:**

The fact that words do not have fundamental meanings creates problems for language translation. It may be that in some other language, the word with the meaning closest to a grandparent may include grandmother and grandfather and in another language, it is possible that grandparent may include more than two words separated according to the parents of the mother's side and father's side as in Turkish. As a native speaker of Turkish, I have always used different words for my grandmothers and grandfathers. For example, if my grandmother is my mother's mother then I can call her anneanne in written Turkish but annane in spoken Turkish. The voiced sound 'e' and

unvoiced sound ‘n’ drops. For my grandmother who is my father’s mother I would call her babaanne in written Turkish and babanne in spoken Turkish. On the other hand we do not have different words for our grandfather; we just call them dede whether they are my father’s father or my mother’s father. This difference is also true for my great grandmother and great grandfather. Among peers or with younger persons, the title him is used for (‘Ms.’) and bey for (‘Mr.’). These titles follow the given name, for example, Perihan Hanim or Kamil Bey. With older people, one uses able for women Asli Abla or agabey for men Can Agabey. These terms mean sister and brother. If there is a great difference of age, the terms aunt and uncle are used, again after the first name: teyze (Fatma Teyze) for women and amca (Ahmet Amca) for men. However, the word abla means older sister and agabey means older brother. If we have a younger brother or sister we call them kardes, also a common word that means brothers and sisters. Besides, it is important that Turkish does have different words for mother’s sister and father’s sister. They are not called aunt for both as in English. Mother’s sister is teyze and father’s sister is hala (‘aunt’). The similar difference can also be seen when we want to refer to father’s brother amca (‘uncle’) and mother’s brother dayi.

Another important consideration in Turkish family members is the words that indicate politeness. We do not normally use kari for wife and koca for husband. The word eş is a synonym of both kari and koca, it indicates our husband if we are women and it also indicates our wife if we are men. The reason why we use eş (‘spouse’) instead of kari or koca is that those words sound to be very rude in Turkish. Other than that we also do not use kayinvalide which refers to (‘mother in-law’) ‘the mother of your husband or wife’ and kayinpeder (‘father in-law’) ‘the father of your husband or wife’. They sound to be impolite too but not as impolite as kari and koca. So, we call them anne (‘mother’) and baba (‘father’) although they are not. Lastly, in Turkish we have the word damat (‘groom’) for son in-law ‘the husband of your daughter’ and gelin (‘bride’) for daughter in-law ‘the wife of your son’, but most of the Turks believe that damat and gelin are rude to call so they prefer ogul (‘son’) and kiz (‘daughter’) even if they are not.

Another interesting word in Turkish is yeğen which could be translated as niece/nephew. Turkish does not have different words for the children of our brother or sister. When we say yeğen we do not actually know that the child is a she or he. The only way we can learn the gender of our yeğen is by asking. A similar ambiguous gender-related word in Turkish is to run (‘grandchild’). We do not have different words to specify the gender of our grandchild as in English granddaughter and grandson.

For the last category of the words of family members in Turkish are the words with many synonyms such as enişte, bacanak, kayinbirader for brother in-law ‘the husband of your sister’ and baldiz, gorumce, yenge for sister in-law ‘the wife of your brother’. It may seem confusing that yenge is also used for your uncle’s wife and enişte for your aunt’s husband. However, in Turkish, we can use any of the words that I have listed for sister-in-law and brother-in-law. The category represented by Turkish Family members (see Appendix B) and American Family members (see Appendix A) demonstrates that such categories are often language-specific.

## ENGLISH:

As in Turkish, the words such as husband, wife, mother, father, daughter, son, mother-in-law, father-in-law, sister-in-law and brother-in-law seem similar in the definition. So, I will just explain and illustrate the family words that are not specified in Turkish and also define the second meanings of some such words as father, sister etc. that does not exist in Turkish.

The first meaning of father is 'a person's male parent', and the second meaning is 'the title of certain priests' for example Father O'Reilly. For the word mother, it is pretty similar to Turkish in meaning, the female parent of a person or an animal. American people may also call their mother as mom, mommy and for father dad or daddy in informal English. Especially the kids love to call their mother mommy and for their father daddy which sounds cute. Even I, as a Turkish speaker, sometimes call my mother and father mommy and daddy since I like the sound.

In English grandparent (also grandmother; grandfather) is not specifically separated according to mother's side or father's side. It refers to the mother or father of one of your parents. Grandma and grandpa are also used for grandparents in informal English. For the other members of the family such as sister the dictionaries tend to define more than one meaning. The first meaning is a girl or woman who has the same parents as another person. In English, there is no common word that means brothers and sisters. The word sibling is very formal. The second dictionary meaning of sister is 'a member of certain female religious groups; a nun.' The last noun meaning of sister is actually informal, 'a woman who you feel close to because she is a member of the same society, group, etc. as you.' As for the word brother, dictionaries have similar meanings with sister. The first is 'a man or boy who has the same parents as another person.' The second meaning is 'a man who is a member of a Christian religious community.' For the last one which is informal, 'a man who you feel close to because he is a member of the same society, group, etc. as you.'

Moreover, in English the words such as aunt and uncle they do not differ according to mother's side or father's side. Aunt is 'the sister of your father or mother; the wife of your uncle.' In informal English auntie or aunty can be used too. As for uncle, the dictionaries define it as 'the brother of your father or mother; the husband of your aunt.'

It is also interesting that in English grandchildren are specified as a granddaughter, the daughter of your child, and grandson, the son of your child, which is very helpful for the speakers to understand which grandchild he is talking about.

According to Ms Cindee Broughton, English tends to specify the words for first cousin, second cousin, nieces, nephews etc. It is possible to say that English is more specific than Turkish in clarifying the difference between cousins, nieces and nephews. For further information, I have searched the internet together with dictionaries and found some support for interesting words for cousins in English. In English, the first cousin once removed is the child of your first cousin. However, your mother's first cousin is your second cousin. Other than those, English also specifies such as nieces, the daughter of your brother or sister; the daughter of your husband's or

wife's brother or sister, and nephews is defined as the son of your brother or sister, or the son of your husband's or wife's brother or sister.

Comparison of both languages and the probable errors that Turkish speakers might encounter while learning English family words:

Having discussed the similar family words of both languages and the words that are not specified in Turkish it is possible to conclude that English is more specific in the words like cousins, nieces and nephews, however, Turkish is more specified in the words like siblings, aunts, and uncles etc. For example, in English, all the parents' sisters are aunts, and all the parents' brothers are uncles. All the parents' parents are grandparents, so Turkish seems to be more specific in these words as I have mentioned before on page 2-4. Still, in English, it is possible to specify these words by sentences like my grandmother on my mother's side but aunt on my mother's side could sound weird so it's better to say my mother's sister. So, it is possible to say that both languages seem to be more specified in different words. In addition, if Turkish speakers want to learn English words efficiently they have to learn the specified words which are not specified in Turkish.

Another important issue is the second meanings of the English words that do not exist in Turkish. As I have dealt with the second and third meanings of the words on page 5-6 such as sister, brother and father it could be inferred that Turkish does not have those meanings. This could lead to the formation of new habits for Turkish speakers. Besides, I believe learning the other meanings of those words are very crucial because if not learned properly Turkish speakers might consider the first meanings of those words even if we speak about the second meaning thus misunderstandings would appear.

Turkish learners have a good understanding of the basic relationship words such as mother, father, aunt, uncle, brother and sister since they are very similar in Turkish. So, these words can be considered as keeping their old habits. Even some terms like siblings are more specific than English since there are different words for older and younger siblings. However, the terms like the first cousin once removed, second cousin etc. would probably cause difficulties in understanding the actual meaning of them since Turkish learners are not familiar with these words. For example, if a person from U.S.A walks up to a Turkish person and says "Howdy, I'm your friend's first cousin once removed," that would confuse the Turkish person learning English. They wouldn't actually have an idea what that means. They would actually have to break their old habits and learn new words for cousins since in Turkish all of those words are just kuzen ('cousin').

Other than those, English is more specific with the words such as niece/ nephew and granddaughter/ grandson, but these words would not actually cause many difficulties when we as English language teachers tell the difference between them like one is for boys and the other is for girls they can learn these new habits easily.

Subsequently, it is possible to say that both languages have different features although they both talk about the words for family members. As I have explained most of the important features of both languages, it is possible to illustrate these features through features chart (see Appendix C and D) which can help Turkish speakers to interact with ease.

According to my analysis it is also possible to draw a hierarchy of difficulty chart for the Turkish speakers learning English family words.

### A HIERACHY OF DIFFICULTY FOR TURKISH SPEAKERS LEARNING ENGLISH FAMILY WORDS:

<p><u>I. Breaking old habits</u></p>	<p><u>First cousin once removed, second cousin etc.:</u></p> <p style="text-align: right;"><u>English : Different Turkish:</u></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><u>Different</u></p>
<p><u>II. Learning a new habit</u></p>	<p><u>The second and third meanings of sister, brother, father :</u></p> <p style="text-align: right;"><u>English : Yes Turkish:</u></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><u>No</u></p> <p><u>Niece/nephew, granddaughter/</u></p> <p><u>grandson:</u> <span style="float: right;"><u>English: Yes Turkish:</u></span></p> <p><u>No</u></p> <p><u>Words for older/younger</u></p> <p><u>brother/sister:</u> <span style="float: right;"><u>English: No Turkish:</u></span></p> <p><u>Yes</u></p> <p><u>Words for grandparents on</u></p> <p><u>mother's/father's side:</u> <span style="float: right;"><u>English: No Turkish:</u></span></p> <p><u>Yes</u></p> <p><u>Different words for mother's sister/brother</u></p>

	<p><u>and father's sister/bother:</u>                      <u>English: No    Turkish:</u> <u>Yes</u></p>
<p><u>III. Keeping old habits</u></p>	<p><u>Father, mother, daughter,</u> <u>son, husband, wife, brother/sister in law</u></p> <p><u>mother in-law, father in-law:</u></p> <p><u>English : Similar    Turkish : Similar</u></p>

**A brief explanation of the hierarchy of difficulty chart:**

In the hierarchy of difficulty chart, I have numbered the breaking old habits as the hardest thus agreed with University of Idaho professor, Dr Douglas Adams, because I think changing the habits from the way one has learned before is more difficult than learning a new habit which is related to the negative transfer.

Breaking the old habits part includes some words such as the first cousin once removed, the second cousin and so on. On page 8 I have already addressed that Turkish does not express distinctions between the words for cousins, they just call cousins for the first cousin once removed etc, but English does. So, in order to form correct sentences, Turkish learners need to break their old habits and learn the different meanings of English cousin words. According to this data, I have indicated that the words for cousins of both languages are different in the chart.

The next part includes learning a new habit. I have discussed earlier that some words such as sister, brother and father have a second or third meaning in English but not in Turkish, thus I placed them as a new habit for Turkish speakers and marked as no and yes for English. Besides, I have also addressed before in my discussion that Turkish does not have different words for indicating genders such as niece and nephew. Instead Turkish uses a word that does not identify the words as gender. Thus, Turkish speakers need to learn a new habit that consists of using specific words for the daughter or the son of my brother (sister); the daughter or the son of my husband's (wife's) brother or sister.

Therefore, I have labelled English as yes which indicates that English does use those kinds of specific words and wrote no for Turkish that is to say Turkish does not have. The situation is similar for the words such as granddaughter and grandson so I marked them as yes for English and no for Turkish.

Other than those, there are also some words that I have dealt with before as the words that are not specified in English. These are the words for older/younger brother/sister that Turkish has but English not so marked Turkish as yes and no for English. What's more, I have explained before that Turkish uses different words for grandparents on mother's/ father's side thus labelled Turkish as yes and no for English. Another similar situation is the different words that Turkish uses for mother's sister/ brother and father's sister/brother. Since English uses only aunt and uncle as mentioned before, I wrote yes for Turkish and no for English. These labels also indicate that Turkish speakers need to learn a new habit of how English speakers tend to use those words as one word. For example, Turkish speakers have to learn to understand that when a person from U.S.A talks about her sister he does not specifically indicate his older or younger sister.

For the last part which is keeping the old habits, I have placed the words that have the same meanings in both languages such as; father, mother, daughter, son, husband, wife, brother-in-law, sister-in-law, and mother-in-law. Since I have discussed before that those words do mean the same in Turkish and English I labeled both the languages as similar.

## **An assessment of resources:**

In order to analyze the two languages, Turkish and English, I searched the internet data together with some dictionaries that I borrowed from the library and used my personal instincts, experiences about the Turkish language. I also asked native speakers of English so that I can learn more about the meanings of family words. The data given in the references parts were good in general but they had some specific weaknesses, too.

The dictionaries such as Oxford Word Power by Miranda Steel was quite new and updated but still it did not explain the difference between the third cousin, fourth cousin, once removed etc. It only defines what cousin means. So I had to search the genealogy.com site for more detailed information about how American people perceive the different meanings of cousins.

The strengths were that in most of my data I could find some very useful examples that illustrated the comparison clearly. The most important ones are by [http://www.genealogy.com/16\\_cousn.html](http://www.genealogy.com/16_cousn.html), <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/family>, personal experience in Turkish and English, and Broughton, C. Pedagogical Issues in Writing. Course at the University of Idaho (2008). Both of the internet sites did explain a lot about the family members words explicitly. Besides I had a chance to have a conversation with Dr Cindee Broughton a lecturer at the University of Idaho about those words in English which did help me a lot to compare both languages.

The Turkish speakers who attempt to learn English family words will find some features of them easy and some other features difficult as explained in this project. The easiness comes from the semantic elements which are similar to the learner's language and the difficulty from those which are different from his native language. To discover and predict this type of learning difficulties it needs comparing the English language with the Turkish language as can be seen in this paper and, thus, I believe this research will provide the language teacher with a chance to know what the real learning problems of Turkish speakers faced to the unfamiliar words of English.

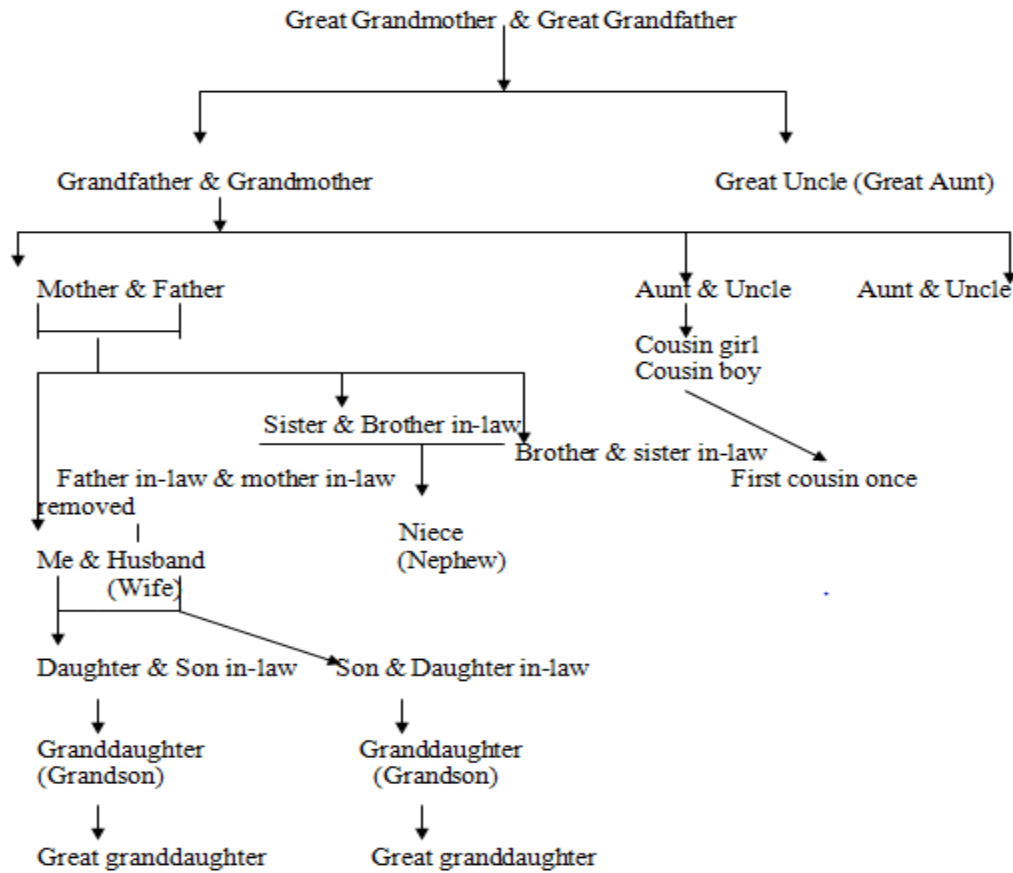
In my opinion, when used in the classroom, the contrastive study of a language's semantic forms a useful technique, employing the previous knowledge of the learner, informing him about the similarities and differences between his native language and the foreign language he is studying, also warning him about making false analogies and about the mother tongue interference. I believe it is possible to eradicate the errors caused by the differences between L1 and L2 by providing efficient teaching materials, etc. I also suggest that raising our students' consciousness to the problems mentioned in this paper may be a useful way of helping them keep the two languages apart. In other words, English teachers can show the differences between the student's native language and the second language (English) by the help of teaching materials such as charts, Appendix A, B, C etc. and then make the students aware of the probable problems they will encounter while learning English. This may help students to pay attention to the probable errors more and thus they may try not to make errors. Languages are much more complex than one might think, so I believe I still have to search more and more. Lastly, if I were to continue this project I would definitely search for more books and interview with speakers of both languages and see their reaction towards these words. For example, I would ask Turkish students what they know about the first cousin once removed or etc. to support my ideas.

## Appendix A



### ENGLISH FAMILY MEMBERS TREE

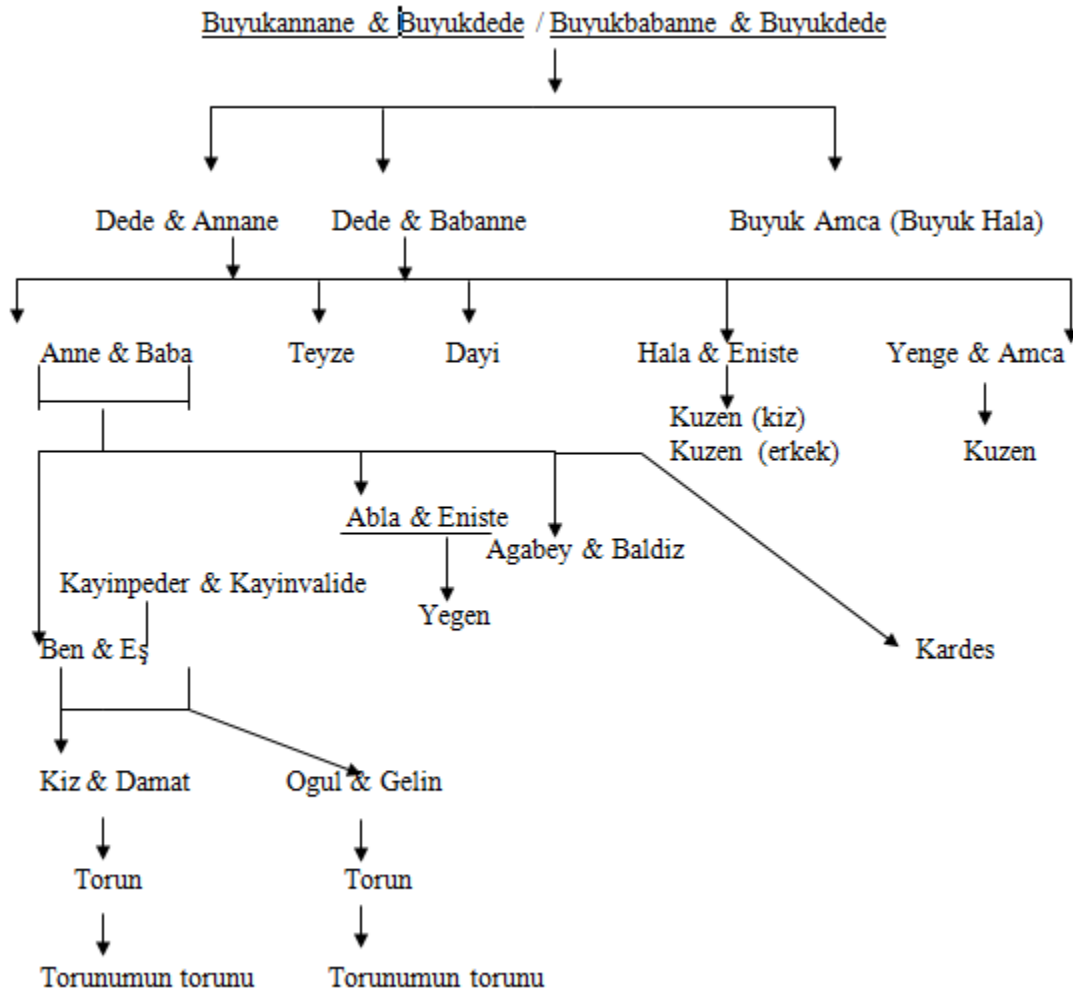




Appendix B



TURKISH FAMILY MEMBERS TREE



Appendix C

FEATURES OF TURKISH FAMILY MEMBERS

	MALE	FEMALE	POLITE	OLDER (+) OR YOUNGER (-)	HAS A SYNONYM	RELATED TO MOTHER (+) OR FATHER (-)	INDICATES GENDER
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Anneanne (mother's mother)	—	+	+	0	—	+	+
Babaanne (Father's Mother)	—	+	+	0	—	—	+
Dede (grand- father)	+	—	+	0	—	+/_	+
Abla (older sister)	—	+	+	+	—	0	+
Agabey							

(older brother)	+	—	+	+	—	0	+
Dayi (brother of mother)	+	—	+	+	—	+	+
Kardes (younger sibling)	+/_	+/_	+	—	—	0	—
Kari (wife)	—	+	—	0	+	0	+
Koca (husband)	+	—	—	0	+	0	+
Eş (spouse)	+/_	+/_	+	0	+	0	—
Kayınvalide (mother							

in-law)	—	+	—	0	—	+/_	+
Kayınpeder (father in-law	+	—	—	0	—	+/_	+
Yeğen (niece/ nephew)	+/_	+/_	+	+/_	—	+/_	—
Torun (grand-child)	+/_	+/_	+	+/_	—	+/_	—
Enişte/ Bacanak/ Kayınbirader (brother in-law)	+	—	+	+/_	+	0	+

Baldiz/ Gorumce/ Yenge  (sister in- law)	—	+	+	+/_	+	0	+
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+ Feature is present    - Feature is the opposite    +/- matter of dispute (could be both)

0 Does not show that feature

Appendix D

### FEATURES OF AMERICAN FAMILY MEMBERS

	MALE	FEMALE	HAS A SECOND OR THIRD MEANING	WORD THAT IS CONFUSING	HAS AN INFORMAL USAGE TOO	INDICATES GENDER
Grand-mother  (informal grandma)	—	+	—	—	+	+

Grand-father (grandpa)	+	—	—	—	+	+
Sister	—	+	+	—	—	+
Brother	+	—	+	—	—	+
Father (informal dad)	+	—	+	—	+	+
Mother (informal mom)	—	+	—	—	+	+
Uncle	+	—	—	—	—	+
Sibling	+/_	+/_	—	—	—	—

Wife	—	+	—	—	—	+
Husband	+	—	—	—	—	+
Spouse	+/_	+/_	—	—	—	—
Mother in-law	—	+	—	—	—	+
Father in-law	+	—	—	—	—	+
Niece	—	+	—	—	—	+
Nephew	+	—	—	—	—	+
First cousin once removed, second cousin etc.	+/_	+/_	—	+	—	—
Grand-						



daughter	—	+	—	—	—	+
Grandson	+	—	—	—	—	+
Brother in-law	+	—	—	—	—	+
Sister in-law	—	+	—	—	—	+

+ Feature is present    - Feature is the opposite    +/- matter of dispute (could be both)

0 Does not show that feature

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<http://www.thefreedictionary.com/family>