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# Pronouns in affinal avoidance registers: evidence from the Aslian languages (Austroasiatic, Malay Peninsula)

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(Running head: *Pronouns in affinal avoidance registers*)

## Abstract

Affinal avoidance registers are strategies of restrained linguistic conduct in relation to one's in-laws. Current theories are primarily concerned with two types of strategies: (1) taboos on uttering the proper names of affines, and (2) substitution of everyday words with dedicated parallel lexicon in the presence of affines (so-called “mother-in-law languages”). However, the role of pronouns has received limited attention. Here we explore little-known registers in the Aslian languages (Austroasiatic, Malay Peninsula), where dedicated pronoun paradigms take centre stage in communication with and about in-laws. We characterise and compare these closely related but internally diverse systems, situate them in their cultural contexts, and discuss their status in relation to current theories and typologies of avoidance and honorific registers.

## Keywords

Pronouns; Affinal avoidance; Aslian languages; Austroasiatic; Honorific and respect registers; “Mother-in-law language”; Dual

## Introduction

### *Affine avoidance in language*

Affines are the relatives of one's spouse. The ethnographic literature frequently describes forms of restrained sociality whereby affines, or "in-laws", are associated with various types of avoidance behaviour (see e.g. Murdock 1971). Such avoidance can take the form of taboos against eye contact, body contact, direct transfer of objects, and direct oral communication between individuals in in-law relationships. Affinal avoidance can also have overt linguistic expression, and, in a recent typology, Fleming (2014) proposes a major distinction within such linguistically manifested in-law avoidance between "referentially based" and "interactionally based" strategies. Referentially based strategies involve taboos on uttering the proper names of certain in-laws and, frequently, words which are phonetically similar to those names. These commonly documented strategies have a geographically and genealogically widespread distribution among the world's languages (see also Fleming 2011). Interactionally based strategies involve categorical substitution of everyday words with a conventionalised set of avoidance lexicon in contexts where the speaker is in the presence of certain in-laws. Typical examples include the so-called "mother-in-law registers" described for a number of Australian languages (see e.g. Dixon 2010; Haviland 1979; McGregor 1989). Fleming (2014) concludes that, with few exceptions, interactionally based strategies are by and large exceptional to Australian languages.

Affine avoidance registers are sometimes described as a type of honorific system (Agha 1994). Indeed, in both cases, the relation between the speaker and another individual determines the speaker's choice of linguistic form. However, Fleming (2014, 141, 146) distinguishes the two, establishing first of all that they handle two very different types of societal nexus: honorific registers build on "sociocentrically reckoned hierarchy" whereas avoidance registers are determined by "egocentrically reckoned affinity". Furthermore, honorific registers are fundamentally *addressee*-focused; that is, their use is determined by the identity of the person addressed by the speaker. Affine avoidance registers can and do apply in such contexts as well, but they are also essentially *bystander*-focused, since their use is frequently conditioned by the identity of a person who is within earshot but not participating in the conversation.

The pivotal role of pronouns in honorific strategies is well-known (Agha 1994; Head 1978; Helmbrecht 2003, 2013). Indeed, they form a primary linguistic conduit for expressing social status among speech participants. As pointed out by Fleming (2014, 122), pragmatic variation in pronominal usage forms an integral part of many affinal avoidance registers as well. For example, Garde (2013, 179) describes how tabooed kin can be referred to indirectly by means of plural pronouns, alongside other strategies such as kinship verbs, circumlocutory descriptors, and dedicated pointing gestures in Biniŋ Gunwok. In Korowai (Stasch 2009, 86), avoiding pairs of mother-in-law and son-in-law refer to each other by means of plural pronouns as well as plural verb inflections, euphemistic plural expressions, and pluralised tekonyms. Less in evidence are affine avoidance registers in which pronominal substitution is the sole linguistic avoidance strategy, although Fleming (2014, 122) cites two examples which come close: Dhimal (King 2001) and Bear Lake Athabaskan (Rushforth 1981). The primary pattern in Dhimal is a shift in direct address between in-laws from first and second person singular pronouns to distinct forms historically derived from the plural equivalents (King 2001, 167-168). In Bear Lake Athabaskan, it is only the second person singular which shifts to its plural equivalent in direct conversation between affines (Rushforth 1981, 28). In both cases, the strategies are restricted to direct address, which make them functionally similar to honorific systems.

### *Aslian languages and cultures*

In this chapter we explore affine avoidance and its linguistic manifestation in the Aslian languages, a branch of the Austroasiatic family spoken in the Malay Peninsula. These 20-odd languages offer an interesting environment for exploring the relationship between linguistic features and culture (Burenhult and Kruspe 2016). The languages are remarkable in that their speech communities, all of which represent minority groups, belong to either of three diverse societal modes and subsistence systems. Thus, according to a framework developed by Benjamin (1985), one group of Aslian languages is spoken by mobile subsistence foragers known as the Semang; another group is spoken by swidden horticulturalists called Senoi; and a third group is spoken by communities who subsist on collection of forest produce for trade called the Malayic cultural tradition. These three societal themes correspond to some degree to three genealogically defined subbranches of the Aslian language family: Northern, Central, and Southern Aslian, respectively.

Furthermore, the Semang, Senoi, and Malayic categories each display a distinct set of societal features and regulations pertaining to descent groups, basic social units of production, cousin marriage, social stratification, and cross-sex avoidance. We will here be concerned with the latter parameter. Distinguishing avoidance, joking, and restraint in relation to opposite-sex parent-in-law/child-in-law, sibling-in-law, and sibling, Benjamin's 1985 typology suggests that ethnolinguistic groups within the Semang sphere display the highest degree of avoidance, with strict rules against cross-sex interaction among all the kin categories in question. Senoi groups observe strict avoidance only for the parent/child-in-law relationship and restraint or joking in relation to the others. The remaining groups, mostly characterised as belonging to the Malayic sphere, do not observe any avoidance rules and display neutral or restraint relationships for all categories (Benjamin 1985, 252).

Most Aslian languages have rather elaborate systems of pronominal distinctions, and categories like duals, inclusive/exclusive opposition, gender, and familiarity are all represented within the group. Crucial to the topic of this chapter, several Aslian languages also have parallel sets of pronouns used for talking to and about in-laws, a category of kin associated with diverse linguistic and cultural expressions across the Aslian communities. Here we investigate the relationship between linguistic and cultural categories in the context of affine avoidance across six Aslian speech communities. As will become clear, the distinct sets of pronouns form a primary linguistic channel through which affine avoidance is expressed. However, the systems are remarkably diverse in both form and function, and some communities do not partake in the avoidance ideology at all, as is also evident from Benjamin's 1985 typology.

From an areal point of view, the little-known Aslian affine avoidance registers form an island in what is otherwise a sea of well-described honorific systems in Mainland and Island Southeast Asia. For example, elaborate honorific registers have been documented in Standard Malay (McGinn 1991), Javanese (Errington 1988), and Thai (Kummer 1992), typically with prominent associated consequences for pronominal paradigms and usage. Although sharing this pronominal focus, the Aslian affine avoidance registers described here build on small-scale cultural and social frameworks which are distinctly different from those of the highly stratified majority societies. Kinship is the primary organisational framework in these largely egalitarian societies.

## **Affines and pronouns: evidence from six speech communities**

In this section we describe in detail the cultural and linguistic aspects of affinal relations in six Aslian speech communities—Jahai, Ceq Wong, Semaq Beri, Semelai, Mah Meri, and Temiar. Focusing on pronominal systems, we situate each system against its cultural and linguistic backdrop in terms of kinship, behaviour, and ritual, in order to elucidate the underpinnings of pronoun usage and to explain the mechanisms behind the observed diversity in how affine relationships are given expression among the Aslian communities.

Our sample languages are diverse in relation to the societal categories and linguistic subgroups outlined in the previous section: Jahai is a Northern Aslian language spoken by communities of subsistence foragers classified as Semang; Ceq Wong is also a Northern Aslian language but spoken by a community with a mixed economy, sometimes classified culturally as Senoi; Semaq Beri belongs to the Southern Aslian subgroup and is spoken by subsistence foragers who are nevertheless conventionally classified as Mixed and not as Semang; Semelai and Mah Meri are also Southern Aslian languages but spoken by communities with mixed economies based on swidden cultivation and collecting-for-trade, classified as Malayic; Temiar is a Central Aslian language spoken by swidden horticulturalists classified as Senoi.

With the exception of the account of Temiar, which is based on Benjamin 1967, 1999, the descriptions build entirely on first-hand data collected by ourselves in the field over the past 25 years, much of which as recently as 2016-2017. The sample reflects our language expertise and, as noted above, conveniently spans all three of the societal categories elucidated by Benjamin (1985), as well as the three genealogical subbranches of Aslian. However, in some cases, our analysis of avoidance at the community level contradicts Benjamin's typology, sometimes in rather significant ways, pointing to complexities in the classification (cf. Burenhult, Kruspe, and Dunn 2011). Since the main target of our study is a particular linguistic category and not the role of avoidance regimes in the larger cultural context, we will not elaborate on or attempt to explain these inconsistencies further here.

Before turning our attention to the individual speech communities, we should briefly summarise the relevant main characteristics of the Aslian kinship systems. In all of them,

special affinal kin terms are distinguished only for three generations—namely, ego's, and the proximate ascending and descending generations. Across the Aslian languages, the set of affinal kin terms are generally simple, primarily distinguishing generation, and usually with just a single gender-neutral term—parent-in-law, child-in-law and sibling-in-law. The Central Aslian language Temiar, introduces various distinctions in ego's generation resulting in five referential terms for siblings-in-law (Benjamin 1999), while in Jahai, Temiar, Semaq Beri, Semelai, and Mah Meri some additional distinctions borrowed from Malay occur, such as co-parent, co-spouse, and spouses sibling's spouse.

The relatively simple sets of referential kinship terms belie complex categorical distinctions, based on relative sex and age that manifest in systems of affinal avoidance. Avoidance is expressed through proscribed behaviours, which, depending on the individual community, may extend to how one both refers to and addresses affinal kin. The diversity of practices will become apparent in the following descriptions of the six communities.

### *Jahai*

The Jahai are a community of about 1,000 subsistence foragers, traditionally forming mobile bands in the mountain rainforests of the upper parts of the Peninsular Malaysian states of Perak and Kelantan, as well as adjacent areas of Thailand's Yala and Narathiwat provinces. Their language, also referred to as Jahai, belongs to the Northern Aslian subgroup of Aslian. Jahai is the only community in our sample which belongs to the Semang ethnographic category, a cluster of mostly Northern Aslian-speaking populations defined by their nomadism, hunting-gathering-based subsistence, and attendant societal features (Benjamin 1985; see Introduction).

The Jahai kinship system is based primarily on generational distinctions, which express six levels of generations, from great-grandparent to grandchild. Secondary distinctions encode the relative age of siblings in ego's generation and that of ego's parents, and gender in the parental and grand-parental generations as well as, vaguely, in the generation of ego's children. In accordance with the Hawaiian type of system, the categories systematically include all collaterals: ego refers to cousins as 'siblings', to nieces and nephews as 'children,

offspring’ (and to their children as ‘grandchildren’), and to aunts and uncles as ‘mother’ and ‘father’.<sup>1</sup>

Similar to the consanguine terms, affine categories encode generational distinctions but not gender or relative age. The following in-law categories exist: *knʔac* ‘parent-in-law’, *mɲsaw* ‘child-in-law’, *lamiy* ‘sibling-in-law’, and *bisen* ‘co-parent-in-law’ (i.e. a parent of ego’s child-in-law; this is an infrequent borrowing of Malay *bisan*, with the same meaning). As a consequence of the extension of terms to all collaterals in the same generation in the consanguine system, affine categories systematically include all such collaterals of the in-law. That is, you refer to your parent-in-law and all of his or her siblings and cousins as *knʔac*, to your child-in-law and all of his or her siblings and cousins as *mɲsaw*, and to your sibling-in-law and all of his or her siblings and cousins as *lamiy*.

The basic Jahai paradigm of personal pronouns distinguishes singular, dual, and plural number. First, second, and third person distinctions are made for singular and dual pronouns, whereas plural pronouns display a first vs. non-first distinction. Inclusion vs. exclusion of the second person is distinguished in first person dual and plural. Three degrees of familiarity/politeness are distinguished in second person singular. This results in a basic paradigm of twelve distinct pronominal forms (see Burenhult 2005, 83).

This basic system of pronominal meanings is employed to refer to and (in the case of second person forms) address consanguines as well as unrelated people. For affines, however, a different mapping of pronominal form to meaning applies (see Table 1). Here, a subset of the regular non-singular forms are used for reference and address. Thus, the second and third person form used for one’s parent-in-law is second/third person plural *gin*; for one’s child-in-law it is the third person dual *wih*; for one’s sibling-in-law the second person dual *jih* is used in second person and the third person dual *wih* in third. In this usage the forms are number-neutral—for example, *gin* is used for reference to one or more parents-in-law, *wih* for one or more children-in-law. The affine-specific pronominal paradigm maps exactly onto the lexical

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<sup>1</sup> In the case of parents’ siblings, Jahai referential kinship terms are compounds in which the terms for ‘mother’ and ‘father’ modify the age- and (partly) gender-encoding forms for parent’s siblings, e.g. *beh ʔey* ‘younger.uncle father’, ‘younger uncle in the form of father’. The vocative equivalents only involve the latter forms: *ʔɔy beh!* ‘Hey, uncle!’.



categories and associated referents of the kinship system. That is, usage of the in-law pronouns applies to all individuals covered by the corresponding affinal kinship terms, including the in-law's collaterals in the same generation (siblings and cousins of parent-in-law, child-in-law, and sibling-in-law, respectively).

	Parent-in-law		Child-in-law		Sibling-in-law	
	Same-sex	Cross-sex	Same-sex	Cross-sex	Same-sex	Cross-sex
Address	<i>gin</i>	TABOO	<i>wih</i> '3DU'	TABOO	<i>jih</i> '2DU'	
Reference	'2/3PL'	<i>gin</i> '2/3PL'		<i>wih</i> '3DU'	<i>wih</i> '3DU'	

**Table 1.** Jahai in-law pronouns.

Usage of in-law pronouns for the corresponding affinal relations is obligatory; it is taboo to apply the regular pronominal distinctions and doing so results in a much-feared state of ritual danger (see further below).

Among the Jahai, affinal relations are associated with an elaborate set of ritually determined rules of avoidance and restraint. The most prominent aspect of this regulation of behaviour is the far-reaching avoidance observed between a married person and his or her opposite-sex parent-in-law. A man and his mother-in-law, and a woman and her father-in-law, may not touch each other, look each other in the eyes, or give things to each other. Furthermore, they may not talk to each other or in other ways take part in the same conversation, nor point to, mention by name or otherwise make explicit reference to each other if they are within earshot of each other. If both are present under the same roof they withdraw to opposite ends of the building; if their paths are about to cross both make a circumambulating maneuver to avoid contact (lexicalised as a motion verb *liwər* 'to move around an obstacle').

In accordance with the kinship terminology, the avoidance rules apply to all same-sex collaterals of the in-law: a man avoids all female *knəac* (his mother-in-law as well as her sisters and female cousins) and all female *mɲsaw* (his daughter-in-law as well as her sisters and female cousins); a woman avoids all male *knəac* (her father-in-law as well as his brothers

and male cousins) and all male *mɲsaw* (her son-in-law as well as his brothers and male cousins).

Same-sex parent/child-in-law relationships are also characterised by some behavioural restrictions. Communication between them is respectful and discreet, and vocatives and loud address are avoided. The appropriate way of referring to parents-in-law in their presence is in-law pronouns in combination with the terms for grandparents (*taʔ* ‘grandfather’ for father-in-law and *yaʔ* ‘grandmother’ for mother-in-law) and, correspondingly, to children-in-law with the term for grandchild (*kaɲcoʔ*). This reference is appropriate also for opposite-sex in-laws who are present. For example, it is perfectly acceptable for a woman to refer discreetly to (but obviously not address) her father-in-law in his presence with the construction *gin taʔ* ‘2/3PL grandfather’, and for him to refer to her by saying *wih kaɲcoʔ* ‘3DU grandchild’. In the affine’s absence, however, reference usually involves the in-law pronouns in combination with the terms for man and woman; for example, a man will typically refer to an absent daughter-in-law as *wih k=baboʔ* ‘3DU REL=woman’.

The extension of kinship categories to all same-sex collaterals of the in-law also means that such consanguines sometimes enjoy behavioural liberties which do not apply to other community members. For example, while there is a taboo (called *tnlaʔ*) for men against touching or sitting next to a woman if she is menstruating or has recently become pregnant, her husband and his brothers and male cousins (that is, her male *lamiy*) are exempted from this restriction. Consequently, by extension, the taboo also does not apply between these men and her sisters and female cousins, who are all each other’s *lamiy*. Furthermore, Jahai society encourages marriage to a divorced or deceased same-sex sibling’s spouse.

The principles that regulate behaviour and communication between affines form part of a larger regime of beliefs associated with Karey, an essentially benevolent but much-feared superbeing who tends the Jahai world (Schebesta 1957).<sup>2</sup> Karey monitors everyday Jahai behaviour from his abode among the clouds, punishing human wrongdoing by sending violent thunderstorms, crippling afflictions, and physical pain. He perceives such wrongdoings with his eyes, ears, or nose, and Jahai principles of spatial, personal, and social behaviour are

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<sup>2</sup> Although currently under pressure to convert to Islam or, to some extent, Christianity, most Jahai still commit to their traditional animistic belief system.

structured in ways that perceptually prevent attracting his curiosity and anger (Burenhult and Majid 2011). Breaking these principles results in one of a set of states of ritual danger, each of which has a lexical label and associates with a particular domain of offenses. Affine-related wrongdoings fall under a state of ritual danger labeled *tolah* (ultimately from Malay *tulah* ‘calamity’, ‘misfortune’, cf. sections on Ceq Wong and Semaq Beri below), which also applies to incestuous offenses. Punishment is meted out directly by Karey to the perpetrator(s); there is no judicial framework or institution in the human realm with the authority to punish.

According to Jahai belief, Karey’s visual and olfactory access to the community means that he can determine if people in an opposite-sex parent/child-in-law relation are within inappropriate proximity to each other. Similarly, his auditory access allows him to detect if in-laws behave towards each other in ways which are detrimental to their sensitive relationship. He will be enraged and unleash his punitive powers if in-laws’ names are called out, or if in-laws are addressed or referred to with the incorrect, regular pronouns. Interestingly, Jahai consultants assert that the dedicated in-law pronouns leave Karey unaware of, or confused as to, who is addressing or referring to whom. Rather than being polite forms which please Karey’s ears, the pronouns appear to serve as a vocative and referential smokescreen with the purpose of inhibiting Karey’s sensory access and avoiding his attention altogether. This is in accordance with other ritual behaviour associated with Karey, which is all about manipulating the sensory relationship between him and the human realm (Burenhult and Majid 2011). Thus, the in-law pronouns ritually alleviate communication with and about a potentially contentious sector of one’s kin, and at the same time they represent constant bolstering of this sector as an exceptional category. In the process, they provide linguistic reinforcement of the kinship system and its rules of behaviour.

The idea that the in-law pronouns disguise the real addressee or referent to Karey may go some way towards explaining why such pronouns are not unique forms but are drawn from the regular pronominal paradigm. Since they are common forms used for uncontentious addressees and referents, their adjusted meaning and reference do not draw unnecessary attention. The partial mismatch in number and person between regular and in-law pronoun usage further inhibits Karey’s ability to successfully match his auditory and visual cues, making it harder for him to monitor communicative behaviour between affines. This hypothesised strategy of evasion becomes particularly apparent in the avoidance constructions

involving in-law pronoun determiners in combination with kinship terms. For example, reference to a father-in-law as *gin taʔ*, ‘2/3PL grandfather’ (‘you/they grandfathers’), and the addressing of a child-in-law as *wih kaŋcəʔ* ‘3DU grandchild’ (‘they.two grandchildren’), obscure the person and number as well as the generation of the intended individual.

### *Ceq Wong*

The Ceq Wong are a small group of around 300 people resident in the forests of the southern slope of Gunung Benom in central Pahang state. The Ceq Wong speak a Northern Aslian language, like the Jahai (above), but unlike them, they are not considered part of the Semang hunter-gatherer cultural group. The Ceq Wong traditionally combined foraging forest products for both subsistence and trade, and low-level swidden cultivation.

Ceq Wong kinship is organised generationally, with a symmetric distinction of three levels each ascending and descending from ego’s generation. All elder kin in ego’s and the first ascending generation are distinguished for relative age, and in the latter there is an additional distinction for gender. A distinction between lineal and collateral kin is made in the terms for one’s parents as opposed to their siblings, and for ego’s children, who are distinguished from sibling’s children.

Affinal terms are distinguished only in ego’s, and in the proximate ascending and descending generations. There are no generation distinctions for age or gender—*klək* ‘parent-in-law’; *bsew* ‘child-in-law’ and *lah* ‘sibling-in-law’.

The Ceq Wong pronominal paradigm distinguishes first, second and third person, and singular, dual and plural number (see Kruspe, Burenhult, and Wnuk 2015); there is no 2/3 person syncretism of plural forms present in some other Northern Aslian languages, see Jahai above. An inclusive/exclusive distinction is made in the first person nonsingular forms. A distinction in second person on the basis of familiarity/politeness, as reported for Jahai, has not been noted. In addition to the basic set of pronouns, there is a common second person address term *haʔ* ‘VOC’; *haʔ* is never used referentially.

A subset of the regular pronouns are used with affinal kin (see Table 2). Second and third person plural forms replace the regular singular or dual forms, so that *jin* ‘2PL’ is used for a

sibling-in-law, and *gən* ‘3PL’ for a parent-in-law, effectively neutralizing any number distinction. In addition, the first person plural exclusive *jaʔ* is used for self-reference in the presence of affines.

	Ego	Parent-in-law		Child-in-law		Sibling-in-law	
		Same-sex	Cross-sex	Same-sex	Cross-sex	Same-sex	Cross-sex
Address	n.a.	<i>jin</i> ‘2PL’	TABOO	<i>jin</i> ‘2PL’	TABOO	<i>jin</i> ‘2PL’	
Reference	<i>jaʔ</i> ‘1PL.EXCL’	Regular 3SG	<i>gən</i> ‘3PL’	Regular 3SG	<i>gən</i> ‘3PL’	Regular 3SG	

**Table 2.** Ceq Wong in-law pronouns.

Ceq Wong society is organised by complex sets of prohibitions, articulated through ritual embodied in the practices of daily life: cooking, hunting, interpersonal relations and so forth (Howell 1989). The prohibition, *tolah* is a collective of various proscribed behaviours that includes aspects of accepted social behaviour with one’s affinal kin, amongst other things (Howell 1989, 202-03; cf. Jahai above and Semaq Beri below). *Tolah* calls for reserved behaviour toward affines in general, and therefore applies to all in-laws, including one’s spouse. It strictly disallows any form of contact between cross-sex parents-/children-in-law—for example, sitting or sleeping in close proximity, drawing attention to each other, stepping across a body part, or directly addressing each other.

Restraint is required between cross-sex siblings-in-law, and all same-sex in-laws: they may speak to each other, but should monitor their behaviour. *Tolah* also dictates against the use of the usual terms of reference and address with one’s affinal kin. Personal names, second person pronouns, and the vocative *haʔ* ‘VOC’ are either not used, or have restricted use with respect to one’s affines. Instead, one uses either a circumlocution, for example ‘X’s kin’, or an in-law-avoidance pronoun, as appropriate. Note that kin terms are not used as alternative address terms in Ceq Wong.

The strictest prohibition applies between cross-sex parent/child-in-law; but restrictions also hold with same-sex parents in-law, and with siblings-in-law. The pronominal *jin* ‘2PL’ is used to address kin with whom one is allowed a speaking relationship, while the third person plural

*gən* ‘3PL’ is used in the presence of kin with whom one is not permitted to have a speaking relationship. Furthermore, acknowledging the reciprocity of one’s position as an affine, the speaker uses the first person plural exclusive *jaʔ* ‘1PL.EXCL’ in self-reference, instead of the regular first person singular pronoun (*ʔiŋ*) when speaking with, or in the presence of an affine. This is also attested in the neighbouring distantly related Aslian language Jah-Hut (Kruspe, field notes 2002).

In addition, the second person address term *haʔ* ‘VOC’ cannot be used with either parent-in-law, but it may be used with same sex siblings-in-law. Restrictions on the usage of *haʔ* ‘VOC’ are also attested with consanguineal kin: it is only used to address same sex kin in ego’s and ascending generations, but is used to address either gender in descending generations, for example an uncle addressing a niece.

A period of sustained unequal gender distribution, and a reluctance of people to marry out of the group, has impacted on the kinship system of this “micro” society. Consequently, the Ceq Wong have adopted endogamous marriage—including first cousin marriage. Once viewed as a form of incest (Needham 1956; Kruspe, field notes 2002), the latter is now a common form of union. Even in these circumstances, avoidance behaviour is adhered to—at the expense of alienating close kin to affinal status. This contrasts with prohibitions on address for consanguines which are no longer adhered to, for example the prohibition against uttering one’s parents’ names.

*Tolah* prohibitions are strictly adhered to; violation is considered a form of incest, especially in the most dangerous cross-sex parent- and child-in-law relations. The punishment for transgressing *tolah* is swelling (*swəh*) in the lower body, although where this originates from is unclear. None of the usual agents of retribution like *taŋkoʔ* (the punisher of incest); the tiger, or the subterranean serpent are attributed as being responsible in the case of transgressions of *tolah*. In contrast, incest involving sexual contact (*taŋkoʔ*) is punishable by the superbeing of the same name, who sends a crippling thunderbolt as a warning, and death to persistent perpetrators.

*Semaq Beri*

The northern subgroup of Semaq Beri (c. 365 speakers) have long ranged in an area straddling the upper reaches of the Tembeling, Terengan, Terengganu, and Lebir Rivers at the intersection of the states of Pahang, Terengganu and Kelantan. Up until approximately 30 years ago, the people were mobile hunter-gatherers. Traditionally they maintained an egalitarian, band-based society, groups constantly forming and reforming as they moved about the forest and exploited resources. Such movements took place among their own bands, and neighbouring Aslian ethnic groups—primarily neighbouring groups of Batek—with whom they trace kinship relations. This constant state of flux remains a feature of life even in the resettlement village, and they continue to maintain strong links with the other hunter-gatherers with whom their traditional range intersected. Linguistically the Semaq Beri belong to the Southern Aslian branch (Kruspe 2015), along with Semelai and Mah Meri (see below); however, their subsistence mode and certain cultural traits, exhibited in their cosmology and social organisation are clearly Semang-like, although they have not traditionally been included in the Semang classification.

The Semaq Beri kinship system is organised generationally, with four generations each ascending and descending. Various in-generation distinctions are made with respect to lineality, age, and gender. In ego's generation there is no distinction between one's true siblings and cousins. In the first ascending generation one's parents are distinguished from their collateral kin, and in the first descending generation, ego's offspring is distinguished from a sibling's offspring. In all other generations, terms are extended collaterally. Relative age is distinguished for all elder kin in ego's and the first ascending generation, and all elder kin in ego's, and the first and second ascending generations are also distinguished for gender.

The set of affinal terms applies only to ego's, and the proximate ascending and descending generations, and there are no in generational distinctions—*rnɔp* 'sibling-in-law'; *knedaʔ* 'parent-in-law', and *kmpoj* 'child-in-law', respectively. In all other generations the system reverts to the consanguineal terms.

The term *knedaʔ* 'parent-in-law' includes one's spouse's parents and all their collateral kin, however the descending term *kmpoj* 'child-in-law' is restricted to the child's spouse, and is not applied to their siblings, in contrast to Jahai (above). However, a sibling's child's spouse is considered a child-in-law.

Bonds with affinal kin are considered as stable as consanguineal ones, and once established are never extinguished (see Benjamin 2001, 138 for Temiar). Therefore, a former spouse is still reckoned as kin, even though the union has effectively been dissolved, and there are terms for one's former spouse, and for a spouse's former or subsequent spouse. This inclusivity effectively rules out any of the kinsmen of a former spouse as a prospective spouse. The high incidence of multiple marriages in the community means that one's affinal kin encompasses an ever increasing array of individuals over one's lifetime.

The Semaq Beri pronominal paradigm distinguishes three persons, with an inclusive/exclusive distinction in first person. Number is distinguished for first and third person, but not second person. The presence of a gender distinction (*ja* '2SG.F' and *he?* '2SG.M') in the second person is unusual for an Aslian language. Typically for a Southern Aslian language, there is no dual category (Kruspe 2015).

The usage of personal pronouns as terms of address is highly restricted. Second person pronouns are only used with consanguineal kin in the same, or descending generations; elder consanguines are addressed with kin-based address terms or teknonyms. Among affinal relations, only those in the same generation with whom one is permitted a speaking relationship are addressed with a pronoun, in this case *gi* '3PL'. Spouses use a special vocative form *ʔoja?* to address each other, and never the regular pronoun or personal names.<sup>3</sup> The pronominal pattern is illustrated in Table 3.

	Parent-in-law		Child-in-law		Sibling-in-law			
	Same-sex	Cross-sex	Same-sex	Cross-sex	Same-sex		Cross-sex	
					Elder	Younger	Elder	Younger
Address	VOC	TABOO	VOC	TABOO	<i>gi</i> '3PL'		TABOO	<i>gi</i> '3PL'
Reference	Regular 3SG	POSS AFF	Regular 3SG	POSS AFF	Regular 3SG		POSS AFF	Regular 3SG

**Table 3.** Semaq Beri in-law pronouns.

<sup>3</sup> There is some variation, with some people reporting *ʔohe?* 'male sibling-in-law' as the term for husband (Kruspe, field notes).



Prohibitions on interpersonal behaviour pertain to affines across all three generations, in the first ascending and descending generations—one’s parents-in-law and children-in-law—and in ego’s generation, with elder siblings-in-law, that is both one’s spouse’s elder siblings, and one’s elder siblings’ spouses. Avoidance prohibitions are strongest between opposite-sex affines from the ascending and descending generations; between an opposite sex parent and child-in-law. Elder cross-sex affines in ego’s generation are also included in this group. No direct contact should take place between them. They must not address each other directly, nor should they ever be alone together, walk or sit in close proximity, let their shadows fall across each other’s, hand something directly to each other, or have sexual relations. One can only refer to them with a kin term possessed by a third person pronoun or vocative, e.g. *gaʔuʔ ke* ‘his elder sister’, *kmpoŋ ʔi=baŋ* ‘the young male’s spouse’, as illustrated in the example *ʔibeʔ ke swak gaʔ hnãnʔ* (father 3SG go to where) ‘Where is his [=my] father[-in-law] going?’.

With same-sex siblings-in-law and younger cross-sex siblings-in-law the rules of behaviour are relaxed—restraint rather than avoidance is practiced, allowing a speaking relationship. These affines are addressed with either the third person plural pronoun *gi* ‘3PL’, a teknonym, or special affinal vocatives, such as *ʔoheʔ* or *ʔuy* for male-siblings in-law, and *naliʔ* (from ‘unrelated friend’) for female siblings-in-law.

There is also a total ban on using an affine’s personal name, which causes some degree of difficulty given that personal names are drawn from toponyms or plants, and the prohibition extends to the entity from which the name is drawn. Numerous examples are cited of how this has led to lexical change in the different Semaq Beri communities.

Consultants cite the fact that affinal relationships override consanguineal ones as the main deterrent to marrying consanguines. To marry a consanguine, one’s kinsmen are effectively recategorised as affines, and the relevant prohibitions must be observed (Kuchikura 1987, 21). People are naturally reluctant to have to adopt the avoidance behaviour that this would entail, although instances where people disregard this are not unknown.

Prohibitions relating to address fall into a category called *tolah*, which regulates aspects of interpersonal behaviour (cf. Jahai and Ceq Wong above). The prohibitions operate between children and their elders, and reciprocally across all three generational levels of affinal relations, and include not uttering the personal name of anyone in an ascending generation, or

using a second person singular pronoun to address them. Committing such acts has the potential to result in the person whom the act was directed at having an accident, and the transgressor facing a difficult death in the future, *he ga=k<sup>h</sup>bəs, beh jadi?* ‘(When) we are going to die, it won’t happen (easily)’. It is not clear how the retribution is triggered, but it is not enacted by the thunder deity Karay.

The transgression of physical affinal prohibitions, like failing to avoid close proximity, arouses Karay’s anger, and he sends a thunderbolt causing stones in the perpetrator’s knees. These prevent one from being mobile, clearly a serious predicament for someone engaged in a mobile subsistence mode.

### *Semelai*

The Semelai live in the southwestern corner of the state of Pahang and neighbouring Negeri Sembilan, around the Bera, Serting and Teriang River systems. They formerly divided their time between swidden rice growing and collecting forest produce for trade. Most are now engaged in small holding cash-cropping. The language belongs to the Southern branch of Aslian.

The Semelai system has asymmetric generations: five ascending and four descending. Consanguineal kin terms distinguish gender in ego’s and the first three ascending generations, but not in descending ones. Relative age is distinguished only in ego’s generation. In the first ascending and descending generations, lineal kin are distinguished from collateral kin.

Affinal kin terms only apply to ego’s and the two proximate generations. Terms are extended to include the affines of ego’s collateral kin, so that one’s sibling’s child’s spouse is also considered a *knypyn* ‘child-in-law’; however, one’s true parents-in-law *mntuhv?* (from Malay *mentua*) are distinguished from their siblings (*mntuhv? sɔŋ dawon* (parent-in-law tip leaf))—a distinction which has a behavioural correlation. Relative age of siblings-in-law (*ɔipar* from Malay *ipar*) is distinguished: an elder sibling-in-law is *ɔipar gdo* (sibling-in-law be.old), while a younger sibling is *ɔipar knkən* (sibling-in-law child). The distinction has behavioural consequences, discussed below. A sibling-in-law’s spouse is one’s *biras*, from Malay *biras* ‘to be connected by marriage, as two women who have married brothers’ (Wilkinson 1932). The infrequent term *besan* child-in-law’s parent (from Malay *besan*) only refers to the parents

and not their collateral kin. In a marked difference from the Semaq Beri, affinal kin relations are dissolved following the ending of a marriage, whether it is the result of the death of one party or separation, and it is formally acknowledged in a process called *ʔyot taryot* (return CAUS-return).

In Semelai free pronouns are distinguished for person, number, clusivity, and deference, although none of these categories applies across the full paradigm (Kruspe 2004). The first person singular form is *ʔəŋ* ‘1SG’. There is an inclusive/exclusive distinction in the non-singular forms: exclusive *yɛ* and inclusive *hɛ* which maximally include two persons, and *yɛ=ʔen* and *hɛ=ʔen* for an augmented number of people. The second person pronouns are: *kɔ* ‘2SG’, and *ji* and *je=ʔen* ‘2PL’. In the third person there is a simple number distinction between singular and plural, *kəh* ‘3SG’ and *deh* ‘3PL’.

First and second person singular forms are also distinguished for deference. Deference is based on the relative age and familiarity of the speaker and addressee and usually operates reciprocally. The regular first person singular forms *ʔəŋ* ‘1SG’ and *kɔ* ‘2SG’ are substituted by the non-singular *yɛ* ‘1EXCL’, and second person *ji* ‘2SG’ forms. The familiar terms are used only with consanguineal kin in the same and descending generations. There are derived reciprocal verb forms—*b-kɔ-kɔ* ‘to address each other in the familiar form’, and *b-yɛ-yɛ* ‘to use *yɛ* in self-reference with someone’. While elder consultants say that deferential pronouns should be used with anyone in an ascending generation, related or otherwise,<sup>4</sup> usage differs widely within the community, and they are rapidly falling into disuse.

Semelai lacks the kinds of affinal avoidance and accompanying systematic use of specialised pronominal forms or vocatives for referring to and addressing affinal kin, described for the closely-related Southern Aslian Semaq Beri, and the more distantly related Northern Aslian languages outlined in the preceding sections. In the past, one was not permitted to directly address one’s parent-in-law, and instead the third person singular pronoun *kəh* ‘3SG’ was employed when speaking in their company. The third person usage did not extend to a parent-in-law’s siblings. The restraint was not reciprocal, so that a parent-in-law could directly address the child-in-law, usually with their birthorder name. However this very mild form of restrained behaviour and use of the third person is no longer practiced, and instead people

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<sup>4</sup> The Semelai consider that they are all ultimately related.

now use the person's birth order *paŋelan*, or a euphemism like *gdo* 'to be old', but generally avoiding the use of a pronoun. This also holds for the parent-in-law's collateral kin. In addition to parents-in-law, there is a restriction with regards to terms of address of a spouse's elder siblings (*?ipar gdo*) and their collaterals. They must not be addressed with the familiar second person pronoun *kɔ* '2SG', unlike one's own siblings; a *paŋelan* or the deferential *ji* are used. In the presence of all elder affines one uses the first person exclusive form *yɛ* in self-reference. Younger siblings-in-law, may be addressed with *kɔ* '2SG', like ego's own siblings. The use of personal pronouns, however, is generally avoided in favour of address terms based on birthorder or nick-names, as appropriate.

Interpersonal behaviour, like other aspects of Semelai society, is articulated through various prohibitions. Uttering one's parents' names is prohibited by the behavioural constraint *ma=tulah*. Addressing someone incorrectly also falls under this prohibition. The retribution for transgressing *ma=tulah* affects the reproductive organs, resulting in *top burut* 'swollen scrotum' in males, and *ktet* 'to suffer uterine prolapse' in females.

### *Mah Meri*

Mah Meri belongs to the Southern branch of Aslian, like Semaq Beri and Semelai. It is spoken in remnant pockets along the southwestern coast of the state of Selangor. The variety discussed here is spoken in a village of approximately 600 people in the Sepang district. The total population is around 3,000. The Mah Meri were originally animistic swidden horticulturalists and shoreline foragers. Engulfed by urbanisation and mainstream society over the last six decades, they now exist predominantly as small holding cash-croppers, or unskilled laborers in the rural and urban sectors, and have increasingly adopted mainstream religions.

The kinship system is ordered generationally into four ascending and descending generations. Various secondary distinctions are made, although typically none apply uniformly across all generations. Gender is distinguished in the first and second ascending generations, and in ego's generation for elder siblings. Most consanguineal kin terms are extended to include collateral kin, however lineal and collateral kin are distinguished in the proximate generations, again a variation from the true Hawaiian type. Ego's siblings (including cousins) are also distinguished for age.

The Mah Meri distinguish one's consanguineal kin (*ʔəpəh*) from affines. The affinal kin terms are all loanwords from Malay. Notably, the categories are not extended to include the affine's collateral kin. Affinal terms are found in the proximate ascending and descending generations, *məntuwə* 'parent-in-law' from Malay *mentua*; *nantuʔ* 'child in-law' from Malay *menantu*, and in ego's generation, *ʔipa* 'sibling-in-law' from Malay *ipar*. Co-parent-in-law is *besət* from Malay *besan*.

The Mah Meri pronominal paradigm distinguishes three persons. A number distinction is made for first person, but not for second or third. In contrast to other Aslian languages, there is no inclusive/exclusive distinction in first person (see Kruspe 2010). The pronouns are unrestricted in their usage as terms of reference and address, so that notably, unlike the languages described above, there is no specialised usage of pronouns for any affinal kin at all.

The absence of specialised affinal pronouns is matched by an absence of any restrictions on behaviour that set affinal kin apart from one's consanguines: parents in-law are referred to and addressed as *ʔamaʔ* or *bapaʔ*, like one's own parent's, and respectful behaviour towards them is similarly regulated by the general prohibition *tolah* 'respect toward elders', that includes not uttering a parent's name or entering into conflict with them.

### *Temiar*

Spanning more than half a century, the large body of work on the Temiar by anthropologist Geoffrey Benjamin constitutes our most profound source of knowledge about any Aslian-speaking society. Drawing on Benjamin's accounts, we will here only briefly distill the insights of most relevance to the core concerns of this chapter, mainly from Benjamin 1967; 1999. The Temiar are a group of about 25,000 swiddeners belonging to the Senoi cultural regime and inhabiting the mountainous interior of the Malaysian states of Perak and Kelantan. They speak a Central Aslian language, the only such language in our sample.

Like several other Aslian speech communities, the Temiar observe elaborate rules of avoidance and restraint in relation to affinal kin (Benjamin 1967, 10-13). Complete verbal and physical avoidance applies between a person and his or her opposite-sex parent-in-law. They may live in the same house but have to communicate through intermediaries. One is allowed

to interact with one's same-sex parent-in-law, but it is an unequal relationship characterised by considerable respect. Parents-in-law are referred to as *bəlɔʔ*, children-in-law as *mensaaw*. The relationship between opposite-sex siblings-in-law, *mənəəy*, is very relaxed, to the point that they have sexual access to each other and are each other's preferred partners for a second marriage (cf. Jahai), and is characterised by joking. In the case of same-sex siblings-in-law, Temiar displays a pattern which is unattested in the other communities of our sample. With same-sex siblings-in-law who are younger than one's spouse (female *mənəəy*, male *mənaay*), a person has a non-joking, cooperative and equal relationship. With those who are older than one's spouse, however, the relationship is similar to that with a same-sex parent-in-law, that is, unequal and respectful. By this category of sibling-in-law one is referred to as *mensaaw*, just as one is by a same-sex parent-in-law. A man refers to such siblings-in-law as *kənooj*; a woman refers to them as *mənɔʔ*.

These relationships and their characteristics of restraint are perfectly echoed in the pronominal distinctions employed to address affines (see Table 4). Thus, same-sex parent-in-law and child-in-law address each other reciprocally with the second person plural pronoun *ɲɔb*, as do a person and his or her same-sex sibling-in-law older than spouse. With same-sex siblings-in-law who are younger than one's spouse one uses reciprocally the second person dual pronoun *kəʔan*. Finally, befitting the relaxed nature of their relationship, opposite-sex siblings-in-law do not address each other with dedicated affine pronouns but use the second person singular of the standard paradigm, *hããʔ*. In Benjamin's analysis, this gradation between singular, dual and plural pronouns marks a cline of interactional distance between affines (Benjamin 1999, 13).

	Parent-in-law		Child-in-law		Sibling-in-law		
	Same-sex	Cross-sex	Same-sex	Cross-sex	Same-sex		Cross-sex
					Older	Younger	
Address	<i>ɲɔb</i> '2PL'	TABOO	<i>ɲɔb</i> '2PL'	TABOO	<i>ɲɔb</i> '2PL'	<i>kəʔan</i> '2DU'	Regular 2SG
Reference	Regular 3SG	<i>ɲun</i> '3PL'	Regular 3SG	<i>ɲun</i> '3PL'	Regular 3SG		

**Table 4.** Temiar in-law pronouns.

Benjamin (1999, 13) also briefly describes reference by means of complex third-person expressions to in-laws with whom one is not allowed to speak, especially when such in-laws are within earshot. For example, reference to a bystanding opposite-sex parent-in-law involves the third person plural pronoun in expressions like ‘they big ones’.

The Temiar kinship system, like all Aslian systems, is similar to the Hawaiian type and involves classificatory extension of kinship categories to collaterals. As in the case of Jahai above, the avoidance rules and their associated expressions in the Temiar language similarly extend to the avoided individual’s siblings and cousins (Benjamin 1999, 10-11).

As far as religious beliefs are concerned, the ritually most significant principle is the complete avoidance of one’s opposite-sex parent-in-law. Transgression of this rule is believed to result in “dangerous automatic supernatural sanctions of usually unspecified nature” (Benjamin 1967, 10).

## **Discussion**

Affinal avoidance is a fundamental cultural feature of four of the six Aslian speech communities examined in this chapter. The Jahai, Ceq Wong, Semaq Beri, and Temiar share a regime of principles which regulate and restrict behaviour and interaction in relation to affinal kin, among them a relationship of strict reciprocal avoidance between opposite-sex parents- and children-in-law. These principles are firmly anchored in the respective belief system of each group. Among the remaining two communities, the Semelai exhibit a mild form of asymmetrical restraint applying to interaction with one’s parents-in-law (of either sex); the Mah Meri do not display any restrictions that set affines apart from other kin. This distinction between strict avoidance systems and more relaxed ones partly transcends cultural and linguistic boundaries. In the context of the cultural spheres established by Benjamin (1985), avoidance is observed among members of both the Semang and Senoi (Jahai and Temiar, respectively), as well as one of those of the Malayic tradition (to which the majority of the Semaq Beri but not our subgroup conform). Similarly, in relation to the primary subsistence mode of the communities, avoidance is observed among subsistence foragers (Jahai, Semaq Beri) and others (Ceq Wong, Temiar) alike. As far as linguistic subgroupings are concerned, it

is noteworthy that the Southern Aslian clade contains speech communities which either observe avoidance (Semaq Beri) or not (Semelai, Mah Meri).

The linguistic manifestation of affine avoidance takes a variety of forms among the Aslian-speaking communities, forming a bundle of strategies. Such strategies include pronominal and vocative substitution, naming taboos, and more or less conventionalised circumlocutory descriptors (such as kin term substitution). Importantly, all such strategies are restricted to reference to or addressing the relevant participants, that is, to the affines themselves. For example, although Aslian languages have rich avoidance lexica, for example terms for plants and animals in the context of foraging (Matisoff 2003, 49-50), the languages examined here do not provide evidence of the kind of lexical substitution which characterises avoidance registers of the Australian type (cf. Fleming 2014). Furthermore, unlike the Australian “mother-in-law registers”, Aslian avoidance strategies are not primarily conditioned by the interactional role of the avoided affine as bystander. Instead they apply to any reference, whether directly to an affine addressee or indirectly to one who is either a bystander or not present. This makes them similar to the widely documented referentially based strategies involving taboos on uttering the proper names of in-laws (Fleming 2011, 2014). Indeed, their employment of pronominal substitution and other conventionalised descriptors may be considered to be an expansion and elaboration of such strategies. However, these particular categories of reference also make the Aslian strategies similar to the Australian avoidance registers in that they, unlike avoidance restricted to a naming taboo, involve a conventionalised substitution of everyday linguistic forms which applies to the speech of any member of the community, given the right interactional circumstances. Thus, to some extent, the Aslian avoidance strategies can be argued to exhibit key characteristics of both “referentially based” and “interactionally based” systems, thereby complicating the fundamental distinction between the two proposed by Fleming (2014).

#### *Affine paradigms: similarities and diversity in categorial strategies*

Turning to the specific pronominal in-law paradigms, we observe some interesting similarities as well as differences among our sample. First of all, it is clear that, in all of the languages that employ pronoun substitution for affine reference and address, the systems are not merely an ad hoc or fluid strategy of avoiding the ordinary pronominal forms. The in-law pronouns form dedicated parallel paradigms whose fixed forms are rigidly applied to specific kin



relations by all members of the respective community. As such, they constitute a primary linguistic and categorial consolidation and vehicle of the principles of community relationships, on a par with the paradigms of honorific pronouns described for other languages. Another feature that the systems have in common is the employment of existing pronominal forms from other parts of the standard paradigm, typically non-singular and non-first person forms. This is in accordance with a pattern which is well-documented cross-linguistically in both honorific and affine avoidance pronouns (Brown and Levinson 1987, 198; Head 1978, 156-167; Helmbrecht 2003).

However, although the main strategy of drawing on non-singular forms is common to most of the Aslian affine paradigms, the specific categorial solutions employed in each language differ rather markedly. These differences concern the number of forms used, as well as which number and person distinctions are sourced and targeted. Among the paradigms, Semaq Beri has the most minimal system in terms of source forms, employing the third person plural *gi* for address of all affines to whom one is permitted to speak (but recall that second person address involves a set of dedicated non-pronominal vocatives). Ceq Wong similarly draws on the plural paradigm but maintains the second/third person distinction in the form of *jɪn* ‘2PL’ and *gən* ‘3PL’, respectively, for each category of in-law. In Jahai things get more complicated. For a parent-in-law, a Jahai speaker uses the non-first person plural pronoun *gin* (recall that second and third person plural are collapsed in the standard paradigm); for child-in-law the third person dual *wih* is sourced for both second and third person; for sibling-in-law the second and third person duals are used and thus the person distinction of the standard paradigm is maintained. Temiar employs the second person plural *ɲɔb* for address between a person and his/her same-sex parent-in-law as well as same-sex elder sibling of spouse, that is, wife’s older brother or husband’s older sister; the second person dual *kəʔan* is used between a man and his wife’s younger brother and between a woman and her husband’s younger sister. In reference, the third person plural *ʔun* and dual *wəh* are used among these same relationships.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Employment of plural and dual distinctions akin to that in Jahai and Temiar appears to occur in Kensiw, a close Northern Aslian relative of Jahai, as can be gleaned from a partial description by Bishop (1996, 250). The avoidance ideology and incest taboos appear particularly far-reaching among the Kensiw, where even cross-sex sibling-in-law avoidance is observed, as described in detail by Nagata (2010).

The use of dual distinctions in Jahai and Temiar is significant, since this is a cross-linguistically unusual phenomenon in both avoidance and honorific paradigms. Occasional reports hint at similar strategies elsewhere: Santali, a distantly related Austroasiatic (Munda) language of India, employs the second person dual for address between a parent-in-law and child-in-law (Ghosh 2008, 33, 86-7; cf. McPhail 1953, 23). Further afield, Wuvulu (Austronesian, Papua New Guinea) is reported to use the second person dual for address between all affines (Hafford 2014, 60). Among honorific pronominal paradigms more generally, duals are put to use in languages like Kharia and Mundari (Peterson 2014, 102-5) as well as Tuvaluan (Besnier 2000, 388-9) (cf. the typology of Head 1978, 157-8). Among our Aslian sample it is noteworthy that Ceq Wong does not make use of dual distinctions for affines, despite the fact that it has such distinctions in its standard paradigm (unlike Semaq Beri and Semelai) and is the closest relative of Jahai, again pointing to the diversity of solutions in the group.

Two additional, isolated features deserve mentioning. One is the Ceq Wong use of the first person plural exclusive *jaʔ* for self-reference when speaking with or in the presence of an affine. Reported also for the little-known Aslian neighbour Jah Hut, this is an unusual feature in Aslian (Kruspe, field notes).<sup>6</sup> The second feature is the employment in Semelai of the third person singular form *kəh* for addressing a parent-in-law. These features in Ceq Wong and Semelai are the only examples in our sample of affinal pronouns drawn from first person and singular forms, respectively. They are also functionally rather remarkable, since they represent pronominal reference which unusually does not apply in the absence of the affine referred to. They are therefore more fundamentally conditioned than other Aslian usage by the bystander role of the affine, which makes their interactional properties more similar to those of the avoidance registers described for Australian languages.

### *Systemic similarities and differences*

Beyond the pronominal categories themselves, the languages also diverge in terms of the more systemic properties of the paradigms. Three patterns will be outlined here. The first one is a difference between systems as to whether pronominal forms are symmetrical between

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<sup>6</sup> Similar use of the first person dual exclusive is reported for distantly related Santali (Ghosh 2008, 33). See King (2001, 168) for an example from unrelated Dhimal.

affine relations or not. In Ceq Wong, address and reference are symmetrical in the sense that the limited set of affine pronouns is used in the same way by all affines—for example, a parent-in-law addresses a child-in-law of the same sex with the second person plural, and refers to the same with a third person plural, and vice versa. Temiar also displays symmetry, whereby, for example, a man and his wife’s elder brother both address each other with the second person plural, as do same-sex parents-in-law and children-in-law. This symmetry suggests that the pronouns primarily invoke the mutuality of the relationship in terms of a specific “distance” (or “bond”, for that matter) between a particular pair of affines (cf. Benjamin 1999, 12-13), and not the categorial identity of the participants as such. This is very different from Jahai, where only siblings-in-law address and refer to each other with the same pronouns (second and third person dual) whereas the parent-in-law/child-in-law relationship is pronominally asymmetrical: a parent-in-law addresses and refers to a child-in-law with the third person dual, but a child-in-law addresses and refers to a parent-in-law with the non-first person plural. Thus the Jahai forms much more clearly encode the categorial identity of the participants and their mutual roles, and not just the mutuality of the relationship in terms of “distance” or “bond” between a pair of affines. A similar type of asymmetry meets us in Semaq Beri. Here third person reference to an in-law is universally expressed with the third person plural pronoun, but second person address obligatorily involves dedicated vocatives which are specific to each affine category. Although a different form class, they are similar to the Jahai pronominal equivalents in that they encode the affinal category of each participant. It is interesting to note that the asymmetrical systems identified here are found in those two languages of our sample which are spoken by subsistence foragers; the significance of this observation remains unclear. It should be noted that a distinct type of non-reciprocity applies to Semelai, where a child-in-law addresses a parent-in-law with the third person singular pronoun but the parent-in-law uses the standard second person singular back.

The second pattern concerns the extent to which the use of affine paradigms corresponds to kinship terminologies, and specifically whether in-law pronoun use is restricted to descriptive relations or extends to include classificatory relations such as collaterals to whom in-law kinship terminology applies. Jahai stands out as a particularly clear example of systematic mapping of pronominal use (as well as rules of behaviour) onto all of an affine’s collaterals to whom the particular kinship term applies. The pronoun employed for addressing and referring to one’s spouse’s parent also applies to a sibling or cousin of that parent, who is nominally also a *knʔac* ‘parent-in-law’; the pronoun employed for addressing and referring to one’s

child-in-law extends to his or her siblings and cousins, also nominally *mɨsaw* ‘child-in-law’; and so on. The Temiar system operates according to the same principles (Benjamin 1999, 5, 12), as does the Semaq Beri one. (Ceq Wong displays a similar classificatory system and extensions of kinship terminology but their relationship with affine pronoun usage remains unexplored). This close categorial shadowing of the classificatory relations and associated extensions of behaviour of avoidance or restraint by the in-law pronouns underscores their role as integral components and expressions of the Aslian ideologies of affinity.

The third pattern concerns those affine relationships which in most of our sample communities are subject to complete avoidance (opposite-sex parent-in-law and child-in-law avoiding each other). The systems vary as to how and under which interactional circumstances such an affine can be referred to, but Semaq Beri is noteworthy in this respect because here avoided affines cannot be referred to pronominally at all. This comes across as an extreme feature in Aslian. Pronoun avoidance in address is a well-known phenomenon, especially in the honorific registers of East and Southeast Asia (Helmbrecht 2003, 197-198, 2013), but pronoun avoidance in reference (even in the absence of the person referred to) may be cross-linguistically unusual.

### *Ritual aspects*

Although there is no room here to thoroughly compare and account for the ritual ecologies of the Aslian in-law pronouns, a few observations are worth mentioning. In all of the affine-avoiding societies of our sample, the in-law pronoun paradigms and their use are deeply engrained in the ritual behaviour impelled by the local belief systems. Transgression of taboos on affine interaction, including the improper use of pronouns, results in much-feared states of ritual danger and a genuine belief in inevitable supernatural punishment. The source and nature of supernatural retribution varies between the communities. Among the Jahai, bodily punishment in the form of crippling diseases is meted out by the thunder-causing superbeing Karey. Among the Ceq Wong, Semaq Beri and Temiar, punishment involves abstract supernatural forces triggered by transgressions and resulting in specific types of bodily harm: the Ceq Wong believe it involves a swelling of the lower body, the Semaq Beri an imminent accident or a difficult death.

Consultants mostly do not justify adherence to the principles of restrained affine sociality in terms of politeness, respectfulness, or discreetness towards the affines as such. Indeed, the restrictions typically apply even if no affine addressee or referent is present. Nor do they rationalise it in terms of communal pressure for appropriate social behaviour, or of risk of embarrassment or loss of face in front of community members. So, superficially at least, Aslian affine avoidance does not give the impression of being an interactional strategy for preventing threats to the face of the human participants. This makes the Aslian in-law pronouns somewhat difficult to reconcile with the proposal by Brown and Levinson (1987, 198) that non-singular marking of single participants in honorific and respect registers is aimed at avoiding threats to the addressee's face. Recall here the explanation by Jahai consultants that pronoun substitution has the purpose of avoiding arousing Karey's suspicion and wrath. The belief systems and their principles ultimately structure behaviour and communication among humans, but it is evident that, in the minds of Aslians, the primary target audience of affinal etiquette are not the community members themselves but ever-present abstract forces or invisible bystanders from the supernatural realm.

## Conclusions

This study has examined the linguistic and cultural expression of affine avoidance in the Aslian speech communities, with particular attention to the role of pronouns. Here we summarise our main findings.

The Aslian languages offer features of interest to the general typology of affinal avoidance systems in language. One striking characteristic is the propensity of their strategies to cross-cut distinctions deemed fundamental to previous theorisation of such systems. For example, Aslian strategies cannot be described as being primarily *addressee*-focused, *referent*-focused, or *bystander*-focused (cf. Comrie 1976; Fleming 2014, 120), because their linguistic solutions handle all three types of context and none can be determined to be more dominant or fundamental than the others. They also do not conform straightforwardly to the distinction between *referentially-based* and *interactionally-based* systems (Fleming 2014), again because they exhibit attributes of both types. They also fail to align with Fleming's strict division of the linguistic specialisation of affine avoidance strategies into *proper name avoidance* and *lexical substitution* of the "mother-in-law register" type, since neither of those strategies

forms the core of the Aslian systems. Furthermore, although solely and profoundly conditioned by “egocentrically reckoned affinity” and not “sociocentrically reckoned hierarchy” (Fleming 2014, 141), the Aslian systems blur the distinction between affine and honorific registers in that their strategies of pronominal substitution, with non-singular forms applied to single individuals, seem taken from the honorifics textbook.

What we are dealing with is a family of systems employing bundles of linguistic strategies to represent affinal kin, be they addressees, bystanders, or (in some cases) absentees. These strategies include dedicated paradigms of in-law pronouns, specific vocatives, proper name avoidance, and circumlocutory kinship and possessive expressions. However, the pronominal paradigms are at the heart of the systems and are, in a sense, what defines them as a type. This is because the in-law pronouns form the most pervasive and stable strategy across the languages, and because they are that linguistic category which maps on to the participant roles of both addressee and referent in the most overt and saturated way (unlike name avoidance and vocatives, for example). In other words, they form our foremost linguistic access point to the affinal avoidance ideology of the communities.

At the same time, we have seen that the Aslian systems are internally diverse. The pronominal solution is categorially different in each language, in terms of how many categories are involved and which distinctions are employed. The languages also diverge as to whether pronominal forms are used reciprocally and symmetrically between two affines, or if two different forms are used asymmetrically. The sample further hints that languages can vary as to whether or not the usage of in-law pronouns maps onto kinship categories in the descriptive or classificatory sense. In these respects the Aslian systems form a rich typological microcosm, and they highlight formal and functional parameters along which other systems may be fruitfully explored.

The diversity of affine avoidance registers in Aslian, as well as their absence from some of the languages, reflects the rich cultural diversity observed among the Aslian-speaking communities. However, the cultural correlates are far from obvious. Established societal classifications (Benjamin 1985) do not associate neatly with the categorial patterns observed in the languages, which also do not align with the genealogical classification of the languages into a Northern, Central, and Southern subgroup. Instead, linguistic solutions appear to be

largely tailored to the societal and cultural characteristics of each individual ethnolinguistic community in ways which remain largely unexplored.

One cultural distinction inherent to our sample calls for some discussion. The societal and demographic characteristics of hunter-gatherers are sometimes hypothesised to have linguistic correlates, for example in patterns of language change (Bower 2010; Burenhult, Kruspe, and Dunn 2011), or in the semantic strategies within specific domains of cultural relevance (Burenhult and Kruspe 2016; Epps et al. 2012; Majid and Kruspe 2018). One might therefore be tempted to assume that the hunter-gatherers of our sample—the Jahai and Semaq Beri—could display patterns in their linguistic avoidance strategies which are somehow distinct from those of the other groups. The only candidate pattern identified here is the asymmetry in pronominal forms used between in-laws, found in some form or other in Jahai and Semaq Beri but not in the other languages. We are unable on the basis of the present data to determine if and how this pattern is significant but hope to pursue this in future research.

### **Abbreviations and conventions**

1 ‘first person’; 2 ‘second person’; 3 ‘third person’; CAUS ‘causative’; DU ‘dual’; EXCL ‘exclusive’; F ‘feminine’; INCL ‘inclusive’; M ‘masculine’; PL ‘plural’; POSS AFF ‘possessed affinal kin term’; REL ‘relative clause marker’; SG ‘singular’; VOC ‘vocative’; = ‘clitic boundary’.

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