

Towards a multidimensional typology of nominal classification

Nominal classification is an area of grammar which poses extreme difficulties for cross-linguistic definitions, starting with the identification of sufficiently narrowly defined types of nominal classification systems (e.g. numeral classifiers, noun classes) as typologically relevant categories. A wide range of different systems have been described, ranging from strongly grammaticalized, morphosyntactic agreement systems (e.g. gender in European languages) to discourse-sensitive, lexico-grammatical systems (e.g. Chinese numeral classifiers). In order to identify different types of such systems, conceived as prototypes with fuzzy borders, two main definitional criteria are used (Grinevald 2000, Aikhenvald 2000), setting up a two-dimensional space: 1) the notion of Agreement sets agreeing “noun class systems” apart from non-agreeing “classifiers”. 2) Within this grand type, individual classifier systems are distinguished by morphosyntactic loci, e.g. numeral classifiers, verbal classifiers, etc.

In line with a number of current developments in typology (Corbett 2005, 2006; Bickel 2007), this paper argues for a multidimensional approach to investigating nominal classification systems, i.e. it focuses on a relatively large number of relatively detailed criteria as the main units of typological characterization and comparisons. This helps to (i) define precisely the canonical core of some traditionally recognized “types” for which implicational relations with independent linguistic characteristics hold, and (ii) investigate systematically the structure of the typological space beyond the canonical instances, i.e. the identification of directions into which individual systems extend away from the canon. Two important types of nominal classification systems are discussed from this perspective, using the Amazonian language Miraña (Seifart 2005) as a main example:

Firstly, for numeral classifiers two partially overlapping typological clusters can be established: (i) narrowly defined numeral classifiers, with a certain constituent structure of numeral constructions, and which imply the absence of obligatory plural marking in the same constructions, and (ii) another wider notion of individuating classifying morphemes, which cluster with additional characteristics, such as shape semantics.

Secondly, the variability found among and within noun classes and gender systems, defined by agreement, can be described to a certain extent by the various criteria which characterize canonical agreement (Corbett 2006). A fuller understanding of noun class systems requires taking into account degrees of semantic transparency of noun class assignment, which is closely linked to recurring characteristics such as the optionality of agreement controllers and the derivational function of noun class and gender marking on nouns.

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