

Distinguishing between class terms, classifiers and noun classes: the case of Movima (Bolivia) [Oral presentation]

There seems to exist pervasive confusion surrounding the phenomenon of nominal classification systems found in languages of the world, partly induced by the nature of misnomer of the term “classifier” itself. There are those that lump all the systems together and tend to call them all classifiers (Aikhenvald 2003, 2012) and those that try to keep them apart as separate systems, even if sharing lexical origins (Craig 1986, Grinevald 2000). This paper will be an exercise in clarification of the issues involved, invoking the need to always keep the dynamics of the systems in view, and the evaluation of the productivity and degree of grammaticalization of any system.

Amazonian languages have often been cited as particularly challenging to the typology of noun classification, since their systems seem to cut across the different types identified so far (see Aikhenvald 2012, Derbyshire and Payne 1990, Grinevald 2000). The Movima language (isolate, Bolivia; Grinevald 2002, Haude 2006) is a case in point. In Movima, noun roots (e.g. *ba* ‘fruit’) can be attached to nominal, verbal, and numeral bases in order to specify particular classes of objects that are named, acted upon, or counted. These roots function as class terms (e.g., a plant name combined with *ba* denotes a particular kind of fruit) or classifiers (characterizing entities according to their shape or consistency; e.g., *ba* is used to refer to three-dimensional, fist-sized round objects), and they can serve to create anaphoric reference in discourse in a way reminiscent of noun class systems. Apparently the Movima system has undergone several modifications over time, through which the inventory of bound nominal elements has become more heterogeneous. At one point – as can be seen, from example, from the treatment of early Spanish loans – noun classes were created by simply truncating the last syllable of a noun, a process which today is no longer productive. Discourse data furthermore show that the anaphoric function of the classifying elements is in decay, too, since words that require such an element (e.g. numerals) usually take the default, semantically neutral element *-ra*.

With Movima as an example, the paper will demonstrate among other things the relations between class terms and noun class systems, the need to keep track of levels of lexicalization of items, the evolution from semantically motivated classification to phonological truncation for generating new noun classes, and the consequences of eventual fossilization of the system.

References:

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