



Functions of nominal classification



Ellen Contini-Morava^{a,*}, Marcin Kilarski^b

^a Department of Anthropology, University of Virginia, P.O. Box 400120, Charlottesville, VA 22904-4120, USA

^b Faculty of English, Adam Mickiewicz University, Al. Niepodległości 4, 61-874 Poznań, Poland

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ABSTRACT

Nominal classification systems are generally categorized on the basis of morphosyntactic criteria. However, the functional motivations for these phenomena do not coincide directly with their morphosyntactic properties: some functions are shared by diverse systems, and each morphosyntactic type may serve diverse communicative functions. We provide a functional typology for nominal classification, including both noun class and classifier systems. We focus on two types of functions: semantic, i.e., the use of classification markers to expand the referential power of the lexicon, and discourse/pragmatic, i.e., the use of classification markers to establish and manipulate the status of discourse referents. We identify functions that are shared by formally diverse systems as well as functions that depend on means of expression. We also review psycholinguistic evidence for the role of nominal classification in language comprehension and production.

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1. Introduction¹

Nominal classification systems are generally categorized on the basis of morphosyntactic criteria, and studies of these systems have identified a range of communicative functions such as tracking of discourse referents or presentation of them from different perspectives (see below for discussion and references). However, the functional motivations for these grammatical phenomena do not coincide directly with their morphosyntactic properties: some functions are shared by formally diverse systems, and each morphosyntactic type may serve diverse communicative functions. Also, studies of nominal classification sometimes differ in their definitions of terms, in their goals, and in the phenomena that they focus on. In this paper we aim to provide a systematic framework for describing functional motivations for nominal classification, including both noun class and classifier systems. We identify the most important functions, relate function to means of expression, and compare functions across morphosyntactic forms. Due to space constraints we will focus on the question of functions of nominal classification itself rather than on the issue of the extent to which the principles for assigning nouns to classes are semantically motivated. We also take a synchronic perspective on nominal classification systems rather than tracing their historical origins (see, e.g., Aikhenvald, 2000, Chapters 11–13 and references therein). We draw examples from the

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 434 924 6825; fax: +1 434 924 1350.

E-mail addresses: elc9j@virginia.edu (E. Contini-Morava), kilarski@amu.edu.pl (M. Kilarski).

¹ Abbreviations: 3.ACT.PRO, 3rd person active pronominal marker; 3.UND.PRO, 3rd person undergoer pronominal marker; ACC, accusative; ALL, allative; ANIM, anim., animate; ATT, attributive marker; AUG, augmentative; CM, common; CL, cl., class; CLF, classifier; COLL, collective; CON, sentence connector pronoun; CONSEC, consecutive; CONT, continuous; COP, copula; COUNT, countable; CP, concordial prefix; DEICTIC.CLF, deictic classifier; DEM, demonstrative; DISC, discourse particle; DIST, distal; ECHO, prosodic echo vowel; ERG, ergative; EXIST, existential; FEM, fem., feminine; FUT, future; GCM, general class marker; HAB, habitual; HUM, human; IMPERF, imperfective; INAN, inanimate; INCOMPL, incomplete; INDEF, indef., indefinite; INSTR, instrumental; INTER, interrogative; LOC, locative; MASC, masc., masculine; MOD, modifier particle; NCLF, noun classifier; NCP, noun class prefix; NEG, negative; NEUT, neut.; NUM.CLF, numeral classifier; OBJ.PFX, object prefix; PERF, perfective; PERS, person; PFX, prefix; PL, pl., plural; POSS, possessive; PRED, predicative; PRO, pronoun; PROX, proximal; PRT, particle; PURP, purposive; QUANT, quantifier; QUOT, quotative; REL.PRO, relative pronoun; REL.CLF, relational classifier; RELZ, relativizer; SCM, specific class marker; SG, sg., singular; SUBJ.PFX, subject prefix; SUBORD, subordinate; TAM, tense-aspect-mood marker; TH, thematic.

major morphosyntactic types of nominal classification, using languages from diverse families, but we do not claim that our sample is representative. Like the typologies of classification systems that have been proposed over the past 10–15 years, our framework is preliminary and should be tested against a wider sample of the world's languages.

By way of an introduction, in Section 2 we clarify terminological points and consider differences between noun classes/gender and classifiers.² In Section 3 we provide an overview of recent research on the topic. In Sections 4 and 5 we discuss two types of functions of nominal classification: semantic functions, i.e., the use of noun class markers and classifiers to expand the referential power of the lexicon, and discourse functions, i.e., the use of classification markers to establish and manipulate the status of a referent in discourse. Finally, Section 6 reviews psycholinguistic studies of nominal classification that provide evidence for its role in language comprehension and production. In the Conclusions we summarize our findings with regard to functional commonalities among morphosyntactically diverse systems and differences related to forms of grammatical realization. We also suggest some avenues for future research.

2. Terms and definitions

2.1. What is 'function(ality)'?

In this paper we use 'function' and 'functional' along the lines that these terms have been used by linguists who espouse theoretical frameworks described as 'functionalist' (e.g., Jakobson, 1960; Dik, 1978; Halliday, 1994; Harder, 1996; Givón, 2001; Diver, 2012). Although there are many differences among these approaches, they share the goal of seeking cognitive and communicative motivations for linguistic structure. In this regard they distinguish themselves from approaches that treat grammar as based on principles that are independent of meaning, communicative interaction, or general human cognitive abilities, such as some versions of generative grammar (e.g., Chomsky, 1974; Hoekstra and Kooij, 1988; Newmeyer, 1998, Chapter 2). In particular, our use of the term 'functional' differs from the use of this word within generative approaches that divide linguistic categories into 'lexical' vs. 'functional' (i.e., grammatical), e.g., introductory textbooks such as Carnie (2013, p. 52). For one thing, nominal classification is expressed by linguistic forms that fall on both sides of this divide: many classifiers are relatively 'lexical' whereas markers of concordial agreement would most likely be described as 'functional' or grammatical. Indeed, the latter are often not regarded as 'functional' in the way we are using the term, because they are perceived to be meaningless (see below for further discussion of this point). However, we regard all the types of nominal classification discussed in this paper as 'functional' in our sense: they all contribute to communication, either by adding to the lexicon, affecting the interpretation of lexical items, helping to track discourse referents, or contributing to discourse processing.³

Some scholars have regarded nominal classification systems as grammatical forms that lack communicative motivation, either because the assignment of nouns to classes may be largely arbitrary from a semantic point of view, or because the use of a classifier or 'agreement' marker is seen as redundant, merely repeating information already supplied by a noun.⁴ Such arguments assume a narrow conception of 'function', prevalent in the grammatical tradition inherited from Western classical views of language, namely that the function of language is to convey propositional content, or 'semantico-referential' meaning (Silverstein, 1976). Although other functions have long been recognized (see, e.g., Vološinov, 1973 [1928], pp. 99–106; Bühler, 1982 [1933], pp. 147–164; Jakobson, 1960), the referential function continues to serve as the basis for the definition of linguistic units at all levels, and other functions are ignored or seen as marginal (Silverstein, 1976). A further, related assumption is that 'meaningfulness' is to be construed in a narrow, information-theoretic sense (Shannon and Weaver, 1949): linguistic elements seen as not adding new (referential) information are regarded as redundant, hence meaningless.

Thus for example it is sometimes suggested that marking of gender on first and second person singular pronouns is communicatively useless, presumably because the gender of speech-act participants may be obvious from visual cues and is therefore redundant (Trudgill, 2011, pp. 160–161). However, given the ubiquitous social importance of gender differentiation in human societies, obligatory marking of gender on referential indices should come as no surprise. Such marking may serve to reinforce that differentiation, while also being available for creative manipulation, e.g., in reported speech or for stylistic purposes (Trechter, 1999); to signal affect (Tobin, 2001) (see Section 4.4), or to signal gender status that does not fit into a dichotomous partition, such as that of *hijras* in India (Hall and O'Donovan, 1996).

In this paper we will take a broad view of 'function', that includes affective/social as well as referential information (see Sections 4.4 and 5.3), and information that helps with discourse processing (see Sections 5.1, 5.2 and 6). Our approach to the functionality of noun classes/gender is thus consistent with that of scholars such as Jakobson (1959), Heath (1975) and

² The terms 'gender' and 'noun class' have sometimes been used interchangeably (cf. Guthrie, 1948; Corbett, 1991; Aikhenvald, 2000). To avoid confusion, we will restrict the term 'gender' to the subset of noun class systems in which assignment principles are at least partly sex-based, as in German or Arabic.

³ Some syntacticians have problematized a sharp distinction between 'lexical' and 'functional' categories, arguing that the notion 'functional category' should be regarded as multidimensional in nature (e.g., Muysken, 2008, pp. 144–145). The term 'semi-lexical', coined by van Riemsdijk (1998) for the N_1 in constructions such as Dutch *een plak kaas* 'a slice [of] cheese' (see van Riemsdijk, 1998, pp. 1–48), has been applied to mensural classifiers in languages such as Vietnamese (cf. Löbel, 2001). However, the question where to draw the line between 'lexical' and 'functional' does not affect the point we are making about the difference between our use of the term 'functional' and its use in formal syntax.

⁴ See, e.g., Claudi (1997), McWhorter (2005, pp. 40–41, 74–75), Neumann-Holzschuh (2006, pp. 260–266) and Trudgill (2011, pp. 154–167) on noun classes/gender, and Greenberg (1972, p.10), Hundius and Kölver (1983, pp. 186–189) and Beckwith (1998) on classifiers. For a history of approaches to noun classes/gender in Western linguistics, see Kilarski (2007, forthcoming).

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