

REVIEW OF: NOMINAL CLASSIFICATION IN ASIA AND OCEANIA: FUNCTIONAL AND DIACHRONIC PERSPECTIVES¹

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Nominal Classification in Asia and Oceania: Functional and Diachronic Perspectives (Current Issues in Linguistic Theory 362, John Benjamins publisher, 2023, ISBN 9789027214379, edited by Marc Allasonnière-Tang and Marcin Kilarski, 251 pages) is a volume that explores gender and sortal classifiers (a subclass of numeral classifiers used with ontologically count nouns) in the Asian-Pacific region. This book is an outcome of the Session on Nominal Classification in Southeast Asia held at the 46th Poznan Linguistic Meeting (2016), bringing together four papers presented at the workshop with three additional invited chapters. The volume is organized into two thematic parts: “Functions of classifiers” comprises two papers and “Diachrony of nominal classification systems” has four contributions. The six substantive chapters total 215 pages, with the papers greatly varying in length, between 19 and 54 pages. The case studies span Papua New Guinea, North and Northeast India, Northwest China, the Amur Peninsula, and Sakhalin Island. These are complemented by an overview chapter on the distribution of classifiers across Asia and the Pacific. The main body of the book is flanked by an introduction by the editors and a “Concluding discussion” by Ellen Contini-Morava.

In this review, I will briefly outline each chapter, highlighting the typologically rarest or theoretically most challenging aspects of the examined domains. I will also offer potential alternative outlooks on certain sets of facts compared to those in the book and will conclude with an overall evaluation of the volume.

The system of classifiers in Kilivila: The role of these formatives and their functions by Gunter Senft revisits earlier work by the author and identifies identification/tracking of referents in discourse and word formation, among others, as the major functions of classifiers in Kilivila (Trobriand Islands, Austronesian). The tracking of referents in discourse means that classifiers aid the recovery of elided nouns, potentially across larger stretches of text. What Senft calls the word-formation function is the property of requiring an accompanying infixed or prefixed classifier, a property shared by numerals, almost all demonstratives, and some adjectives. There are thus as many classifiers in the NP as N-modifiers from the above-mentioned set.²

(1) *ke-yu waga ma-ke-si-na ke-manabweta* (Kilivila)
CLF.wooden-two canoe DEM-CLF.wooden-PL-DEM CLF.wooden-beautiful
‘two beautiful canoes’ (p. 18)

(1) is typologically significant in that it shows that classifiers can, in some languages, be involved in concord, a property typically reserved for other types of noun categorization devices, namely, gender and noun class.

In **Nominal classification in Assamese: An analysis of function**, Pori Saikia and Marc Allasonnière-Tang offer a detailed overview of the inventory and use of Assamese classifiers. There is a feature of the

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² Abbreviations: CLF = classifier; DEM = demonstrative; PL = plural.

Assamese classifier system that appears to be unique: according to the authors, there seems to be a sortal classifier that is restricted to mass nouns. This is illustrated in (3). A regular sortal classifier is given in (2) for comparison.

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|-----|--------------------|-------------|-----|--------------------------------|-------------|------------|
| (2) | <i>e-zɔn</i> | <i>lɔra</i> | (3) | <i>e-kʰini</i> | <i>pani</i> | (Assamese) |
| | one-CLF.male.human | boy | | one-CLF.mass | water | |
| | ‘a boy’ (p. 39) | | | ‘one measure of water’ (p. 44) | | |

In classifier languages, ontologically mass nouns take mass classifiers (aka measure words or massifiers) rather than sortal classifiers. If *kʰini* were determined to be a genuine sortal classifier, Assamese would be an unparalleled classifier language. Interestingly, in contrast to (3), Kidwai & Sutradhar (2008) indicate that *kʰini* is incompatible with numerals (**tini kʰini tel*, lit. ‘three *kʰini* oil’), but it is grammatical in the bare ‘N Clf’ pattern (*tel kʰini*, lit. ‘oil *kʰini*’, ‘some oil’). As co-occurrence with numerals is a necessary but not sufficient condition for classifying a word as a sortal classifier, the status of *kʰini* needs further clarification.

Today, Assamese relies on classifiers to categorize nouns, a strategy characteristic of the Sino-Tibetan and Austroasiatic languages spoken in the neighborhood of Northeast India. However, the chapter mentions that Assamese used to have gender marking, which is typical for its Indo-European family. Notwithstanding the authors’ freedom in the choice of their topic and the need to restrict the focus of the individual contributions, since this volume is about nominal classification strategies in general and not just about classifiers, a brief discussion of gender in earlier Assamese would have been useful (e.g., how many genders it had, when they were lost, and if they overlapped in time with classifiers).

At 54 pages, the longest chapter is Christian Huber’s **Gender marking in Shumcho**. Shumcho is an endangered Tibeto-Burman language in Himachal Pradesh (India), with no monolingual speakers left. While it originally did not have gender, Shumcho borrowed a number of nouns and adjectives from Indo-Aryan in gender-marked masculine-feminine pairs. Gender marking in Shumcho remains restricted to borrowed words.

A primary point of interest in this chapter is how the possible logical combinations of gender-inflecting versus non-gender-inflecting (i.e., neutral, formally invariant) adjectives on the one hand and gendered versus non-gendered nouns on the other play out in the grammar. The most interesting combinations are those of a gender-inflecting adjective and a non-gendered noun, in which either the masculine/common gender or the feminine gender must be chosen for the adjective, but the noun does not have a gender feature. In a subset of these cases, younger speakers inflect the adjective according to the grammatical gender of the corresponding noun in Hindi. This permeability between grammars offers an excellent laboratory to compare hypotheses about the bilingual mind in future work.

One-Soon Her and Bing-Tsiang Li’s chapter **A single origin of numeral classifiers in Asia and the Pacific: A hypothesis** explores the hypothesis that sortal classifiers emerged via internal development in a single language group in Asia and that they diffused via contact to all other languages in the Asia-Pacific region which have classifiers today. First, the authors use “The World Atlas of Classifier Languages” (WACL, Her et al. 2022) to show to what extent sortal classifier languages of the world are concentrated in East and Southeast Asia. They demonstrate that out of the 713 sortal classifier languages found so far, 310 (43.5%) are in the Sinitic, Miao-Yao, Austroasiatic, Tai-Kadai, Tibeto-Burman, and Indo-Aryan families, collectively referred to as SMATTI, just 12.4% of the world’s languages. Second, pairing WACL with Ethnologue’s “World Language Mapping System” (Lewis et al. 2016), the authors also show that increasing geographic distance from SMATTI correlates with classifiers petering out, as expected under the SMATTI-internal single-origin hypothesis.

Within SMATTI, Sinitic and Tai-Kadai have emerged in the previous literature as the potential source of classifiers. The authors review and counter previously proposed arguments in support of Tai-Kadai being the innovator, and they conclude the chapter with some arguments for classifiers originating from Sinitic. They are careful to point out, however, that the currently available evidence does not allow us to draw a definitive conclusion. All considered, this contribution is a very useful thorough treatment for anyone looking for an authoritative overview of old and new arguments.

It is worth noting, however, that one of the arguments for Sinitic being the innovator is stronger, while another is weaker than suggested in the chapter. Observing that Tai-Kadai languages borrowed numerals from Chinese, the authors propose that the most likely scenario is one in which classifiers were also

borrowed in this direction. While the chapter does not mention this, cross-linguistic tendencies in language contact support this view: matter borrowing goes hand in hand with pattern borrowing (e.g., Law 2020). The borrowing of numerals from a classifier language into a non-classifier language is normally accompanied by the introduction of classifiers too, alongside the new numerals (e.g., Indo-Aryan to Malto (Greenberg 1972), Nepali to Chantyal (Noonan 2003), etc.). Conversely, when numerals are borrowed from a non-classifier language into a classifier language, then the new numerals tend to be used without classifiers in the recipient language (e.g., Spanish to Ch’ol (Bale & Coon 2014)). This scenario would make it unlikely that at the time when numerals were borrowed, Tai-Kadai had classifiers, but Chinese was not.

As for another argument in the chapter, the authors uncritically adopt Wang’s (1994) proposal that classifiers must have developed in Chinese because (i) Ancient Chinese classifiers are derived from indigenous nouns, and (ii) “whether the classifiers in a language are derived from its own lexicon is a key point in determining whether the classifier feature is native to the language” (p. 150). However, pattern borrowing without matter borrowing is widely attested, so in principle, Chinese may very well have borrowed the classifier construction in such a way that it used its own lexicon to fill in the newly adopted template. This almost certainly happened in Hungarian, in which the existence of the sortal classifier construction could not have been passed down from Proto-Uralic, but many classifiers are derived from indigenous nouns inherited from Proto-Uralic (Agyagási & Dékány 2019).

Contact-induced reduction, loss, and emergence of numeral classifiers: Two case studies from East Asia by Erika Sandman and Francesca Di Garbo has its main focus on the loss of classifiers in Wutun and Nivkh. This contribution should, perhaps, have been two separate chapters. Although there are some parallels between the Wutun and Nivkh situations, and both are very well worth discussing in this volume, the chapter has two clearly demarcated parts, namely, case study 1 on Wutun, with comparisons to Mangghuer, and case study 2 on Nivkh. They do not necessarily have the kind of coherence that would justify treating them in a single piece.

Wutun is a Northwest Mandarin variety in the Amdo Sprachbund. Located in an area dominated by non-Sinitic speakers, it has undergone extensive Altaicization. The historically dominant Amdo Tibetan language lacks sortal classifiers. Its effect on Wutun has led to the radical reduction of the classifier inventory: Sandman and Di Garbo claim that today only the general classifier *-ge* is used in Wutun. Unlike in Standard Mandarin, numerals and *-ge* follow the noun (no doubt an effect of N-initial Amdo Tibetan), and *-ge* has become a suffix, as in (4). There seems to be one exception to the ‘N Num-Clf’ word order, however: with some Chinese-based temporal units, the Mandarin-like ‘Num-Clf N’ order is used.

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|-----|---------------------|-----------------|-----|-----------------------|------------|---------|
| (4) | <i>qhichai</i> | <i>liang-ge</i> | (5) | <i>liang-ge</i> | <i>yai</i> | (Wutun) |
| | car | two-CLF | | two-CLF | month | |
| | ‘two cars’ (p. 171) | | | ‘two months’ (p. 173) | | |

The contrast between (4) and (5) is clear, but it causes a significant analytical problem. Specifically, the word order appears to depend on the choice of the lexical noun, and thus appears to require item-specific word order rules as opposed to the usual scenario whereby word order rules are sensitive to (morpho-)syntactic categories/features. Imagine a hypothetical version of English in which the noun *dog* is pre-modified by numerals (*two dogs*), but the noun *cat* takes post-nominal numerals (*cats two*). Such a language would be extraordinary, and one would want to make sure that one understood the facts correctly. I suggest that there is a plausible alternative outlook on the order of elements in (4) and (5), which makes Wutun less like our hypothetical version of English and more like a “well-behaved language”. Words for temporal and monetary units have the distribution of classifiers in many languages (see Dékány 2022, though there are also languages in which they behave as lexical nouns). In these cases, temporal units occupy the classifier slot, and the noun slot is either filled by a lexical noun, or it remains empty on the surface. Standard Mandarin *nian* ‘year’ is illustrative: *san nian (shijian)*, lit. ‘three year time’, i.e., ‘three years (of time)’ (Her et al. 2015).

The fact that at least some temporal units are classifiers in a good number of languages, including varieties of Mandarin, raises the possibility that Wutun *yai* ‘month’ is a classifier rather than a noun. If in (5) the entire string is in the post-nominal position of an understood but unpronounced noun ‘time’, then (5) has the noun-initial order characteristic of the Wutun numeral phrase, and we can avoid positing lexeme-specific word order rules. This would mean that (5) has two different numeral classifiers in the same NP (*-ge* and

yai). There are classifier languages in which this is indeed possible, such as Vietnamese (Simpson & Ngo 2018), Newar (Hyslop 2008), Persian (Gebhardt 2009: 273), and, to a limited extent, Hungarian (Dékány 2021) as well as Kilivila (cf. Senft’s chapter). In future work, it would be interesting to examine if the classifier analysis of Wutun *yai* can be supported with independent arguments.

The second case study of the chapter centers around the loss of classifiers in Nivkh, a moribund isolate in the Amur Peninsula and on Sakhalin Island. Originally, the ‘low’ numerals 1 to 5 were postnominal and were obligatorily accompanied by classifiers (‘N Num Clf’). Numerals above 5 were prenominal and took classifiers optionally (‘Num (Clf) N’). Numeral expressions in Nivkh were affected by two major changes. First, as in Wutun, the classifier inventory underwent radical reduction: today, only the generic sortal classifier (*-qř/-oqř/-qr/-oqr/-kř*) remains widely used. Second, the numerals 4 and 5 may now pattern with the ‘high’ numerals and appear prenominally. Interestingly, in this position, they can take both the generic classifier and a more specific sortal classifier, e.g., *-o* for fishnets: *ŋə-kr-o* (four-CLF.gen-CLF.net) and *t’o-gr-o* (five-CLF.gen-CLF.net, p. 189). The authors suggest that here *-qř/-oqř/-qr/-oqr/-kř* is no longer a classifier but has fused into and has become an unsegmentable part of the numeral, which is what allows for a specific classifier to be added. This is entirely plausible, but the possibility of a genuine double classifier pattern discussed above could also be considered for these data.

Finally, Hiram Ring’s contribution **Gender, classifiers, and diachrony in Khasian** describes the gender and sortal classifier systems of the Khasian branch of the Austroasiatic language family (Meghalaya state, India). Khasian languages exhibit gendered pronouns as well as gender marking on lexical nouns via clitics. Gender marking is unusual for the Austroasiatic family, and the paper discusses possibilities for how this category may have arisen in the languages in question. As for Khasian classifiers, they obligatorily accompany numerals. Khasian also has obligatory plural marking for nouns with non-singular reference, and this leads to the typologically rare situation in which classifiers and the plural marker obligatorily co-occur in cardinal phrases (except, of course, when the numeral is ‘one’).

- (6) *saw* *ŋut* *ki=briw* (Khasi)
 four CLF.hum PL=person
 ‘four people’ (p. 212)

Although the seminal paper of Sanches & Slobin (1973) has often been misunderstood to imply or predict that (i) a language has either classifiers or a plural marker or (ii) if it has both, they don’t co-occur in the same NP (see Dékány 2021: 24–27 for discussion of the actual claim and its misinterpretations), it has been known for a while that classifiers and the plural marker do co-occur in a number of languages (cf. Dékány 2011: 234 for a non-exhaustive list). However, it remains to be the case that obligatory co-occurrence between these categories is very rare. Recently, Akolkar (2023) discussed such a case in Bishnupriya Manipuri (also spoken in Northeast India, as well as the Bangladeshi state of Sylhet), but only in definite and *wh-* cardinal phrases (definite pattern: ‘N Num-Def Clf-*(PI)’, indefinite pattern: ‘N Num Clf(*-PI)’). In Khasian, classifiers and the plural marker obligatorily co-occur regardless of definiteness. Since it is unusual for classifiers and the plural marker to obligatorily co-occur, and it is also relatively uncommon for a language to possess both classifiers and gender, Ring’s paper has much to offer for further theoretical work on the interaction between these categories.

As can be seen from the preceding discussion, none of the papers in the second part of the volume are “classic” diachronic studies in the sense that they follow classifiers or gender through various stages within the confines of a chosen language, examining stepwise morpho-syntactic changes in the vertical dimension. Many of the discussed languages are spoken in areas where language families relying on distinct noun categorization devices meet, and the main interest of the chapters lies in how these contact zones have reshaped the noun categorization strategies of particular languages by introducing, radically reducing the use of, or entirely eliminating either classifiers or gender. This results in languages with typologically atypical features for their respective families (Assamese in Indo-Aryan, Khasian in Austroasiatic, Shumcho in Tibeto-Burman, and Wutun in Sinitic) and provides a fertile ground for contrastive work on classifiers versus gender. But since the chapters make their primary contributions to our understanding of the horizontal transmission of noun categorization devices rather than diachronic linguistics in the narrow sense, it would have been informative to include the term *contact* in the volume title.

In spite of the remarks made above, many aspects of this volume make it a welcome, valuable addition to the body of literature of nominal classification. One of its strengths is that it discusses different noun categorization devices in tandem. Another is that it contains studies on some smaller, underdescribed or endangered languages which have not been at the forefront of linguistic theorizing about classifiers or gender. The numerous case studies on languages which are located at the geographical crossroads between typologically different language families, and therefore have noun categorization features that are atypical for the families to which they belong, is also a distinguishing feature of the volume. The book also broadens our knowledge of NPs containing more than one classifier (cf. Kilivila and, depending on the correct final analysis of some data, potentially also Wutun and Nivkh).

I especially applaud this collection for including studies on languages with small classifier inventories. In my interaction with fellow linguists, I have heard countless times that a classifier language in which the inventory and distribution of sortal classifiers is not like in Mandarin Chinese is “not the real thing”. It is my hope that this book will contribute to laying these voices to rest, as it demonstrates that even varieties of Mandarin show significant variation in the use of classifiers, and some can have minimal classifier inventories. This volume contains plenty of food for thought that can be taken further, by functional and formal linguists alike, and it will also appeal to researchers of language contact interested in the interaction between typologically different languages.

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