Discourse functions of nominal classification

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Nominal classification systems have played a central role throughout the history of Western linguistics in discussions about the meaning and function of grammatical categories, and their cognitive and cultural correlates. Many linguists have regarded nominal classification as semantically arbitrary and have seen the presence of agreement or a classifier as redundant. Such systems have often been seen as examples of grammatical forms that lack communicative purpose (e.g., Greenberg (1972); Claudi (1997); Trudgill (1999); Katamba (2003)). However, all nominal classification systems have an underlying referential basis and play an important role at the interface of grammar and lexicon by way of their semantic and discourse functions.

In this paper we provide evidence of discourse functions of gender/noun class and classifier systems. First, nominal classification systems can be used anaphorically or deictically as referent tracking devices. Second, classification markers can be used to introduce a new perspective on the referent. In addition, gender/noun classes and classifiers contribute to reference management, where the presence of noun class marking/agreement and the presence or choice of a classifier correlates with such properties as definiteness and prominence in discourse. Examples of functionality of nominal classification are provided from gender/noun classes (Indo-European, Bantu, Iroquoian, Algonquian, Australian), and from four types of classifier systems: noun classifiers (Mayan), numeral classifiers (Sino-Tibetan, Mayan), verbal classifiers (Athabaskan) and deictic classifiers (Siouan).

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