

Multiple systems or just a multi-faceted system? Differences in the use of gender agreement in different syntactic domains in Mawng

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Recent work on nominal classification has shown that it is not that unusual for more than one system of nominal classification to be found in a single language (see for example Fedden 2011, Seifart 2005, van Egmond 2012). The co-existence of what appear to be functionally similar devices is quite surprising. For example a survey of fifteen languages that have agreement for at least three genders marked in the verb, found that nine of these languages also have noun-incorporation, which is also a kind of classificatory device (Singer 2016: chapter 7). As Corbett & Fedden (2017) demonstrate, determining whether there are actually two systems within one language or not can be difficult. For example in Corbett and Fedden (2015) they show that while Mian (Fedden 2011) does have two separate systems, the formally different free and enclitic classifiers in Ngan'gityemerri (Reid 1990) in fact comprise a single system.

Passer (2016) argues somewhat controversially that 'verb classifier' is a spurious category as so-called 'verb classifiers' do not actually classify the nominal domain but modify the concept expressed by the verb. A shortcoming of Passer (2016) is that it does not compare putative verb classifiers with classifiers that occur in NPs. In fact, nominal classification devices in general rarely fulfil the role of the perfect nominal classifier. For example, Singer (2016) shows how gender agreement in the Australian language Mawng, although superficially a neat gender system, is used more like systems of noun classifiers in other Australian languages, than like better-known gender systems. In particular it is shown how gender agreement in the verb plays an important role in mediate senses of the verb (see also Singer 2012).

This talk begins with a response to Passer's challenge, looking at differences in the role of gender agreement in the verb and within the noun phrase. Gender agreement in noun phrases tends not to be as flexible as in the verb. This means that we have less evidence that NP-internal gender agreement is involved in the interpretation of verb sense as argued in Singer (2012). Another area of apparent difference within the gender system is related to animacy. We could argue that the different patterns of gender agreement point to separate gender agreement systems for humans, nonhuman animates and inanimates.

The closer we look at the data, the more Mawng's apparently coherent gender system is riven with divisions. However, this does not necessarily mean that we should analyse Mawng as having more than one system, or that some parts of the system should be excluded from the typological realm 'nominal classification'. Rather the case for multiple systems in Mawng shows the need for in-depth studies of diverse nominal classification in individual languages. These studies have revealed how more than one system of nominal classification can coexist. They can also reveal how multi-faceted each system can be, and the diverse range of roles nominal classification plays in each language.

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