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Towards a multidimensional typology of nominal classification

Nominal classification is an area of grammar which poses extreme difficulties for cross-linguistic definitions. This is reflected in the fact that not even for basic categories within nominal classification there are commonly accepted terminologies, e.g. “noun classification” vs. “nominal classification” and “classifiers” vs. “class markers”. The problem is not so much a definition of the whole phenomenon, which can be put roughly as “morphosyntactic systems which impose a classification on the nominal lexicon, possibly to some extent via the classification of nominal referents”. A more problematic aspect, addressed in this paper, is the identification of sufficiently narrowly defined types of nominal classification systems (e.g. numeral classifiers, noun classes) as typologically relevant and cross-linguistically applicable categories.

The major challenge for such definitions is the seemingly overwhelming morphosyntactic and functional variability of nominal classification systems, across languages as well as in terms of different uses of the same classifying morphemes within languages. This is related to the fact that nominal classification systems often appear to be “secondary systems”, which are heavily dependent on other morphosyntactic systems, such as agreement systems and number marking and countability systems. In fact, the classification of nominal words or referents often appears to some extent an epiphenomenal effect of other morphosyntactic systems (e.g. countability systems), and the definition of types of nominal classification systems thus needs to be closely interrelated with the definition of these categories.

This paper argues for a multidimensional approach to the definition of types of nominal classification systems, with the aim of (i) defining categories sufficiently narrowly so as to allow for cross-linguistic comparison and (ii) achieving a better understanding of the structure of the typological space beyond the canonical instances, i.e. the identification of directions into which individual systems extend away from the canon. It aims to contribute towards setting up a multidimensional typological space, using a relatively high number of parameters, which help to define canonical instances of individual types of systems as clusters of parameters. Within this multidimensional space, the relation of such systems to other grammatical phenomena, e.g. countability systems, may be more precisely described. Three important types of nominal classification systems are discussed from the perspective of multidimensional typology:

(i) numeral classifiers, for which it is proposed to include the constituent structure of numeral constructions as a definitional criterion;
(ii) verbal classifiers, for which the syntactic role of the argument represented by the verbal classifier is a definitional criterion; and
(iii) noun classes, whose definition is closely connected to the definition of agreement and for which a cluster of non-canonical instances can be identified that can be characterized as weakly grammaticalized systems.

In conclusion, for a better understanding of nominal classification, a multidimensional approach is not only useful for defining canonical instances, but also as a tool to further describe apparently non-canonical instances, in order to make headway

towards a more comprehensive definitional framework in this complex area of grammar.