Perspectives on Classifier Constructions in Sign Languages

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Classifiers in Spoken and in Signed Languages: How to Know More

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Almost all languages have some grammatical means for the linguistic categorization of noun referents. "Classifiers" is an umbrella label for the continuum of noun categorization devices, from lexical numeral classifiers of South-East Asia to highly grammaticalized gender agreement classes of Indo-European languages. They provide a unique insight into how the world is categorized through language in terms of universal semantic parameters involving humanness, animacy, gender, shape, form, consistency, orientation in space and functional properties of entities.

Classifiers are overt morphemes that constitute a grammatical system and serve to arrange nominal referents into semantically defined classes. A language has classifiers if it possesses Classifier Constructions. These are understood as separate grammatical units—such as noun phrases, verb phrases, or clauses—which require classifiers, chosen according to the semantics of a noun.

Classifiers in spoken languages come in different guises. Noun classes, or genders (as in Spanish) are highly grammaticalized agreement classes based on such core characteristics of noun referents as animacy, sex, humanness and sometimes also shape. In some languages, most nouns are assigned to just one noun class; in other languages different noun classes can be chosen to highlight a particular property of a referent.

Noun classifiers categorize the noun with which they co-occur and are independent of any other element in a noun phrase, or in a clause (Craig, 1992). They are often independent words with semantic meanings; thus, in Yidiny, an Australian language, "one would not generally say... the girl dig up the yam", ...it is more felicitous to include generics and say "the person girl dig in the vegetable yam" (Dixon, 1982, p. 185). The choice of a noun classifier is predominantly semantic, based on social status, function, and nature, and also on physical properties, such as shape. Noun classifiers should be distinguished from derivational components in class nouns,
such as berry in English strawberry, blackberry, etc. with their limited productivity, high degree of lexicalization, and the fact that they are restricted to a closed subclass of noun roots.

*Numeral classifiers* appear next to a numeral, or to a quantifier; they categorize the referent of a noun in terms of its animacy, shape, and other inherent properties. In possessive constructions, *Relational classifiers* categorize the ways in which noun referents can be manipulated by the possessor—whether they are to be eaten, drunk, worn, etc.; whereas possessed classifiers categorize the Possessed Noun and the extremely uncommon Possessor classifiers reflect the semantic properties of the possessor. Other rare classifier types are *Locative classifiers*—found in some South American Indian languages—which occur on a preposition, and *Deictic classifiers*—found in North American Siouan and South American Guaranían languages—which are tied to demonstratives and involve shape and orientation as semantic parameters.

*Verbal classifiers* can be affixes on the verb, categorizing the referent of a nominal argument, which is typically in S (intransitive subject) or O (direct object) function, in terms of its animacy, shape, size, structure, and position. Or they may be fused with a verb forming *Suppletive (or partly analyzable) Classificatory verbs*. They are found in some North-American Indian languages (such as Athabascan), some North-Australian languages, some Papuan languages and some South-American Indian languages. Different verbal stems are used for handling, existence and location of round things, long things, granular things, things in bags, etc. Alternatively, different classificatory verbs categorize the intransitive subject argument in terms of its orientation or stance in space, and also to its inherent properties. In Enga, a Papuan language, a verb meaning ‘stand’ is used with referents judged to be tall, large, strong, powerful, standing or supporting, e.g. men, houses, trees; ‘sit’ is used with referents judged to be small, squat, horizontal and weak, e.g. women, possums, and ponds. For an overview of classifier types in spoken languages see chapters 2 to 7 of Aikhenvald (2000).

The main argument in favor of the proposed typology lies in the possibility of one language having more than one classifier type: for instance, numerous Mayan languages have noun classifiers and numeral classifiers. Languages can use the same set of morphemes as numeral classifiers and as noun classifiers—one such example is Hmong (Miao-Yao, from China). See chapters 8 and 9 of Aikhenvald (2000).

Of all classifier types, only noun classes involve agreement. Different types of classifier differ in their preferred semantic parameters; animacy and humanness are predominant in noun classes, whereas noun classifiers often categorize referents in terms of their function and social status. Numeral classifiers typically categorize referents by shape, e.g. round or vertical, whereas verbal classifiers may also involve orientation—vertical or horizontal. Semantic parameters employed in classifier systems are not random. If a language has classifiers for three-dimensional objects, it will also have classifiers for two-dimensional ones. There are certain recurrent patterns by which nouns become classifiers; these include changes from ‘head’ to ‘round object’, from ‘eye’ to ‘small round object’, from ‘leg’ to ‘vertical object’, and from ‘leaf’ to ‘flat object’.

Functionally, classifiers involve identifying properties of referents and categorizing them by these properties. A classifier of any type can categorize a whole class of referents, or just a member of a class; or a member of a class when it is playing a particular role in the context. Classifiers frequently highlight particular properties of a referent. For instance, in Burmese, a river can be viewed as a place, as a line (on a map), as a section, as a sacred object, or as one connection. These meanings are distinguished through the use of different numeral classifiers. In Apache, a plug, a box, a stick, or a bag of tobacco are distinguished through the use of different classifica-
tory verbs. All classifiers are used anaphorically, that is, as proforms, for tracking referents in discourse (see chaps. 10 to 14 of Aikhenvald 2000).

The only kind of classifiers reported thus far for sign languages are classificatory verbs of handling, motion, and location. These appear to be found in every sign language. Note that in spoken languages they are restricted to highly polysynthetic languages of the Americas, Australia and Papua New Guinea.

A feminine/masculine distinction in pronouns is found in Japanese Sign Language; Taiwanese Sign Language distinguishes the two genders in argument marking on auxiliary verbs.

Similarly to spoken languages, classificatory verbs in sign languages belong to semantic groups of handling, location and motion. In sign languages, they operate with a more fine-grained set of shapes and magnitude than they do in spoken languages. They typically identify referents by their orientation in space, and by number; this is less common in spoken languages.

Shape and size specifiers are semantically similar to classifiers in spoken languages. However, they appear to be a subclass of modifiers also employed as descriptive predicates, and do not seem to form a classifier construction of their own.

Many questions remain unanswered at the present stage of research on classifiers in sign languages. Do classificatory verbs in sign languages “categorize” the referents of their arguments? How like—and how unlike—classificatory verbs in spoken languages are they? How do classifiers in sign languages get grammaticalized and what semantic changes take place? Note that in spoken languages classifiers of most types come from nouns. At least in Thai Sign Language, classifiers “appear to be historically related to spatial-locative predicates” (Collins-Ahlgren, 1990, p. 115).

Answering these—and many more—questions, requires investigating the following issues, based on the material of sign languages from different parts of the world:

1. What are the definitional properties of classifier constructions?

2. What are the inventories of classifier morphemes, e.g., classifier handshapes, and the semantic parameters employed? In which ways are they different from those of spoken languages? What semantic extensions are natural for sign languages? Can classifier categories be semantically complex?

3. What are the functions of classifiers? Are they used to categorize noun referents as members of conceptually distinct classes of entities? (Note that the intuition of native speakers is crucial here). How does the use of classifiers correlate with discourse-pragmatic properties of noun referents—such as their topicality—and with their syntactic function?

An in-depth study of classifier constructions in sign languages in terms of these parameters will shed light on their nature and development, and may involve significant modification to the local points for the typology of classifiers proposed on the basis of spoken languages.

REFERENCES

