The reference tracking role of nominal classification systems

Timothy Feist
University of Surrey
t.feist@surrey.ac.uk

Grammatical gender is often given as one of the strategies employed by the world's languages in order to avoid, or at least reduce, the potential for referential conflicts by disambiguating between possible referents (e.g. Foley & Van Valin 1984). Nominal classifiers may likewise serve as 'referential aids' (Kibrik 2011) given their ability to eliminate potential referential conflicts on semantic grounds. It is understandable, then, that these two systems, which in many respects are functionally redundant, might be credited with such a reference tracking function. But just what role do, or can, gender and classifiers play in reference tracking?

This paper looks at whether the ability of gender and classifiers to serve as referential aids is a primary function of these systems or whether this function might be better viewed as an opportunistic by-product of them to which interlocutors have recourse. I address this question through a comparative study of narratives in four languages, selected to cover the typological space: Spanish (gender only); Kilivila, an Austronesian language of Papua New Guinea (classifiers only); Mian, a Trans-New Guinea language also of Papua New Guinea (a language exhibiting the rare combination of both gender and classifiers); and Skolt Saami (which uses neither of these referential aids).

The study undertaken diverges from established methods (e.g. Givón 1983, Dooley & Levinsohn 2001), whose aims typically centre around understanding how references are encoded, and instead considers how referential conflicts are avoided. As such, a newly developed methodology is employed: under this methodology each and every reference in a narrative, including those references which are not core arguments (and are thus often disregarded from reference tracking studies), is scored according to a number of criteria which may contribute to identifying a referent (activation level, person, number, gender). Other factors which may contribute to reference assignment are also considered, including switch reference, semantics, syntax and context. The scores are then compared across the four languages to ascertain whether significant differences exist between them. Finally, references where the referent cannot be unequivocally identified are flagged as ambiguous references and an explanation for this is sought.

Assuming the hypothesis that reference tracking is a primary function of gender and/or classifier systems we might reasonably expect to find a significant number of references (in languages which possess these systems) where gender and/or a classifier functions to identify a referent in the absence of any other referential aid. However, the findings of this study reveal that this is rarely the case: while gender and classifiers do indeed appear to play a small role in reference tracking, this role seems to be subsidiary in nature, with other referential aids such as the activation level of the referent and the wider context of the story being capable of serving the reference tracking function even in the absence of gender and/or classifiers.

References:

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