Classifiers in Kilivila: introducing referents and keeping track of them

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Kilivila, the Austronesian language of the Trobriand Islanders of Papua New Guinea, has a rich inventory of (numeral) classifiers or "classificatory particles (CP)" which play an important role for the word formation of numerals, demonstrative pronouns, adjectives and interrogative pronouns/adverbs, as illustrated in the following two examples (see Malinowski 1920; Senft 1996; 2000; 2007):

Ke-vila   **waga**   **le-kota-si?**
CP.wooden-how many   canoe   3.Past-arrive-Plural
How many canoes arrived?

Ke-yu   **waga**   **ma-ke-si-na**
CP.wooden-two   canoe   Dem-CP.wooden-Plural-Dem
ke-manabweta   **(le-kota-si).**
CP.wooden-beautiful   (3Ps.Past-arrive-Plural).
These two beautiful canoes (arrived).

After a brief introduction of this system of nominal classification I will briefly outline the main functions of these classifiers, especially the functions of introducing referents in discourse and keeping track of these referents, thus preserving coherence in discourse. The following examples illustrate these functions:

A-tataitataba.   **Tauwau**   **tabalu**
1.-carve   tataba-board   men   Tabalu-subclan
m-to-si-na   **ma-ke-na**   **si**   **koni.**
this-CP.male-Plural-this   this-CP.wooden-this   their   sign.of.honor
I carve a tataba-board. These men belonging to the Tabalu-subclan, - this is their sign of honor.

Here the speaker refers to a certain board with carved patterns that marks houses, food houses, and canoes as the personal property of men belonging to the Tabalu-subclan. The reference of the two demonstrative pronouns produced is unequivocal, because in this context the CP **to** can only refer to the noun **tauwau** and the CP **ke** can only refer to the noun **tataba**.

Tauwau   **pela**   **e-me-si**   **bi-lebu-si.**
E-kokwa'u-si
men   for   3.-come-Plural   3.Fut.-take-Plural   3.-weave-Plural
kebila **ma-buda-na-ga**   **e-kugwa-si** **e-me-si.**
stretcher   this-CP.group-this-Emphasis   3.-first-Plural   3.-come-Plural
The men have come to take him with them. They have woven a stretcher, the men belonging to this group who were the first to arrive.

Here the speaker uses the CP **buda** with the demonstrative pronoun in the second sentence to refer unequivocally to the noun (**tauwau**) produced in the first sentence.

O da-valu-si e-sisu-si tommota
in 1.(incl)-village-Plural 3.-live-Plural people
to-paisewa. Vivila na-salau, tauwau
CP.human.beings-work woman CP.female-busy men
to-bugubagula. Tommota gala to-dubakasala,
CP.male-work.in.the.garden people not CP.human.beings-rude

kena kumwedona e-nukwali-si bubune-si bwena.
but all 3.-know-Plural manners-their good
In our village live people taking pleasure in their work. The women are busy, the men are good gardeners. The people are not rude, but all have good manners.

This example illustrates that, in general, reclassification does not allow the noun to be omitted. To emphasize the different characterization of men and women on the one hand and all villagers on the other hand, the nouns can hardly be omitted. The speaker uses the CP **to** to refer to 'human beings' and to 'persons of male sex'. The CP **na** is used to refer to 'persons of female sex'. If the speaker did not realize the noun **tommota** in the last sentence again, then this sentence would refer to 'persons of male sex' only

It would be interesting to use this case study as a basis for comparative research on how classifier systems in other languages – including sign languages, of course – fulfil these functions or which other means in these languages are used to fulfil them.

References:

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See also:
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