How do measure terms in non-classifier Indo-European languages resemble classifiers?

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Measure terms in non-classifier languages are typically regarded as lexical classificatory devices distinct from grammatical systems of nominal classification, i.e., gender and classifiers. In this paper I compare selected properties of numeral classifiers in Japanese and measure terms in three Indo-European languages, i.e., Polish, English and German, in order to demonstrate that measure terms share a number of characteristics with classifiers despite the prevailing opinion that they constitute a separate type.

Measure terms differ from classifiers mainly with regard to the degree of grammaticalization. Classifier systems, even though they form an open and productive class, are more grammaticalized and restrictive in their use than measure terms. Whereas in non-classifier languages it is possible to make a measure term out of almost any noun and classify anything the speaker wishes to classify (Lehrer 1985), classifier systems offer only limited possibilities. Anaphoric use demonstrates yet another difference, showing that classifier systems offer greater possibilities of treating non-identical items as members of the same set.

However, measure terms resemble classifiers both synchronically and diachronically. The properties of classifiers suggested by Dixon (1982) in his comparison of gender and classifiers also characterize measure terms. For Lehrer (1985) English measure terms bear such a strong resemblance to classifiers that she refers to them as classifiers. In my paper I place measure terms in between lexical items and classifiers on the grammaticalization scale. Further, I show that measure terms in Polish, English and German resemble various stages of the creation of classifier systems. Bearing in mind the unidirectional nature of grammaticalization, I claim that the only possible change concerning measure terms in these languages is a shift towards a true classifier system.

References:

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