

Categorization: combining canonical typology, evolution and psycholinguistics

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Fascinating new systems of nominal classification continue to be found, but analysis has lagged behind. We therefore propose a typology of nominal classification, encompassing gender and classifier systems of categorization. Relinquishing the opposition of gender vs classifiers allows a clearer picture. We pull apart traditional gender characteristics, and traditional classifier characteristics, and show how these characteristics combine in many ways. This motivates a canonical perspective: we define the notion of canonical gender, and use this idealization as a baseline from which to calibrate the theoretical space of nominal classification. Within it we can situate the interesting combinations we find. This typological background proves invaluable for approaching the origin and nature of gender. The possessive classifier systems of Oceanic languages provide a unique insight here. Typically, a noun can occur with different classifiers, depending on the use of the possessed item. In marked contrast, languages like North Ambrym (Vanuatu) typically select a given classifier for a particular noun (Franjeh 2016). This innovative system resembles a gender system. We seek to establish empirically whether gender systems can indeed emerge from possessive classifiers in this way. If so, we must also uncover how and why languages would abandon a useful, meaningful classificatory system, and adopt a rigid, less motivated gender system. To this end, we are running seven experiments, comparing possessive classifier systems in six Oceanic languages of Vanuatu and New Caledonia (with 2 to 23 classifiers). This combination of typology with psycholinguistics promises to shed new light on the development and functioning of systems of nominal classification. Moreover, the Oceanic data obtained so far suggest that, in this instance, diachronic change is running in the direction of canonicity.