

Noun classification in three languages of Raja Ampat

Most languages make use of some morphosyntactic strategy to categorize the nominal inventory. Numeral classifiers, possessive classification, and gender systems are three familiar ways of distinguishing subcategories of nouns; other strategies include systems of verbal, locative, or deictic classifiers. In this presentation, I will discuss the noun classification systems of three South Halmahera-West New Guinea (Austronesian) languages spoken in the Raja Ampat archipelago (West Papua province, Indonesia): Ma'ya (van der Leeden n.d.; Remijsen 2001), Matbat (Remijsen 2010), and Ambel (Arnold forthcoming). The data will show that, while Matbat has two noun classification systems, Ambel and Ma'ya both make use of three separate classification systems to categorise the nominal inventory.

All three languages have, to a greater or lesser extent, a numeral classifier system, in which nouns are categorised based on semantic properties of the referent when modified by a numeral (illustrated with data from Matbat in (1) below; superscript numerals indicate tone). Additionally, all three languages have a system of relational possessive classification, in which the relationship between the referents of the possessed and possessor nouns is morphosyntactically coded (illustrated with Ambel data in (2)). Finally, both Ambel and Ma'ya have a noun class (gender) system, in which animate nouns are distinguished from inanimate nouns (illustrated with Ma'ya data in (3)).

(1) Numeral classifier system (Matbat):

lo ¹² ŋ	di-lu ³	ho ¹ ŋ	pa-lu ³
fishing.spear	CL:LONG-two	mango	CL:ROUND-two
'two spears'		'two mangoes'	

(2) Possessive classifier system (Ambel):

na-k	now	ni-k	now
POSS.GEN-1SG	house	POSS.SOC-1SG	same.sex.sibling
'my house'		'my same-sex sibling'	

(3) Noun class (gender) system (Ma'ya):

'ia	nafka'syu ² 1N-i	wa-kasa ¹²	ana
3SG.AN	give.birth.3SG-3SG.AN	3PL-open	3SG.INAN
'She gives birth to him/her.'		'They open it.'	

The presence of three separate noun classification systems in a single language, as found in Ambel and Ma'ya, is quite rare: only a handful of languages are attested with a combination of more than two classification strategies (Aikhenvald 2000: Chap. 8). Given this scarcity, I will conclude by considering how the present-day classification systems of Ma'ya, Matbat, and Ambel may have developed, paying particular attention to the role of contact in the development of these systems.

References

Aikhenvald, Alexandra (2000). *Classifiers: A typology of noun categorization devices*, Oxford: OUP. Arnold, Laura (forthcoming). *A grammar of Ambel*, PhD thesis, the University of Edinburgh. van der Leeden, A. C. (n.d.). *Ma'ya dictionary, morphology, and syntax*, unfinished ms. Remijsen, Bert (2001). *Word-prosodic systems of Raja Ampat languages*, Utrecht: LOT. Remijsen, Bert (2010). 'Nouns and verbs in Magey Matbat', in: *East Nusantara: Typological and areal analyses*, Michael Ewing and Marian Klamer (eds.), Canberra: Pacific Linguistics.