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# Review of: Classifiers: A Typology of Noun Categorization

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**Alexandra Y. Aikhenvald**, *Classifiers: a typology of noun categorization devices*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000. Pp. xxvi + 535.

Reviewed by EDWARD J. VAJDA, Western Washington University

This book offers a multifaceted, cross-linguistic survey of all types of grammatical devices used to categorize nouns. It represents an ambitious expansion beyond earlier studies dealing with individual aspects of this phenomenon, notably Corbett's (1991) landmark monograph on noun classes (genders), Dixon's important essay (1982) distinguishing noun classes from classifiers, and Greenberg's (1972) seminal paper on numeral classifiers. Aikhenvald's *Classifiers* exceeds them all in the number of languages it examines and in its breadth of typological inquiry. The full gamut of morphological patterns used to classify nouns (or, more accurately, the referents of nouns) is considered holistically, with an eye toward categorizing the categorization devices themselves in terms of a comprehensive framework. The author directs her results toward several aims. One is to fashion a unified and straightforward system of terminology dealing with noun categorization devices. Another is to present new data on classifier systems from recently described languages in a broader typological dimension and to begin considering what such systems can reveal about human cognition, current limitations in knowledge about linguistic diversity notwithstanding. Last but not least, the book is intended to inspire and guide more linguists into conducting fieldwork on undescribed or under-described languages by providing 'a framework within which fieldworkers and typologists will be able to work, and which can be amended and adjusted as new data and new insights emerge' (viii).

Over five hundred languages were sampled in researching this book, a number that Aikhenvald modestly reminds the reader is 'no more than about one tenth of all human languages' (5), and doubtless omits many classifier systems as yet undocumented. Still, the author included every language containing noun classifier phenomena of any kind that came to her attention, by using the most thorough possible 'sample of convenience' (4). Pages 489–508 contain an alphabetical list of the languages included, giving their genetic affiliations, along with lists of language families and linguistic areas in which classifier phenomena have been documented. Maps at the end of individual chapters show the distribution of the various classifier phenomena

discussed. A lengthy bibliography (452–470) includes every major publication dealing with any aspect of noun categorization devices. Much of the extant literature on such prolific topics as East Asian numeral classifiers or Bantu noun classes likewise appears to have been consulted, though only some of these works receive individual mention in the discussion. In all these ways, this study is extremely authoritative and up-to-date. It is especially rich in new data from South America and, to a lesser extent, Australia and the South Pacific, much of it never before considered in a cross-linguistic perspective. A fair portion of the South American data was gleaned from the author's own extensive field work in the Brazilian Amazon.

The book contains fifteen chapters and three appendixes, and closes with the expected indexes of languages, linguistic areas and language families (509–518), authors (519–524) and subjects (525–535). Chapter 1, entitled 'Preliminaries' (1–18), defines the study's goals and justifies its methodology. It is important to realize that the proposed typological framework assumes that classifier elements and systems in individual languages represent a continuum rather than a series of discrete types. The latter view, were it adopted, would have proven too rigid to accommodate many of the languages Aikhenvald describes, some of which juxtapose several classification devices used for different purposes. Treating classifiers as discrete phenomena would also be more likely to mislead during investigations of unknown languages. The continuum approach is also felicitous when dealing with individual systems from a diachronic perspective.

Each of the next eight chapters discusses a specific type of noun classification device (the 'focal points' on Aikhenvald's continuum) as manifested crosslinguistically. Clear illustrations of each of these devices are provided from at least one language, with occurrences of the same phenomenon in other languages mentioned in passing so that coverage approaches the encyclopedic. Chapter 2 (19–80) discusses noun classes and genders – defined as 'noun categorization devices realized outside the noun itself within a head-modifier noun phrase' (17). These function as grammaticalized agreement systems and correlate at least partly with semantic features (19). Following Dixon (1982), Aikhenvald notes that these systems tend to occur in fusional and agglutinating languages. The remaining discussion concentrates on aspects of noun classes not covered extensively in Corbett (1991), with particularly rich examples from the languages of Africa, New Guinea and South America. The concise discussion of terminology and types of noun class phenomena here provides a particularly superb textbook treatment. The map showing the world distribution of noun class systems (78) should have indicated Ket as an isolated example of a Siberian language with noun classes, something mentioned in the chapter discussion (77).

Chapter 3 (81–97) moves on to noun classifiers, non-concordial noun-categorization devices whose presence in the noun phrase is determined by lexical selection according to syntactic properties of the head noun rather

than inflectional processes (81). Numeral classifiers, the other lexical type of noun categorization device, are discussed in chapter 4 (98–124). Coverage extends beyond the already described noun categorization systems of Australia to reveal the lesser known systems of Southeast Asia, Mesoamerica and South America (Chibchan). Aikhenvald notes that no North American or Papuan languages with noun classifiers have yet been documented (97). Similarly, the discussion of numeral classifiers takes the familiar systems of East Asia only as a starting point, then goes on to provide a wealth of fresh data about such systems in South America, Western Austronesia and in isolated pockets across North America. Aikhenvald notes that these systems appear to be absent from Australia and very rare in Africa (124). The author stresses that categorizations such as ‘very rare’ or ‘frequent’ are tentative, pending documentation of additional languages. In the spirit of her book as representative of research in progress, Aikhenvald prominently urges readers in a special ‘plea’ on page xi to communicate any ‘counterexamples, new ideas and data to further develop, refine, and improve the generalizations put forward here’.

Chapter 5 (125–148) turns to the topic of classifiers in possessive constructions, a much rarer phenomenon found so far in only a few areas. Aikhenvald describes three types, distinguished by whether they define the type of possessional relation, or are dictated by the inherent semantics of either the possessum or the possessor. Relational classifiers, which ‘categorize kinds of institutionalized, culturally relevant relationships between the possessor and the possessed’ (146), have been found in Amazonia and parts of the Pacific. Possessed classifiers occur in isolated instances in both North and South America, as well as Central Africa. Possessor classifiers have so far been found only in a few Makú languages of Northwest Amazonia. Eurasian and Australian languages appear to lack these devices altogether.

Chapter 6 (149–171) discusses verbal classifiers, verb-internal morphemes that ‘categoriz[e] the referent of [their arguments] in terms of its shape, consistency, size, structure, position, and animacy’ (149). Examples representing Australian, Papuan and especially Native North American and Lowland Amazonian languages illustrate classificatory uses of noun incorporation, affixation, and suppletive roots. No verbal classifiers of any kind have been found in the languages of Africa or Eurasia, or in Austronesian (171). Chapter 7 (172–183) discusses classifiers found in locative noun phrases and classificatory deictic modifiers and/or articles. Deictic classifiers appear to be confined to Siouan, Yuchi, Eskimoan and Guaicuruan (South America). Locative classifiers are even rarer, with the only examples documented so far coming from South America. This is the first discussion of all of these types of noun categorization devices together in one book.

Chapter 8 (184–203) turns from issues of categorial typology to address the extent to which the various noun classification devices may co-occur in a single language system. Aikhenvald demonstrates that, rather than being

mutually exclusive, 'several distinct classifier types may coexist in one language' (184), and she proceeds to give a variety of detailed examples. Sometimes, one type of device is obligatory, another optional. But the full range of possibilities and their interaction with other typological features must await further language documentation. Even on the basis of her extensive empirical study, Aikhenvald does not rush to impose any firm conclusions regarding the possible limits of language diversity. So far, no language has been found that contains all of the categorization devices simultaneously. Chapter 9 (204–241) discusses what Aikhenvald calls 'multiple classifier languages' (204), in which the same morphemes can be used as more than one type of classificatory device. One example comes from the author's research on Tariana (Arawak, Lowland Amazonia), in which a single classifier suffix can be used simultaneously with a demonstrative, numeral, possessive modifier, adjective and the predicate word itself in a way that superficially resembles the concordial noun-class prefixes of Bantu. Many other South American languages appear to use lexical classifier morphemes in similar ways. At present, the variational possibilities seem to trail off into the uncharted linguistic spaces of Amazonia.

The remaining six chapters discuss what Aikhenvald calls the 'contingent properties of classifiers' (18), that is, the interaction of these devices with other aspects of language and with the real world of the speakers. Chapter 10 (242–270) begins the task of assessing the typological interaction between classifiers and other grammatical and lexical elements. Chapter 11 (271–306) addresses issues of what real-world semantic and pragmatic distinctions motivate various classifier systems. Chapter 12 (307–351) moves the discussion toward the implications of these linguistic categories for an understanding of human cognition. Chapter 13 (352–412) addresses diachronic issues, such as the origin, development and decay of classifier systems, with special attention to the different paths that grammaticalization may take. Appendix 2 (442–446) continues this chapter by discussing the origin of lexical classifiers from body-part or other common nouns. Chapter 14 (413–424) is particularly fascinating and unexpected, as it contemplates what observed patterns of child language acquisition and adult aphasia have to tell us about the cognitive and linguistic structure of classifier systems. Most other books on typology fail to include any discussion of this important contingent property of the phenomena they describe. Finally, chapter 15 (425–435) reiterates the book's main findings and conclusions. Appendix 1, 'Noun categorization by means other than classifiers' (436–441), explores other structural patterns involving the same semantic features that underpin classifier systems, such as gender-related derivational processes and the role of animacy in word-order hierarchies.

This book has much to offer linguists motivated by any one of several primary interests, particularly language universals and the connection between language and cognition. Written outside the domain of any

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particular formalism, and loaded with data presented in a clear, straightforward manner, this volume could serve equally well either as a textbook or as an authoritative reference. And yet it is also cutting-edge research presented in the spirit of a work in progress. Many of the individual chapters contain the seeds of future monographs. Aikhenvald displays the rare gift of being able to inspire interest in new research through the success of her own results, without stifling those future possibilities through undue certitude in having discovered all of the answers already. The best thing about this very excellent book is precisely the author's keen awareness that it is not the last word on the subject. Aikhenvald's conclusions are offered more as inspirational guidelines to sponsor future work on languages that may contain noun categorization devices. The universal framework presented, though manifold, versatile, and wonderfully documented, is offered as merely putative. This approach is much more in the spirit of Bloomfield's (1933: 20) remark that 'features which we think ought to be universal may be absent from the very next language that becomes accessible' than any of the less inductively-motivated practices that have dominated much of linguistics during the intervening decades. As the author herself notes, 'a study like this could only be definitive when good and thorough descriptions have been provided for most of the world's languages; we are at present a long way from this situation' (viii). To this end, the volume closes with a series of suggestions in appendix 3 (447-451) entitled 'Fieldworker's guide to classifier languages'. And the preface reiterates the author's hope that 'this book will encourage people to study noun classification devices, especially in little-known or undescribed languages, going out into the field and documenting languages threatened by extinction (before it is too late to do so)' (viii).

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