Semantic Perspectives on Baniwa Classifiers

Using Principal Component Analysis to Investigate Grammaticalization in Nominal Classification Systems

Cronhamn, Sandra

2021

Link to publication

Total number of authors:
1

Semantic Perspectives on Baniwa Classifiers

Baniwa [bwi] is an Arawak language spoken in northwestern Amazonia, which makes ample use of its 50-or-so classifiers. These are realized as suffixes, and are used in several morphosyntactic contexts, in both inflectional and derivational functions (Aikhenvald 2007). Previous studies have primarily focused on their morphosyntactic properties (e.g. Ramirez 2001; Aikhenvald 2007), their historical origins (Aikhenvald 2019) or cultural aspects of the classification (e.g. Hill 1988, for a closely related variety), but an in-depth mapping of the semantic aspects of the system is still lacking. The current study aims to investigate this, and to compare the semantic aspects of the system to its morphosyntactic and phonological properties in order to investigate it from a grammaticalization perspective.

The first phase of the study aims to answer the following questions:

1. *Which semantic properties provide cues for classifier assignment?*
2. *What is the semantic core of each classifier?*
3. *What is the semantic range of applicability of each classifier?*

The study is based on two sets of recently collected data. One set is based on a noun listing task where the stimulus consisted of a classifier in a carrier phrase (Franjieh 2018), serving to establish the classifiers' semantic cores.

The other set consists of noun-classifier combinability judgments based on a ~1000 item noun list, serving to establish the classifiers' semantic ranges. Additionally, the nouns in the list are coded for semantic properties, in order to determine which of these provide cues for classifier assignment. Preliminary results suggest that nouns show some correspondence between their semantic properties and their classifier combinability. The classifiers are thus expected to cluster into subsets based on various parameters of their semantic behaviour.

The second phase of the study aims to answer the following question:

4. *Do the classifiers' semantic properties correlate with their morphosyntactic and/or phonological properties?*

The classifiers' semantic, morphosyntactic and phonological properties are—likewise—expected to show (some degree of) correspondence. There is reason to believe that the Baniwa system is undergoing grammaticalization, as instances of some morphosyntactic properties generally taken to be signs of a higher degree of grammaticalization (e.g., allomorphy, suppletion and syncretism), are concentrated in a certain part of the paradigm. The goal of this comparison is to investigate the system-internal variability in the degree of grammaticalization of Baniwa classifiers, as all three of these domains are normally involved in grammaticalization (Heine & Kuteva 2002).

In a broader perspective, the study can hopefully shed some light on an understudied system which is interesting from a typological perspective. Nominal classification systems similar to that of Baniwa can be found in many languages in western Amazonia (cf. Seifart 2005), and have been argued to pose a challenge to nominal classification typology by not being easily positionable within the traditional typological space (Grinevald & Seifart 2004). This study can hopefully contribute to the understanding of how such systems arise and what functions they have for language users, which would be of importance for nominal classification research in general.

References

Aikhenvald, A.Y. (2007). Classifiers in multiple environments. Baniwa of Içana/Kurripako–A North Arawak perspective. *International Journal of American Linguistics* 73(4), pp. 475-500.

Aikhenvald, A.Y. (2019). Genders and classifiers in Arawak languages of north-west Amazonia. In: Aikhenvald, A.Y. & Mihas, E.I. *Genders and Classifiers: A Cross-Linguistic Typology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Franjieh, M. (2018). North Ambrym possessive classifiers from the perspective of canonical gender. In: Fedden, Sebastian, Jenny Audring & Greville G. Corbett (eds.), *Non-Canonical Gender Systems*, 36-67. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press

Grinevald, C.G. & Seifart, F. (2004). Noun classes in African and Amazonian languages: Towards a comparison. *Linguistic Typology* 8, 243–285.

Heine, B. & Kuteva, T. (2002) On the Evolution of Grammatical Forms. In: Wray, A. (ed.), *The Transition to Language*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Hill, J. (1988). The soft and the stiff: ritual power and mythic meaning in a northern Arawak classifier system. *Anthropologica*, 69, 55-77.

Ramirez, H. (2001) *Uma gramática do Baniwa do Içana*. MS. Manaus.

Seifart, F. (2005). *The structure and use of shape-based noun classes in Miraña (North West Amazon)*. Nijmegen: Radboud University dissertation.