

An empirical study on universals of nominal classification systems

Nominal classification systems are traditionally divided into gender systems and several classifier systems. Based on this tradition, linguists provide descriptions (Allan 1977; Corbett 1991; Aikhenvald 2000; Senft 2001; Grinevald 2002; Kilarski 2012; Di Garbo 2014; Kramer 2015) and suggest universals (Greenberg 1966) about the nominal classification systems. However, more and more linguists agree nowadays on the view that there are no crucial differences between gender and classifier systems (Contini & Kilarski 2013; Corbett & Fedden 2015; Singer 2016; Passer 2016; Fedden & Corbett 2017; Seifart 2018). I report here an examination of universals about nominal classification systems with a database of 200 languages and explore the possibility of proposing new universals and generalizations.

This 200 language sample is a worldwide core sample using the Genus-Macroarea-Method according to Miestamo et al. (2016). It covers most of the world at standard densities. The languages are chosen regardless of whether they have nominal classification systems and which kind of system they have. The database contains general information about the language and a range of properties of the nominal classification system in the language. If the language has more than one nominal classification system, each system has one record in the database. If the language has no nominal classification system, only general information about the language is noted.

I test preliminarily eight Greenbergian Universals (Greenberg 1966) about gender systems. Some universals are confirmed. Meanwhile for some other universals serious counterevidence has turned up. Universal 31 says that if either the subject or object noun agrees with the verb in gender, then the adjective always agrees with the noun in gender. Languages like Alambalak, Ama (Papua New Guinea), Barasano, Berik, Burushaski, Kiowa, and Yuchi do not have gender agreement in the adjective though they have subject or object indexes. Thus Universal 31 is highly questionable. Universal 36 states that if a language has the category of gender, it always has the category of number. This universal is confirmed insofar as every gender language in the database also has the number category. However, not only the gender languages but also the classifier languages and languages which do not have any nominal classification systems tend to have number category. Haspelmath (2005) underlines the importance of the number category that only 28 out of 133 languages (21.05%) do not have any nominal plural.

This study provides not only a clear distribution of nominal classification systems in the world's languages but also investigates possible principles of human languages on the basis of real universals about nominal classification systems.

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