

CATEGORY OF NOMINAL CLASSES IN INDONESIAN AND ITS REINTERPRETATION

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In the so-called SAE (Standard Average European according to Benjamin Lee Whorf) languages we are accustomed to a certain set of grammatical categories and to a set of their properties one of which is their obligatory application. The grammatical categories obviously express a kind of generalized meaning the origin of which is to be looked for in the environmental, social, and cultural reality of a particular linguistic community; however, the original motivation may gradually fade away, become opaque and finally disappear or undergo the process of reinterpretation.

Occasionally we are confronted with the dilemma whether the language we use reflects the reality of our existence or whether it rather creates it. The answer is simple – it does both but each within certain limits. Language articulates the observed reality but we have to admit that the linguistic version of the world is no faithful copy of it. Language discretizes what is continuous and establishes sharp borders where there are none, cf. “*hill – mountain – peak*” or “*brook – stream – river*”, “*idiolect – dialect – language*”, etc. Besides, the linguistic articulation is partly determined by both subjective and social involvement of the users of the language and this evaluative attitude to the articulation leaves its imprint of utilitarianism upon the vocabulary and the grammatical means. If the semantic borders among units acquired in the process of primary articulation are notable for a degree of vagueness (let us say upon the level of words), this holds even more for a higher level of abstraction.

The meaning of a grammatical category is obviously “fossilized” (K. Lorenz speaks of “*Verdummung*” in his book *Die Rückseite des Spiegels*, see Lorenz 1973) and it is sometimes this “fossilization” that makes a reinterpretation of a particular category desirable.

The category of noun classes is common for example in several large linguistic areas such as Subsaharan Africa, Caucasian region, and in the Southeast Asia from the Thai family, the Austronesian family, Chinese and Korean to Jap-

anese. Provided we regard noun gender as a variety of nominal classification, we cannot avoid the inclusion of the Indo-European family into this area either.

The classification of nouns into classes reflects a variety of selected features of the (originally relevant) referents of the nouns involved. This motivation varies from features that are easy to perceive with senses, to features that are covert and understandable only in cultural terms. As a rule, any noun belongs only to one of the classes and the affiliation of each item is (under the required circumstances) obligatory. For example, when the noun is to be combined with numerals, the speaker cannot avoid using the so-called numerative (or classifier, in a different terminology). Under different conditions, the affiliation of a particular noun to its class remains implicit. The original extralinguistic motivation may in the course of time be replaced by a formally defined criteria. The loss of content motivation may subsequently be compensated for by formal and perfectly unambiguous criteria. For example, the ending *-o* in Slovak typically signalizes neuter while *-a* goes most usually with feminine. And yet the original content motivation may sometimes prevail. Thus a Slovak noun ending in *-o* is classified as masculine if it is a personal name (*Jano, Ivo, Fero*) or if it refers to an affective (and negatively tinged) expression applied to a male (*truľo, chmuľo, kápo*). Likewise, if a noun ending in *-a* refers to a person of male sex, it is classified as masculine (*sluha, hrdina, radca*) and if it refers to a young living being, human or animal (such as *vtáča, psička, chlapča*), it is classified as neuter.

An advanced formalization of classificatory criteria is no obstacle to the subsequent semantic reinterpretation of the classification. The latter can take place without a preceding formalization of the classification as well. In such a case one may expect a phase during which the classificatory criteria tend to overlap and the speakers tend to hesitate which solution would be "correct", and as a consequence the number of classes is gradually being reduced.

However, even if the category of nominal classification loses its semantic foundation, it need not be useless because its redundancy may serve the purpose of correct understanding of the communicative intention of the speaker.

The changes in the system of nominal classification seems to go on in several languages. We shall illustrate this development upon the example of Malay/Indonesian spoken in Malaysia and Indonesia in the Southeast Asia. Malay and Indonesian are two varieties of the same language. Its unity has been reinforced by the unification of orthography as well as by the fact that after the World War Two Dutch has been replaced by English as one of the main sources of loanwords in the Indonesian variety (in the present-day Malaysia English has fulfilled this function centuries ago).

Both geographic and genetic as well as typological distance between Malay/Indonesian and Japanese is considerable and yet they display analogous evolutionary tendencies. The difference between them might be characterized as a kind of phase shift because the process of simplification has advanced faster in Indonesian than in Japanese. The evolution of the nominal classification in Japanese may be characterized as simplification while in Malay/Indonesian we have been confronted with simplification and subsequent reinterpretation.

The category of nominal classes has appeared both in Japanese and in Malay/Indonesian in the context of the need of quantification of nouns and in the context of the absence of quantitative characteristic of the noun as a word (lexeme), which is obvious in the absence of the number as an obligatory grammatical category. Both Japanese and Malay/Indonesian give their speakers the possibility to mark the plural either via reduplication or affixation, e.g. Japanese *kuni* "country" – *kuniguni* "countries", Indonesian *gunung* "mountain" – *gunung-gunung* "mountains"; however, affixation is attested only in Japanese, cf. Japanese *-tachi*, *-domo*, *-ra*, etc. The compatibility of these suffixes is stylistically and/or pragmatically restricted. Neither is reduplication universally applicable.

In truth the plural in Japanese and Malay/Indonesian is not entirely identical with the plural in the SAE languages. A tinge of diversity or entirety is inherent to the former and the so-called singular may be applied where a SAE language would employ plural. And the lack of quantitative specification of the basic form of the noun is obviously the reason why the precise quantification by means of a numeral requires the use of the so-called numerative (the term classifier would be better). The use of numeratives/classifiers is in this context obligatory. In some instances the numeratives/classifiers are compatible with demonstrative pronouns as well.

Our grammatical tradition distinguishes classifiers from weights and measures and the former are required for the quantification of nouns referring to objects without a distinctive shape of their own. Japanese and Malay/Indonesian linguists often do not distinguish measures from numeratives; the absence of any quantity specification either in Japanese or in Malay/Indonesian nouns probably contributes to foregrounding the contrast of non-quantified versus quantified while in the languages of the SAE type it is the contrast of singular versus plural that appears to be foregrounded.

There are instances when nouns are quantified by means of "numeratives/classifiers" in European languages, cf. English *three heads of cattle* or in Slovak *päť hláv kapusty* "five heads of cabbage". It is probably a low individualization of referents such as *cattle*, *fish*, *sheep*, in Slovak *kapusta* "cabbage", in Russian *ryba* "fish" that comes to the word here. In Russian this is even the case of several ethnonyms, e.g. *mordva* "Mordvines", *čud'* "people of ethnic communities speaking one of the small languages of the Finnish group". The individualization of fish is obviously very low because we can speak of a full net of fish, of several casks of fish, etc.

The nominal classifications in the languages of Southeast Asia differ from analogous phenomena in other languages through the proliferation of their sets of classifiers notable for their transparent semantic motivation. The best defined and the most stable are those classifiers that are motivated by their visual properties and that is why they are easy to remember. Our information on the inventory of Malay/Indonesian numeratives/classifiers leans on several descriptions of this language.

Abdullah Hassan characterizes the classifiers (using this term) as a "system... to divide the various objects denoted by nouns according to their shape,

texture, appearance and so on". He carefully distinguished classifiers in the true sense from two kinds of the units of measure (termed "uncountable but containable objects" and "units of measure"). In addition to these he proposes 7 groups of classifiers according to their extralinguistic motivation. They are as follows (after Hassan 1974: 32-34):

I. Vegetables, Fruits and Plants

1. *berkas* 'bunch' for twigs, branches, etc.
2. *gemal* 'handful' for bunch of stems of rice, wheat, etc.
3. *gugus* 'group' for bunch of fruits: plums, cherries, etc.
4. *jambak* 'heap' for heap of grains, vegetables on stems: spinach, etc.
5. *piak* 'piece' for leafy plants: tobacco, betel leaves, etc.
6. *pucuk* 'shoot' for conical vegetables: cabbage of bamboo, mushrooms, etc.
7. *kuntum* 'bud' for flowers and bulbs: tulips, roses, etc.
8. *rumpun* 'bunch' for vegetables like onions, leeks, chives, etc.
9. *sikat/sisir* 'comb' for fruits in rows: bananas, etc.
10. *tandan/tangkai* 'stalk' for bunch of fruits like coconuts, areca nuts, etc.

II. Thin and Flat Objects

1. *daun* 'leaf' for sheet of papers, boards, etc.
2. *helai/lembar* 'sheet' for soft objects like cloths, papers, blankets, etc.
3. *keping* 'piece' for hard objects like planks, hard boards, tiles, etc.
4. *lapis* 'layer' for things in layers like floors, shelves, etc.

III. Cylindrical and Long Objects

1. *batang* 'trunk' for bridges, rivers, logs; etc.
2. *baris* 'line' for objects in rows, terrace houses, vegetables, beds, etc.
3. *bilah/laras* 'strand/tube' for long weapons: spears, guns, swords, etc.
4. *gulung* 'roll' for rolled objects : papers, mats, etc.

IV. Chain and Strings

1. *untai/utas* 'strand' for chains, belts, strings, ropes, etc.
2. *urat* 'vein' for fine strings, hairs, etc.

V. Objects

1. *biji* 'seed' for fruits, pebbles, etc.
2. *butir* 'particle' for small stones, nuts, etc.
3. *ketul* 'lump' for lumpy objects, rocks, stones, etc.

VI. Irregular Objects

1. *bentuk* 'mould/curve' for coiled things, rings, bracelets, bangles, etc.
2. *buah* 'fruit/unit' for houses, mountains, ships, etc.
3. *cebis/cebite* 'bit' for small amounts, salt, sugar, pepper, etc.
4. *patah* 'portion' for words, etc.
5. *pétak* 'squares' for areas of fields, rubber estates, etc.

6. *pintu* 'door' for shops, terrace houses, etc.
7. *pokok* 'tree' for trees, clouds, etc.
8. *kaki* 'foot' for umbrellas, mushrooms, etc.
9. *puntung* 'butt' for cigarettes, firewoods, etc.
10. *orang* 'person' for men and women.
11. *ruas* 'knot' for portions of cane, bamboo, etc.

VII. Animals and Birds

1. *ekor* 'tail' for animals, birds, fish, etc.
2. *pasang* 'pair' for animals in pairs, etc.
3. *pawan* 'friend' for animals in groups, etc.

The stability of the classification is disturbed by the fact that some classifiers are at least to some extent mutually substitutable as well as by semantic changes.

M. B. Lewis lists some thirty classifiers separating more common ones (*orang* for human beings, *ekor* for other living creatures, *buah* for large things, e.g. houses, cars, ships, also books, rivers, chairs, and some fruits, *biji* for smaller things, e.g. eggs, fruits, nuts, cups, *batang* for rod-like things, e.g. walking sticks, trees, pencils, *helai* for things that occur in thin layers or sheets, e.g. paper, cloth, also for feathers, and hair, *keping* for pieces, slabs, fragments, e.g. of wood, stone, bread, also land, and paper, *puchok* for letters, firearms, needles, *bilah* for bladed things, e.g. knives), from the less common ones as below: *běntok* for rings, hooks, *bidang* for mats, widths of cloth, *kuntum* for flowers, *kaki* for long stemmed flowers, *urat* for threads, *pintu* for houses (in a row), *tangga* for Malay houses (each with its house-ladder), *patah* for words and proverbial expressions, *butir* for jewels, seeds, fruits, *puntong* for stumps, butt-ends (e.g. of firewood, cigars, teeth), *potong* for slices of bread, etc. *utas* for fishing nets.

The author underlines that the classification "is by no means rigid" (Lewis 1947: 67), obviously meaning that it is intuitive. The classifiers, as Lewis points out, are used in speech not only in numerical phrases but also in generic function when the basic word lacks the required derivative markers, for example: *negeri Melayu* "Malaya" (lit. Malay country) – *orang Melayu* Malay "the Malay" (lit. Malay man) – *bahasa Melayu* "Malay" (lit. Malay language), or *bunga mēlur* "jasmine" (lit. jasmine flower), *bunga mawar* "rose" (lit. rose flower), *ikan tēnggeri* mackerel (lit. mackerel fish), *ikan lumba* "dolphin" (lit. dolphin fish), *ikan gurita* "octopus" (lit. octopus fish), etc., which is syntactically very different from examples as *ikan basah* "fresh fish", *ikan asin* "salted fish", or *ikan kering* "dried fish".

The gradual reduction of the number of classifiers paralleled by their partial overlapping may be caused by the fact that the selection of the "correct" classifier may charge the speaker's short-termed memory and retard the communication if the number of classifiers is excessive.

Macdonald and Soenjono state that the counters or classifiers "form a diminishing, and perhaps disappearing, class of words in Indonesian", adding that

their following list is not exhaustive (Macdonald – Soenjono 1967: 132-134): *orang* human being for counting human beings, *ekor* "tail" for animals, birds, fish, etc., *buah* "fruit" for objects in general, and particularly roundish objects, *biji* "seed" for small objects, *batang* "stick" for long cylindrical objects, *helai* "sheet" for paper, cloth, etc., *gugus* "cluster" for clusters of objects, *keping* "chip" for slices, flat objects, leaves, *miang* "grain, drop", grains of sand, drops of water, *patah* "piece" for words, *pucuk* "sprout" for guns, letters, *sikat* "brush" for bunches of bananas, *tepek* "slab, cake" for fat, loaf sugar, etc., *carik* "strip" for paper, cloth, *utas* "piece of string" for string, cord, *catuk* "spoonful" for liquid, *cekak* "pinch" for salt, pepper, etc. The authors have included measures *litar* litre, *metar* metre, *kilo* kilogram, too. Macdonald and Soenjono state that *orang*, *ekor*, and *buah* tend to be generalized and, besides, underlines the tendency to use the counters more regularly with the numeral *se-* one (Macdonald and Soenjono 1967: 134).

The generalization of three classifiers, i.e. *orang*, *ekor* and *buah* is reminiscent of a kind of gender – *orang* is compatible with nouns referring to human beings, *ekor* with other living creatures while *buah* defines objects, phenomena, and abstractions.

Hans Kähler in his grammar (Kähler 1965: 68-69) carefully distinguishes classifiers from measures using this terminology. According to him the usage of classifiers has again slightly risen after the initial decrease. However, N. F. Alieva in her recent grammar (Alieva et al. 1991) does not share his view.

The stability of the category of nominal classes is indirectly proportional to their number. More nominal classes means a greater burden for our short-term memory, a decrease of the occurrence of the particular instances and the subsequent simplification of the system of classes. Memory is thus another key factor exerting influence upon the nature of a particular grammar in a way analogous to Victor Yngve's discovery of the link between syntactic structure and short-term memory (see Yngve 1960).

Both Malay and Indonesian systems of nominal classes have been changing and yet in the case of Indonesian the development is faster. The simplification of Indonesian is supported by its status of a national language of a multilingual country despite the fact that Bahasa Indonesia is a second language for the great majority of its users.

Various papers state that the use of *orang*, *ekor*, and *buah* is increasing, and the classifier *ekor* is applied not only to animals but at least in some dialects to human beings as well: "*Dalam penghitungan nomina yang menyatakan binatang dipakai kata bantu bilangan ekor...Di sinilah kelihatan gramatikalisasi kata ekor dalam fungsi tersebut. Selain itu, dalam beberapa dialek bahasa Melayu, kata bantu bilangan ini dipakai juga untuk manusia*" (Alieva et al. 1991: 207). The class of nouns compatible with the classifier *buah* is extremely numerous and a fairly universal expansion is notable for the classifiers *orang* and *ekor* too. The system of multiple nominal classifiers has been virtually reduced to a ternary system reminiscent of the category of gender (with three genders that could be labelled human, animal, and objective. In case of the fusion of the

first two classes (marked by *orang* and *ekor*) we should be confronted with two classes, that of animate and another one of inanimate nouns).

A comparison of the Malay/Indonesian system of classifiers leads to the conclusion that the Japanese system of classifiers has been undergoing a much slower simplification. The young generation is inclined to simplify the Japanese system of nominal classifiers because the cultural motivation of some of the classifiers is opaque.

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