Number, names, and animacy: 
Nominal classes and plural interactions in Gitksan

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In this talk, I discuss three types of nominal classification in Gitksan (Tsimshianic; BC): mass/count, animacy, and the common/determinate distinction characteristic of the Tsimshianic language family. I propose that all three types of nominal classification interact with a distinct type of number marking, and present an articulated nominal structure to account for these interactions. This serves as the most rounded discussion of plurality in Gitksan to date, drawing on evidence from morphological form, multiple types of verbal agreement, and semantic interpretation.

The mass/count distinction in Gitksan is similar to that attested in English and familiar languages (Bicevskis et al. in prep); it interacts closely with morphological plural marking, with plurals on mass nouns being highly restricted. Animacy, in contrast, is highly relevant to pronominal plurality and for plural φ-agreement on the clause predicate. I present a novel view of the Gitksan person-marking system which takes this animacy factor straightforwardly into account.

The most gender-like of the three types of noun classification is the Tsimshianic common/determinate divide. This is a deeply grammaticalized type of common/proper distinction, dividing personal names, pronouns, demonstratives, and elder kinship terms (‘determinate’ nouns) from all other nouns in the language. Rather than follow analyses which associate the ‘proper noun’ feature with names, I suggest that this property in Tsimshianic is more appropriately aligned with animacy.

Nouns in this determinate class use distinct determiners and are marked with a specialized form of plurality (dip). I show that this determinate-specific plurality does not pattern in a manner comparable to the other types discussed, and analyze it semantically as an associative, following Nakanishi and Ritter's (2009) approach to Japanese -tati.

Gitksan thus instantiates a language with three distinct types of classification and associated number marking, occurring at different points in the nominal spine and all operating simultaneously. The resulting structure sheds light not only on plurality in the nominal domain, but also has consequences for the structure of the Gitksan clause.

References
