On the contribution of animacy to noun classification and referential indexing

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In this paper we begin by reviewing some of the evidence that cross-linguistically, noun classification is a heterogeneous phenomenon – even the most cursory survey indicates that languages differ in the number and content of noun classes. This heterogeneity raises the following methodological problem: If noun class systems can vary dramatically from one language to the next, how can we determine when two languages have comparable systems? Following Humboldt (1829/1963), we assume that this methodological problem can be addressed by introducing a tertium compationis, a third term, and following Wiltschko (2014), we argue that the Universal Spine constitutes an ideal tertium compationis for this purpose.

We view the Universal Spine as a hierarchically organized set of universal categories with fixed interpretive functions, and assume that this constitutes a skeletal structure that is fleshed out with language specific substantive content. Given this conception of the spine, we expect two sources of cross-linguistic variation in noun classification: (i) the spinal category that classificatory features are associated with and (ii) the substantive content of classificatory features associated with a given category. We demonstrate that both types of variation are attested, giving rise to different categories, on the one hand, and different features, on the other.

Focusing on the noun classification system found in Blackfoot (Algonquian) we show that it differs both in substance and in category from familiar sex-based gender systems. Blackfoot is a typical Algonquian language in that nouns are either animate or inanimate. However, it is atypical in that the formal [± animate] feature is associated with the category Inner Aspect, rather than n. Consequently, animacy in Blackfoot has the same interpretive function as [± bounded], the feature that underlies the mass/count distinction in familiar languages like English or French, and a different function from [± feminine] or [± neuter], the features that underlies gender distinctions in many Indo-European languages.

We further show that there are in fact two different but related types of nominal classification – an animacy-based head feature, which determines the form and content of inflection, and a human phrasal index features, which determines selection. In Blackfoot, only human(oid) DPs can be (i) actor arguments of transitive verbs, (ii) goals of benefactive verbs or (iii) goals of inverse-marked verbs. In all three cases, the human(oid) DP is the external argument of a functional head - v, Appl or PoV (Ritter & Rosen 2010, Bliss 2010, Bliss 2005). Since functional heads can only select for syntactic features of DPs, human(oid) must be a syntactic feature. Following Wiltschko 2014, we assume that universally, DPs contain an abstract discourse referent argument in SpecDP (Wiltschko 2014). We propose that this argument bears a human feature whenever the DP denotes a human(oid) entity, and show that this approach correctly predicts that human(oid) must be distinguished from (in)animate morphology.

While classificatory head features are well-studied phenomenon, selectable referential indices are not. We conclude with some preliminary remarks towards a typology of index features.