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## The status of classifiers in Kugu Nganhcara nominals

Steve Johnson

University of New England

A large number of the languages in the Cape York region have simple nominal classifier systems. Compound nouns are also found in many of these languages, and it has been suggested, at least for Kuku-Thaypan (Rigsby 1976) and for Wik-Mungkan (Kilham 1974) that classifier constructions are best described as instances of compounding. I intend to demonstrate that Kugu Nganhcara, a middle Paman language of western Cape York, provides evidence that classifier and compound constructions can be distinguished on both semantic and syntactic grounds, at least in this language.\*

### 1. SIMPLE CLASSIFIERS IN KUGU NGANHCARA

A non-pronominal NP in Nganhcara<sup>1</sup> consists of one or more of the following elements:

- classifier
- noun
- adjective(s)
- quantifier
- demonstrative

These are ordered as above, and no variation is permitted. The elements of an NP are never separated by other sentential constituents, except occasionally by an associated pronoun. The last element of the NP carries the case marking for the whole NP. Nganhcara is thus quite different from one common type of Australian language (cf Dixon 1980:270) which allows the elements of an NP to be scattered in any order throughout the sentence and which marks every word in the NP for case.

Most Nganhcara nouns can be preceded by a classifier. The classifier is usually present on first mention of the noun (or when vocabulary is being elicited) but the classifiers *yuku* 'THING' and *agu* 'PLACE / [POINT IN] TIME' are frequently absent. First person kinship terms, body parts and many words for items of material culture lack classifiers. The classifier can be the sole member

of an NP, in which instance it has the status of a noun, and sometimes has an anaphoric function.

There are only a small number of classifiers, but they are of very frequent occurrence in noun phrases. However, the classifier may not always be present with the specific nominal, especially when the whole construction has already occurred previously in the discourse. For example, instead of *minha pangku* 'wallaby', we may find *pangku* by itself.

### 2. CLASSIFIER OR GENERIC?

The use of the term 'classifier' to describe the phenomenon under discussion is not new in Cape York linguistic descriptions. Sommer 1972 devoted a section of his Kunjen grammar to classifiers.<sup>2</sup> He noted however that Dixon had described them as generic terms, and this was still the terminology preferred in Dixon's grammar of Yidiny (1977). I have problems with this use of 'generic' for two reasons. Firstly, 'generic' already has a clearly defined technical meaning in semantics, one which is not relevant in the present instance. Secondly, Nganhcara and other Cape York classifier systems are similar, both in their syntax and in their semantics, to the numeral classifier languages of Asia and Central America. The main difference lies in the fact that they do not enter into any special syntactic construction with quantifiers, as is the case for the great majority of noun classifier languages which have been described up to the present. However, there are other classifier languages outside of Australia which are comparable to Nganhcara in that they possess a system that does not interact with quantifiers in any restricted way, for example Jacalteco, described in detail in Craig 1986. I therefore regard Nganhcara as a classifier language, but not one belonging to the subset of such languages which includes those with numeral classifier constructions.

Perhaps Dixon was influenced by the tradition represented in Allan 1977, who while defining classifiers 'on two criteria: (a) they occur as morphemes in surface structures under specifiable conditions; (b) they have meaning, in the sense that a classifier denotes some salient perceived or imputed characteristic of the entity to which an associated noun refers (or may refer)' (Allan 1977:285), which would definitely include Cape York classifier systems, then goes on to characterize classifiers as belonging 'to one of four types — (i) numeral classifier languages, (ii) concordial classifier languages, (iii) predicate classifier languages, and (iv) intra-locative classifier languages' (Allan 1977:286) — which would exclude simple classifier languages such as Nganhcara. I think this was unintentional on Allan's part, and resulted from the fact that simple non-numeral classifier systems, found principally in Cape York and Central

America, had not featured prominently in the literature. His seminal paper provides no reference to an example of this type.

The result has been that 'generic' has become, for better or for worse, a common term for classifier in Australianist works, for example Dixon 1980:102 and Blake 1987:94. Dixon himself appears to have changed his mind about the appropriate terminology, for the 1982 reprint of his description of Yidiny classifiers is entitled 'Classifiers in Yidiny' (Dixon 1982:185-205), although in the text they are still sometimes described as generics or 'generic classifiers', a new usage that Dixon doesn't justify. (Are generic classifiers meant to be a type different to numeral classifiers? If so, on what grounds?)

### 3. NOMINAL COMPOUNDS

Compounding is a common derivational process in Nganhcara nouns. Some examples of transparent nominal compounds are:

*thaa=panci* (mouth=hair) 'beard'  
*thaa=aku* (mouth=skin) 'lip(s)'  
*pu'u=thaa=aku* (vagina=mouth=skin) 'vulva'

Semantically more opaque forms include the following:

*pindha=eka=waba* (head=shell=frog) 'brain'  
*kono=waba* (ear=frog) 'eardrum'  
*thuli=kaa=kuthu* (woomera=face=nose) 'heart' (the throwing end of the  
 woomera is vaguely heart-shaped)

Compounding is common in detailed anatomical terminology, as seen here, but also often occurs in terms for material culture and flora and fauna. Body part terminology is used extensively in artefact vocabulary. Examples:

*yuku=watha=kumpu* (THING=green:ant=urine) 'cicada'  
*minha=kaa=kuthu=kimpu* (ANIMAL=face=nose=kookaburra) 'kingfisher'  
*yuku=pinci=mepen* (THING=seawater crocodile=little) 'seahorse'  
*thuma=pupi=pu'u* (fire=matchwood=vagina) 'hole in firestick for twirling'

### 4. COMPOUNDS AND CLASSIFIER CONSTRUCTIONS

Nominal compounds may be semantically distinguished from classifier constructions in the following way: the first (classifier) element in the latter construction is superordinate to the whole construction, whereas there is no such necessary relationship between the elements in compounds. This means that the classifier is predictable from the meaning of the whole of the construction, unlike the first element in a compound. For example, in *minha pangku* (ANIMAL wallaby) 'wallaby', *minha* is a superordinate for the entire construction, and is

predictable, as *pangku* denotes a source of edible meat; consequently *minha* is a classifier.

SUPERORDINATE (classifier) + (specific nominal)  $\equiv$  HYPONYM<sup>3</sup>

In *kono=waba* (ear=frog) 'eardrum', on the other hand, *kono* is not a hyponym for *kono=waba*, nor is *kono* predictable on the basis of *waba*. Thus this construction is a compound.

In the vast majority of classifier constructions, the second (classified) element has the same sense as the entire construction, for example *pangku* is equivalent to *minha pangku*. This is not generally true of compounds: *waba* is not a synonym for *kono=waba*. However, the second element of a classifier construction sometimes cannot stand alone with the same meaning as the full construction, for example *nga'a muka* 'catfish species' (lit. FISH=stone), where the specific nominal on its own unambiguously means 'stone'. It is to accommodate such instances that I have had to designate the entire construction, and not just the specifier, as the hyponym of the classifier.

Semantic predictability is not a necessary feature of the classifier. There are instances where the specific noun is referentially restricted by its classifier; for example, *yuku yengbe* is the ladyapple tree, *mayi yengbe* its fruit.

Syntactically, both elements of a compound must be present, otherwise a quite different meaning results, for example *ma'a eka* 'fingernail' has the components *ma'a* 'hand' and *eka* 'shell'. As discussed above, the prototypical classifier construction allows deletion of the classifier where it can be reconstructed from the discourse.

The evidence indicates that compounds and classifier constructions in Kugu Nganhcara (and probably many other Cape York languages) are quite different. It is understandable that their similarities tempted other researchers to treat them alike, and it is this similarity which is quite different to the type of classifier construction that obtains in the 'classical' classifier languages, where the classifier constitutes a unit with the numeral rather than with the head noun. How much this difference is typologically and grammatically significant, is a matter for further research. The semantics of compounding is still a little explored area, as is the syntax of classifiers (cf Lyons 1977:464 for a similar comment with reference to semantics) and it may turn out that a more sophisticated and embracing theory of compounds could still find a place for classifier constructions.

#### NOTES

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provided comment and discussion. I am indebted, as always, to Ian Smith for much of my understanding of Kugu Nganhcara grammar. Our joint research on the language has been close and intense enough for it to be impossible for me to claim sole authorship for any of the data presented here. However, I do take full responsibility for any infelicities in this paper.

1. I follow acceptable speaker practice in dropping the classifier *kugu* 'LANGUAGE, SOUND' within discourse. The phonology of Kugu Nganhcara, while typical of many Cape York languages, has one unusual feature: voicing is contrastive between the first and second vowels, so that *aku* 'skin' forms a minimal pair with *agu* 'place'. In the practical orthography, the glottal stop is represented by an apostrophe, while *j* and *c* represent the voiced and voiceless palatal stops respectively.
2. His 'classifier' is however much more inclusive than mine; occurrences of a nominal that can serve as a classifier, for example *inh* 'ANIMAL', are identified as such even in compounds such as *inh=eten* 'hide, scalp', i.e. *ANIMAL=skin* (Sommer 1972:76). This paper will reject such practices on the grounds that these constructions are indeed compounds and not classifier constructions.
3. It may perhaps be more accurate, following Cruse 1986, to describe this semantic relation as one of taxonymy. 'A useful diagnostic frame for taxonymy is:
 

*An X is a kind/type of Y*

 If X is a taxonym of Y, the result is normal:
  - 1a. A spaniel is a kind of dog.
  - b. A rose is a type of flower.' (Cruse 1986:137)
 Cruse points out that not all hyponyms are taxonyms, for example 'A kitten is a kind of cat', or 'A queen is a type of monarch' are odd. For my purposes, the distinction provides no special insights, so I have used the more familiar terminology.

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