

## **One system or two? Reflections on variation and coherence in a single system of nominal classification**

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Recent work on nominal classification has shown that it is not that unusual for two systems of nominal classification to be operating in a single language (see for example Fedden 2011, Seifart 2005, van Egmond 2012). Singer (2016, chapter 7) surveys fifteen languages from around the world that have agreement for three or more genders in the verb. Nine of the fifteen languages also have noun-incorporation in the verb, so they have two classificatory systems working in parallel, within each verb.

Corbett & Fedden (2015/2017) demonstrate that determining whether there is one system or two systems of nominal classification within a language is no simple matter. They develop a set of criteria and using these argue that the Papuan language Mian (Fedden 2011) does have two separate systems, whereas the formally different free and enclitic classifiers of the Australian language Ngan'gityemerri form a single system of classification (Reid 1990). Along the way they also reveal that the distinction between a single system and two systems is not as straightforward as might be assumed, because even in comparatively clear-cut single-system languages, the way nominal classification works can be quite variable, depending on the morphosyntactic context (e.g. number, syntactic domain), the kind of referent (e.g. animacy), genre etc.

This talk explores differences between uses of gender agreement in the verb and within the noun phrase in Mawng. In Singer (2012) I argued that Mawng gender agreement is involved in the interpretation of verb sense. This argument is based on variation in verbal gender agreement in a range of contexts. However, gender agreement in Mawng noun phrases tends not to be as flexible and variable so this role may not be associated with NP agreement. Another area of apparent difference within the gender system is related to animacy. Gender agreement in discourse can play a quite different role depending on whether the referent is human, non-human animate or inanimate.

The fact that Mawng's gender system makes distinctions that align with kinds of variation in agreement does not mean that we should analyse Mawng as having more than one system. Rather, it shows that a fine-grained exploration of a nominal classification system can help with functional analyses. And conversely, a better understanding of the diverse range of roles nominal classification can play within a single language will inform an evaluation of the internal coherence of nominal classification in that language.