

Palikur and the Typology of Classifiers

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1998 *Anthropological Linguistics* 40(3):429-480

ABSTRACT—This article describes an unusual and complicated system of genders and classifiers in Palikur, a northern Arawak language spoken in Brazil and French Guiana. Palikur has three genders (masculine, neuter, and feminine); gender assignment is based on a combination of semantic features (humanness, animacy, size, and shape). There are two or three gender choices depending on construction type. There are also four distinct types of classifiers (with two subsets – those occurring on stative verbs, which are frequently used as modifiers in noun phrases, and those occurring on transitive verbs), locative classifiers (used as adpositions), and possessive classifiers (generic nouns used in possessive constructions with certain alienably possessed nouns). Different noun classification devices have different functions and scope; all, except possessive classifiers, overlap in their semantics. Classifiers provide cross-categorization of nouns and help the language to structure concepts. Throughout the article, Palikur gender and classifiers are placed in typological perspective.

KEY WORDS—Brazil, Arawak, Maipuran, Palikur, classification, gender, typology, semantics