0. Introduction. As the author notes in the first chapter, “noun classes and genders, on the one hand, and numerical classifiers on the other, have been the object of linguistic investigation for as long as languages with these categories have been studied” (p. 5). She observes on the same page that “classifiers and noun categorization systems have long been a particular focus of functional typology,” and mentions the common belief among linguists that these particular grammatical structures “provide a unique insight into how people categorize the world through their language.” Furthermore, she claims that:

…the study of classifiers and noun categorization systems is intrinsically connected with many issues which are crucial in modern linguistics, such as agreement; processes in language development and obsolescence; the distinction between derivation and inflection; and types of possessive construction. (p. 5)

Given the perceived importance of noun categorization systems in linguistic circles, one would expect comprehensive proposals in typological literature “for a semantic and grammatical typology” (p. 6) of these systems. Among field linguists of my acquaintance, the best known proposals seem to be Dixon 1982, Allan 1977, and some of the articles in Craig’s 1986 volume *Noun classes and categorization*; Aikhenvald adds Denny 1976 and Dixon 1968 to this list. Most of these proposals are based on, at best, samplings of only a handful of languages. The increasing amount of available data on noun categorization systems have forced the revision of some of these typologies in more recent works, for instance Derbyshire and Payne 1990.[1] The increasing amount of data available on little-studied minority languages in turn calls for a revision of these revisions. In addition to the well-known typologies established in the more general literature, model descriptions of noun classification systems exist at the regional level for different areas of the world, and Aikhenvald cites examples for each general area. Although area specialists are usually familiar with them, field linguists working in other areas of the world rarely have access to them.

One result is that field linguists who suspect the existence of noun categorization devices in the language (or languages) that they are studying, especially ones that do not behave according to the parameters proposed in regional literature or typologies cited above, are hard pressed to know exactly what they have on their hands. The existing literature (as noted by Aikhenvald)
presents considerable terminological confusion and an array of diverging definitions (often regional in nature) for basic terms, which is sure to confuse investigators who have not kept up-to-date on the issues. The book under review represents the most comprehensive proposal to date for a semantic and grammatical typology of noun categorization systems; it is designed to remedy the defects of the literature noted here, plus provide an analytical guide for field linguists faced with noun categorization systems in previously undescribed languages.

1. Contents. Chapter 1 “Preliminaries” includes a discussion of the data base for the proposals in the book: Aikhenvald dug up sources on roughly 500 languages (data on 10 of these come from her own field work) and read copiously (enough to generate a 36-page bibliography). In addition she offers an illustration of several types of classifiers, basic definitions, a discussion of terminology (including some discussion and examples of the “pervasive terminological confusion in the literature,” p. 1), a presentation of “parameters for the typology of classifiers,” and an overview of the structure of the book.

Readers should pay especially close attention to Aikhenvald’s discussion of parameters in this chapter, for it defines her approach throughout the rest of the book. She presents a definition of “classifiers,” following the definition of Allan 1977, and then states that:

the main purpose of this book is to provide a typology of classifiers primarily based on the morphosyntactic loci (or environments) of classifier morphemes (following the approach in Craig 1992, in press). This implies establishing types of noun categorization systems which acquire surface realization in natural languages. (p. 13)

She proceeds to list relevant parameters on pp. 14–16:

- “morphosyntactic locus of coding”
- “scope, or domain of categorization”
- “principles of choice, or ‘assignment’ of noun categorization devices”
- “kind of surface realization”
- “agreement”
- “markedness relations,” and
- “degree of grammaticalization and lexicalization”

She considers these to be “definitional properties of classifiers, in agreement with the morphosyntax-prior approach to classifiers adopted here” (p. 16). She lists other parameters which she considers to be “contingent properties,” such as “interaction with other grammatical categories,” “semantic organization of the system,” “evolution and decay,” and “language acquisition and dissolution”; once the definitional properties are used to determine the type(s) of classifiers in a language, “they will be shown to display correlations with [contingent properties]” (p. 16).

Chapter 2 “Noun Class and Gender Systems” (pp. 19–80) presents the typology of “grammaticalized agreement systems which correlate—at least in part—with certain semantic characteristics. They are sometimes called concordial classes; they include grammaticalized “gender” systems of the Indo-European type” (p. 19). The author notes that “noun class, gender,
and sometimes gender class are often used interchangeably” (p. 19); she uses the term “noun class” as a cover term for noun class and gender,” although she considers “gender” to refer to a system of three or less distinctions (“always including masculine and feminine”), and “noun class” to refer to systems with more distinctions (these would include the well-known Bantu noun class systems). Although Aikhenvald has some things to add, most of the discussion of this chapter follows that of Corbett 1991. Therefore field linguists should use Aikhenvald’s book to figure out if they have a “noun class” system on their hands. If so, they should proceed to Corbett’s book for more detail, noting that he uses “gender” as a cover term for “noun class” and “gender” systems; he does not recognize Aikhenvald’s distinction between the two latter terms.

Chapter 3 “Noun Classifiers” (pp. 81–97) deals with the typology of classifiers which “characterize the noun and cooccur with it in a noun phrase.” She goes on to further define noun classifiers, lists several characteristics by which they can be identified, discusses their morphological realizations, considers their links with noun class systems, and finishes with a map showing their distribution in the world’s languages.

Chapter 4 “Numerical Classifiers” (pp. 98–124) is concerned with the most well-known type of classifier system, sets of morphemes which “appear contiguous to numerals in numeral noun phrases and expressions of quantity” (98). Each type of classifier brings with it special issues and concerns, most of which Aikhenvald is careful to discuss, and this chapter is no exception: under “constructions and morphological realization of numerical classifiers” she deals with the hot issue of these classifiers as independent lexemes or as morphemes which affix or even fuse themselves to numerals. Independent and affixed numerical classifiers can be in complementary distribution in some languages; she presents examples. She then treats some current issues regarding numerical classifiers: “mensural and sortal classifiers: distinguishing classifiers from quantifying expressions”; and “incipient numerical classifiers.” The chapter finishes with a map presenting the “distribution of numerical classifiers in the languages of the world.”

In Chapter 5 “Classifiers in Possessive Constructions” (pp. 125–148) Aikhenvald builds a typology for a rare classifier type best known to linguists working in some native American languages and Austronesian languages—these classifiers, which “categorize nouns in possessive constructions,” have not been reported to occur elsewhere in the world. They come in three flavors, all discussed and exemplified here: “possessed classifiers” (categorize the possessed noun); “relational classifiers” (“characterize a possessive relation between nouns” (pp. 133)); and “possessor classifiers” (“categorize the possessor in a possessive construction” (pp. 139)). Possessed and relational classifiers sometimes interact intimately, and more than one of the three subclasses can co-occur in a given languages, so the author deals with these issues. The chapter finishes with a map showing the distribution of the general classifier class in the world’s languages.

Chapter 6 “Verbal Classifiers” (pp. 149–171) deals with classifiers that:

… appear on the verb, categorizing the referent of its argument in terms of its shape, consistency, size, structure, position and animacy. Verbal classifiers always refer to a predicate argument. (pp. 149)
Aikhenvald establishes three subsets of verbal classifiers: ones that originate from noun incorporation; ones that are affixed to the verb; and suppletive classificatory verbs. Here the reader must pay close attention to terminology: suppletive classificatory verbs are often referred to in the literature as “classificatory verbs.” Aikhenvald uses the term “suppletive classificatory verbs” for her third subset, and refers to the first two subsets as “verbal classifiers.” At the same time “classificatory verbs” are “verbal classifiers” in the more general sense. The three subtypes of verbal classifier interact or more than one subtype is present in some languages; known interactions and combinations are discussed, as usual with abundant illustration. At the end of the chapter the author presents a world map demonstrating that verbal classifiers so far have only been found in languages of the Americas, Papua New Guinea, and Australia.

Chapter 7 “Locative and Deictic Classifiers” (pp. 172–183) is a bit of a grab bag, describing as follows:

… two further types of classifier which have a noun phrase as their scope: locative classifiers which occur in locative noun phrases and deictic classifiers which occur on deictic modifiers and articles in head-modifier noun phrases. (p. 172)

Examples are so scarce that Aikhenvald limits herself to describing what has been reported (here a majority of examples come from her own field work) and eschews proposing a typology. Locative classifiers only occur in a few South American languages; deictic classifiers occur in a few North American and South American languages.

Chapter 8, “Different Classifier Types in One Language” (pp. 184–203) and Chapter 9 “Multiple Classifier Languages” (pp. 204–241) are unique. As far as I can tell, Aikhenvald is the first investigator to propose a typology for either area, perhaps because of her fieldwork on languages in the Brazilian Amazon basin which have more than one classifier type (different classifier systems co-occur “in different morphosyntactic environments” (p. 184)) or multiple classifiers (“the same set of morphemes can be used in more than one classifier environment” (p. 185)). The chapters present all interactions noted in the literature (or in Aikhenvald’s fieldwork) to date.

In Chapter 10 “Classifiers and Other Grammatical Categories” (pp. 242–270) Aikhenvald discusses known interactions of classifiers with other grammatical categories, including number, person, grammatical function, types of possession, declensional classes, verbal categories (tense, verb class), deictic categories, and derivation.

Chapter 11 “Semantics of Noun Categorization Devices” (pp. 271–306) presents a summary of basic semantic parameters which are encoded by the different types of noun classification devices. “These parameters fall into three large classes: animacy, physical properties, and function” (p. 271). She lists and defines pertinent parameters in the class “physical properties,” discusses the semantics of each classifier type, and closes the chapter with a summary chart. Chapter 12 “Semantic Organization and Functions of Noun Categorization” (pp. 307–351) includes topics such as the relationship between semantic organization and function of classifier systems, discourse-pragmatic functions of classifier systems, the reflection of human cognitive functions in classifier systems, and the relationship between culture and noun classifier systems. With regard to the last two topics, Aikhenvald does not give in to rampant speculation, but
instead concludes that noun classification basically offers clues to how the human mind categorizes the physical world and social-cultural environment—and these are not always categorized as outside observers would expect.

Chapter 13 “Origin and Development of Noun Categorization Devices” (pp. 352–412) summarizes what is known about the origins of types of classifier systems. Much useful information can be found in this chapter, including charts “groups of nouns which tend to develop to classifiers” (p. 354) and “typical sources for noun categorization devices” (p. 412). For the struggling field linguist this chapter is more crucial than would appear at first glance: Aikhenvald presents abundant evidence that noun categorization systems develop and decay—development and decay can even cycle around, much as the breaking and colliding of continental plates in the earth’s geological history. The result is that field linguists are likely to find themselves facing a system that is either not completely developed nor completely decayed, perhaps superimposed on the remnants of some other decayed system; this renders more difficult the identification and description of whatever classifier system(s) might be present. Aikhenvald’s discussion can help a baffled field linguist unravel many tangled threads.

Chapter 14 “Noun Categorization Devices in Language Acquisition and Dissolution” (413–424) is a summary of what little is known about this topic. As the author observes, there is need for further investigation. Chapter 15 “Conclusions” (pp. 425–435) “recapitulates and summarizes the general themes which have emerged from a cross-linguistic study of noun categorization devices.” This chapter reviews definitions for the classifier types presented in the book (pp. 425–426), and goes on to useful summary discussions of the “definitional” and “contingent” parameters of noun categorization systems first touched on in Chapter 1. More useful charts appear: syntactic “scope of classifier types” (427); and “morphological realization of classifiers” (430). Three appendices follow: “Noun Categorization by Means Other than Classifiers” (pp. 436–441); “From Nouns to Classifiers: Further Examples of Semantic Change” (pp. 442–446); and “Fieldworker’s Guide to Classifier Languages” (pp. 447–451). The last appendix is especially useful: it specifies what should be in a description of classifiers, and gives many hints as to what to look for with regard to the parameters discussed in the book. The book closes with references, lists of language families, linguistic areas, and proto-languages, and indexes of languages, linguistic areas, language families, authors, and subjects.

2. Is this book for the field linguist? A good measure of a book’s usefulness is to approach it with unanswered questions generated by unruly data. When I read this book, I was developing the hypothesis that there were three separate noun classification systems at work in my corpus of analyzed field data. I had also read all the existing literature I could find (including almost all the references cited in this review). The marathon reading sessions put me reasonably up-to-date, but I still ended up as a confused field linguist, thanks in part to the previously mentioned terminological confusion. Corbett 1991 was a first step in dispelling the confusion; Aikhenvald’s work preliminary to this book (Aikhenvald 1994, Aikhenvald and Green 1998) did much to sort out the rest. Nevertheless, reading this book was the definitive step in getting my feet firmly on the ground with respect to the typology of noun categorization systems and the nature of the systems operating in the language.
3. Further evaluation and comments. One of Aikhenvald’s implicit goals in this book was to sort out the terminological confusion in the literature. She succeeds admirably, and only rarely slips—for instance in the third full paragraph on p. 58, where it appears by the examples here and the list of classifiers in Aikhenvald 1994 that noun classes and noun classifiers have been confused. Even so, her terminology is certainly the most carefully defined and least confusing of any literature on classifiers available; a linguist who uses this book in combination with her earlier work on classifier systems (Aikhenvald 1994 and Aikhenvald & Green 1998) and Corbett (1991) should be able to slash through the worst of terminological snarls.

For a field linguist one of the more useful concepts pervading the entire book is that of “continua,” or “scales”—in other words, the idea that boundaries between classifiers and other morphosyntactic categories are not always discrete. For instance, one continuum has defunct noun classes on one end, noun classes somewhere in the middle, and a full-fledged noun classifier system on the other end (1a below); another continuum has noun incorporation on one end, verbal classifiers (according to the more strict definition—see §1 above) in the middle, and predicate classifiers on the other end (1b below). Yet another scale has compound nouns on one end, nouns with affixes or clitics in the middle, and a full-fledged noun classifier system on the other end (1c below). In many cases, for instance noun classifiers, the scales are full circles, in which classifier systems form and decay, and then the decayed remnants develop into another noun classifier system.

(1a) defunct noun classes — noun classes — noun classifier system
(1b) noun incorporation — verbal classifier — predicate classifiers
(1c) compound nouns — nouns with affixes/clitics — noun classifier system

The evidence is abundant supporting this approach to classifiers; it is a great aid to field linguists who must try to figure out what they have on their hands, because living languages tend to be considerably more sloppy than theoretical linguists about establishing discrete categories. As an example, for some time I did not recognize a system of no classifier in my data, in part because individual suffixes within the noun classifier system are at different stages of decay on the scale (2) below:[5]

(2) unitary lexical items — semi-productive suffixes — noun classifier system

Aikhenvald’s use of scales and continua is a direct consequence of her thoroughly typological-functional-descriptive approach to noun categorization. This is no doubt why she does not even mention one crucial issue that is very much in vogue just now in the Americas: do verbal classifiers (in the more general sense) exist as a valid morphosyntactic category, or are they primarily a semantic category best left to lexical semanticists? Those who contend that verbal classifiers are not a valid morphosyntactic category argue that they represent a case of word formation in the lexicon; those who believe that syntax operates in the lexicon ascribe their origin to “noun incorporation” in the sense of Baker 1988.[6] Levy 1999 provides an example of the approach used to argue against the validity of verbal classifiers as a morphosyntactic category, although she admits that the Athabaskan system of predicate classifiers constitutes a valid system of noun categorization. Aikhenvald just assumes that verbal classifiers (according
to both the more general and the more specific definition) are a valid morphosyntactic category and bypasses the whole debate. She instead follows the lead of Marianne Mithun (1984, 1986) who was the first to call attention to the continuum between noun incorporation and verbal classifiers (Aikhenvald’s exposition, although original, draws much from Mithun’s work).

Nevertheless, I still had to face the question of how to identify verbal classifiers. Given the debate concerning their existence both in general and within the language family, I also had to conclusively demonstrate that verbal classifiers exist in my data. Here Aikhenvald’s book was not so helpful, although it did offer plenty of examples of verbal classifier systems, and one major criterion: verbal classifiers categorize A/S/O arguments according to their shape and/or orientation. I had to glean through the literature and develop my own criteria. This resulted in a number of lines of evidence leading to the conclusion that there is a system of verbal classifiers for positional verbs, verbs of falling, cutting verbs, and breaking verbs: speakers consistently insisted that the form and/or consistency of manipulated objects determined their lexical choices; speaker’s explanations of their choices indicated that they regarded changes in orientation of objects to be changes in shape; the basic semantic categories for classifier verbs paralleled those of the noun and numerical classifier systems; about 50 percent of the morphemes overlapped between the three systems, though there were semantic shifts in meaning; no basic verb for ‘position/be positioned,’ ‘fall,’ ‘cut,’ or ‘break’ could be found in the language which was not dependent on the form of the manipulated object; rich systems of direction/orientation verbal suffixes and nominal postpositions co-occur with verbal classifiers; verbs whose choice depended more on manner or orientation than shape could be substituted for some classifier verbs under the right conditions. Aikhenvald does not discuss in any detail the close semantic relationship between shape and orientation, she simply considers orientation/deictic categories as possible categories within noun categorization systems, based on evidence from a variety of languages.

Out of curiosity, I checked some recent introductory guides to morphological or morphosyntactic analysis, to see what mention is made of classifiers and noun categorization systems. Payne 1997 offers brief discussions of noun classifiers and noun classes; as far as I can tell, other kinds of classifiers are not mentioned. Bickford 1998 does not mention noun categorization at all. The guide to morphological analysis in SIL International’s LinguaLinks Library (Version 4.0) mentions noun classifiers and noun classes, defines them in its linguistic glossary, and cites older references (mostly outdated, even at the time of issue of Version 4.0). These guides are designed for absolute beginners; analysts confronted with complex systems (like the Tariana system that first piqued Aikhenvald’s interest in noun categorization—see Aikhenvald 1994), are obviously in the water over their heads, and need more than good rubber boots. Aikhenvald’s book is the most comprehensive and dependable guide available—it is unique—and the serious field linguist who is dealing with noun class systems, an unusual classifier system, a system of multiple classifiers, or multiple classifier systems cannot afford to ignore her work.

Notes

[2] Allan 1977 refers to verbal classifiers in general as “predicate classifiers,” citing the Athabaskan type (these latter are Aikhenvald’s “suppletive classificatory verbs”).

[3] A third chart “assignment of classifiers” appears on p. 428. It looks incomplete, but in the body of the text one finds the statement that “noun class assignment can be governed by the semantic, morphological, or phonological properties of a noun, or a combination of these (426) … the assignment of all other classifier types is semantic” (428).

[4] OUP is to be commended for the high quality of this book. I only noticed six typos (pp. 13, 58, 198, 305, 394, and 463—here compare the date for Emeneau’s article with the date listed for the book on p. 468.).

[5] In contrast to systems in which noun classifiers are partly or entirely inflectional and used as an agreement device, these noun classifiers are exclusively derivational and only occur on nouns (i.e., there is no grammatical agreement elsewhere in the NP). For this reason they do not decay into noun classes, but instead decay by fusing with the nominal root to form unitary lexical items.

[6] Here one’s position in this debate (and one’s account of noun incorporation) is obviously determined by one’s theoretical position regarding the “Lexicalist Hypothesis.” See Spencer 1991 for an excellent summary of the issues.

References


