

## **Questioning the basis of the classifier-gender distinction: evidence from Mawng**

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The Australian language Mawng has what looks like a prototypical gender system but it does not behave like one. Mawng has five genders each with a strong semantic basis which have similar uses to ‘noun-like’ classifiers in other Australian languages (cf. Wilkins 2000; Evans 2003). Verbal gender agreement plays a key role in verb sense disambiguation in Mawng (Singer 2012). This role has been suggested by Denny (1976) to be a key function of classifiers. Gender agreement is also important in establishing initial references and modifying existing referents in Mawng (Singer f.c.). However, since Heath (1983), tracking referents is often seen as the only real function of gender.

We could accommodate Mawng into existing typologies by proposing that it sits somewhere along a continuum between prototypical gender and classifier systems. But where do our prototypes come from? Kilariski (2013) demonstrates how theories of nominal classification have failed to adequately integrate systems with a strong semantic basis. European gender systems are still seen as the prototype for gender systems but these systems may well be relatively unusual from a global perspective.

The gender/classifier dichotomy assumes a number of connections between form and function which have not been adequately examined. Gender systems are usually identified primarily by their agreement patterns and exclusive system of categorization (Corbett 1991). Perceived functional differences between genders and classifiers are thought to be related to their formal differences. However evidence for a formal-functional correlation is lacking because of the limited data available on the function and use of nominal classification systems (cf. Contini-Morava and Kilariski 2013). Typologies of nominal classification typically start with a split between classifier and gender systems. If we started with function rather than form, what might we find?

### **References**

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