

Possessive classifiers in Vanuatu

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The languages of Vanuatu are well known for their possessive classifier systems, known as relational classifiers (Lichtenberk 1983), in which possessed nouns can occur with different possessive classifiers dependent upon the intentional use of the possessed item by the possessor. For example, in Lolovoli the possessed noun *wai* ‘water’ can occur with either the ‘drinkable’ possessive classifier *me* or the ‘general’ classifier *no*, depending on the intended use:

(1) Lolovoli (Hyslop 2001: 181)

a. *Na=ni utu na me-mu wai*
1SG=IRR draw.water ACC DRINK.CL-2SG water
‘I will draw you some water to drink’

b. *Na=ni utu na no-mu wai*
1SG=IRR draw.water ACC GEN.CL-2SG water
‘I will draw you some water (to wash with, or use for some other purpose).’

However, recent experimental evidence from North Ambrym has revealed that its possessive classifier system is rigid, comparable to a lexical feature like gender. For example, *we* ‘water’ in North Ambrym can only ever occur with the *ma* classifier and not the ‘general’ classifier *mwena*:

(2) North Ambrym

*Na uti ma-m / (*mwena-m) we*
1SG[IRR] draw.water CL.II-2SG / (*CL.V-2SG) water
‘I will draw you some water.’

This shows that not all languages with possessive classifiers have true relational classifiers and individual languages vary between relational systems and possessed classifier system, where the classifier is specified in the lexical entry of the noun.

Classifier variation is possible for non-prototypical possessive relations and for distinguishing different senses of a polysemous noun.

This talk will look at a sample of languages from Vanuatu to explore the range of different classifiers in each language, some languages having more rigid non-relational classifier systems and others having relational systems. Furthermore, I will argue that some well cited relational classifier systems should be reanalysed in the light of the findings from North Ambrym’s system.

References

- Hyslop, C. 2001. *The Lolovoli dialect of the North-East Ambae language, Vanuatu*. Pacific linguistics, no. 51. Canberra: Pacific Linguistics, Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, Australian National University.
- Lichtenberk, F. 1983. Relational classifiers. *Lingua* 60(2-3): 147-176.