On the structural analogy between German gender and types of classifiers

Background: Different languages may have different noun classification systems, such as numeral (NUMCL) or deictic (DCL) classifiers, etc., or gender. These differ in their morphosyntactic properties in interesting ways (cf. Aikhenvald, 2000). But there is a sense in which gender and classifiers are the, respectively, synthetic and analytic variants of "the same thing" (cf. Dixon, 1982). While there is a diachronic path from classifier systems to gender systems (Craig, 1986; Dixon, 1986), in this talk I will focus on structural analogies from a purely synchronic perspective.

Question: Assuming a universalist picture of the grammar and, following a century-old tradition, that morphology and syntax are two sides of the same coin, I will ask: Which one (if any) of the above-mentioned classifier systems does German gender morphology most closely instantiate a synthetic variant of? – The answer will be: Both!

German gender: The traditional description of German holds that there is <u>one</u> three-way distinction of grammatical gender: masculine, feminine, and neuter. These are expressed on both the definite and the indefinite determiners (and on adjectives). The examples in (1) are nominative forms (1b, as found in NP ellipsis, i.e. pronominal contexts). (Orthographic *-ie* of the feminine is a long *[i:]*.)

(1) a. der / die / das
     the.M / the.F / the.N

   b. einer / eine / eines
     a.M / a.F / a.N

(2) a. -e-r   / -i-Ø / -a-s
     VM-CM / VF-(F) / VN-CN

   b. -r   / -Ø / -s
     CM   / (F) / CN

The endings of the definite and indefinite article are different, but more interestingly, the latter are formally included in the former: (1-a) has a vocalic 3-way distinction *e-i-a* as well as a consonantal 3-way distinction *r-Ø-s*, whereas (1-b) only has the latter. This invites a (non-traditional) description in terms of a higher morphotactic complexity in (a) as compared to (b), cf. (2). Furthermore, both systems neutralize their oppositions (to the feminine *die*) in the plural. But only the vocalic system neutralizes (to the masculine *-e-*) in oblique case environments: *de-m/-r-/-s/-n*.

Two types of classifiers: Chinese-type NUMCL accompany numerals, including |1| (3-a), the universal source of indefinite articles *one* (Givón, 1981), as well as demonstratives (3-b), a common source of definite articles (Greenberg, 1978), and in some varieties adjectives (Biggs, 2023). Siouan-type DCL are associated with definiteness ((4), Aikhenvald, 2000, 177ff.).

(3) a. yī běn shū
     one CL book

   b. zhè běn shū
     this CL book

(4) a. nî t'e
     'the (standing) water'

   b. nî k'e
     'the (line of) water, the stream'

Proposal: German combines <u>two</u> 3-way gender systems: a vocalic system that shares distributional hallmarks with Siouan-type DCL, and a consonantal system that shares distributional properties with Chinese-type NUMCL. The talk will extend the analogy to the gender neutralization patterns observed with plural and oblique case contexts.

References

Ahrens, Kathleen, and Chu-Ren Huang. 2016. Classifiers. In *A Reference Grammar of Chinese*, ed. Chu-Ren Huang and Dingxu Shi, chapter 7, 169–198. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Aikhenvald, Alexandra Y. 2000. *Classifiers: A typology of noun classification devices*. Oxford University Press.

Biggs, Alison. 2023. Building adjectives. Talk handout, Concordia, November 2023.

Craig, Colette G. 1986. Jacaltec noun classifiers. A study in grammaticalization. *Lingua* 70:241–284.

Dixon, R. M. W. 1982. *Where have all the adjectives gone? and other essays in semantics and syntax*. Berlin: Mouton.

Dixon, R. M. W. 1986. Noun classes and noun classification in typological perspective. In *Noun Classes and Categorization: Proceedings of a symposium on categorization and noun classification. Eugene, Oregon, October 1983*, ed. Colette Craig, 105–112. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Eschenberg, Ardis. 2005. The article system of Umoñhoñ (Omaha). Doctoral Dissertation, SUNY Buffalo.

Givón, T. 1981. On the development of the numeral 'one' as an indefinite marker. *Folia Linguistica Historica* 2:35–53.

Greenberg, Joseph H. 1978. How does a language acquire gender markers? In *Universals of Human Language*, ed. Joseph H. Greenberg, Charles A. Ferguson, and Edith Moravcsik, volume III, 47–82. Stanford University Press.