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Preface

This book aims at providing a cross-linguistic analysis of noun classification systems across the languages of the world, also dealing with a variety of other problems such as the morphological status of the markers of these categories, agreement phenomena, and the syntactic and semantic classification of adjectives and numbers. It is generally accepted that linguistic categorization of nouns is a reflection of human mind and culture. The present study thus has far-reaching implications for cross-cultural as well as cross-linguistic studies of human cognition, and will provide new insights concerning the mechanisms by which human language functions.

Languages with extensive systems of noun classification devices, especially those which combine classifiers and genders, present a true challenge for the typologist. My first encounter with these unusual systems was through fieldwork on Tariana and Baniwa, two closely related North Arawak languages spoken in Northwest Amazonia. The more I worked on the topic, the more exotic and unusual systems I encountered, especially among little-known South American languages, and languages of the South Pacific. This book came into being as an attempt to integrate these systems into a cross-linguistically based typological framework.

This study is an up-to-date introduction to the field, and will be of value not only to a wide variety of linguists and linguistic students but also to anthropologists, cognitive psychologists, and philosophers who are interested in language and the mind. It can be used both as a sourcebook for further typological studies, and as a textbook. The discussion in the book is in terms of basic linguistic theory, the framework of linguistic analysis in terms of which most grammars are cast, and in terms of which significant typological generalizations are postulated. (I have avoided using any of the more specific formalisms, which come and go with such frequency.)

Some terminological clarifications are in order. First, my conception of a lexical entry for ‘noun’ roughly corresponds to the notion of ‘lexeme’ as outlined by Lyons (1977 vol. 1: 19). Second, throughout the book ‘linguistic categorization of a noun’ is used to mean ‘linguistic categorization of the referent of a noun’, just as in many linguistic usages ‘human noun’ is a short way of saying ‘noun with a human referent’. Third, the term ‘noun categorization’ is used here in a sense close to the ‘noun classification’ (cf. Craig 1986a; Derbyshire and Payne 1990) or ‘nominal classification’ (cf. Harvey and Reid 1997) employed by other authors. The term ‘classifier system’ refers to a grammatical system of noun categorization device(s) in a particular language.
In order to limit the book to a reasonable size, I have only been able to refer to a portion of the available literature. There are many other sources that I have consulted, which only provide additional exemplification for points that are already well covered. When a language is introduced for the first time, its genetic affiliation and the source of information on it are given in parentheses; further on, this information is only repeated where relevant. Examples, tables and diagrams are numbered separately within each chapter.

The orthography used in the examples and language names follows that of the sources (unless indicated otherwise).

A study like this could only be definitive when good and thorough descriptions have been provided for most of the world’s languages; we are at present a long way from this situation. Nevertheless, I hope that this study will provide a framework within which fieldworkers and typologists will be able to work, and which can be amended and adjusted as new data and new insights emerge.

It is my hope that this book will encourage people to study noun classification devices, especially in little-known or undescribed languages, going out into the field and documenting languages threatened by extinction (before it is too late to do so).
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Plea

This book is far from being the last word on noun categorization devices. I welcome reactions, counterexamples, new ideas and data, to further develop, refine, and improve the generalizations put forward here. Please send them to me at Research Centre for Linguistic Typology, La Trobe University, Bundoora Vic., 3083 Australia.
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