

University of Zurich
Department of Comparative Linguistics

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Classificatory Verbs in Slave

Andreas Gerster
Bahnstr. 19
8610 Uster
043 466 92 48
andreas.gerster@gmail.com

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1 Introduction

Since Hoiijer's (1945) description of classificatory verb stems in the Apachean languages, classificatory verbs have become one of the better researched topics in Athapaskan linguistics. So far, all Athapaskan languages that have been examined, including Slave, have a system of classifying using verbs (Davidson et al. 1963) and although each language classifies objects according to different criteria, all Athapaskan languages are of the predicate classifier type (Davison et al. 1963). Classificatory verbs can reveal the structure and content of "covert taxonomies" (Haas 1967 quoted in Basso 1968). Covert taxonomies mean the way a linguistic community structures and orders the world into categories covertly through language. After a cursory glance at classifiers from a typological perspective and an examination of the types of classificatory verbs in Slave, an attempt to discover the dimensions of Slave's covert taxonomy through classificatory verbs will be made.

2 Classifiers from a typological perspective

A Classifier is an element of language that changes its form to agree with certain properties of another element (usually a noun) to which it refers to. For example, in the Japanese examples (1) to (4), *mai* and *dai* are numeral classifiers. They must agree with the physical properties of the counted noun. *mai* can only be used for flat two dimensional nouns (1), whereas *dai* can only be used for big and bulky nouns (2). *mai* cannot be used for cars (3) nor can *dai* be used for paper. The English word *sheets* has a similar function as *mai*; however, in Japanese, classifiers are obligatory (4) for any noun counted with this type of numeral construction.

(1) kami jyū-mai
paper ten-MAI
'ten sheets of paper'

(2) kuruma jyū-dai
car ten-DAI
'ten cars'

(3) *kuruma jyū-mai
car ten-MAI
'ten cars'

(4) *kuruma jyū
car ten
'ten cars'

In his extensive typological study of classifiers, Allan (1977) defines four types of classifiers:

- Numeral classifiers
- Concordial classifiers
- Predicate classifiers

- Intra-locative classifiers¹

All Athapaskan languages so far examined, Slave included, belong to the predicate classifier languages (Davidson et al. 1963). This means that they have verbs which vary their form according to the characteristics of the verb's object. These verb stems "do not refer to particular events [...] Instead, these Athapaskan stems signify the states of being or actions of more or less precisely delimited categories of object" (Davidson et al. 1963: 30). The following examples (Davidson et al. 1963: 30) from Navajo illustrate this well. All the sentences in (5) roughly mean 'money lies (there)', but a. refers to a single coin, b. to a handful of coins and c. to a single bill.

- (5) a. *béésò sí'q*
b. *béésò sínìl*
c. *béésò síltsòòz*

3 Classificatory verbs in Slave

According to Krauss' (1968: 200) reconstruction of Proto-Athapaskan-Eyak (PAE),

PAE must have had a double system of noun classification in the verb complex, classification by stem and (at least partly crossing this) classification in a set of prefixes which came between the prefix for the future [...] The system of noun classification by verb stem has developed and flourished in Athapaskan, where it is primary, but not in Eyak, where it is vestigial.

This means that classificatory verbs are deeply rooted in the Athapaskan languages and although each language has gone on to develop this system further, the basic structure of classification through verbal stems remains the same throughout. There are four types of classificatory verbs in Slave (based on Rice 1989 and Davidson et al. 1963):

¹also called *deictic classifiers*

- A verbs of location
 B verbs of 'controlled'² handling
 C verbs of 'uncontrolled' handling
 D verbs of free movement, falling

The division into 4 types of classificatory verbs is significant. Type A verbs (locatives) cannot be uncontrolled, while Type B and C verbs (and most other motion and handling verbs) can be done either in a controlled or uncontrolled manner. Type D verbs (verbs of falling and free motion) are inherently uncontrolled. The imperfective stems of type A verbs, the imperfective, perfective and optative momentaneous stems of type B verbs, and their semantic class are given below (Rice 1989: 781):

	A	B	
1a.	ø-tq	ø-tj̄h, -tq, -tq̄	sticklike
1b.	ø-l̄a	ø-l̄ee, -l̄a, -l̄ee	plural, ropelike
2a.	h-chú	h-chuh, -chú, -chu	clothlike
3.	ø-'q	ø-'áh, -'q, -'á	chunky
4a.	ø-kq	ø-káh, -kq, -kah	containerful, rigid, small
4b.	h-tq	h-tj̄h, -tq, -tq̄	containerful, long
5.	ø-tj̄	ø-téh, -tj̄, té	animate (intransitive)
		h-téh, -tj̄, té	animate (transitive)

Of these classificatory verbs, 3. is the most productive and when used for abstract meanings, it is often lexicalised and "only somewhat related to 'handle three dimensional object.'" (Rice 1989: 782). Considering the following examples (Rice 1989: 782), we see how this is the case.

(6) *kegots'i'q* 'one learned it'

(7) *tágoj'ó* 's/he made a mistake' (Hare, Bearlake)

The classificatory verbs of type C are similar to type B in that they also are verbs of motion/handling, but unlike B they do not have any locative counterparts. Type C verbs only classify objects into 4 classes. Classes 1a., 3. and 5. collapse into

²the notion of 'controlled' and 'uncontrolled' in Slave will be discussed in section 4

one class (Rice 1989: 783). However, the principle difference between B and C is in the manner in which the action is done, henceforth referred to as 'control'.

4 Control

It is instructive to consider the following pairs of examples used by Rice (1989:783-784) to illustrate the concept of control in Slave (the controlled examples, type B, precede the uncontrolled, type C):

- (8) a. *gohkwj segháni'q*
's/he gave me the axe to keep'
- b. *gohkwj segháyéché*
's/he handed me the axe'
- (9) a. *ts'ééré 'ónédéla*
's/he gave away the blankets'
- b. *ts'ééré 'ónédéwa*
's/he threw away, got rid of the blankets'
- (10) a. *nóhballi ts'elíyihshú*
'I left the tent far off' (deliberately)
- b. *nóhballi ts'elíyí'a*
'I lost the tent'
- (11) a. *tu segháni'káh*
'you.sg give me a glass of water' (politely)
- b. *tu segháni'ghge*
'you.sg give me a glass of water' (quickly)

Control is related to purposefulness, everydayness, politeness, humility, gentleness, concern and carefulness (Rice 1989: 784). According to Rice the concept of control *séodjít'e* and absence of control *séodjít'e ile* is "relevant throughout the

entire culture as well as permeating the language" (1989: 784). Rice (1989, 2007) stresses that the uncontrolled variants are not negative, but the norm, while the controlled ones are especially positive and valued in Dene culture.

It is important not to confuse the dimension of control with the dimensions classified by classificatory verbs. Control is not a dimension classified by the classificatory verbs, but is a separate dimension, affection the whole language system, and which intersects the classificatory verbs, producing the four classes of classificatory verbs in Slave.

The distinction between *séodit'e* and *séodit'e ile* is what produces many other non-classificatory verb pairs that differ only with respect to control. The following examples (Rice 1989: 786) are *not* classificatory verbs, but are other verbs, also differentiated with respect to control:

- (12) a. *yadɔ*
's/he drank it'
- b. *yats'e*
's/he drank it' (quickly)
- (13) a. *líbari tá'edédehta*
'I rolled the barrel down, guiding it' (controlled, gently)
- b. *líbari tá'edédehxene*
'I rolled the barrel down, not guiding it' (uncontrolled, roughly)
- (14) a. *nihjya*
's/he got up slowly, deliberately'
- b. *nihítlah*
's/he got up slowly'

5 Type D verbs and quasi-classificatory verbs

Type D verb stems classify their argument into four semantic classes very different from type A, B and C (Rice 1989: 788):

- a. three dimension, rigid, animate singular
- b. two dimensional, changing but maintaining unity, mass
- c. aggregate, plural, liquid in cup
- d. dual, ropelike

An example for each class is given below (Rice 1989: 788):

- (15)
- a. *t'selidawé*
'it is lost'
 - b. *sɪtl'ayede*
'(cloth) slipped from my hand'
 - c. *tákedét'i*
'they pl. fell down'
 - d. *sɪtl'ayikj*
'it (rope) slipped from my hand'

There are also other verb themes in Slave which "indicate [the] characteristics of their object" (Rice 1989: 789), however, they do not seem to belong to the classificatory verbs discussed above. They are no different to English verbs which have inherent class of their objects or instruments with defining characteristics. For example *ø-áh* means 'chew' while *d-dq* is 'eat liquid, drink'. These verbs do not seem to do any more classification than their English counterparts. Similarly the verbs which Rice (1989: 789-790) describes as "action by poking", "action by whip" and "action by gun" do not seem to be significantly different from the English verbs *poke*, *whip* and *shoot*. Although, poking can only be done with long, thin, rigid objects, whipping with long thin and non-rigid objects and shooting with a gun or some other kind of ballistic weapon, it does not seem to make much sense to call *poke*, *whip* and *shoot* classificatory verbs and thus these quasi-classificatory verbs will not be included in the discussion of 'true' classificatory verbs.

6 Functions of classificatory verbs

After having discussed the morphological and semantic form of classificatory verbs, the question of function must be answered. Why should a language classify anything at all? What is the purpose of classificatory verbs? Rushforth (1991) has put forth some suggestions, arguing that besides giving more information about generic nouns as in (16), classificatory verbs in Bearlake Slave can have discursive functions, as in (17) and (18), and can be used non-literally in conventional (19) and unconventional (20) ways.

- (16) a. *Lidí seghánìchu* ‘Hand me (a single box or bag) of tea’
 b. *Lidí seghánìwa* ‘Hand me (a boxes or bags [plural]) of tea’
 c. *Lidí seghánìhge* ‘Hand me (a cup or other shallow, open container) of tea’
 d. *Lidí seghánìhxo* ‘Hand me (some, a handful of loose) tea’
 e. *Lidí seghánìhxe* ‘Hand me (a nonshallow, nonopen container of) tea’
- (17) Dene 'jdídzené kwik'u t'á t̥ì whehk'é. Tułíta gots'é
 Person yesterday gun with dog s/he-shot-it. Fort.Norman to
 déṭq.
 it-was-taken (a sticklike object)
 'A person shot a dog with a gun yesterday. [The gun] was taken to Fort Norman'.
- (18) Dene 'jdídzené kwik'u t'á t̥ì whehk'é. Tułíta gots'é
 Person yesterday gun with dog s/he-shot-it. Fort.Norman to
 déhti.
 it-was-taken (an animate object)
 'The person shot a dog with a gun yesterday. That person was taken to Fort Norman'.

The only difference between (17) and (18) lies in the stem of, and thus the class allowed by, the classificatory verb in the second clause. Precisely this difference

allows unambiguous ellipsis in the second clause.

(19) Sédzi godi 'i'q
My-ear story s/he-placed-it (a single solid object)
'S/he told me the news'

(20) *Weno'q
You (a single solid object)-sit-down
'Sit down'

(20) is ungrammatical, but is an actually recorded playful reference to the addressee's corpulence (Rushforth 1991: 263).

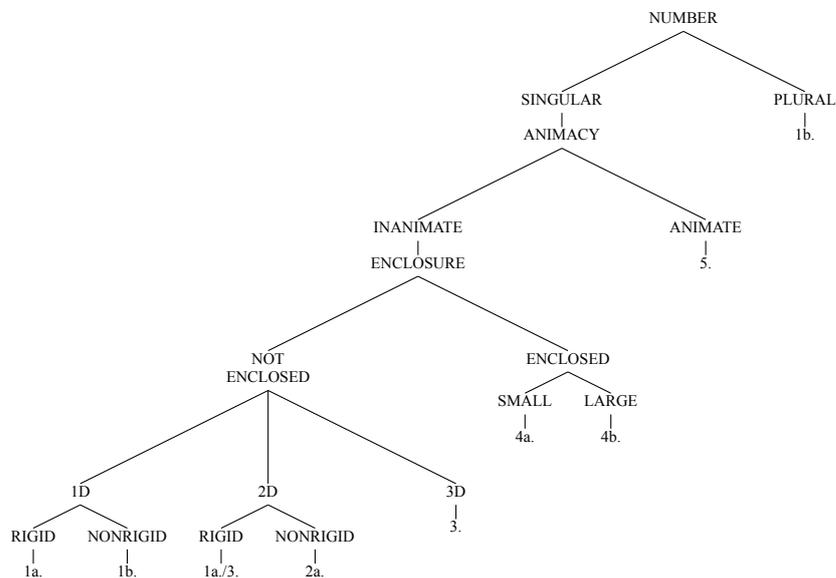
7 Covert taxonomies in Slave

Besides having a function, classificatory verbs are also related to a linguistic community's perception of objects. Basso's (1968) research in the Western Apache classificatory verb system using componential analysis has yielded interesting results about covert taxonomies in Western Apache and is a powerful way of defining the classes of objects classified by classificatory verbs. In his typological study on classifiers, Allan (1977: 297) identifies seven dimensions that classifiers classify: "(i) material, (ii) shape, (iii) consistency, (iv) size, (v) location, (vi) arrangement and (vii) quanta". Basso (1968) also identifies seven semantic dimensions that underlie the covert taxonomy in Western Apache. Using this approach and the data given in Rice (1989: 794-795) the creation of a similar taxonomy as demonstrated in type A and B verbs in Slave will be attempted. The list below shows the defining features of the seven classes.

- 1a. singular, inanimate, not enclosed, one-dimensional, rigid
- 1b. singular, inanimate, not enclosed, one-dimensional, non-rigid
or any plural objects
- 2a. singular, inanimate, not enclosed, two-dimensional, non-rigid
3. singular, inanimate, not enclosed, three-dimensional

- 4a. singular, inanimate, enclosed, small
 4b. singular, inanimate, enclosed, large
 5. singular, animate

The same information with more emphasis on the dimensions is shown in the tree diagram below. The dimensions that are relevant for the taxonomy of Slave's classificatory verbs, are *number*, *animacy*, *enclosure*³, *size*, *dimensionality* and *rigidity*.



1D one-dimensional (sticklike or ropelike)

2D two-dimensional (clothlike)

3D three-dimensional (chunky)

ENCLOSURE whether an object is enclosed in a container or not (containerful)

This tree diagram may give the impression of very clear cut boundaries between classes, however, Rice (1989: 780-781) words her definitions carefully, for class 4a. she writes that "the containers are *generally* rigid, shallow and open" (Rice 1989: 780, emphasis added). Also the continuum between small and large cannot be seen as a rigid boundary. The main criteria to distinguish between small

³This term is copied from Basso (1963)

and large seems to be whether the container is open or closed. However, according to Rice (1989: 781) a "bucket of water" and a "full slop pail" would also fall into 4b.

As the tree diagram shows, not every possible combination of features has a unique class. Rice's (1989: 780) hypothesis for the syncretism of the "plural" and "ropelike" classes is that the "ropelike meaning was primary and the plural meaning an extension since rope was used to put objects together".

8 Conclusion

In this paper the form, meaning, function and taxonomic dimensions of classificatory verbs in Slave have been investigated. The usefulness of classificatory verbs lies in greater specificity, unambiguous ellipsis in discourse and potential for linguistic play. In the section about covert taxonomies, the dimensions that define the boundaries of classes in Slave have been isolated through componential analysis based on Rice's (1989) data. Of these dimensions, "(ii) shape, (iii) consistency, (iv) size, [...] and (vii) quanta" are also mentioned by Allan (1977: 297) in his typological study of classifiers. The dimension of animacy⁴ and enclosure are not mentioned by Allan (1977). The dimension of enclosure is not unique in Slave, since it is also a dimensions in Western Apache (Basso 1963: 258). Further typological research into the dimensions of the covert classificatory taxonomies classifiers of Athapaskan and other languages and psycholinguistic research into how linguistic units are ordered in the brain could help us better understand classifiers and the way humans think about the world.

9 References

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⁴unless we assume that animacy is subsumed under the dimension of consistency or material

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