Noun classification in three languages of Raja Ampat

Most languages make use of some morphosyntactic strategy to categorize the nominal inventory. Numeral classifiers, possessive classification, and gender systems are three familiar ways of distinguishing subcategories of nouns; other strategies include systems of verbal, locative, or deictic classifiers. In this presentation, I will discuss the noun classification systems of three South Halmahera-West New Guinea (Austronesian) languages spoken in the Raja Ampat archipelago (West Papua province, Indonesia): Ma’ya (van der Leeden n.d.; Remijsen 2001), Matbat (Remijsen 2010), and Ambel (Arnold forthcoming). The data will show that, while Matbat has two noun classification systems, Ambel and Ma’ya both make use of three separate classification systems to categorize the nominal inventory.

All three languages have, to a greater or lesser extent, a numeral classifier system, in which nouns are categorised based on semantic properties of the referent when modified by a numeral (illustrated with data from Matbat in (1) below; superscript numerals indicate tone). Additionally, all three languages have a system of relational possessive classification, in which the relationship between the referents of the possessed and possessor nouns is morphosyntactically coded (illustrated with Ambel data in (2)). Finally, both Ambel and Ma’ya have a noun class (gender) system, in which animate nouns are distinguished from inanimate nouns (illustrated with Ma’ya data in (3)).

(1) Numeral classifier system (Matbat):

\[
\text{ho}^{1} \text{u} \quad \text{pa-lu}^{3} \\
\text{mango} \quad \text{CL:ROUND-two}
\]

\[
\text{ho}^{1} \text{u} \quad \text{pa-lu}^{3} \\
\text{two mangoes}
\]

(2) Possessive classifier system (Ambel):

\[
\text{na-k} \quad \text{now} \\
\text{POSS.GEN-1SG} \quad \text{house}
\]

\[
\text{ni-k} \quad \text{now} \\
\text{POSS.SOC-1SG} \quad \text{same.sex.sibling}
\]

‘my house’

‘my same-sex sibling’

(3) Noun class (gender) system (Ma’ya):

\[
\text{wa-kasa}^{12} \quad \text{ana} \\
\text{3PL-open} \quad \text{3SG.INAN}
\]

\[
\text{wa-kasa}^{12} \quad \text{ana} \\
\text{3PL-open} \quad \text{3SG.INAN}
\]

‘She gives birth to him/her.’

‘They open it.’

The presence of three separate noun classification systems in a single language, as found in Ambel and Ma’ya, is quite rare: only a handful of languages are attested with a combination of more than two classification strategies (Aikhenvald 2000: Chap. 8). Given this scarcity, I will conclude by considering how the present-day classification systems of Ma’ya, Matbat, and Ambel may have developed, paying particular attention to the role of contact in the development of these systems.

References