

## *Semantic dimensions and morphosyntactic roles of verbal classifiers in valency change: Insights from Gumuz, Gooniyandi, and Worrorra*

This study investigates the semantic and morphosyntactic behavior of verb classifiers in valency change, based on data from Gumuz (Africa), Gooniyandi, and Worrorra (Australia). Focusing on valency reduction via P-demotion, through P-elimination or loss of P-indexation, it examines how classifier semantics trigger or correlate with this structural outcome.

Verb classifiers typically categorize events along semantic parameters such as manipulation, motion, aspect, direction, intentionality (McGregor 2002). While their morphosyntactic roles, such as agreement marking or valency change, are well attested, the semantic principles underlying classifier selection and distribution remain underexplored, particularly in verbal domains. This study addresses this gap by exploring whether specific classifiers consistently co-occur with verbs of particular semantic types, and whether consistent semantic profiles can be identified for classifiers that condition P-demotion.

In Gumuz, classifying morphemes derived from locative nouns, such as /-(a)go(a)/ ‘place’, encode spatial semantics. However, ‘place’ can also reduce valency through P-elimination, (1).

### 1. North Gumuz (Gumuz; Ahland 2012: 190, 340)

- a. *áχó*      *d-a-s*                      *ŋga*  
3SG      AFF-3SG.TR-eat              porridge  
‘He ate porridge.’
- b. *áχámá*              *d-á-sá-gw*                      *mar*  
3SG                      AFF-3SG.INTR-eat-PLACE              IDEO:much  
‘S/he ate a lot.’

In Gooniyandi, the aspect-sensitive classifiers +A (‘extend’) and +I (‘be/go’) condition a valency shift. +A, typically found in transitive clauses, marks events as directed and agentive, as in (2a) where *mila-* ‘see’ expresses a bound, intentional act targeting a perceptual object. In contrast, +I, associated with intransitive or middle clauses, encodes processes internal to the agent. In (2b), *mila-* denotes an unbounded, ongoing activity with no specific P-argument.

### (2) Gooniyandi (Bunaban; McGregor 2002: 63, McGregor 1990: 321)

- a. *nganyi-ngga*      *wayandi*              *mila-l-Ø-a*  
I-ERG              fire.ABS              see-1SG.NOM-3SG.ACC-CLSF  
‘I saw a fire.’
- b. *nganyi*              *mila-ngir-i*  
I.ABS              see-PRS/(1SG)N-CLSF  
‘I am looking.’

In Worrorra, the classifier *bwu*, associated with dynamic, contact-based events, functions as a transitive classifier and appears with P-indexation, as in (3a), marking the clause as transitive. In contrast, *nu*, an inchoative or stative classifier, is used in expressions of states or habitual actions. In (3b), *nu* occurs in a lexicalized expression for habitual eating and participates in P-demotion, as indicated by the absence of P-indexation, rendering the clause intransitive.

### (3) Worrorra (Worroran; Clendon 2014: 277, 331)

- a. *arrka*      *karnmangku*      *wok*      *ka-bwarr-a=bwu-na*              *ngeenya*              *minjarl*  
3PNAR yam              cook      3A-3P-EP=hit-past              honey              eat  
‘They cooked yams and ate honey.’
- b. *mangarri*              *minjarl-minjarl*              *kaarr=nu-na*  
veg.food              eat-eat              3PL=be-PST  
‘They used to eat vegetable food.’

These data address two questions central to the workshop theme: (i) Which semantic features in classifier-verb collocations predict valency reduction via P-demotion? (ii) How systematic and crosslinguistically stable is the relationship between classifier meaning and syntactic behavior? Addressing these questions will help reveal that verbal classifiers are semantically patterned and syntactically productive, offering insight into the interface between lexical categorization and clause structure.

Keywords:

valency change, verb classifier, P-demotion, syntactic transitivity, semantic categorization

Wordcount: 441

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