

Semantic categorization in Witotoan classifiers from Northwest Amazonia: Exploring patterns across the language family

The Witotoan languages of Northwest Amazonia (Murui-Muina MM, Ocaina OC, and Nonuya NO) exhibit intricate classifier systems that contribute not only to reference but also to word formation and semantic categorization (Echeverri, Fagua Rincón, & Wojtylak, forthcoming). While earlier work has focused on MM (Wojtylak, 2016), this paper expands the analysis to explore classifier patterns across the entire Witotoan family, drawing on comparative data from OC (Fagua Rincón, 2013) and NO (Echeverri, 2019), and incorporating new insights from fieldwork.

Witotoan classifiers are suffixed to noun roots (both free and bound), as well as to modifiers such as demonstratives, numerals, interrogatives, quantifiers, and pronouns. They also function as nominalizers and, more marginally, as elements in verbal constructions in MM. Classifiers form a semi-open class (e.g., over 110 in MM and over 90 in OC) and vary in grammaticalization, with some emerging from “repeater” forms — truncated or partially repeated nouns filling classifier slots when no dedicated classifier exists.

Semantically, Witotoan classifiers can be grouped into physical property classifiers (e.g., shape, size, arrangement), animate classifiers (marking natural gender), abstract classifiers, and a neutral classifier for general or unspecified referents. They carry a distinct semantic load essential for interpretation, and in many cases contribute derivationally to the creation of new lexical stems. For instance, the MM noun *yera* ‘liquid tobacco’ may appear with different classifiers to yield ‘tobacco substance’, ‘container of tobacco’, or ‘drop of tobacco’, but combinations are constrained by culturally and semantically grounded restrictions (*yera-mani* ‘tobacco as big river’ is ungrammatical).

This paper examines the semantic clustering of classifier-noun pairings, the range of variation in their distribution, and their role in derivation and reference. I argue that Witotoan classifiers do not merely reflect noun-inherent features but impose meaning, reshape reference, and interact with discourse in ways that challenge traditional boundaries between classification, derivation, and compounding.

By comparing classifier systems across related languages (Aikhenvald, 2002), this study contributes to a finer-grained understanding of how classifier semantics are structured and the extent to which they reflect cognitive, cultural, and grammatical factors (e.g., Aikhenvald, 2000). It also addresses broader typological and methodological questions raised by the workshop, such as how to identify and describe semantic values of classifiers in underdescribed systems.

Word count 368; Witotoan, classifier semantics, nominal classification, derivational morphology

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