

Investigating the flexibility of the classifier-to-noun assignment in Terena (Arawakan)

Terena, an endangered language spoken by about 15,000 people in Mato Grosso do Sul, Brazil, belongs to the Bolivia-Paraná Arawakan sub-branch. Like all the other closely related languages in this sub-branch, Terena displays a multi-loci classifier system with classifiers occurring in several morphosyntactic contexts. Classifiers in Terena, comprising about 13 mono- or bisyllabic suffixes, convey nuanced semantics related to aspects of objects like shape or consistency. This talk focuses on classifiers on verbs like in (1), the most prominent context for classifiers in Terena.

- (1) *y-oye-pú'i-ko-ti* *ko'ee*
2SG-cook-CLF:round-ACT-DUR potato
'You are cooking potatoes.' (Oliveira 2021: 166)

The classifier for round objects *-pu'i* is used on the verb 'to cook' in (1) referring to (round) potatoes, which are the direct object of the sentence.

This talk will examine the flexibility of the assignment of classifiers to nouns in Terena. It aims to answer the question if and to which extent speakers can vary the choice of a classifier on a verb when mentioning a specific noun or talking about a particular referent. Could another classifier be used if a particular potato is less round, but for example rather flat-shaped or if a speaker wants to highlight a different aspect of the object?

This question is particularly interesting against the background of different claims about the closely related languages: Whereas in Baure nouns appear to be strictly associated with a single fixed classifier (Danielsen 2007: 141), in Mojeño Trinitario it seems to be the case that a speaker can choose among different classifiers, emphasizing different aspects of a referent or indicating that the properties of the referent have changed (Rose 2019: 434). This question has not yet been explored for Terena.

Initial analyses based on the Terena dictionary (Ek Dahl & Butler 1969) and a pedagogical grammar (Butler & Ek Dahl 1979) suggest a tendency towards a rigid classifier assignment, where one noun typically aligns with a single classifier. However, it is not clear to which extent these observations reflect the actual use of classifiers or rather are the result of a simplified presentation of typical combinations in the existing language material.

Therefore, a fieldwork study conducted by the author in February and March 2024 promises to shed more light on the classifier assignment in Terena. The study employs various methods to gain more insights in the flexibility of classifier assignment. These include a free listing task (Franjeh, Grandison et al. 2022) to identify prototypical nouns associated with classifiers, acceptability judgements, and elicitation tasks to explore the use of classifiers with differently shaped referents. The collected data is analyzed drawing on experience of similar analyses conducted on neighboring languages.

The study of the flexibility of classifier to noun assignment also holds broader typological implications, serving as a key factor in distinguishing between classifier systems, with variable assignment, and more grammaticalized noun class or gender systems with a prototypically rather rigid assignment of nouns to certain classes (e.g. Dixon 1986, Grinevald 2000, 2015).

References

- Butler, N. E., & Ekdahl, E. M. (2012 [1979]). *Aprenda Terena* (Vol. 1). Associação Internacional de Linguística; SIL Brasil.
- Danielsen, S. (2007). *Baure: An Arawak language of Bolivia. Indigenous languages of Latin America (ILLA): Vol. 6*. Research School CNWS.
- Dixon, R. M. W. (1986). Noun Classes and Noun Classification in Typological Perspective. In C. G. Craig (Ed.), *Typological studies in language (TSL): Vol. 7. Noun classes and categorization: Proceedings of a Symposium on Categorization and Noun Classification, Eugene, Oregon, October 1983* (Vol. 7, p. 105). John Benjamins Publishing Company. <https://doi.org/10.1075/tsl.7.09dix>
- Ekdahl, E. M., & Butler, N. E. (1969). *Terêna dictionary. Arquivo Lingüístico No. 095*.
- Franjeh, M., Grandison, A., Dotte, A.-L., & Corbett, G. G. (2022). Implementing free-listing: possessive classifiers in Oceanic. *Semantic Field Methods, 4*, Article 7.
- Grinevald, C. (2000). A morphosyntactic typology of classifiers. In G. Senft (Ed.), *Systems of nominal classification* (pp. 50–92). Cambridge University Press.
- (2015). Linguistics of classifiers. In J. D. Wright (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences* (pp. 811–818).
- Oliveira, C. P. de. (2021). *Aspectos lingüísticos da língua Terena (Arawak)* [Doctoral thesis]. Universidade Estadual de Campinas, Campinas.
- Rose, F. (2019). From classifiers to applicatives in Mojeño Trinitario: A new source for applicative markers. *Linguistic Typology, 23*(3), 435–466. <https://doi.org/10.1515/lingty-2019-0024>