Noun Classes across Different Languages

Introduction

Nouns are a category of words found in nearly all languages. Nouns are often described as words denoting a person, place or thing, although this is not very explanatory—there are words like 'height' which don't really fit any of these categories, but are nouns, for example. A more useful description is that the category of nouns tends to include more time-stable concepts than their opposites, verbs, which denote actions, i.e. concepts which quickly change with time (Payne 1997 p. 33).

In many languages, nouns are divided into several different classes which affect how they are used in the language. The most familiar examples to English-speakers are the systems of grammatical gender found in European languages like French, German and Spanish. Grammatical gender is an especially common type of noun class system but it is not the only one. The Bantu languages of Africa often have more than 10 noun classes. English does have a very simple noun class system, distingushing people and other things by whether the pronoun 'it' or 'he/she' can be used to refer to them.

There are several other ways of dividing nouns which can be similar to noun classes. In some languages, possession of different nouns is expressed in different ways; the difference is often between inalienable nouns like body parts that cannot be lost from the possessor and more temporary possessions (Payne 1997 p. 40-41). Similarly, languages often distinguish nouns that can be counted from those that can't, and these uncountable (mass) nouns behave differently; for example they can't generally be made plural. These distinctions are not usually thought of as noun class distinctions since they relate to some particular grammatical function (possession or pluralisation).

The division of noun classes often has some sort of semantic basis. In some languages this is very clear; for example in English the 'it' vs. 'he/she' distinction almost exactly corresponds to things vs. people with only a few exceptions like ships and babies (and using the more expected pronoun with these exceptions is still common and not usually seen as a mistake). In languages like German, the distinction between masculine, feminine and neuter is quite arbitrary—males are usually masculine, females are usually feminine, but inanimate objects can be any of the genders and there are even exceptions like *Mädchen* 'girl', which is neuter.

The classes of nouns manifest in how they interact with other words. For example, adjectives, articles and other modifiers on the noun may take different forms depending on the gender of the noun (e.g. in French, 'the boy' is *le garçon* but 'the girl' is *la fille*); this is known as agreement. The noun may also be made plural, or marked for possession in different ways (e.g. Latin *puella* 'girl', *puellae* 'daughters', *puellarum* 'girl's', but *puer* 'boy', *pueri* 'boys', *puerorum* 'boy's'). Generally in a language with noun classes, at least numerals will agree with their noun's class (Payne 1997).

Many languages have words or morphemes known as classifiers which appear in numeral expressions along with the numeral and the noun. In English this is seen with mass nouns

such as 'three pairs of scissors'. Mandarin Chinese has it with every noun, e.g. qī zhāng zhuōzi 'seven tables', where qī means 'seven', zhuōzi means 'table', and zhāng is a classifier that tends to be used with nouns denoting flat things. These systems are not proper noun class systems—there are often a large number of classifiers, numbering in the hundreds, new ones are often created, many nouns may be able to take multiple classifiers, and the classifiers can often be used as nouns of their own with meanings while in a true noun class system, the classifiers are affixes. However the two systems cannot be clearly distinguished from each other, and classifier systems often evolve into noun class systems.

There are many interesting questions which can be asked about noun classes, such as:

- What motivates people to put one word in one class and another in a different class? In other words, what type of words does each class consist of?
- Why do people differentiate words into these categories in particular? Are the choices of categories affected by people's culture?
- Why do languages have noun classes at all? What use are they?
- How do noun class systems get created, changed and lost over time?





explained in the previous section, it is hard to clearly distinguish noun class systems from other types of system, so a different analysis could give a slightly different-looking map. For example in this map English is shown as having three genders, because of the pronouns *he*, she and it, even though all of the rest of the gender system has been lost. There are many other complications to analysing the number of genders; for example in the Bantu languages plural nouns are often treated as separate noun classes, and some languages have hybrid nouns which combine aspects of several different genders (e.g. Italian *il braccio* 'the arm', using the masculine definite article, but le braccia 'the arms', using the feminine definite article).

Noun classes are a feature of advanced language and do not appear in creoles. Often native speakers of a language disagree on which class certain words belong to (Ayoun 2007), and as a result words sometimes spontaneously switch classes over time. In classifier systems, there is often a wider range of classifiers used in formal styles (Dixon 1986).

The distribution of noun classes

We can see from the map that languages with noun classes are not spread evenly across the world. Instead they tend to cluster in certain regions. They also tend to be inherited from parent languages rather than innovated as a result of influence from nearby languages, judging by the fact that in Europe, the three languages without any trace of a noun class system are four non-Indo-European ones: Basque, Hungarian, Estonian and Finnish. We can also see that Sub-Saharan Africa, where the Niger-Congo language family is dominant, is the only area where languages with five or more classes are common; there are small clusters of others with large numbers of classes though in northern Australia, New Guinea, the Caucasus and Central America.

Meanings of noun classes

One of the most common systems of noun class is based on gender. These systems have a masculine class, and a feminine class, and may also have a neuter class for non-gendered referents. Systems of grammatical gender are common in Europe. In these systems, male referents are usually masculine, female referents are usually feminine, but non-gendered referents are distributed evenly through the different classes rather than being restricted to the neuter gender, as they are in other languages like Tamil. So in these languages, the classification of nouns is somewhat arbitrary.

The other common system is based on animacy. The division may be between animates (living things, or things that can move of their own accord, since the sun, moon and stars are often included) and inanimates (non-living things), or rational (humans and gods) and non-rational, or something in between. These tend to be less arbitrary than gender systems, since while most inanimate objects are unspecified for gender and could be in either class, most objects are clearly living or not. Nonetheless there are nouns whose class isn't obvious, like words for body parts, or materials obtained from living things like wood or hides. Most languages also have some odd assignments; for instance in Ojibwe, *odaábaan* 'car', *ataádiwin* 'playing card', *zhoóniyaa* 'money' are all animate. The fact that a car can move around is probably what motivates it to be assigned to the animate class, but the word *naabikwaan* 'ship' is inanimate, and the motivation is less obvious with the words associated with gambling. There are more opaque examples of animate nouns like *akík* 'kettle', *asáb* 'net', *giboodiyegwaázon* 'trousers' (Valentine 2012). So animacy systems still have a great deal of arbitrariness.

Often the animacy of a noun is not strictly fixed. It's common for normally inanimate nouns to become animates in stories where they can speak. An example of this is a Cree story heard from western Ontario, where a man receives an offer from a spirit to live as long as the spirit does, and takes it, only to find out that the spirit is a leaf and will die in the autumn. The word for leaf in this story behaves like an animate (Valentine 2012).

Languages can combine both axes, along with other more culturally specific ones. One Australian language, Yanyuwa, has 16 noun classes, distinguishing males, females, food, trees and related objects, abstractions, body parts, relatives, groups of humans, names, place names and names of ceremonies. There are several different classes for relatives, depending on the type of relation—close relatives have one class, further relatives another, and 'avoided' relatives (i.e. siblings and cousins of the opposite sex, in-laws, and relatives whose same-sex parent has recently died). However you can leave out the noun class prefixes entirely when speaking informally and referring to a familiar relative. There is also a gender difference in the noun class system: the masculine class normally takes no prefix, but women add on a special prefix when talking about male humans, though never when referring to masculine animals. This effectively means Yanyuwa has an extra noun class when spoken by women.

Shape is also a factor in some noun class systems. In the Navajo language of North America, each verb takes a suffix indicating the shape of its object. Navajo also shows animacy in its nouns indirectly. A more animate noun has to come first in the sentence, possibly breaking the usual word order, where the direct object follows the subject (Hale 1973).

In many languages, the assignment of genders is much less straightforward. In the Australian language Dyirbal, there are four classes, which could be described as 'masculine'. 'feminine', 'edible fruits', and 'other'. But the exact assignment of objects to a class seems quite arbitrary, if you look at the table (from Plaster & Polinsky 2007). However, Dyirbal speakers confidently assign newlyborrowed words to a class without much disagreement, which has led researchers to believe that there are simple

| Class I | Class II | Class III | Class IV |
|---------------|--------------------|-------------------|----------------|
| Men | Women | | body parts |
| Kangaroos | Bandicoots | | meat |
| Possums | Dogs | | |
| Bats | platypuses & | | |
| | echidnas | | |
| most snakes | some snakes | | |
| most fishes | some fishes | | |
| some birds | most birds | | |
| most insects | fireflies, | | bees and honey |
| | scorpions, | | |
| | crickets and the | | |
| | hairy mary grub | | |
| | anything to do | | |
| | with fire or water | | |
| the moon | the sun and | | wind |
| | stars | | |
| storms and | | | yamsticks |
| rainbows | | | |
| some speakers | some spears | | some spears |
| | some trees | trees with edible | grass, mud, |
| | | fruit | stones, moist |
| | | | noises, |
| | | | language |

principles behind the categorisation. Lakoff 1987 proposes that the sun and moon are put in the feminine and masculine class, respectively, because these are seen as female and male deities in Dyirbal religion. Birds also go in the feminine class because they are thought to be spirits of dead women in this culture's folklore. So these assignments can be explained because these things are literally feminine, according to mythology. Other nouns are assigned to the class by association with similar things: fire goes in the same class as the sun, and so does the hairy mary grub because its sting hurts like a sunburn. The other principle of assignment identified by Lakoff is distinguishing an important property. In Dyirbal, most fishes are masculine, as seems to be default for animate things, and most trees are in the inanimate (fourth) class, but poisonous, stinging ones are feminine, which presumably helps Dyirbal speakers remember which animals and plants are dangerous. The feminine class is chosen for dangerous things because some dangerous things, like fire and the hairy mary grub, have already been placed in it for other reasons.

Plaster & Polinsky 2007 take a different view on the motivations of Dyirbal noun class assignment, instead looking at it from a historical perspective. Most of the languages related to Dyirbal don't have fully fledged noun class systems, but classifiers, and it's clear that the

Dyirbal system recently arose from classifiers. They notice that the related language Yidiny has a classifier that is used for edible animals. Naturally, this excludes poisonous ones. So the fact that these animates have been put in Class II rather than Class I in Dyirbal could just be because of this difference in classifiers. This also explains why dogs are not in Class I. Plaster & Polinsky manage to explain many such inconsistencies not accounted for by Lakoff's explanation in a similar way: for example the word for salt water is in Class IV, not II like most water-related nouns, which is explained by the fact that the original classifier for these nouns was actually one for drinkable water. The only thing unexplained is why the particular classifiers comprising each Dyirbal noun class merged with the particular classifiers they did. Part of the reason may have been similarities in key words using these classifiers (e.g. yibi 'woman' and yimalimal 'welcome swallow', or binda 'waterfall' and bibi which appears in related languages with the meanings 'woman', 'mother' or 'breast'). The hairy mary grub may be in Class II not because of the rather obscure association with the sun, but instead because the words for 'hairy mary grub' and 'sun' are actually identical as garri. It's then clear why garrum 'gar' might be assigned to Class II as well-gars aren't particularly dangerous.

So to some extent, the classification of nouns in Dyirbal may be based on formal considerations (the form of the word) rather than semantic considerations (the meaning of the word). This kind of



classification is seen in other languages as well, although no language appears to classify nouns entirely by their form, as shown in the WALS map to the right. Form is generally only considered for nouns which are part of the residue that can't be clearly assigned to one of the semantically-based classes. In Russian, most of the residual nouns are assigned based on the case endings they take. A certain set of endings is associated with masculine nouns, a different set with feminine ones, and a different set with neuter ones. However, the endings only affect the noun's gender if its referent has no real gender: $\partial \pi \partial \pi$ 'uncle', for example, is masculine despite taking the endings associated with feminine nouns.

A distinction can be made between phonological and morphological assignment. Phonological assignment is based on the shape of the word, as in Dyirbal with *garri* and *garrum*, while morphological assignment is based on the endings the word takes. However, there is not really a clear distinction between these two types. Speakers of a language probably don't remember words by their stems, e.g. remembering the German word for 'eat' as *ess*-, but instead remember a fully inflected form of the word (*essen*). If that form's ending is distinctive of a particular gender, they can effectively work out the gender by looking at the phonology. For example in Russian, the nominative ending in the paradigm associated with feminine nouns is *-a*. Presumably nouns are remembered in their fully inflected, nominative form: *mpaea* 'grass' not *mpae*-, and from their ending their gender is inferred (so *mpaea*) must be feminine), although the natural gender might override it as with $\partial \sigma \partial \sigma$ (phonemically /diadia/.

Languages which have been carefully studied have often been found to have predictable phonological assignment rules applying to the majority of nouns, even those such as French where it is not immediately clear. Lyster 2006 found that when analyzing all the nouns in a French dictionary, over 80% of the nouns had rhymes (final syllables with the initial consonant omitted, taking into account only their pronunciation and not their spelling) that could predict their gender, i.e. over 90% of words with that rhyme had the same gender. This is without even taking morphological considerations into account. Whether speakers actually use these rules is uncertain, since they certainly don't (in the case of French) always know them consciously. So at least some apparently arbitrary assignment is generally just the result of complex rules of phonological assignment.

The map above shows that systems like Russian's, with both semantic and formal assignment, are common in Africa, Europe, the Middle East and north India. These are regions dominated by three language families, Niger-Congo, Afro-Asiatic and Indo-European, which are known to have had noun class systems for millennia at least (since the systems are found in all languages of these families, apart from those which can be shown to have recently lost it, so they were presumably present in the ancestral languages of these families). This fits in with the hypothesis that over time, purely semantic systems are likely to change to become more arbitrary (due to things like meanings changing over time but not noun classes).

Relation of noun classes to the speakers' culture

Dyirbal seems like a clear example of culture influencing a noun class system, for example in how birds are assigned to the feminine class and are seen in folklore as spirits of dead women. But the causation could be the other way around. As explained above birds might be in the feminine class simply because words like the one for 'welcome swallow' happened to be similar to the word for 'woman', and the Dyirbal later came up with this mythology due to the fact that birds were in the same class as females. Whatever happened, it seems plausible that where a noun class system is based mainly on semantics, certain words might be assigned to a class which people from another culture would not expect due to having different traditions regarding what is considered male, female or animate.

There have been studies which have shown that grammatical gender can have effects on how different objects are subjectively viewed. For example, one study found that when asked to personify each day of the week, Russian speakers personified the days with masculine names in Russian as males, and the ones with feminine names as females. Another one found that when asked to give inanimate objects voices, Spanish speakers gave them voices according to their grammatical gender. And another found that when German and Spanish speakers were asked to rate inanimate objects by their power, the ones with masculine gender in their native language tended to be rated more powerful. When there were nouns that were masculine in one language and non-masculine in the other, the speakers of the language where it was masculine judged it more powerful.

One problem with these studies is that they involve highly subjective judgements. A Russian speaker, when asked to personify a day of the week, might just take the obvious option of

personifying them according to their grammatical gender in the absence of any other things to make them choose one gender over another. They might not necessarily be influenced by the grammatical gender in any normal situation.

In a different study, researchers told native German and Spanish speakers, in English, to remember gendered names for various inanimate objects, each of which was masculine in one language and feminine in the other. Sometimes the names were consistent with the object's grammatical gender in the subject's native language, sometimes they were not. When they were consistent in their own native language, subjects were more likely to remember the name of the object than the subjects for whom the name was inconsistent. Also, when native English speakers were given the same task, they were more likely to remember an object's name than the speakers of the language which the name was inconsistent with, and just as likely to remember the name as the speakers of the language which it was consistent with. So grammatical gender actually impaired speakers' ability to remember names for objects which conflicted with the object's gender, while not giving them any increased ability to remember names for objects when the languages with the grammatical gender were not actually being spoken.

Another study went further and taught native English speakers about a fictional language in which there were two classes of nouns. They called the two classes by nonsense names, rather than masculine and feminine, but then told the subjects which class a variety of words belonged to, and for every subject one class consisted of all the words referring to females as well as some others, while the other consisted of words referring to males, and some others. So the two classes of this fictional language were masculine and feminine classes, although the subjects weren't explicitly told this. Once everyone had learnt which class each object belonged to they wrote down adjectives which they felt described the object, which were sent to some other people (who knew nothing else about the study) who rated the adjectives as masculine or feminine. And as expected, the objects which were assigned to the feminine class tended to be given more masculine adjectives, and the ones assigned to the feminine class were given more feminine adjectives—even though the subjects had only just learned which objects belonged to which class. (Boroditsky 2003)

All these studies indicate that knowing a language with a system of grammatical gender can subtly influence the way people think about objects. Words that are grammatically masculine in the language tend to be imagined with masculine qualities, and words that are grammatically feminine tend to be imagined with feminine qualities. Presumably, then, speakers of languages with a noun class system based on animacy, like Ojibwe, might tend to personify semantically inanimate nouns that are grammatically animate (like money) more than those that are grammatically inanimate. But this is a topic which has been much less studied.

How noun classes originate

Classifiers are the most obvious precursors of noun class systems. It's easy to see how noun class suffixes could develop from classifier words which come to be seen as part of the preceding words; or how prefixes could develop similarly. Classifiers themselves can originate from the constructions used to quantify mass nouns, such as 'a speck of dust' or 'a grain of sand'. Some of the most well-known languages with classifiers, like Chinese, also have no singular-plural inflection in nouns. The development of a classifier system for all nouns could be explained as all nouns coming to be seen as mass nouns and taking classifiers. Then the classifiers for these nouns could be re-interpreted as grammatical prefixes or suffixes on the noun, and a noun class system would be the result. Since there are usually more classifiers in a classifier system than different noun classes in a noun class system, it can be expected that more recently-developed gender systems will have a greater number of noun classes.

However, most noun class systems found today originate from before a time when the language was written down. And some of them like the Indo-European noun class systems are found in languages which don't have any known relatives without a noun class system.

Even though the question of the origin of the Indo-European noun class system is very uncertain, it has been given a lot of attention. There is a general view that the Indo-European languages originally had a two-gender animate/inanimate system (with the animate corresponding to the masculine and the inanimate to the neuter), rather than the three-gender (masculine, feminine, neuter) one found in most of these languages. The difference between genders was in the nominative and accusative singular case markers—only animate nouns took these case markers, and only animate nouns were inflected for grammatical number. The Anatolian languages, which are often thought to be the outgroup to all the other Indo-European languages, and are attested from as early as the 2nd millennium BC, still have the same system (Luraghi 2009). The reason for this difference in treatment in animate and inanimate is probably that sentences were originally phrased so that inanimates were always the objects of verbs, since an inanimate cannot wilfully carry out an action in the same way an animate referent might, so there was no need to add case markers to them. Adjectives and other modifiers on the noun had to have the same case markers as their head nouns, so this produced a gender system.

The origin of the feminine gender is much more uncertain. The reconstructed Indo-European case endings for the feminine seem to be just the neuter endings, with an extra suffix added in front. This same suffix was used to form collective nouns (i.e. nouns denoting a group of something) and to turn so some researchers have proposed that all feminine nouns were originally collectives. For example the word for 'widow' might originally have meant 'the relatives of a dead person' before being narrowed to 'widow'. However it is unexplained why the class came to contain all nouns denoting females.

When noun classes originate from grammaticalised classifiers, Luraghi 2009 calls this 'gender from above', contrasting with the 'gender from below' origin found in Indo-European, where gender originally arises as a consequence of noun modifiers agreeing with nouns that have different kinds of behaviour based on semantic properties.

How noun classes develop

It's common for languages to lose or reduce the number of noun classes (although often some marginal agreement remains, e.g. the purely meaning-based three genders of the third-person pronoun in English). The most simple way for this to happen is when sound changes occur in the language causing the endings that distinguish gender to become mostly indistinct from each other; this is what happened in English. As well as English, many other languages in the Indo-European group have lost gender, such as Persian and Armenian—these two have gone even further than English and eliminated gender distinctions in the pronouns. Others have just reduced it to a two-gender system, which may be masculine and feminine, like the Romance languages, Insular Celtic languages and Pashto, or common (= masculine and feminine) and neuter, like Dutch, Danish and Swedish. The most common reason for this is sound change, as in English, but some also seem to have simplified their gender systems due to influence of neighbouring languages: the nowextinct Cappadocian dialect of Greek, once spoken in Turkey, had lost gender even though it had not reduced the endings much. The loss can probably be attributed to the influence of Turkish, which has no genders. The influence of foreign languages was also probably what caused Afrikaans to lose gender, while Dutch has kept it.

Some like the Pamiri languages in Tajikistan and Afghanistan have also reassigned the genders of words so that they can be predicted from their meaning. This kind of simplifying development has occured on a smaller scale in other languages like Modern Greek, where gender can be determined by simply looking at a noun's ending in the nominative singular: ones ending in *-s* are masculine, ones ending in *-a* are feminine, and ones ending in *-o* are neuter, although there are words ending in *-i* which may be feminine or neuter. Gender was not so predictable from the endings in Ancient Greek.

There are also examples of languages innovating new genders. This happened in the extinct Tocharian languages spoken in what is now Xinjiang in western China. They were Indo-European languages, so they already had a masculine vs. feminine distinction. One of the Tocharian languages expanded this system by evolving separate masculine and feminine first-person pronouns, which are not found in any other Indo-European language. Both of them also had an animacy distinction (there was no distinct accusative case ending for non-humans), which seems to be a survival of the mostly-lost neuter (Krause & Slocum 2012). In many Slavic languages like Russian, a distinction of animate vs. inanimate evolved within the masculine gender, and on adjectives—the accusative case has merged with the genitive for animates, and with the nominative for inanimates. These two different forms of the accusative seem to originally have just been two different ways of inflecting nouns or adjectives, purely formal classes like English nouns that take plurals in *-s* or *-en*, but over time they became more associated with particular meanings.

Although it's much more common in the Indo-European languages for the number of noun classes to decrease rather than increase, this cannot be generalised to all languages. The high frequency of loss in Indo-European is probably a result of the endings being quite similar in the parent language, so they are likely to merge by sound change. In other families like the Niger-Congo languages, there does not seem to be the same trend. The Dogon, Ijoid and Mande languages lack noun classes, but they are not firmly established as Niger-Congo languages and are probably outgroups to the rest anyway. This may also be true of the Katla and Rashad languages, usually classified as parts of a Kordofanian family, in which the other languages do have noun classes, but this family isn't firmly established; Blench 2012 thinks the lack of noun classes reason to doubt their inclusion in Kordofanian. Apart from these every Niger-Congo language has noun classes. Proto-Niger-Congo has not been reconstructed and we don't know how many noun classes it might have had, but it seems unlikely that languages like Fula with 25 noun classes in some dialects have not innovated many of them. (Matasović 2008)

Functions of noun classes

One reason why noun classes survive, despite the extra load in memory of remembering what class a particular noun has, is to add redundancy to the language via agreement which helps reduce the chance of misunderstandings. If someone hears a noun unclearly and can't decide exactly what the word was, they may still know what gender the noun was because of grammatical agreement, and this helps them narrow down the possible alternatives helping them deduce what the word was from context. Similarly, if two words happen to become homophones, but still have different genders, such as German *Leiter* (meaning 'leader' when masculine and 'ladder' when feminine) they still can't be confused. Or a speaker might abbreviate a compound noun, leaving it with the gender of the omitted noun as a clue: e.g. neuter *das Info* for *das Informationsblatt*, meaning a sheet of paper with information on it (*Information* itself is feminine). (Hickey 1999)

Noun classes also help to clearly identify pronouns with a certain referent. For example, in English, we can say sentences like:

When John met Mary, he realised that he'd met her before.

This sentence would not be possible in a language such as Finnish, in which there is no gender distinction in pronouns. It would have to be rephrased, and could probably not be expressed so concisely. Languages with a more fully developed gender system can do this more often than English, for example in German:

Ich habe ein Fahrrad und einen Wagen aber ich benutze ihn recht selten "I have a bicycle and a car, but I only use it occasionally."

Since *ihn* means 'him' and *Fahrrad* is neuter, we know that it's the car which is only used regularly with the German sentence; but the English one is ambiguous. There are ways to get around this however, like using "the latter" in the English sentence above. Some languages even have "fourth-person" pronouns just for this function. When you need to refer to an additional person, but the third-person pronoun is already being used, you can use the fourth-person pronoun; some of these languages are also capable of adding a marker to nouns to indicate that it will be referred to with the fourth-person pronoun. So there are various ways to solve the multiple-referents problem.

In many languages, noun class markers can be used to derive extra meanings from a word root. For example in Italian, *ragazzo* means 'boy' and *ragazza* means 'girl', with the *-o* and *-a* endings typical of masculine and feminine gender respectively. And Luganda has *mbwa* 'dog', with the prefix used for animals, *kabwa* 'puppy' with the dimunitive prefix, and *gubwa* 'mutt' with the pejorative prefix. But this is not strictly speaking a function of noun classes, as the same thing could be done with a suffix, which would not require any other words to agree with it.

These functions help explain why noun class systems manage to survive in languages, but they probably don't motivate them to be originated in the first place. As we saw in the section on noun class origins, it's possible for noun class systems to arise almost by accident, by the 'gender from below' origin. The grammaticalisation of classifiers could also happen pretty much by accident, as speakers originally pick what they think the most suitable word to describe a fixed quantity of a noun, and these end up turning into agreement suffixes. So like many features of language, there is probably no motivation that makes speakers adopt noun class systems; it evolves naturally by simple changes in meaning and the position of word boundaries. Once a noun class system is in place, speakers then find it useful for deriving words and keeping track of multiple referents.

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