

Numeral Classifiers in Niger-Congo Languages Revisited

Abstract

Given a numeral (Num), a classifier (CL), and a noun (N), a word order universal has been proposed: N does not intervene between Num and CL (e.g., Greenberg 1990[1972]:185, Aikehenvald 2000:104-105, Her 2017a, among others). This universal, dubbed Greenberg's Universal 20A by Her (2107a), thus allows any order except [CL N Num] and [Num N CL].

Kießling (2018:36) provides a list of sixteen numeral classifier languages in Niger-Congo and discusses their semantic and syntactic properties. This paper revisits the putative [CL N Num] order in five of these languages, as shown in (1)-(5).

- (1) Bali-Mungaka (Benue-Congo, Cameroon)

bón lí? nsú íbá

children CL:eye fish two

'two little fish' (Tischhauser & Stöckle 1993:164)

- (2) Denya (Benue-Congo, Cameroon)

ɲ-ɲì né ɲɲjègésè né-má

5-CL:eye ASS.5 groundnuts 5-one

'one groundnut' (Kießling 2018:40)

- (3) Ejagham (Benue-Congo, Cameroon)

è-sán ' í-cókùd j'á-d

5-CL:trunk ASS.5 19-orange.tree 5-one

'one orange tree' (Watters 1981: 312)

- (4) Ibibio (Benue-Congo, Nigeria)

ɲkùà áwó ìtá

ɲkùà person three

'three people' (Kaufman 1972: 363)

- (5) Isu (Benue-Congo, Cameroon)

túw fífâp fâ mǝ?

19.little.head ASS.19:5.leaf ASS.19 one

'one single leaf only' (Kießling 2018:42)

We contend that the putative classifiers in (1)-(5) are in fact nouns syntactically and thus pose no challenge to Greenberg's Universal 20A. We offer three arguments based on noun class agreement, number distinction, and immediate constituency.

First, Kießling (2018:49-50) considers the putative CLs grammaticalized forms of nouns in the associative construction composed of two nouns, [N N Num], where the first noun is the head (Seguin 1998:48-49, Watters 1981: 105, Kaufman 1969:174). Following Her's (2017a) account of putative classifiers in Ejagham, we argue the putative classifiers are still nouns and thus agree with the numeral agree in noun class.

Second, Kießling (2018:61) considers the loss of number distinction of singular vs. plural evidence for CL, e.g., the singular form *lí* 'eye' in (1) does not agree with the plural number *íbá* 'two'. However, number distinction is indeed observed in Bali-Mungaka.

- (6) Singular form *lí*; plural form *mi*

a. *lí'kǔ* (singular form *lí*)

'single root of colocasias' (Tischhauser & Stöckle 1993:164)

- b. *mi* ' *kǔ* *iba*
 a.single of colocasias two
 'two colocasias' (Tischhauser & Stöckle 1993:164)

Third, the putative [CL N Num] construction requires a right-branching structure, [[CL N] Num]] (Kießling 2018:57), exactly that of the associative construction, [[N N] Num]] (Kaufman 1969:186). However, Her (2017a) and Her & Tsai (2020) have demonstrated that left-branching account, where Num and CL form an immediate constituent excluding Num, should be much favored cross-linguistically given its explanatory adequacy. Thus, in the undisputed right-branching structure of the putative [[CL N] Num]] construction, the putative CL is likely still a noun.

To summarize, syntactically the putative numeral classifier in the [CL N Num] construction in Niger-Congo is likely still a noun and therefore poses no challenge to Greenberg's Universal 20A, i.e., N does not intervene between Num and CL.

Keywords:

numeral classifier, word order, Niger-Congo languages, associative construction

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