The extension of person name markers to noun class markers

Bernhard Wälchli
Stockholm University
bernhard@ling.su.se

Using a diverse convenience sample with languages from all continents, this paper explores how noun class markers can develop from person name markers or from personal pronouns via person name markers.

Person name markers can grammaticalize from nouns or from personal pronouns. They can have or lack sex distinctions. In some languages they cumulate with case or topic. Noun classes fall into gender and classifiers, which typologists find increasingly difficult to distinguish. Gender tends to be more grammaticalized, which is largely due to cumulation with another grammatical category, notably number, case and/or person. Instances of recent origin of gender, such as animacy in Slavic, where gender has developed from different object marking and has travelled down the animacy hierarchy from pronouns to proper names and further to appellative humans and animals, as can be observed in Old Russian and Russian, demonstrate that the tight interaction of gender with case, number or person can date back to the origin of the gender category, and need not be a secondary development from classifiers.

A first step in the extension of person name markers is older kinship terms, notably 'father' and 'mother' and human interrogatives 'who?'. Person name markers can then further develop to uniqueness markers. There are several instances where non-canonical noun class systems can be shown to have originated from person name markers, notably Nalca (Mek, Trans-New Guinea phylum), Owa (Oceanic, Austronesian) and Mopan Maya.

It a wide range of languages from different places in the world, noun class markers are so-called pronominal articles, which means that noun class markers have the same form as third person pronouns and have developed from third person pronouns. Interestingly, many languages with pronominal articles use pronominal articles with proper names. This suggests that pronominal articles can grammaticalize via person name markers.