

CLASSIFICATORY PARTICLES IN KILIVILA

GUNTER SENFT

Classificatory Particles in Kilivila

OXFORD STUDIES
IN
ANTHROPOLOGICAL
LINGUISTICS William Bright, *General Editor*

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New York Oxford
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS
1996

OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

Oxford New York
Athens Auckland Bangkok Bombay
Calcutta Cape Town Dar es Salaam Delhi
Florence Hong Kong Istanbul Karachi
Kuala Lumpur Madras Madrid Melbourne
Mexico City Nairobi Paris Singapore
Taipei Tokyo Toronto

and associated companies in
Berlin Ibadan

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Published by Oxford University Press, Inc.
198 Madison Avenue, New York, New York 10016

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Senft, Gunter 1952-
Classificatory Particles in Kiriwina / Gunter Senft
p. cm. - (Oxford Studies in Anthropological Linguistics)
Includes bibliographical reference and index.
ISBN 0-19-509211-2
1. Kiriwina language-Particles
2. Kiriwina language-Classification
3. Trobriand Islands (Papua New Guinea-Languages-Grammar)
I. Title II. Series
PL6252. K5S38 1995
499'. 12-dc20
Printing (last digit) : 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
Printed in the United States of America
on acid free paper

pela minana sinebada namanabweta
nakabitam ula kwava nabweliguee

BARBARA

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... Cassirer 1923 behandelt im ersten Teil seiner *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen* die menschliche Sprache, wobei auch die "Grundrichtungen der sprachlichen Klassenbildung" besprochen werden... Das Wort "Philosophie" möchte vielleicht Namen, wie die eines MAUTHNER und HOOGLIET und andere mehr in Erinnerung rufen, hier aber ganz zu unrecht. Dieses Buch ist reich an Gedanken und Einsichten, äußerst suggestiv und lehrreich.

Es sei nicht die Aufgabe der Sprachphilosophie "die verschiedenen Formen der Begriffs- und Klassenbildung, die in den Einzelsprachen wirksam sind, zu beschreiben, und sie in ihren letzten geistigen Motiven zu verstehen... Die Wege, die die Sprache hier einschlägt, sind so vielfältig verschlungen und so dunkel, daß es nur durch die genaueste Versenkung und durch die feinste Einfühlung in das Detail der Einzelsprachen gelingen kann, sie allmählich zu erhellen. Denn gerade die Art der Klassenbildung macht ein wesentliches Moment jener "inneren Form" aus, durch welche sich die Sprachen spezifisch voneinander unterscheiden".

Man sieht, daß sich CASSIRER visionärer Flüge in das Reich der erphantasierbaren Möglichkeiten enthält und dauernde Fühlungnahme fordert mit der reichen Mannigfaltigkeit der sprachlichen Tatsachen. Aber wenn auch die verschiedenen Klassifikationssysteme in verschiedenen Varianten wechselten, so könnten doch in dieser großen Mannigfaltigkeit "gewisse allgemeine Gesichtspunkte" entdeckt werden. Zweifellos sei es möglich, diese Gesichtspunkte so anzuordnen, "daß man dabei jenen ständigen Fortgang vom "Konkreten" zum "Abstrakten", der die Richtung der Sprachentwicklung überhaupt bestimmt, als leitendes Prinzip benutzt". Aber, so fügt CASSIRER... hier richtig hinzu, man dürfe nicht vergessen, "daß es sich hier nicht um eine zeitliche, sondern um eine methodische Schichtung handelt, und daß demnach in einer gegebenen historischen Gestalt der Sprache die Schichten, die wir hier gedanklich zu sondern versuchen, neben- und miteinander bestehen und sich in der mannigfachsten Weise übereinander lagern können".

Gerlach Royen (1929:254-255)

... wer auf der Studierstube ein System zimmert, ohne es der Welt anzupassen, der lebt entweder seinem System all Augenblick schnurstracks zuwider, oder er lebt gar nicht.

Jakob Michael Reinhold Lenz (1774)

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Preface

We shall deal in this article with a single phenomenon, namely, the *classificatory formatives* in the language of Kiriwina, Trobriand Islands, an archipelago lying due north of the eastern end of New Guinea.

Bronislaw Malinowski (1922:37)

Classification is certainly a basic fact of life. That classification abilities are necessary for the survival of every organism is an important insight of biology. Human beings classify consciously and unconsciously—and subconsciously, of course—in all situations. When we confront a scientific problem, we try to solve it by first classifying the various parts of the problem. Thus it is not surprising that the history not only of philosophy but of all branches of science is also the history of how these sciences have classified their research subject. Classification always implies selection because, as Koestler (1978:201) stated,

(our) minds would cease to function if we had to attend to each of the millions of stimuli which—in William James's classic phrase—constantly bombard our receptor organs in a "blooming, buzzing confusion." Thus the nervous system and the brain itself function as a multilevelled hierarchy of filtering and classifying devices, which eliminate a large proportion of the input as irrelevant "noise," and assemble the relevant information into coherent patterns before it is represented to consciousness.

If we want to communicate about this perceived, classified, and filtered input, we have to classify once more: We have to transform this input into classes and categories provided by the systems that organize our communicative verbal and nonverbal faculties. With our systems of language and gesture, we again classify and filter on various levels while communicating. On one of these levels, we decide, for example, on the grammatical structure we want to use to refer to what we want to communicate about; on another level, we also have to classify the referents of our communication. Linguistics is the science that tries to describe, illuminate, and explain the processes of classification that are relevant for communication—and this goal is the reason that many

linguists find their discipline so fascinating. Indeed, human beings have developed a number of different linguistic techniques to apprehend the world, providing an enormous database for the analysis of this problem. This book deals with a classification technique used by the speakers of an Austronesian language, Kilivila.

In August 1982, I entered for the first time the district that was to be the future site of my linguistic fieldwork—the Trobriand Islands in Milne Bay Province of Papua New Guinea. I did so with, I suppose, almost the same feelings of intense interest and suspense that Malinowski felt (Malinowski 1922:51). However, I had the enormous advantage of having read Malinowski's masterpieces on the Trobriand Islanders' culture. Nevertheless, there is a difference between having read about a completely foreign world and actually confronting it. The aim of my research project was to describe and explain aspects of ritual communication. To achieve this aim, it was necessary to acquire a certain competence in the language, of course. Since there was no existing grammar of the Trobrianders' language, writing a grammar was one of the prerequisites (G. Senft 1986:3–5). Among the few linguistically reliable sources on Kilivila was Malinowski's fascinating article "Classificatory Particles in the Language of Kiriwina," published in 1920. Working on this system of classifiers became one of my preoccupations as soon as I was able to master the language. After fifteen months of field research, I returned to Germany with a great deal of data on classifiers, knowing that I would concern myself for a long time with the analysis of these data and with an attempt to understand this system and its importance for the language as well as for the culture. This concern is documented in a number of publications (G. Senft 1983, 1985a, 1985b:133–134, 1986:68–72, 1987a, 1989, 1991c, 1993).

In this book, I present the results of almost ten years' work on the system of classificatory particles in Kilivila. However, I am not at all sure whether this means that I am really "through" with my Trobriand friends' classifier system.

The work is offered as a contribution to the research on classifiers and classifier languages.

It is an empirical work, based on data gathered during a period of fifteen months of field research in 1982 and 1983 and four months of field research in 1989. It is extremely data-oriented and emphasizes the use of classifiers in social contexts. The aim of this work is to describe (1) the functions of the system of Kilivila classifiers; (2) the acquisition of the classifier system; (3) the inventory of Kilivila classificatory particles (produced in actual speech); (4) the processes of language change that affect the system; and (5) the semantics of the Kilivila classifier system.

The introductory chapter—based on a broad survey of the relevant literature—gives a general definition of the concepts "classifier languages" and "classifiers" and presents the aims and methods pursued in traditional studies on the classifier systems of classifier languages in general and on the Kilivila language in particular. Chapter 2 presents a description of the

grammatical and discourse functions of the system of classificatory particles (CPs) in the Kilivila language.

The third chapter is the central chapter of this book. After a description of the aims and methods used in data collection, the CP data gathered in a specially developed elicitation test, as well as CP data documented in my overall corpus of Kilivila speech, are presented in detail. First, the CP production data are presented and preliminarily interpreted separately for each of the five age groups into which I divided my consultants. This data presentation is meant to give the reader a first impression and a general account of CP production in each of the five age groups. Second, the data gathered in the CP elicitation test are presented in two ways: (1) the CP types and the respective tokens produced by all consultants during the elicitation test are given, including a description of which consultant produced how many tokens of the respective CP type; and (2) the CP types produced by all consultants in the elicitation test are given, allocating the tokens of the CP type produced to the CP type or types actually expected. Finally, the CP types and tokens documented in my overall corpus of Kilivila speech data are presented.

This kind of data presentation serves as an empirical, checkable basis for the analyses necessary to reach the aims of this study. I am aware that this large-scale presentation requires space; however, it allows the critical reader to check (and countercheck) all the analyses and all the inferences made using these data. Moreover, it is hoped that this large-scale data presentation makes it easier for the reader to understand the train of thought that starts with the empirical datum elicited (on the basis of theoretical reflection and ideas presented in the relevant literature) and leads to the description, interpretation, and evaluation of this empirical datum, resulting in theoretical conclusions.

Following the data presentation, the results of the CP research are given. First, the question of how the CP system is acquired by Trobriand children is considered. Here, all but one of the many side issues of this complex question are answered. The subquestion of why the individual CPs are acquired in the order found is the last question addressed in this chapter, because the answer requires the information provided by the answers to the other two main questions raised in the study. The question of how the individual CP types are produced in actual speech is considered next. The third and last question answered in chapter 3 is that of the semantic domains constituted by the CP system. The headings of the sections and subsections in chapter 3 should make it easy for readers to find the answers to aspects of this study that may be of special interest to them.

Chapter 4 presents the results of a restudy I did in the Trobriand Islands in 1989, in which I reconsidered the results of my analyses of the Kilivila CP system based on data gathered in 1982 and 1983.

Chapter 5 is an excursus; it discusses—with all necessary caution—possible interdependencies between language, culture, and cognition based on an analysis of the CP system.

Chapter 6 summarizes the results of the study and presents a “network” model for the description of classifier systems.

Appendix A lists the individual consultants used in gathering CP data in 1982 and 1983; appendix B lists which consultant produced which CP in what text category in my overall corpus of Kilivila speech data; appendix C lists the consultants I worked with during my restudy in 1989; and appendix D presents some hypotheses on the origin of classifiers.

I would like to mention here two concepts that are central in understanding the research and the arguments that I present.

First, I speak of the “system” of CPs in Kilivila and of “systems of classification” in general. I do this not only because I follow the general usage in the literature, but especially because I am convinced that my analyses of the CPs in Kilivila justify the use of the term “system.” One of the aims of this research is to describe a set of elements—that is the set of CPs in Kilivila—and the set of relations existing among these elements (Klaus 1968:634). I try to describe the internal order among linguistic elements and to present the functional relation that can be found on various levels of description and in relation to social and other subsystems (Bussmann 1983:489).

Second, I speak of “referents” and of the “act of referring.” A referent is an object or a fact in the extralinguistic reality to which noun phrases as verbal signs “refer.” By “act of referring,” I understand on the one hand the verbal reference to language-internal and language-external contexts and on the other hand the relation between the verbal expression (name, word, etc.) and the object in the extralinguistic reality to which the expression refers (Bussmann 1983:428).

I would like to end this preface with a warning to my readers: much of this book contains rather dry linguistic descriptions. However, I hope that the results presented help readers forget some of these long hauls and that they may get at least an impression of the fascination I experience in dealing with the complex linguistic phenomenon of classifier systems in general and in particular the system of classificatory particles in Kilivila.

June 1995
Nijmegen, The Netherlands

G.S.

Acknowledgments

During my work in Tauwema in the Trobriand Islands and during the writing of this book, I received the help of many people and institutions. First, I want to thank the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG: Ei-24/10-1-5; Se-473/2-1-2), especially Ursula Far Hollender and Manfred Briegel; the Research Unit for Human Ethology of the Max-Planck-Society; and the Cognitive Anthropology Research Group at the Max-Planck-Institute for Psycholinguistics for their support during my field research.

I am also indebted to Penelope Brown, Bernard Comrie, Volker Heeschen, Stephen C. Levinson, Bernd Nothofer, Roland Posner, and Barbara Unterbeck for their critical reading of first drafts of this monograph; their extensive comments were extremely valuable to me in the preparation of this book.

I would like to thank William Bright and two anonymous referees for their insightful comments, and I thank the team at Oxford University Press for their helpfulness and expertise.

I want to thank the National and Provincial Governments in Papua New Guinea and Milne Bay Province for their assistance with, and permission for, my research projects. I also thank the Departments of Linguistics and Anthropology of the University of Papua New Guinea, the Institute of Papua New Guinea Studies, the Council of Chiefs of the Trobriand Islands, and the Embassy of the Federal Republic of Germany in P.N.G. for their support of my research.

I especially thank the people of the Trobriand Islands, and above all the inhabitants of Tauwema and my consultants for their hospitality, friendship, and patient cooperation. Without their help, none of my work on the Kilivila language and the Trobriand culture would have been possible.

Although I typed the manuscript myself, finishing touches have been made by Edith Sjoerdsma and Gertie de Groen. All the problems I had with the various computers I used were competently solved by Gertie de Groen, Caroline Rek, Herbert Baumann, and Karl Grammer. Many thanks to all of them.

A German version of this manuscript was accepted as my Habilitationsschrift at the Fachbereich 1 of the Technische Universität Berlin. I would like to thank all the people involved in the process of my Habilitation for their support and for helpful comments on my research.

Last, but by no means least, I want to thank my wife for her patience and perseverance in discussing my research with me, criticizing it, and living and working with me in the field. I dedicate this monograph to Barbara Senft.

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Contents

Chapter

1

Introduction

3

1.1	What Are Classifier Languages?	3
1.2	What Are Classifiers?	5
1.3	Structure and Function of Classifier Systems	9
1.4	Methods and Aims of Traditional Classifier Studies—A Brief Survey	11
1.4.1	Studies on Classifier Languages	11
1.4.2	Studies on Kilivila	14

Chapter

2

Classificatory Particles in Kilivila: Grammatical and Discourse Functions

16

2.1	Morphological Relevance	16
2.2	Functions of CPs in Kilivila	18
2.2.1	Referential Function—Concord	18
2.2.2	Nominalization, Plural Marking, Numeralization, and Verblike Expressive Functions	20
2.2.3	Redundancy, Ellipsis, and Discourse Coherence	20
2.3	Summary	22

Chapter

3

The System of Classificatory Particles in Kilivila

24

3.1	Aims and Methods	24
3.2	The Data	31
3.2.1	Interpretation of the Data by Age Group	32
3.2.1.1	Age Group I	32
3.2.1.2	Age Group II	41
3.2.1.3	Age Group III	52
3.2.1.4	Age Group IV	62
3.2.1.5	Age Group V	73

3.2.2	Complete Lists of Data Used in the Analyses	86
3.2.2.1	CP Types/Tokens Produced by All Consultants During the Elicitation Test	87
3.2.2.2	CP Types/Tokens Produced Versus CP Types Expected During the Elicitation Test	134
3.2.2.3	CP Types and Tokens Documented in the Corpus of Transcribed Kilivila Speech	161
3.3	Results	171
3.3.1	Which Formatives Constitute the Kilivila CP System and What Is the Actual Occurrence of CPs in Recorded Tests?	171
3.3.2	How Is the CP System Acquired by Trobriand Children?	180
3.3.2.1	What Is the General Temporal Progress of the CP Acquisition Process?	180
3.3.2.2	Are There Any Differences in the CP Acquisition Process With Respect to the Production of Demonstrative Pronouns, Adjectives, and Numerals That Use CPs as Morphemes in Their Word Formation?	181
3.3.2.3	Are There Any Gender-Specific Differences in the CP Acquisition Process?	182
3.3.2.4	What Is the Order in Which the Individual CPs Are Acquired?	183
3.3.2.5	Are There Any Parallels Between Kilivila CP Acquisition and CP Acquisition Data for Other Classifier Languages?	193
3.3.2.6	Excursus: Are There Parallels Between the Kilivila Data and Acquisition Data With Respect to Demonstrative Pronouns, Adjectives, and Numerals for such Indo-European Languages as English and German?	195
3.3.3	What Is the Realization of the Individual CP Types in Actual Speech?	197
3.3.3.1	Can a Classification of the CP System Be Devised?	198
3.3.3.2	How Do the Consultants Realize the Individual CP Types and Can We Observe Any Processes of Language Change in Progress?	202
3.3.3.3	Why Are the CP Types Affected by Processes of Language Change, and Who Opposes and Who Fosters Language Change?	227
3.3.3.4	What Are the Possible Consequences of Language Change for the Grammar of Kilivila?	236
3.3.4	What Semantic Domains Are Constituted by the Kilivila CP System?	236
3.3.4.1	What Semantic Domains Are Constituted by the Described Subset of the Kilivila CP System?	237
3.3.4.2	What Are the Dynamics of the Semantic Domains Constituted by the CPs and What Rules Do Speakers Use in Their Production of a Certain CP?	242
3.3.4.3	A Flashback: Why Are the Individual CPs Acquired in a Certain Order?	290

Chapter

4

On the Validity of Some of the Presented Results: Six Years Later—A Restudy	295
--	------------

Chapter

5

Excursus: Language, Culture, and Cognition?	312
--	------------

Chapter

6

Closing Remarks: Using Network Models to Describe Classifier Systems	323
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Appendix A	Consultants: 1982/1983 Study	330
Appendix B	Number of CP Tokens Produced for Each CP Type by Text and Word Class for Consultants in Corpus of Kilivila Speech Data	333
Appendix C	Consultants: 1989 Restudy	339
Appendix D	Some Speculations on the Origin of Classifiers	352
References		355
Index		371

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Classificatory Particles in Kilivila
