

Pronouns and Gender: Exploring Nominal Classification Systems in Northern New Guinea

Mark Donohue

UNIVERSITY OF SYDNEY

This article is intended not as an overview of the range of nominal classification systems that can be found in the northern part of West Papua, but as a discussion of a typologically rare development of classification that is found in some languages of this quarter of New Guinea. This discussion is set in a brief discussion of some of the more typical systems that are found in geographically, and genetically, divergent languages of the region. The focus of the article is the presentation of data that shows the classification of the personal pronouns into different gender classes, and examines possible motivations for this unusual phenomenon.

1. NOMINAL CLASSIFICATION. The term “nominal classification” is used here to designate any grammatical system within a language that functions to divide the natural world into two or more parts. In New Guinea languages that employ overt nominal classification, the most common division is a two-way distinction between masculine (male, animate, long, strong, warlike, hot, bright, mobile) and feminine (female, inanimate, short, squat, weak, cold, dark, static) categories (for a discussion of these systems in New Guinea, see Foley 1986:80–81). I shall present data from four languages of northern West Papua that employ this distinction, two with fairly typical (from a European perspective) consequences, and two that show a typologically unusual extension of the classification system from the third person into the first and second persons (henceforth referred to as local persons) as well and, crucially, employing this distinction to separate these persons into different gender classes.

2. CLASSIFICATION WITHIN THE THIRD PERSON ONLY. The simplest forms of nominal classification, and those with the least abstractions and culturally-specific decisions, are those that encode the difference between male and female sex in the language, typically at some point in the pronominal system. The obvious starting point for this is the third person, where gender differences are most likely,

cross-linguistically, to be found. Possible complications of this basic system (which is found in English) can involve the extension of the differences to nonsingular members (though see Plank and Schellinger [1997] for examples of gender in nonsingular members of a paradigm, but not in the singular), or to extend the classification to inanimate objects that lack discernible sex. An example of an uncomplicated system can be found in Saweru, and a more complicated one is seen in Skou.

2.1 SAWERU. Saweru is one of two languages in the Yawa family, and is spoken by an aging population on the island of the same name just southeast of Serui, off the island of Yapen in Cenderawasih Bay (Anceaux 1961; Ayeri and Donohue 1999).

Saweru displays a gender distinction in the third-person singular forms of its pronouns, just as in English. Unlike English, the gender distinction is present in all the pronominal agreement paradigm sets, excepting only the dative suffixes. The forms of the different pronouns are given in table 1; those showing gender differences are marked in bold.¹

The use of the correct member of the third-person singular paradigm is required whenever an argument is referred to that is animate, and has thus a perceptible sex difference (mosquitoes, for instance, do not display a difference between masculine and feminine agreement). A basic example of the use of the different genders is given in the two sentences below. The first shows the use of the third-person singular feminine agreement clitic when the subject of the verb is a discernibly female entity, and the second shows that when the subject is discernibly male, the masculine nominative marker must be used.

- (1) Martha mo=nunu.
Martha 3SG.F=sit
'Martha is sitting.'
- (2) Alfons fo=nunu.
Alfons 3SG.M=sit
'Alfons is sitting.'

TABLE 1. SAWERU PRONOMINAL FORMS

	FREE	NOMINATIVE	GENITIVE1	GENITIVE2	DATIVE
1SG	inei	o=	ina-	isa-	-inai
2SG	iwei	no=	na-	ina-	-nai
3SG.M	afi	fo=	a-	afea-	-dai
3SG.F	ami	mo=	ra-	amea-	-dai
1DU	imai	imo=	isa-	imama-	-jai
2DU	iweri	i=	ya-	wawa-	-yai
3DU	enanai	yo=	ya-	yaya-	-jai
1PL	amai	amo=	asa-	imama-	-asai
2PL	wayawai	wa=	wa-	wawa-	-wai
3PL	enanawi	wo=	ya-	yaya-	-masai

1. The following abbreviations have been used: 1, first person; 2, second person; 3, third person; SG, singular; DU, dual; PL, plural; AGR, agreement; ANIM, animate; DAT, dative; F or FEM, feminine; INAN, inanimate; M or MASC, masculine; OBJ, object; POSS, possessive; TPAST, today's past.

The use of the “wrong” agreement marker is ungrammatical: **Martha fonunu*, **Alfons monunu*. Similar real-world factors affect the use of the genitive clitics, and the (more rarely encountered) free pronouns.

The Saweru nominal classification system can be seen to be one based purely on real-world sex differences. All inanimate objects that require pronominal references use the masculine set of pronouns, which are thus perhaps better referred to as the nonfeminine set. There is no distinction in the nonsingular pronouns, nor is there any indication of the classification system other than by the pronominal paradigm, so the functional load played by gender in Saweru is not great. The fact that a gender distinction is present for the free pronouns and the nominative, genitive1, and genitive2 bound forms means that the distinction between the two genders is frequently encountered.

Finally, it is worth noting that, in all the pronominal forms, there are separate forms for the local persons that do not bear any resemblance to the gendered third-person forms. There cannot, thus, be any assignment of gender to the local persons, and so no consideration of the “gender” of first or second persons (compare with Jarawara [Dixon and Vogel, forthcoming], in which absolutive gender agreement on verbs has one form for third-person masculine, and another form for third-person feminine and all other persons, thus displaying a system that monitors masculine, indicating the real-life sex of the referent, versus nonmasculine, for all other referents).

2.2 SKOU. Skou is the westernmost language of the Sko family, and is spoken in three villages located just west of the Papua New Guinea border along the northern coast of New Guinea (Cowan 1952a, 1952b, Donohue 1999, Galis 1955, Hanasbey and Donohue 1999a, 1999b, Kemo et al. 1999, Laycock 1975, Voorhoeve 1971).

As with Saweru, the nominal classification system in Skou serves to divide the third-person singular category into masculine and feminine categories, and, as in Saweru, it is evidenced in the forms of certain verbs as well as the third-person singular pronouns. We will not discuss the pronouns here, because they show a simple difference in the singular between masculine (*ke*) and feminine (*pe*), and none in the plural (*te*). Instead, we examine the verbal system.

A typical example of these alternations is the verb *fue* ‘see’, which displays the following changes according to features of the object (while other verbs mark the differences in different ways, the system of alternations is the same; where two cells have the same form in this discussion illustrated with *fue*, such as masculine plural and feminine plural in table 2, the same identity of form will be found with other verbs as well).

TABLE 2. SKOU OBJECT MARKING BY VOWEL

	SG	PL
MASC	fue	fe
FEM	fu	fe

The gender distinction, which is shown by vowel alternations, disappears in the plural, where *fe* is used for both masculine and feminine nouns. Examples of the function of these forms are given (3–5).

- (3) Mè kù nì ne mè=fue.
 2SG child ISG.POSS ISG.DAT 2SG=see.M.SG
 ‘You saw my son.’
- (4) Mè kù nì ne mè=fu.
 2SG child ISG.POSS ISG.DAT 2SG=see.F.SG
 ‘You saw my daughter.’
- (5) Mè kù nì ne mè=fe.
 2SG child ISG.POSS ISG.DAT 2SG=see.PL
 ‘You saw my children.’

Unlike Saweru, there are significant complications in the Skou classification system. In addition to the masculine-feminine distinction seen above for animate nouns, there is also a cross-cutting division into animate and inanimate, with inanimate nouns also able to be classified as masculine or feminine. Examples of the extension of the gender system to inanimate objects can be seen in (6) and (7).

- (6) Mè pìng (anangbí, fe, òe) mè=fue.
 2SG arrow (machete, chopsticks, dowel) 2SG=SEE.M.SG
 ‘You saw an arrow (machete, chopstick, dowel).’
- (7) Mè ha (wá, lang, a) mè=fu.
 2SG string.bag (carrying basket, pot, bucket) 2SG=SEE.F.SG
 ‘You saw a string bag (carrying basket, pot, bucket).’

The animate-inanimate dimension interacts with gender in the singular as in table 3.² We can see that there is no difference in the singular between animate and inanimate entities. In the plural, the different pattern of table 4 is seen.

TABLE 3. ANIMACY AND GENDER MARKING: SINGULAR OBJECT

SINGULAR	ANIM	INAN
MASC	fue	fue
FEM	fu	fu

TABLE 4. ANIMACY AND GENDER MARKING: PLURAL OBJECT

PLURAL	ANIM	INAN
MASC	fe	fu
FEM	fe	fu

2. The use of the terms “masculine” and “feminine” with respect to inanimate objects, and when referring to nonthird persons (table 6) represents a translation of the terms used by Skou speakers to characterize these categories (*te báleng* ‘masculine’ and *te ùeme* ‘feminine’). Similarly, the use of the terms “animate” and “inanimate” is based on local emic categories (‘things with souls’ and ‘things that don’t have souls’).

Compare (8) and (9), which illustrate the difference between animate and inanimate monitored on the verb.

(8) Mè peangkù héngtong mè=fé. * Mè peangkù héngtong mè=fu.
 2SG girl three 2SG=see.PL.ANIM
 ‘You saw three girls.’

(9) Mè ha héngtong mè=fu. * Mè ha héngtong mè=fé.
 2SG string.bag three 2SG=see.PL.INAN
 ‘You saw three string bags.’

In this part of the paradigm, the generalization is that there is no difference between the genders: only the animate-inanimate dimension is monitored.

For the local persons, the verb forms chosen in the singular are the masculine ones, regardless of the real-world sex of the referent:

(10) Ke nì ke=fue. * Ke nì ke=fu.
 3SG.M 1SG 3SG.M=see.M.SG
 ‘He saw me (male or female speaking).’

(11) Ke mè ke=fue. * Ke mè ke=fu.
 3SG.M 2SG 3SG.M=see.M.SG
 ‘He saw you (male or female addressed).’

We can see that there is thus an extension of the nominal classification scheme into the local pronouns as well, in that these categories all show the masculine agreement pattern, and not one based on the real-world sex of the referent. This is, however, merely an indication of the unmarked member of the set (at least for singular referents) of the *fue-fu* pair.

We also see a collapse of the masculine-feminine distinction in favor of the animate-inanimate one in the plural. That means that the animate-inanimate superclass overrides the masculine-feminine gender only in the plural; in the singular, the masculine-feminine gender outranks the animate-inanimate superclass in terms of being parsed by the available morphology. The full paradigm of distinctions is shown in table 5.

The important differences between the Skou and the Saweru systems are two: first, the addition of the animacy dimension, and second—and for the purposes of this paper more importantly—the gender system is extended to mark the nonthird-person singular pronouns; interestingly, it is the masculine that extends to these new domains, the opposite of the system in Jarawara. This is seen in table 6.

TABLE 5. FULL SKOU GENDER AND ANIMACY OBJECT PARADIGM

		SG	PL
ANIM	MASC	fue	fe
	FEM	fu	fe
INAN	MASC	fue	fu
	FEM	fu	fu

TABLE 7. ANIMATE CATEGORIES IN BURMESO

	SG	PL
MASC	j-	s-
FEM	g-	s-

- (13) Da tamo j-ih-i-maru.
 ISG man.SG AGR-see-TPAST
 'I saw a man.'
- (14) Da nawak g-ih-i-maru.
 ISG woman.SG AGR-see-TPAST
 'I saw a woman.'
- (15) Da dit / nudo s-ih-i-maru.
 ISG men.PL women.PL AGR-see-TPAST
 'I saw some men/women.'

Examining just this part of the paradigm, this system appears the same as the Saweru and Skou classification systems seen above. Ignoring the inanimate paradigm, we can see how Burmeso differs by showing the extension of the masculine–feminine distinction into the nonthird-person pronouns. Examine the following two sentences in light of the above three:

- (16) Da ba j-ih-i-maru. (17) Ba da g-ih-i-maru.
 ISG 2SG AGR-SEE-TPAST 2SG ISG AGR-SEE-TPAST
 'I saw you.' 'You saw me.'

In the first of these, the object is second person, and the agreement prefix on the verb is the same as that used with a masculine third-person object; in the second sentence, the object is second person, and the agreement prefix is the same as that seen with a feminine object. First, the two nonthird persons are not treated alike with respect to gender choice, and second, the first person is feminine while the second person is masculine.

The complete system is summarized in table 8. The pattern observed here is different from the limited intrusion of gender into nonthird persons that has been seen in Skou (and mentioned for Jarawara). In Burmeso, the two third-person genders are both used to mark the nonthird persons in the singular, with the first person classed as feminine and the second person as masculine. As with Skou, the gender distinction is lost in the plural. This is perhaps not surprising, because there is no gender distinction in the third-person plural either.

3. There are two, arbitrary classes of verbs with different prefix sets; those shown in table 7 represent the most frequent set, and, while differing in form from the prefixes of the other verb class, do not differ in arrangement. The Burmeso examples are presented in an orthography halfway between the practical orthography and the underlying phonemic system. Most notably, /j/ has been written before [i], in which position it is neither pronounced nor represented orthographically; (13) is written *Da tamo ihimaru*.

TABLE 8. ANIMATE CATEGORIES IN BURMESO

	SG	PL
1	g-	s-
2	j-	s-
3MASC	j-	s-
3FEM	g-	s-

3.2 ORYA. Orya is the easternmost member of the Tor-Orya family that reaches from the Tor River south of Sarmi to the little-surveyed upper Taritatu (Idenburg) River. It is spoken in a wide band stretching from just inland of the coast to Guay and Ures. All data are from personal communication with Phil Fields (Summer Institute of Linguistics, Irian Jaya branch, Indonesia), who patiently elaborated Orya grammar for me, and from Fields 1997.

Orya has a gender difference shown by verbal suffixation, with two suffixes that indicate nominative, accusative, and dative categories. Table 9 shows the use of these suffixes in both transitive and intransitive verb forms for third persons (only singular number has been shown to avoid distraction from the gender data; similarly, the dative suffixes, which parallel the accusative suffixes exactly in distribution, are not exemplified).

As can be seen in table 9, gender is marked in Orya for both subject and object. The suffixes *-ta* and *-gu* indicate masculine and feminine object, respectively, and the suffixes *-'ara* and *-'an* mark masculine and feminine subject (in the present tense; some limited vowel harmony is seen following the *-gu* suffix). Most interesting, however, is the use of these same distinctions for nonthird-person categories, as seen in table 10, which extends table 9 to include all (singular) persons. Although there are no new morphological forms in the table, the pattern of extension of the third-person forms, which undoubtedly mark a gender distinction (based both on native speaker reports, translations, and the observed patterns of restrictions with respect to real-life sex in classification) is interesting, in that it shows a pattern similar to that seen in Burmeso.

Examining just the forms with a third-person subject, we can see that the accusative suffixes reflect real-life sex, rather than classifying these persons arbitrarily in terms of the third-person categories, as with Skou, and more dramatically with Burmeso absolutive marking. The nominative suffixes, however, *-'ara* and *-'an*, reflect a different pattern. The masculine suffixes are used with all second person subjects, regardless of whether the second person is male or female. Similarly, all first person subjects are indexed with the feminine suffixes, regardless of the real-life sex of the speaker.

There are thus two patterns: the accusative suffixes still distinguish real-life sex, and split each of the first and second persons into male and female; the nominative set of suffixes is the one that makes a selection for each of first and second person as to the grammatical gender of the whole person category.

Just as with the Burmeso absolutive prefixes, the nominative suffixes in Orya divide the pronouns into two genders, and it is the first person that is treated mor-

TABLE 9. GENDER IN ORYA THIRD PERSONS

SUBJECT	INTRANSITIVE		TRANSITIVE	
			3 MASC OBJECT	3 FEM OBJECT
3 SG MASC	-'ara		-ta-'ara	-gu-'ura
3 SG FEM	-'an		-ta-'an	-gu-'un

TABLE 10. GENDER IN ORYA FIRST, SECOND AND THIRD PERSONS

	1		2		3	
	MASC	FEM	MASC	FEM	MASC	FEM
1 MASC			-ta-'an	-gu-'un	-ta-'an	-gu-'un
1 FEM			-ta-'an	-gu-'un	-ta-'an	-gu-'un
2 MASC	-ta-'ara	-gu-'ura			-ta-'ara	-gu-'ura
2 FEM	-ta-'ara	-gu-'ura			-ta-'ara	-gu-'ura
3 MASC	-ta-'ara	-gu-'ura	-ta-'ara	-gu-'ura	-ta-'ara	-gu-'ura
3 FEM	-ta-'an	-gu-'un	-ta-'an	-gu-'un	-ta-'an	-gu-'un

phonologically in the same way as the feminine, and the second person that is treated as masculine. Again, it is the first person that is coded as female, and the second person that is coded as male.

4. POSSIBLE MOTIVATIONS? As Laycock (1977:36) observes, discussing the appearance of gender systems in a pronominal paradigm, “I know what sex I am, and can make a fair guess at what sex you are, but it is not always possible to be so sure of a third party.” This observation neatly explains the widespread use of gender in third persons, and the rarity of it in other persons. The use of morphemes that are used to differentiate gender in the local persons is functionally motivated only when there are no distinct forms of agreement morphology for those persons, and that is the case with three of the four languages examined here. We are thus asking the question as to why gender marking has been assigned so prominent a role in these languages, and why the (cross-linguistically more widely attested) option of having morphemes that are specific for person is not followed.

One possible motivation for this is the structure of narrative in the languages of northwestern new Guinea. Traditional stories in this part of the world (excluding the Skou, who are located at the extreme east of this region, and have cultural ties to the east) usually involve either two men, the heroes, pitted against a single, evil, female witch; or a lone woman pitted against two male forest creatures/spirits. Given extensive reference by means of verbal agreement alone, the use of a gender-marking system is motivated. Although this is an effective functional explanation for the system, the fact that narratives in languages lacking this grammatical gender system also follow the same broad male-versus-female opposition makes the requirement for the grammatical gender less certain.

The choice of the allocation of first person to feminine and second person to masculine is certainly more arbitrary. Orya speakers declare that the assignment of

second persons to masculine gender is made in order to honor the addressee: men occupy a much more prestigious role in most Melanesian cultures than do women, including that of the Orya, and so the treatment of an addressee, morphologically, as a man (regardless of real-world sex) is interpreted as a form of respect. This account, which requires some measure of suspension of belief, can account for the Skou, Burmeso, and Orya data seen above. It cannot, however, explain why first person is treated as masculine in Skou, and feminine in Burmeso and Orya.

Skou verbal indexing is not pronominal; there is always at least a free pronoun in addition to the verb. Skou, thus, does not—functionally speaking—require a distinction in the object-marking forms between local persons. Both Burmeso and Orya, on the other hand, have extensive NP-drop, and so may require more explicit verbal indexing. But it does not explain the lack of distinct forms for the local persons, and the particular configuration of the assignment of gender to these persons.

Apart from the unusual use of gender in these languages, there are almost no other typological correlates between Burmeso and Orya.⁴ We cannot hunt for explanations of the extension of gender distinctions to pronouns in the values of other grammatical categories.

We have also seen that other languages (such as Jarawara) that allow for the extension of a gender value (presumably the unmarked one) to the local person can select the nonmasculine as the unmarked. There cannot be a universal set of linguistic principles that dictates the extension of one gender (really a nongender) to index local persons.

We can, for the time being, only note the existence of this rare form of gender distinctions being made between different pronouns in different morphological classes (thus reducing the possibility of all this being due to chance resemblance), and note its appearance in this part of interior north-western New Guinea. Whether or not it proves to be a unique phenomenon cannot be known at this stage.

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4. In terms of Foley's (1998) proposed eight morphological criteria that are characteristic of Papuan languages, only three are shared between Burmeso and Orya. This is not indicative of a special relationship, given the prevalence of these typological parameters (no number or gender marked on nouns, suffixal case, strict categoriality of lexical roots) in the New Guinea region. Although not relevant to the discussion here, it is interesting to note that Saweru displays six of the morphological characteristics, despite being surrounded by Austronesian languages, and Skou shows traces of only two.

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