This paper discusses ‘noun class skewing,’ or variation in noun class agreement, in Ticuna (Ticuna-Yurí; Brazil, Colombia, Peru). Through primary field data gathered via elicitation, texts, and naturally occurring discourse, I show that Ticuna employs noun class skewing to convey two kinds of deictic properties: indefiniteness and social deixis.

Data. Ticuna displays a strict semantic noun class system. Absent skewing, nouns referring to female humans are assigned to Class I, male humans to Class II, and household objects to Class III. Most other nouns are assigned to Class IV. All constituents of the noun phrase agree in class with the head noun. In the verb phrase, subject markers and the existential verb agree in class with the subject (1). (Superscript numbers indicate lexical tone.)

(1) Verb phrase agreement with the Class I noun \(\text{no}^{31}\text{?e}^{5}\) ‘old woman’

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{ta}^{4} & \text{гу}^{31}\text{?e}^{2}\text{мa}^{3} \text{ga}^{4} \text{no}^{31}\text{?e}^{5} \\
\text{ta}^{4} & = \text{gu}^{31}\text{?e}^{2}\text{ma}^{3} \text{ga}^{4} \text{no}^{31}\text{?e}^{5} \\
3.1.\text{sbj} & = \text{exist.I} \quad \text{pst old.woman}(I) \\
\end{align*}
\]

‘There were old women.’ (elicited)

When skewing occurs, animate nouns that are typically Class II or Class IV receive Class I agreement on all agreement targets. This can index either indefiniteness or social deixis. In the social deixis use, skewing typically conveys that the referent of the noun is a senior consanguineal relative of the speaker, as in (2), but other readings are also available. Skewing is banned in certain morphosyntactic environments, such as existentials.

(2) Class II noun \(\text{o}^{1}\text{?i}^{5}\) ‘old man’ skewed into Class I, conveying social deixis

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{tau}^{4}\text{?e}^{3} \text{ta}^{2} & \text{o}^{1}\text{?i}^{5} \text{ri}^{1} \text{tj}^{o31}\text{?i}^{5} \text{Lima}=\text{wa}^{5} \text{ta}^{4}\text{mu}^{2} \\
\text{tau}^{4} & \text{?e}^{3} \text{ta}^{2} \text{o}^{1}\text{?i}^{5} \text{ri}^{1} \text{tj}^{o31} =\text{ti}^{5} \text{Lima}=\text{wa}^{5} \text{ta}^{4} = \text{mu}^{2} \\
\text{neg.exist} & -\text{nmlz:l info old.man}(II) \top \text{top 1sg} =\text{acc L} = \text{all 3.1.sbj} = \text{move} \\
\end{align*}
\]

‘My deceased (Class I) grandfather, he (Class I) sent me to Lima.’ (text)

Typology. Canonical gender systems are defined, in contrast to classifier systems, by rigid assignment of lexical items to genders (Aikhenvald, 2000; Corbett, 2017). Skewing makes the Ticuna noun class system superficially non-rigid. But crucially, deriving the deictic meaning of skewing requires comparison between a noun’s underlying noun class features and its surface agreement – showing that, even in skewing contexts, nouns have invariant noun class features in the morphosyntactic representation. On this analysis, Ticuna noun class in fact represents a near-canonical gender system (Corbett & Fedden, 2015).

Implications. Although noun class skewing is typologically common (Corbett 1991, 181-183; Singer 2016), only in a few languages does it regularly convey social deixis: Ticuna, Kambaata (Treis, 2007), Lak (Corbett, 1991), and Shona (Déchaîne et al., 2014). These languages show that the meaning conveyed by noun class can be pragmatic as well as narrowly semantic (cf. Corbett 2013). For the theory of deixis, they indicate that any feature of
the noun phrase – noun class as well as person and number (Fleming, 2015, 2017) – can potentially be manipulated to achieve social deixis.

References


Corbett, Greville. 2013. Politeness as a feature: so important and so rare. *Linguistik Online* 51(1).


