

WHAT DO CLASSIFIERS CLASSIFY?

MORPHOSYNTAX OF GENDER AND CLASSIFIERS IN JAPANESE

Daiho KITAOKA

Dr. Senior Lecturer

Department of Japanese Philology

Uzbekistan State World Languages University

Tashkent, Uzbekistan

KLASSIFIKATORLAR¹ NIMANI TASNIFLAYDI?

YAPON TILIDAGI JINS VA KLASSIFIKATORLAR MORFOSINTAKSI

Daiho KITAOKA

Katta o'qituvch (PhD)

Yapon filologiyasi kafedrası

O'zbekiston davlat jahon tillari universiteti

Toshkent, O'zbekiston

ЧТО КЛАССИФИЦИРУЮТ КЛАССИФИКАТОРЫ²?

МОРФОСИНТАКС РОДА И КЛАССИФИКАТОРЫ В ЯПОНСКОМ ЯЗЫКЕ

Дайхо КИТАОКА

PhD, старший преподаватель

Кафедра японской филологии

Узбекский государственный университет мировых языков

Ташкент, Узбекистан

For citation (iqtibos keltirish uchun, для цитирования):

Kitaoka D. What do classifiers classify? Morphosyntax of gender and classifiers in Japanese // O'zbekistonda xorijiy tillar. — 2024. — 10-jild, № 6. — B. 25-39.

<https://doi.org/10.36078/1735200179>

Abstract. This paper is part of the research project that examines the functions and distributions of classifiers in Japanese and other classifier languages, comparing them to other noun classification systems and with other number and counting systems. This paper specifically seek to investigate whether classifiers in Japanese are instances of Noun Classes (found in, e.g., Bantu languages), grammatical gender (found in, e.g., French, German, Russian), or animacy gender. Close scrutiny of the past relevant literature is conducted to elucidate these structures, and to investigate their

¹ "Lingvistikada klassifikator — ba'zi tillarda klassifikator obyektini kerakli kontekstga qarab tasniflash uchun ishlatiladigan so'z yoki morfema... Eng ko'p ishlatiladigan ma'nosi sanash so'zlari bo'lib, bu vyetnam, xitoy, kambodja, yapon va boshqa tillarda uchraydi"

[https://ru.ruwiki.ru/wiki/%D0%9A%D0%BB%D0%B0%D1%81%D1%81%D0%B8%D1%84%D0%B8%D0%BA%D0%B0%D1%82%D0%BE%D1%80_\(%D0%BB%D0%B8%D0%BD%D0%B3%D0%B2%D0%B8%D1%81%D1%82%D0%B8%D0%BA%D0%B0\)\)](https://ru.ruwiki.ru/wiki/%D0%9A%D0%BB%D0%B0%D1%81%D1%81%D0%B8%D1%84%D0%B8%D0%BA%D0%B0%D1%82%D0%BE%D1%80_(%D0%BB%D0%B8%D0%BD%D0%B3%D0%B2%D0%B8%D1%81%D1%82%D0%B8%D0%BA%D0%B0))) (izoh bizniki — *Tahr.*).

² «Классификатор в лингвистике — слово или морфема, используемые в некоторых языках для того, чтобы классифицировать объект классификатора, исходя из требуемого контекста... Чаше всего употребляется в значении счётных слов во вьетнамском, китайском, кхмерском, японском и других языках»

[https://ru.ruwiki.ru/wiki/%D0%9A%D0%BB%D0%B0%D1%81%D1%81%D0%B8%D1%84%D0%B8%D0%BA%D0%B0%D1%82%D0%BE%D1%80_\(%D0%BB%D0%B8%D0%BD%D0%B3%D0%B2%D0%B8%D1%81%D1%82%D0%B8%D0%BA%D0%B0\)\)](https://ru.ruwiki.ru/wiki/%D0%9A%D0%BB%D0%B0%D1%81%D1%81%D0%B8%D1%84%D0%B8%D0%BA%D0%B0%D1%82%D0%BE%D1%80_(%D0%BB%D0%B8%D0%BD%D0%B3%D0%B2%D0%B8%D1%81%D1%82%D0%B8%D0%BA%D0%B0))) (замечание наше. — *Ред.*).

Received: October 25, 2024

Accepted: December 17, 2024

Published: December 20, 2024

Copyright © 2024 by author(s).

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY 4.0).

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>



similarities and differences of these constructions. Linguistic data is also obtained from the judgments of native speakers. It is demonstrated that classifiers in Japanese do not pattern with Noun Classes or grammatical gender, in terms of their interactions with nouns and the flexibility. The introduction of constructions involving animacy gender, such as interrogatives and existential constructions, demonstrates that classifiers do not probe animacy gender of nouns. This paper presents some understudied applications of classifiers in Japanese, and offers a comparative study of the aforementioned constructions, which, in my shallow knowledge, have escaped attention in the past relevant literature. The work primarily examines classifiers in Japanese; nonetheless, it offers significant implications for other classifier languages as well as non-classifier languages with respect to number, counting properties, and the mass-count distinction.

Keywords: classifiers; gender; animacy; mass-count distinction; morphosyntax; Japanese.

Annotatsiya. Ushbu maqola yapon tilida va boshqa klassifikatorlardan foydalanadigan tillarda klassifikatorlarning funksiyalari va taqsimlanishini o'rganishga bag'ishlangan keng qamrovli tadqiqot loyihasining bir qismi hisoblanadi. Loyiha doirasida biz ushbu klassifikatorlarni turli xil otlarni tasniflash tizimlari va hisoblash tizimlari bilan solishtiramiz. Bu maqolada yapon tilidagi klassifikatorlar bantu tillaridagi otlar sinflariga o'xshashmi yoki ular Yevropa tillaridagi grammatik jins (rod)ga yaqinroqmi, degan masalaga e'tibor qaratamiz. Shuningdek, klassifikatorlarning otlar bilan o'zaro ta'sirini va qanchalik moslashuvchanligini tahlil qilamiz. Buning uchun oldingi yillardagi adabiyotlar va ona tilida so'zlashuvchilar o'rtasida o'tkazilgan so'rovlarni sinchiklab o'rganamiz, shunda ushbu tillarda otlar qanday tasniflanishi va tizimlar qanday farqlanishini aniqlashimiz mumkin bo'ladi. Tadqiqot natijalariga ko'ra, yapon tilidagi klassifikatorlar otlar sinflari yoki grammatik jins (rod)ga otlar bilan o'zaro ta'siri va moslashuvchanligi nuqtayi nazaridan mos kelmaydi. Jonli mavjudotlarning jinsi hisobga olinadigan tuzilmalarni, masalan, so'roq va mavjudlik konstruksiyalarini kiritish shuni ko'rsatadiki, klassifikatorlar jonli mavjudotlarning jinsini ko'rsatmaydi. Ushbu maqolada yapon tilidagi klassifikatorlardan foydalanishning kam o'rganilgan jihatlari ko'rib chiqiladi va yuqorida aytib o'tilgan konstruksiyalarning qiyosiy tahlili taklif etiladi. Ma'lum bo'lishicha, bu konstruksiyalar ilgari tegishli adabiyotlarda o'rganilmagan. Ushbu ish yapon tilidagi klassifikatorlarga bag'ishlangan bo'lsa-da, u, ayniqsa, miqdor, hisoblash xususiyatlari va ommaviy hisoblashdagi farqlar nuqtayi nazaridan klassifikatorlardan foydalanadigan boshqa tillar uchun ham, klassifikatorlardan foydalanmaydigan tillar uchun ham muhim ahamiyatga ega.

Kalit so'zlar: klassifikatorlar; jins (rod); animatsiya; ko'plik va hisobni farqlash; morfosintaksis; yapon tili.

Аннотация. Эта статья является частью обширного исследовательского проекта, посвященного изучению функций и распределению классификаторов в японском и других языках, которые используют классификаторы. В рамках проекта мы сравниваем эти классификаторы с различными системами классификации существительных и системами счисления. В статье мы сосредоточимся на вопросе, являются ли классификаторы в японском языке аналогами классов существительных, как это наблюдается в языках банту, или же

они больше похожи на грамматический род, как в европейских языках. Мы также проанализируем, как классификаторы взаимодействуют с существительными и насколько они гибки. Для этого мы тщательно изучим литературу прошлых лет и опросы носителей языка, чтобы понять, как классифицируются существительные в этих языках и как различаются системы. В результате исследования мы пришли к выводу, что классификаторы в японском не соответствуют классам существительных или грамматическому роду с точки зрения их взаимодействия с существительными и гибкости. Введение конструкций, учитывающих род одушевлённых существительных, таких как вопросительные и экзистенциальные, показывает, что классификаторы не исследуют род одушевлённых существительных. В этой статье рассматриваются некоторые малоизученные аспекты использования классификаторов в японском языке и предлагается сравнительный анализ вышеупомянутых конструкций, которые, насколько мне известно, ранее не были предметом внимания в соответствующей литературе. Хотя эта работа посвящена классификаторам в японском языке, она имеет важное значение для других языков с классификаторами, а также для языков, не использующих классификаторы, в том, что касается количества, особенностей счёта и различий между массовым подсчётом.

Ключевые слова: классификаторы; род; анимация; разграничение множественности и счёта; морфосинтаксис; японский язык.

Introduction

Many, or almost all, Japanese learners face challenges when they encounter [11] classifiers (CLs). In Japanese, nouns require certain classifiers when modified by numerals, whether the entities denoted by the nouns are easy to count conceptually or not. Examine the examples in (1). (The asterisk ‘*’ attached to the beginning of the phrase or sentence indicates that the phrase or sentence is ungrammatical or severely unnatural without proper (often peculiar) contexts. The list of abbreviations is provided at the end of the main sections.)

- [1]a. *gakusei go-nin* / **gakusei go* [Japanese]
student 5-CL student 5
(Intended) ‘five students’
b. *hon san-satsu* / **hon san*
book 3-CL book 3
(Intended) ‘three books’
c. *mizu go-hai* / **mizu go*
water 5-CL water 5
(Intended) ‘five cups/glasses of water’

As in [1], *gakusei* ‘student’ requires the classifier *-nin* to be counted by the numeral. It is often argued that classifiers are somewhat similar to measure phrases in English (e.g., 20 **head** of cattle, two **bottles** of milk, two **pieces** of furniture, etc.), which are commonly used with mass nouns (e.g., *milk*, *furniture*) (7; 8; 26). In Japanese, nouns are normally not used

with bare numerals (i.e., numerals without classifiers). They cannot be just counted by numerals directly without the help of numerals like those in English (i.e., *three books* in English /**hon san* in Japanese), even though the number of people is easily countable conceptually, and even though its English counterpart is a count noun, as demonstrated in [2].

- [2]a. {a/every/one} book
- b. {two/many/few} books
- c. *{much/little/a little} book(s)

In English, the mass-count distinction is manifested by the plural marking, as in [2b], indefinite article, as in [2a], and countability-sensitive quantifiers, as in [2a] and [2b]. Count nouns are not compatible with mass-sensitive quantifiers (*much*, *little*, *a little*), as in [2c] (7; 8; 14). It is not straightforward for many speakers familiar with English-type languages, where overt number morphology is used to express number or counting properties, why and how Japanese, or classifier languages in general, employ(s) such complex counting systems involving a good number of classifiers.

While some influential works descriptive study of classifiers are available (17; 23 for classifiers in Japanese; 1; 2 for classifiers in world languages), and while various theoretical analyses are presented (23; 25; 29; 30) much work needs to be done to figure out the true nature of classifiers, not only from pedagogical, but also from descriptive and theoretical perspectives.

This paper is a preliminary report of my research project towards this goal: distributions, functions, and lexical, morphological, syntactic, and pragmatic properties of classifiers. For instance, this research addresses the three research questions below to reveal the functions of classifiers in Japanese:

- *Do classifiers access lexical semantic properties (lexical meanings)?*

Since appropriate classifiers should be selected according to the semantic properties of the noun in Japanese, classifiers classify semantic properties in the lexicon (25).

- *Do classifiers classify nouns?*

Classifiers are thought to be comparable to noun classes (2; 16), which are observed in, e.g., Bantu languages (Central Africa), or grammatical gender, which is observed in French, German, Russian, and many other languages.

- *Do classifiers specify nominal properties in the course of syntactic derivations?*

It has been proposed that classifiers, in fact, serve for mass-count distinction in a similar way to plural markers in number morphology languages (3; 5; 7; 8).

This paper aims to untangle one of the puzzles involving classifier functions to partially address the first and second questions. I conduct

descriptive studies on classifiers in Japanese, focusing on comparing classifiers with noun classes and gender.

This paper provides some understudied uses of classifiers in Japanese, and presents a comparative study of classifiers in Japanese with Noun Classes, grammatical gender, and animacy gender, which, in my shallow knowledge, have escaped attention in the relevant past literature.

The paper primarily focuses on classifiers in Japanese; however, it provides significant implications for other classifier languages as well as non-classifier languages with respect to numbers, counting properties, and the mass-count distinction.

Method

2.1 Data collection

This paper reports descriptive work in linguistics, focusing on nominal phrases containing classifiers in Japanese. I follow the convention of data management in the field of Generative Grammar (9; 10; 11; 12; 22): i.e., native speakers' grammaticality judgment and referencing past literature, in which the example sentences should have undergone native speakers' judgment.

The descriptive work sorts out grammatical and ungrammatical configurations and evaluates properties of grammatical sentences and phrases, and, if possible, the reasons for the ungrammaticality. Japanese data was primarily collected based on the author's intuition as a native Japanese speaker. The grammaticality of the phrases and sentences was also checked by other native speakers, in particular when the sentences or phrases were not commonly used in daily life.

However, the data was not extracted from more formal and ideal methods, e.g., large-scale and comprehensive elicitation sessions, or a corpus study. Recruitment of native speakers for checking the grammaticality judgment was not strictly controlled in terms of ~~ages~~ age, gender, region, etc. As such, it must be admitted that the judgment of phrases or sentences presented in this paper might not be conclusive.

2.2 Organization of the paper

In this paper, first, a brief overview of classifiers in Japanese is provided in Section 3. Second, this paper demonstrates how classification by classifiers differs from noun classes and gender in other languages. Section 4.1 scrutinizes the past relevant literature on noun classes and grammatical gender in other languages, and illustrates, by comparing these with classifiers in Japanese, that classifiers in Japanese are not the instances of Noun Classes or grammatical gender. Then, the analysis moves on to animacy gender in Japanese. After providing an overview of the grammatical gender (animacy) of Japanese (*be/exist*, *wh*-phrase selections), Section 4.2 illustrates by comparing animacy gender and classifiers in Japanese that classifier systems do not classify nouns with respect to the animacy gender properties.

2.3 Note on descriptions

As noted above, an asterisk ‘*’ is attached to the beginning of a phrase or sentence in order to indicate that the phrase or sentence is ungrammatical or severely unnatural without proper (often peculiar) contexts. When a sentence or phrase is odd but not enough to judge ungrammatical, a question mark ‘?’ is attached to the beginning of a phrase or sentence. Nouns in Japanese are number neutral, i.e., they can be used to refer to a singular or plural entity without any morphology (3). Also, nouns in Japanese are also neutral in terms of definiteness. That is, *gakusei* can be translated into either *a student*, *students*, *the student*, or *the students*. Unless otherwise necessary, a plural indefinite form (e.g., *students*) is used in translations to the Japanese examples in this paper for the ease of exposition.

Overview of Classifiers in Japanese

As introduced above, classifiers are required when nouns are modified by numerals, irrespective of whether the entities denoted by the nouns are conceptually countable, as in [3a] and [3b], or uncountable, as in [3c] and [3d].

- [3] a. *Gakusei-ga hon-o {san-satsu/*san} yonda.*
[Japanese]
student-NOM book-ACC 3-CL 3
read
‘Students read three books.’
- b. *Gakusei-ga {san-nin/*san} hon-o yonda.*
student-Nom 3-CL 3 book-ACC
read
‘Three students read books.’
- c. *Gakusei-ga mizu-o {go-hai/*go} nonda.*
student-NOM water-ACC 5-CL 5 drank
‘Students drank five cups/glasses of water.’
- d. *Gakusei-ga mizu-o {go-hon/*go} nonda.*
Student-NOM water-ACC 5-CL. 5
drank
‘Students drank five bottles of water.’

As shown in [3a] and [3b], dropping classifiers (i.e., using the numerals on their own) normally yields ungrammaticality. The examples in [3] further show that nouns take different classifiers. *Hon* ‘book’ takes the classifier *-satsu*, which is used for bound volumes (e.g., books, magazines). *Gakusei* ‘student’ takes the classifier *-nin*, which is used for humans. The examples in [4] list some other classifiers commonly used for countable objects in daily life in Japanese. (For details of varieties of classifiers in Japanese, see P. Downing, 1986, S. Mizuguchi, 2004b)

- [4] a. *-mei* humans (formal, polite)
b. *-hiki* relatively small animals (e.g., cat, puppy, hamster, bird)

- c. *-dai* vehicles, furniture (e.g., deck), electronic devices (e.g., computer)
- d. *-hon* tubular objects (e.g., bottles, umbrellas, pens, trousers)
- e. *-ko/-tsu* relatively small inanimate entities in general [Shimojo, 1997].

However, the noun-classifier connection is not completely fixed. In Section 4, uncommon, but insightful, uses of classifiers are presented.

Meanwhile, classifiers that are commonly used with uncountable objects, as in [3c] and [3d], show different properties from those in [3a] and [3b]. In contrast with the classifiers in [3a] and [3b], which specify certain semantic properties of the nouns modified (e.g., boundedness in [3a] and humanness in [3b]), those in [3c] and [3d] provide a unit of measurement [see Cheng & Sybesma 1999 for a similar claim for classifiers in Mandarin Chinese]. For instance, *-hai* in [3c] tells that water is measured with a container such as cups, glasses, buckets, decanters, etc. *-hon* in [3d] tells that water is measured with a tubular container object. Since water itself does not have an intrinsic shape (thereby, it is considered as a mass term conceptually (3; 18), classifiers provide a unit of measurement for it. (Note that *-hon* can be used either way, depending on the types of nouns.) As such, *-hai*, *-hon*, and their kins are often not considered as classifiers, but called measure words, etc. Whether those are considered as classifiers or not, those are commonly excluded from discussions on classifiers (17; 25). This paper also focuses on classifiers of the first type, ones used with countable objects: e.g., *-hon* (used with countable objects), *-nin*, *-dai*, etc.

Results and Discussion

This section presents the results of a comparative study between classifiers in Japanese and Noun Classes and grammatical gender in other languages (Section 4.1), and between classifiers and animacy gender in Japanese. It is demonstrated that classifiers in Japanese do not pattern with either of them.

4.1 Noun Classes and grammatical gender in other languages

Noun Classes, commonly found in Bantu languages (Central and Southern Africa), serve for grammatical categorization. In this system, each noun is assigned a specific noun class, which is probed for grammatical agreement with verbs, adjectives, and other modifiers. Examine the example in [5] (1, 32) from Swahili.

- [5] kisu ch-a Hamisi
- [Swahili]
- NCL7-knife NCL7-POSS Hamisi
- ‘Hamisi’s knife’

In [5], the possessive modifier *ch-a* agrees with the possessee *kisu* ‘knife’ in terms of the noun class of *kisu*. Swahili has 15 noun classes,

where singular-plural pairs are formed. For instance, nouns in Noun Class 1 are singular human nouns, while those in Noun Class 2 are plural human nouns. Namely, Noun Classes also involve number (singular or plural) agreement.

Grammatical gender agreement is found in many European languages, including French, as in [6], German, and Russian, where nouns classified into two or three genders undergo agreement with determiners, adjectives, and verbs.

- [6] a. La chanteuse a lu le
livre. [French]
The.F.SG singer.F have read.PP the.M.SG book.M
'The (female) singer read the book.
- b. *Le chanteuse a lu le
livre.
The.M.SG singer.F have read.PP the.M.SG
bookM
(Intended) 'The (male) student read the book.
- c. *La chanteuse a lu la
livre.
The.F.SG chanteuse.F have read.PP the.F.SG
book.M
(Intended) 'The (female) student read the book.

In French, the feminine singular noun *chanteuse* 'singer.F' requires the feminine definite article *la*, as in [6a], and the masculine singular noun *livre* 'book.M' requires the masculine definite article *le*, also as in [6a]. Otherwise, the sentences render ungrammatical, as in [6b] and [6c] for gender mismatch.

It is up to languages how gender is assigned. Some languages exhibit a sex-based or biological gender system (e.g., Tamil; Dravidian), while others biological properties are only partially reflected upon gender systems (e.g., "girl" in French is feminine, but neuter in German; "person" in French is feminine (whether it refers to a man or a woman), but it is sex-based in German) (13; 14; 15). The differences in the systems notwithstanding, the number and agreement of gender systems are generally fixed.

Classifiers are distinguished from Noun Classes and grammatical gender in the past literature (1; 13). Classifiers in Japanese exhibit distinguishing characteristics from Noun Classes and grammatical gender. First, as pointed out by A. Aikhenvald (2000), noun classes only form a limited set of classes. As noted above, Swahili has 15 classes, and this number is unlikely to change very soon. The number of noun classes is at best around 25 (Fula; Nigerian) (15). The number of grammatical genders is mostly two (masculine, feminine) or three (masculine, feminine, neuter). Meanwhile, it is hard to tell how many classifiers exist in Japanese (or Mandarin (20)). Even when we only count classifiers commonly used in daily life, it goes way beyond 25, and probably over 50. P. Downing (1986) lists more than 100 classifiers from literature and elicitation

sessions. Moreover, although classifiers are not open-class elements (20), those in Japanese still introduce new items occasionally, mainly by utilizing foreign words: e.g., *chiimu* ‘team’, *keesu* ‘case’, etc. It is very rare that languages with gender systems or Noun Classes add or reduce the number of classifications.

Also, Noun Classes are different from classifiers in terms of their relations to nouns. As shown in [5] and [6] above, Noun Classes are commonly referred to in order to form a grammatical agreement between nouns and modifiers (and verbs). Meanwhile, classifiers in Japanese do not show grammatical agreement with nouns. It is true that classifiers in Japanese and nouns undergo semantic agreement, where classifiers specify a semantic property of nouns (e.g., boundedness, tubular-hood). However, such a relation is not as rigid as agreement found in languages with Noun Classes or grammatical gender. Examine the examples in [7] from Japanese.

- [7] a. ?Gakusei go-hiki [Japanese]
 student 5-CL
 ‘five students’
 b. ?inu go-nin
 dog 5-CL
 ‘five dogs’

The wrong pairing of classifiers and nouns does not always yield ungrammaticality. For instance, in [7a], where the classifier *-hiki* (commonly used for relatively small animals) is used with humans, the classifier can be used to comically describe students in certain situations (e.g., cuteness, in jeopardy), where, e.g., students are adorably struggling with something. In [7b], where the classifier *-nin* (commonly used for humans) is used with an animal, the classifier might be used since the animal is in the shape of a human (e.g., a dog is turned to a human in a fiction). Thus, in contrast with Noun Classes and grammatical gender, classifiers have pragmatic functions rather than systematic syntactic or grammatical functions.

Thus, it is straightforward that classifier systems are distinct from Noun Classes or grammatical gender, with respect to the number of the classifications, and the flexibility of the relationship to nouns.

4.2 Animacy gender in Japanese

Next, a comparison between classifiers and animacy gender in Japanese is presented. It is again illustrated that classifiers are not instances of animacy gender, although classifiers appear to prove humanness or functional features of semantic representations in nouns.

Animacy is commonly used as gender systems in aboriginal languages in North America, as in [8] (21, 434). (The symbol “>” indicates the relation depicted by a theme sign, which indicates the hierarchy between the persons (1st, 2nd, 3rd) of the participants.)

- [8] a. waapam-aa-ssiw-ak *Animate* *object*
[Ojibwe; Algonquian]
See-DIR-NEG-1SG>3SG.A
'I do not see him/her.'
b. inent-an-siw-aan *Inanimate object*
think-IA-NEG-1SG
'I do not think of it.'

In Ojibwe, the verbal agreement and the theme sign take different forms (e.g., *aa* or *an* for agreement, and *ak* or *aan* for a theme sign), depending on whether the object is animate, as in [8a], or the object is inanimate, as in [8b].

The animacy gender of nouns is not evident in Japanese (hence, it is often not considered a grammatical gender system). However, close scrutiny shows that various constructions or collocations exhibit animacy and gender distinction of nouns in Japanese. The Japanese language shows a three-way animacy distinction: humans, non-human animals (henceforth, simply *animals*), and inanimate entities.

First, examine the examples in [9] to see what *wh*-phrases are selected that show the animacy of the noun that would form the expected answer.

- [9] a. Kore-wa **dare** desu ka? [Japanese]
this-TOP who be Q
'Who is this?'
b. Kore-wa **nan** desu ka?
this-TOP what be Q
'What is this?' (*this* = an animal or an inanimate entity)

Grammatically, by virtue of the choice of a *wh*-phrase, humans, for which *dare* 'who' is used, can be isolated from animals and inanimate entities, for which *nani/nan* 'what' is used. (The choice of *nani* or *nan* is phonologically or morphologically motivated. When *what* is followed by /d, t/ or when *what* is used with classifiers, *nan* is used.)

Existential constructions make inanimate entities isolated from humans and animals. Examine the examples in [10] to see how two types of existential constructions distinguish animacy.

- [10] a. Haruko sensei-ga heya ni **iru**.
[Japanese]
Haruko teacher-NOM room in exist.A
'Teacher Haruko is in the room.'
b. Watashi no neko-ga heya ni **iru**.
I GEN cat-NOM room in exist.A
'My cat is in the room.'
c. Tsukue to isu-ga heya ni **aru**.
desk & chair-NOM room in exist.IA
'Desks and chairs are in the room.'

To describe the existence of someone or something, *iru* ‘exist’ is used which indicates that humans or animals exist. Meanwhile, *aru* ‘exist’ is used when inanimate entities exist.

Thus, animacy gender is three-way in Japanese, as summarized in [11]. The examples in [12] merge the choice of *wh*-phrases and existential constructions.

[11] Animacy gender in Japanese.

	Wh	Exist
a. Human	<i>dare</i>	<i>iru</i>
b. Animal	<i>nani</i>	<i>iru</i>
c. Inanimate	<i>nani</i>	<i>aru</i>

[12] a. Dare-ga *iru* no? *Human*

[Japanese]

who-NOM exist.A Q
‘Who is it?’

b. Nani-ga *iru* no? *Animal*

what-NOM exist.A Q
‘What (animal) is it?’

c. Nani-ga *aru* no? *Inanimate*

what-NOM exist.IN Q
‘What is it?’

As shown in [11a] and [12a], human nouns require the human interrogative, *dare*, and the animate existential verb, *iru*. As shown in [11b] and [12b], animal nouns require the non-human interrogative, *nani*, and the animate existential verb, *iru*. As shown in [11c] and [12c], inanimate nouns require the non-human interrogative, *nani*, and the inanimate existential verb, *aru*. (*Aru* can also be used with human nouns. However, such usage is considered obsolete, or yields a different interpretation.)

Crucially, humanness described in these examples is not the same as the one that semantically/pragmatically agrees with the classifiers, *-nin* or *-mei*. Interestingly, *yuurei* ‘ghost’ grammatically behaves like an animal (even when the ghost is generated from a human). As shown in [13], *nani* and *-iru* are chosen for a ghost (cf. 12b), but not *dare* and *-iru* (as a human requires as in 12a).

[13] A: Yuurei-ga {*iru* / **aru*}.

ghost-NOM exist.A exist.IA
‘There is a ghost.’

B: { **Dare-ga* / *Nani-ga* } *iru-tte*?

who-NOM / what-NOM exist.IN-Comp
‘{*Who / What} did you just say there is?’

The fact that *yuurei* ‘ghost’ is grammatically an animal predicts that it requires a classifier for animals (e.g., *-hiki*, *-tou*), if classifiers are instances of animacy gender systems. (A classifier *-tou* is commonly used

for relatively large animals: large dogs, gorillas, tigers, elephants, etc.). As in [14], nevertheless, this prediction is not tenable. A ghost selects for (or is selected by) a classifier *-nin*. Namely, a ghost is a “human” for classifiers.

[14] Yuurei-ga go-{nin/*hiki/*tou} iru.
ghost-NOM 5-CL exist.A
‘There are five ghosts.’

Such a mismatch is also found with *shitai* ‘body/corpse,’ which is in fact inanimate grammatically, but can be a ‘human’ in terms of the choice of a classifier. Examine [15]:

[15] A: Shitai-ga {aru/*iru}.
[Japanese]
body-NOM exist
‘There is a body.’
B: {Nani*Dare}-ga aru-tte?
what/who-NOM exist-Comp
‘What did you just say there is?’
A: Shitai-ga go-{nin / tai / ko} aru.
body-NOM 5-CL exit
‘There are five bodies.’

The animacy gender of *shitai* is inanimate, judging from the use of *-aru* and of *nani* as in [15A, B] in the same way as animals as in [12c]. On the other hand, however, a classifier *-nin*, which is commonly used for a living human, is also used with *shitai*, which shows that *shitai* is a human for classifiers. (The classifier *-tai* is also used with *shitai*, which is commonly used for a stature, and *-ko*, the general classifier for the inanimate entities, is also acceptable for *shitai*. Thus, classifiers do not probe the grammatical animacy gender, but are associated with the humanness at a conceptual level.

Conclusion

This paper examined the status of nouns in Japanese and their relationship to classifiers. It was shown that classifiers are not instances of Noun Classes (found in Bantu languages) or grammatical gender (found in, e.g., Russian, French, German, etc.). Classifiers do not categorize nouns based on grammatical animacy gender (found in Ojibwe).

The results of the scrutiny thus far **still leave it** open what classifiers classify **and** how. In lieu of a conclusion, this paper closes with future directions for this research. Among the three research questions posited in Section 1, the second question, *Are classifiers instances of Noun Classes or grammatical gender?*, is likely to be safely eliminated.

Regarding the first question, *Do classifiers access lexical semantic properties (lexical meanings)?*, it is somewhat straightforward that classifiers are in relation to lexical properties. However, it leads us to

further investigation on where these properties are and how we can formally distinguish lexical properties and meanings brought by pragmatics.

Regarding the first point, classifiers show strikingly systematic differences with the mass-count distinction in languages with overt number morphology. This point is related to the third question, *Do classifiers specify nominal properties in the course of syntactic derivations?* For instance, number morphology (e.g., the plural marker -s) is required in English in order for nouns to participate in count syntax (e.g., many books, a few books, etc.). Classifiers show a similar function to the plural marker in this sense. Namely, without classifiers, nominal structures in Japanese cannot establish number and counting (e.g., singularity, plurality).

Also, nouns and classifiers in Japanese pattern with measure words in English, in particular, those used with so-called collective artifact nouns, including *furniture, mail, cutlery*, etc. (28). Both collective artifact nouns in English and count-y nouns (nouns that look easy to count, including humans, books, etc.) in Japanese are both countable conceptually, but mass syntactically. For instance, with the sentence *X has more furniture than Y*, the comparison is done by the number of the pieces of furniture rather than the volume of it. This patterns with count nouns. That is, with the sentence *X has more sheep than Y*, the comparison is done by the number of sheep (assuming sheep here refer to living entities). Meanwhile, mass nouns show a different comparison method. With the sentence *X has more water than Y*, the comparison is done by the volume of water (4). Count-y nouns in Japanese show the same results (19). Count-y nouns, including human nouns, animal nouns (when referring to living entities), and discrete inanimate entities, are all compared by number, rather than volume. Thus, these nouns are both conceptually countable.

However, both collective artifact nouns in English and count-y nouns in Japanese resist direct numeral modifications (i.e., **three furniture(s)*, **hon san* '(literally) book three.' Namely, these are all mass syntactically. With this, measure words used with collective artifact nouns, e.g., *piece* as in *three pieces of furniture*, and classifiers in Japanese seem to have a similar function. Namely, these both work for syntactic mass-count distinction, making a count phrase from a mass term (whether the term is conceptually countable or uncountable). To put forth this analysis, it should be figured out, where mass-count distinction is (or mass-count distinctions are) manifested how, and how classification and the syntactic mass-count distinction are interrelated.

List of Abbreviations

A	animate
ACC	accusative case marker
CL	classifier
Comp	complementizer
DIR	direct
F	feminine gender

GEN	genitive case marker
IA	inanimate
M	masculine gender
NCL	Noun Class
NEG	negation
NOM	nominative case marker
PP	past participle
Q	question particle
SG	singular
TOP	topic marker

References

1. Aikhenvald, A. Y. (2000). *Classifiers: A typology of noun categorization devices*. Oxford University Press.
2. Aikhenvald, A. Y., & Mihas, E. I. (Eds.). (2019). *Genders and classifiers: A cross-linguistic typology*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198842019.001.0001>
3. Allan, K. (1977). Classifiers. *Language*, 53(2), 285–311.
4. Bale, A., & Barner, D. (2009). The interpretation of functional heads: Using comparatives to explore the mass/count distinction. *Journal of Semantics*, 26(3), 217–252.
5. Borer, H. (2005). *In name only*. Oxford University Press.
6. Cheng, L. L.-S., & Sybesma, R. (1999). Bare and not-so-bare nouns and the structure of NP. *Linguistic Inquiry*, 30(4), 509–542. <https://doi.org/10.1162/002438999554192>
7. Chierchia, G. (1998a). Plurality of mass nouns and the notion of ‘semantic parameter’. In S. Rothstein (Ed.), *Events and grammar* (pp. 53–103). Kluwer.
8. Chierchia, G. (1998b). Reference to kinds across languages. *Natural Language Semantics*, 6(4), 339–405. <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1008324218506>
9. Chomsky, N. (1957). *Syntactic structures*. Mouton de Gruyter.
10. Chomsky, N. (1965). *Aspects of the theory of syntax*. MIT Press.
11. Chomsky, N. (1981). *Lectures on government and binding*. Foris.
12. Chomsky, N. (1995). *The minimalist program*. MIT Press.
13. Corbett, G. G. (1991). *Gender*. Cambridge University Press.
14. Corbett, G. G. (2000). *Number*. Cambridge University Press.
15. Corbett, G. G. (2013). Number of genders. In M. S. Dryer & M. Haspelmath (Eds.), *WALS Online* (v2020.4) [Data set]. Zenodo. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.13950591>
16. Dixon, R. M. W. (1986). Noun classes and noun classification in typological perspectives. In C. Colette (Ed.), *Noun classes and categorization* (pp. 105–112). John Benjamins.
17. Downing, P. (1996). *Numeral classifier systems: The case of Japanese*. John Benjamins Publishing Company.
18. Greenberg, J. (1972). Numeral classifiers and substantival number: Problems in the genesis of a linguistic type. *Working Papers in Language Universals*, 9, 2–39.

19. Inagaki, S., & Barner, D. (2009). Countability in absence of count syntax: Evidence from Japanese quantity judgments. In S. Inagaki, M. Hiraiwa, S. Arita, Y. Hirakawa, H. Morikawa, M. Nakayama, H. Sirai, & J. Tsubakita (Eds.), *Studies in language sciences 8: Papers from the eighth annual conference of the Japanese Society for Language Sciences* (pp. 111–126). Kuroshio Publisher.
20. Li, X. (2013). *Numeral classifiers in Chinese: The syntax-semantics interface*. De Gruyter.
21. Lochbihler, B., Oxford, W., & Welch, N. (2021). The person-animacy connection: Evidence from Algonquian and Dene. *Canadian Journal of Linguistics/Revue canadienne de linguistique*, 66(3), 431–442. <https://doi.org/10.1017/cnj.2021.14>
22. Matthewson, L. (2004). On the methodology of semantic fieldwork. *International Journal of American Linguistics*, 70(4), 369–415.
23. Mizuguchi, S. (2004a). *Individuation in numeral classifier languages: A case of Japanese classifiers and plurals*. Shohakusha.
24. Mizuguchi, S. (2004b). Ruibetsushi towa nanika [What are classifiers?]. In Y. Nishimitsu & S. Mizuguchi (Eds.), *Ruibetsushi no taishoo [Comparison of classifiers]* (pp. 3–22). Kuroshio Publisher.
25. Nomoto, H. (2013). *Number in classifier languages* (Doctoral dissertation). University of Minnesota.
26. Rothstein, S. (2010). Counting and the mass/count distinction. *Journal of Semantics*, 27(3), 343–397. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jos/ffq007>
27. Shimojo, M. (1997). The role of the general category in the maintenance of numeral-classifier systems: The case of *tsu* and *ko* in Japanese. *Linguistics*, 35(4), 705–733. <https://doi.org/10.1515/ling.1997.35.4.705>
28. Sutton, P. R., & Filip, H. (2016). Counting in context: Count/mass variation and restrictions on coercion in collective artifact nouns. In *Proceedings of SALT 26* (pp. 350–370).
29. Watanabe, A. (2006). Functional projections of nominals in Japanese: Syntax of classifiers. *Natural Language and Linguistic Theory*, 24(1), 241–306. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11049-005-3042-4>
30. Watanabe, A. (2008). The structure of DP. In S. Miyagawa & M. Saito (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of Japanese linguistics* (pp. 513–540). Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780195307344.001.0001>