LIBERAL ARTS

P'urhépecha Classifier Morphemes

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This project focuses on the syntactic properties of classifier (CLF-) morphemes in P'urhépecha, an indigenous language isolate spoken in Michoacán, Mexico. Morphemes are the smallest units of language that carry meaning within a word. CLF-morphemes are bound morphemes attached to the verb which co-refer with an argument (being either the subject or direct object in this study) within a locative phrase, which communicates where an object is, or a motion predicate, which communicates where an object is placed. CLF-Morphemes contain information regarding physical characteristics of their referents, such as size, shape, and position. In sentence (1) below, the verb *ana-nu-sti* contains several CLF-morphemes: *ana-* referring to the determiner phrase (DP) *posti*; *-nu-* referring to the locative phrase *terunukwa-rhu*; and an agreement morpheme *-sti* marks tense and person.

Posti	ana-	nu-	sti	terunukwa	-rhu
Post	CLF$_{vrt}$-	CLF$_{sp}$-	Prs3s	patio	-P

The post is (upright) on the patio.

Posti	apo-	nu-	sti	terunukwa	-rhu
Post	CLF$_{hor}$-	CLF$_{sp}$-	Prs3s	patio	-P

The post is (lying) on the patio.

In sentence (1), *ana-* indicates that its co-referent *posti* is long and standing vertically; *apo-* in sentence (2) indicates that the same *posti* is lying parallel on its surface. This means that the DP *posti* does not determine the use of one or the other: any given DP is compatible with more than one CLF-morpheme.

In traditional *agreement operations*, DP-arguments *uniquely* determine the agreement morpheme features in the verb. However, the DP-*posti* in (1) and (2) does not *uniquely* determine the CLF-morpheme; since a range of CLF-morphemes can co-refer with any given DP, that shows that the DP itself does not contain these sets of features on its own.

The question this project addresses, thus, concerns the syntactic nature of how the CLF-morphemes transfer their features to their corresponding arguments. For that, we adopt the analysis proposed in Benedicto's "Verbal Classifiers in Sign Languages . . . Agreement vs AGREE?" (2018), which proposes that CLF-morphemes constitute a bundle of features; they probe for a DP in their syntactic domain, target it, and then transfer the CLF-features to that DP.

Research advisor Elena Benedicto writes: "Mr. Ball analyzed raw, previously unprocessed data from a minority under-studied indigenous language. His research contributed to the understanding of the morphosyntactic markers for classifiers, a rare element in the verbal domain, for this particular language and for our understanding of the properties that lead to variation in human language."

Morpheme	Size/Shape/Position	Uses
Kira-	Small, round, 2D	Pot, Pebbles, Beans, Dead Spider
Ete-	Small, round, 3D	Radio, Moth, Living Spider
Ichu-	Flat	Cassette Tape, Plate, Paper, Money (Bills)
Ana-	Long, Upright	Wooden post, Spoon, Cup/Glass, Candle, Firewood
Ekwa-	Long, Lying (parallel)	Post
Apo-	Long, Lying (parallel)	Post, Stick, Spoon, Candle, Tube, Lizard, Snake
Pera-	Long, Leaning	Candle, Person, Tube
Tirhi-	Hanging	Cloth, Shirt, Spoon
Chere-	Thrown Carelessly	Cloth

A list of P'urhépecha classifier morphemes and their possible types of co-referents.

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