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Nominal agreement class assignment in Tikuna (isolate, Western Amazonia): a dynamic process conditioned by both lexicon and context

Denis Bertet*

1. Introduction

Tikuna [ISO 639-3: tca], a western Amazonian language isolate spoken by at least 48,500 ethnic Tikunas across the borders of Peru, Colombia, and Brazil,¹ displays a system of five nominal agreement classes (henceforth often simply referred to as “classes”). At the intra-sentential level, the morphosyntactic effects of class agreement are fairly reminiscent of well-known Indo-European gender systems: agreement is obligatory, its targets are relatively numerous both within the noun phrase and the predicative phrase, and the morphological encoding of class agreement in the inflectional forms of the targets can be broadly characterized as fusional in nature. These general properties are illustrated in example (1).²

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¹ For general introductions to the language, see Bertet, Ángel Ruiz & Ángel Ruiz (2019:102-106) and Montes Rodríguez (forthcoming). For more detailed information, see, in particular, Montes Rodríguez (2005) and Bertet (2020).

² Glosses corresponding to the five nominal agreement classes: F=feminine, M=masculine, N=neuter, S=salientive, NS=non-salientive. Other glosses: 1=first person, 3=third person, ACC=accusative, AM=associated motion, ANAPH=anaphoric, BEN=benefactive, COLL=collective, DEM=demonstrative, DIST=distal, FS=false start, GEN=genitive, IND=indicative, INDF=indefinite, LK=linker, LOC1=locative 1, LOC2=locative 2, MED=medial, NEG=negation, OBJ=object, PC \bar{i} =predicative class in \bar{i} , PC \bar{i} =predicative class in \bar{i} , PC $\bar{r}\bar{i}$ =predicative class in $\bar{r}\bar{i}$, PL=plural, PROX=proximal, PST=past, QUOT=quotative, REL=relativizer, SBJ=subject, SBJV=subjunctive, SG=singular, SP=spatial index, SUB=subordinate, TOP=topicalizer. The backslash symbol (as in ‘XXX’) signals that the feature corresponding to the gloss that follows (‘XXX’) is encoded tonologically, not segmentally. Tikuna words are transcribed in an essentially phonologically-based practical orthography. Note the following conventions departing from IPA standards: <r>=[r], <ch>=[tʃ], <y>=[dʒ], <ñ>=[ɲ], <ḡ>=[ŋV], <ng>=[ŋV̄], <'>=[ʔ], <ü>=[u]. The

(1)	Ná=tá 3M(/N/NS).SBJ=be.big 'The deer is big.'	yá=yĩ-má LK.M(/S)=MED.M-ANAPH	kõwú. deer
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Unlike in well-known Indo-European gender languages, however, the assignment of participants to specific classes in Tikuna discourse is highly flexible. Most participants have several options for class assignment, and it is not unusual for them to shift from one class to another over the course of a single discourse performance. Compare example (1) with the equally grammatical and nearly synonymous sentences in (2a-c): the same participant, in this case a deer, may apparently trigger agreement for as many as four different classes, namely Masculine (as in (1)), Feminine (2a), Salientive (2b), and Non-Salientive (2c)—but not Neuter (2d).

(2)	a.	Ī=tá 3F.SBJ=be.big 'The deer is big.'	í=ngé-mà LK.F=MED.F-ANAPH	kõwú. deer
	b.	Tá=tá 3S.SBJ=be.big 'The deer is big.'	yá=yĩ'è-má LK.(M/S)=MED.S-ANAPH	kõwú. deer
	c.	Ná=tá 3(M/N)NS.SBJ=be.big 'The deer is big.'	ì=ngē-mà LK.NS=MED.NS-ANAPH	kõwú. deer
	d.	*Ná=tá 3(M/N)(NS).SBJ=be.big	yà=yĩ-mà LK.N=MED.N-ANAPH	kõwú. deer

Examples such as (1) and (2a-c) make it unlikely for lexical properties of nouns to be the only determining factor for class assignment in Tikuna discourse. What criteria, then—apart from lexical information—underlie the assignment of participants to a given class in a given context?

This intriguing question posed by the system of nominal agreement classes of Tikuna is the main focus of this chiefly descriptive paper. The preliminary analyses tentatively presented here are based on both spontaneous and elicited data that I collected between 2015 and 2018 over six months' work in the Tikuna community of San Martín de Amacayacu (Amazonas, Colombia). The present analyses are therefore only representative of the speech of this specific community, although throughout this paper I refer to the language under study as simply Tikuna instead of San Martín de Amacayacu Tikuna.³

following suprasegmental diacritics (tonemes and syllabic phonation patterns) are used in this paper: in stressed syllables, <ǎ>=/x³⁶/, <ǎ̃>=/x⁴³/, <ǎ̇>=/x³⁴/, <ǎ̂>=/x³¹/, <ǎ̄>=/x³³/, <ǎ̆>=/x²¹/, <ǎ̈>=/x²²/, <ǎ̉>=/x^{creaky.to.modal.voice}/, <ǎ̊>=/x^{modal.to.creaky.voice}/; in unstressed syllables, <ǎ̃̆>=/x⁵/, <ǎ̃̇>=[x⁴], <ǎ̃̈>=/x³/, <ǎ̃̉>=[x¹], <ǎ̃̊>=/x^{creaky.voice}/.

³ For a significantly divergent description of nominal agreement classes and their implementation in the same Tikuna variety, see Montes Rodríguez (2014:41-45). For a similar study on another Tikuna variety, see Skilton (2017). These studies will not be discussed here for reasons of space.

The organization of this paper is as follows. Section 2 provides some preliminaries on the paradigmatic dimension of the nominal agreement classes in Tikuna. General syntactic properties of the system of nominal agreement classes are introduced in Section 2.1 and the inflectional paradigms of the class agreement targets are briefly presented in Section 2.2. Section 3 offers a detailed discussion of how one or the other of the five classes is selected for in the class assignment of given participants in discourse. The system of inherent values of the classes, which I consider to be as a whole the major determining factor in class assignment, is dealt with in Section 3.1 ('grammatical basis for class assignment'). The notion of lexically-assigned reference class, which I see as a constraint secondarily interfering with class assignment based on the inherent values of the classes, is defined in Section 3.2 ('lexical basis for class assignment'). Finally, Section 3.3 shows that the class assignment of other participants in the immediate topical environment also plays a role in class assignment ('discursive basis for class assignment'). Section 4 wraps up the proposed analysis: class assignment in Tikuna thus appears as a complex and dynamic process conditioned to varying extents by (at least) three factors of very different natures.

2. Paradigm: the five nominal agreement classes and their morphosyntactic encoding

2.1. General syntactic properties

Tikuna features five nominal agreement classes. I label these [F] (for 'Feminine'), [M] ('Masculine'), [N] ('Neuter'), [S] ('Salientive'), and [NS] ('Non-Salientive') respectively. The motivation for these labels will be exposed in Section 3.1.3.

The class of a given participant is typically only manifested through agreement, *i.e.* through the selection of specific inflectional forms of a number of morphemes that are targets of agreement for class (these are dealt with in the next section). This implies that in most cases,⁴ controller nouns bear no morphological indication of the class to which the participant they designate⁵ is assigned in discourse.

Agreement for class is obligatory at the sentential level, *i.e.* within a main clause together with its subordinate clauses.

Examples (3-5) illustrate these general properties of the system of nominal agreement classes of Tikuna. I have highlighted in bold the morphemes whose inflectional forms reflect the class assignment of, respectively, the deer in (3) (a participant assigned to [NS]) and the group

⁴ See end of Section 3.2.2 for minor exceptions to this generalization.

⁵ In this paper, I use the verb 'designate' in reference to the pragmatic relation that holds between a linguistic expression and the *discourse participant* it relates to. By contrast, I use the verb 'refer' in reference to the semantic relation that holds between a linguistic expression and the *entity in the world* it relates to. By 'discourse participant', in turn, I mean the mental representation of an entity in the world that speakers co-construct and manipulate over the course of a speech act.

of elders who founded the community of San Martín de Amacayacu in (4) (a group of participants assigned to [S]).

- (3) Nû-mà ì=ngē-mà kōwú=rù
 3(M/N/NS)-ANAPH LK.NS=MED.NS-ANAPH deer=TOP
- tû-mà-ka nî=ú-kù.
 3S-ANAPH-CAUSE 3(M/N/NS).SBJ.PC̄=be.there.SG-in.PL
 ‘The deer, as for it, would go in to see her.’ [IGS 164]
- (4) Yî’è-má-gú tî=í gá=tû-’írà
 MED.S-ANAPH-PL 3S.SBJ.PC̄=be LK.(F/M/S(/NS)).PST=3S-first
- nú-à ġū-ġú-’è [...], chô-’rū pāpá,
 PROX.LOC1-DEM arrive-PL\SBJV-REL.S 1SG-GEN dad
- chô-’rū māmá [...], ñyáchí tōgū’è-gú
 1SG-GEN mum and other.S-PL
- yá=dùú-’è
 LK.(M/S)=be.a.human\SBJV-REL.S
- yá=nū’-má-ġú-’è.
 LK.(M/S)=PROX.LOC2-ANAPH-PL\SBJV-REL.S
 ‘[After talking about his parents:] It’s them and people like them⁶ who came here first [...], my father, my mother [...], and other people who live here.’ [IGV 32-37]

Example (5) shows that failure to observe class agreement either at the level of the phrase or the sentence is ungrammatical. Once *chērà* ‘saw’⁷ is assigned to [M] as is the case in the first line of this example, the relative clause that follows it (*tākū*, lit. ‘that is big’) must agree for [M] together with its linker (second occurrence of *yá* in (5a)). Only (5a) is therefore grammatical, while (5b), (5c), and (5d) were all rejected by my consultant.

- (5) Nú-à nā=ġē yá=chērà ...
 PROX.LOC1-DEM 3M(/N/NS).OBJ=carry LK.M(/S)=saw
- a. ✓ ... yá=tâ-kū!
 LK.M(/S)=be.big\SBJV-REL.M
- b. * ... í=tâ-kū!
 LK.F=be.big-REL.F
- c. * ... yá=tâ-’è!
 LK.(M/S)=be.big\SBJV-REL.S
- d. * ... ì=tâ-’ú!
 LK.NS=be.big\SBJV-REL.NS
 ‘Bring the large saw!’ [JGS elicited]

⁶ The phrase ‘and people like them’ in the translation of this example reflects the associative plural value taken by the plural marker *-gú* in the word *yî’èmagú*.

⁷ *Chērà* ‘saw’ is a borrowing from Portuguese *serra* ‘id.’ or Spanish *sierra* ‘id.’ Note that the borrowed status of this word has no impact on the agreement mechanism illustrated in (5).

Note that if the syncretic form of the linker $yá=$ in $yá=chērà$ is to be interpreted as inflecting for [S] instead of [M], then $yá=chērà$ makes a well-formed noun phrase together with the relative clause $yá=tâ-'è$ in (5c), which precisely agrees for [S]. However, although $yá=chērà$ $yá=tâ-'è$ is in itself a perfectly acceptable noun phrase in certain contexts, it still cannot occur as the direct object of the verb $nā=ǰě$ in (5), which indexes it as an object of class [M] (or [N] or [NS]), not class [S]. This shows that failure to observe class agreement is not only ungrammatical at the phrase level (e.g. between a head and a relative clause within a single noun phrase), but also at the sentence level (e.g. between a noun phrase and a verbal index that codes for it).

Importantly, while class agreement is obligatory at the intra-sentential level, it is *not* obligatory, however, at the inter-sentential level. In other words, antecedent-anaphora relationships across sentence boundaries do not involve obligatory agreement and participants may change class from one sentence to the next within a single discourse performance. This is one of the highly interesting features of the Tikuna class system, one that justifies characterizing class assignment in the language as a dynamic process. Although class shifts are not frequent in actual discourse, the class assignment of any participant may in principle be reassessed and revised at any sentence boundary for semantic, evaluative, or discursive purposes.

The principles that underlie the assignment of a given participant to a given class in actual discourse (and the principles for interpreting that assignment, from the hearer’s perspective) are the main focus of this paper. They are discussed at length in Section 3.

2.2. The targets of class agreement

Several categories of morphemes inflect for nominal agreement class. TABLE 1 and TABLE 2 display the inflectional paradigms of most of them as attested in the subdialect of San Martín de Amacayacu Tikuna spoken—among others—by Loida Ángel Ruiz, a woman aged 53 who is one of my main consultants.⁸

TABLE 1: inflectional forms of the targets of class agreement: deictic roots, linker, relativizer (“TA” stands for “tonological alternation” in this table)

	Deictic roots			Linker		Relativizer
	PROX	MED	DIST	[−PST]	[+PST]	
F	<i>ñá-</i>	<i>ngé-</i>	<i>yé-</i>	<i>í=</i>	<i>gá=</i>	<i>-kū</i> [no TA]
M	<i>dǎ-</i>	<i>yǐ-</i>	<i>gǔ-</i>	<i>yá=</i>	<i>gá=</i>	<i>-kū</i> [+TA]
N	<i>dâ-</i>	<i>yî-</i>	<i>gû-</i>	<i>yà=</i>	<i>gà=</i>	<i>-(’ǔ)nè</i> [+TA]
S	<i>dâ’è</i>	<i>yî’è</i>	<i>gû’è</i>	<i>yá=</i>	<i>gá=</i>	<i>-’è</i> [+TA]
NS	<i>ñǎ-</i>	<i>ngē-</i>	<i>yě-</i>	<i>ì=</i>	<i>gá=</i>	<i>-’ǔ</i> [+TA]

⁸ At least two more subdialectal systems are attested in San Martín de Amacayacu Tikuna, which involve minor segmental or tonological differences affecting certain forms of the linker, the relativizer, and the third person pronominal root (Bertet 2020:252-254, 195-196).

TABLE 2: inflectional forms of the targets of class agreement: third person pronominal root, third person index, ‘other’, ‘what?, who?’ (“allom.” and “p” respectively stand for “allomorph” and “person” in this table)

	3p pronominal root		3p index	Miscellaneous	
	allom. 1	allom. 2	SBJ index in IND	‘other’	‘what?, who?’
F	<i>ngî-</i>	<i>ngî-/ngî-</i>	<i>ī=</i>	<i>nàì</i>	<i>tè’è</i>
M	<i>nû-/nò-</i>	<i>nǎ-</i>	<i>ná=</i>	<i>nàì</i>	<i>tè’è</i>
N	<i>nû-/nò-</i>	<i>ná-/nâ-</i>	<i>ná=</i>	<i>nǎì</i>	?
S	<i>tû-</i>	–	<i>tá=</i>	<i>tògū’è</i>	<i>tè’è</i>
NS	<i>nû-/nò-</i>	<i>ná-/nâ-</i>	<i>ná=</i>	<i>tò</i>	<i>ákú</i>

Within noun phrases, these agreeing morphemes include the proximal, medial, and distal deictic roots; the linker, which also inflects for nominal tense (specifically for [\pm pre-hodiernal past]); the relativizer; the third person pronominal root, which exists in two series of morphologically-conditioned allomorphs; and the words meaning ‘other’, ‘what?, who?’, and ‘which?’ (the forms of the latter are not displayed here). Note that a handful of other morphemes typically used as modifiers do *not* inflect for class, including the indefinite determiner *wí’á* ‘a’, the nouns *nò’ré* ‘few, a little’ and *nù’ré* ‘how many?, how much?’, and the numerals. The language has no class of adjectives; stative verbs and subject relativizations thereof are regularly used in Tikuna as the equivalent of, respectively, predicative and attributive adjectives in other languages.

Within predicative phrases, all third person indexes—whether subject, accusative object, partitive object, or beneficiary indexes—agree for class. The only forms shown in TABLE 2 are those of the subject index (specifically in the Indicative Inflectional Type and in cases where the predicative phrase belongs to the unmarked predicative class or ‘conjugation class’).⁹

Note that the exponents of class agreement vary widely from target to target. In most cases, forms within the paradigm of a given target are simply suppletive (*e.g.* the third person subject index *ī=* ‘3F.SBJ’ vs *ná=* ‘3M/N/NS.SBJ’ vs *tá=* ‘3S.SBJ’) or contrast by their toneme only, in an unpredictable way (*e.g.* the linker *gá=* ‘LK.F/M/S/NS.PST’ vs *gâ=* ‘LK.N.PST’, or *nàì* ‘other.F/M’ vs *nǎì* ‘other.N’). A few forms seem to display extra syllables that encode the value of their class feature (contrast *e.g.* the [N] forms of the deictic roots *dâ-* ‘PROX.N’, *yî-* ‘MED.N’, and *gû-* ‘DIST.N’ with their [S] counterparts *dâ’è* ‘PROX.S’, *yî’è* ‘MED.S’, and *gû’è* ‘DIST.S’). In one case, two forms in the same paradigm are only distinguished by their tonological effect or absence thereof: the [F] form of the relativizer (*-kū*) only differs from its otherwise identical [M]

⁹ Additionally, a couple of discourse particles may optionally agree for class with subjects (such as a particle roughly translatable as ‘as for ...’ or ‘well, ...’ and which may take the forms *ngîwǎ* if SBJ=[F], *nûwǎ* if SBJ=[M/N/NS] or if it is not a third person, and *tûwǎ* if SBJ=[S]).

counterpart in that it prevents, in most cases, the application of a complex set of tonological alternations (abbreviated as “TA” in TABLE 1) that normally occur in the syllable that immediately precedes the relativizer. As a whole, the morphological strategies used for distinguishing the inflectional forms of the targets of class agreement may be characterized as essentially fusional in nature, rather than agglutinative (while Tikuna morphology has overall a strong preference for agglutinative strategies). Note, however, that the morphological encoding of other morphosyntactic categories such as number or case is never merged with that of class. Number and case are encoded by means of easily isolated syllabic suffixes and do not give rise to agreement phenomena.

Note also that the paradigms of the class agreement targets display a fair amount of syncretism (*e.g.* the linker *gá* = ‘LK.F/M/S/NS.PST’). Forms that are identical with one or several others within their paradigm are highlighted in light gray in TABLE 1 and TABLE 2. Such syncretism inevitably gives rise to ambiguities in reference-tracking; one strategy employed for resolving this issue is discussed in Section 3.3.

3. Selection and its effects: principles for assigning a given participant to a given class and for interpreting that assignment

3.1. Inherent semantic and pragmatic values of the classes

Each of the five nominal agreement classes of Tikuna possesses inherent values, *i.e.* involves specific semantic or pragmatic effects that are essentially independent from the lexical component of the language.

These inherent values are best observed in cases of “‘absolute’ use of modifiers”, *i.e.* in cases where “words [or, in Tikuna, phrases] typically used to modify nouns or to anaphorically refer to some noun [...] are neither syntactically nor anaphorically linked to any noun” (Grinevald & Seifart 2004:255, 271-272). In such cases, the class to which the corresponding participant is assigned cannot—by definition—be directly determined by the lexical properties of a noun. Such uses thus provide a fairly direct access to the non-lexical or inherent values of the classes.

3.1.1. ‘Absolute’ use of the demonstratives

The demonstratives may be employed in this way (*e.g.* in sentences equivalent to English *Who’s that next to your father?* or *I’ve never seen anything like this*). The typical interpretations of the inflectional forms of the proximal demonstrative (which are based on the forms of the proximal deictic root displayed in TABLE 1) are listed in TABLE 3 for each class.¹⁰ Note that the corresponding forms of the medial and the

¹⁰ The typical interpretations reported in TABLE 3 through TABLE 11 are directly adapted from observations expressed by at least two speakers for each word form. I asked these speakers to systematically comment in Spanish on what kind of referent they thought each of the word forms under scrutiny typically evoked. The word forms in TABLE 3 through TABLE 5 were submitted to speakers in isolation. Those in TABLE 6 through TABLE 11, because their class assignment is only ever detectable through agreement taking place in morphemes other than themselves, were submitted to speakers together with a

distal demonstratives yield exactly parallel interpretations, just with more physical distance implied between the speaker and the referent pointed at.

TABLE 3: inflectional forms of the proximal demonstrative in its ‘absolute’ use with their corresponding interpretations

F	<i>ñá-à</i>	PROX.F-DEM	‘this [girl or woman]’
M	<i>dǎ-à</i>	PROX.M-DEM	‘this [boy or man]’
N	<i>dâ-à</i>	PROX.N-DEM	‘this [building or geographical location]’
S	<i>dâ’è</i>	PROX.S-DEM	‘this [socially close, dear, or respected person]’
NS	<i>ñǎ-à</i>	PROX.NS-DEM	‘this [non-human referent of any kind]’ or ‘this [<i>not</i> especially close, dear, or respected person]’

The ‘absolute’ use of the demonstratives gives a rather fair idea of the inherent values of the five classes. They suggest that classes [F] and [M] typically convey by themselves that the referent is animate and sexually identified as a female or a male, respectively (and often, more specifically, a *human* female or male). Class [S] indicates by itself that the referent (often a human being) is especially valued socially. Conversely, class [NS] indicates by itself that the referent, at least in cases where it is a human being, is *not* especially valued socially. Class [N] would seem to convey by itself that the referent is a portion of space, but this very specific interpretation does not match well with the more general semantic effect of assigning to [N] a noun whose lexically-assigned reference class is not [N] (see Section 3.2). Anticipating this observation, one may stop at the less specific conclusion that the referent of the [N] form of a demonstrative in the ‘absolute’ use is at least necessarily inanimate and concrete.

Incidentally, note that there is no lexical item in Tikuna that would mean ‘socially especially valued object/person’ or ‘socially *not* especially valued object/person’, nor one that would mean ‘inanimate being’ in general.¹¹ As a consequence, the assignment of the demonstratives (or any other modifier, for that matter) in their ‘absolute’ use to classes [S], [NS], or [N] and their resulting interpretations cannot be accounted for by the underlying presence of a hypothetically ellipsed head noun (whereby, *e.g.*, the proximal demonstrative in [S] *dâ’è* ‘this [socially close, dear, or respected person]’ would in fact have to be interpreted as **dâ’è (xxxxx)*, where *xxxxx* stands for an ellipsed head noun lexically belonging to [S]). The typical interpretations of the ‘absolute’ demonstratives in [S], [NS],

demonstrative preceding them (the non-past anaphoric *ngémà* [F], *yímá* [M], *yímà* [N], *yí’émá* [S], *ngēmà* [NS] ‘that’, which is derived from the medial deictic root featured in TABLE 1) in order to make their intended class assignment unambiguously detectable despite the lack of context. The observations expressed by my consultants during the elicitation sessions just described were found to be for the most part consistent with fully contextualized occurrences of modifiers in ‘absolute use’ in spontaneous texts from my corpus.

¹¹ Nor, for that matter, one that would mean ‘portion of space’ and could be argued to lexically belong to class [N].

and [N] can therefore only be attributed to inherent semantic and pragmatic properties of these classes. There do exist, on the other hand, an independent noun meaning ‘female’ (*ḡê*) and one meaning ‘male’ (*yâtù*), which could indeed be argued to lexically belong to [F] and [M], respectively. However, because the ‘absolute’ use of modifiers can be shown to be a genuine syntactic phenomenon in classes [S], [NS], and [N] (rather than an illusion caused by the ellipsis of an underlying head noun), it seems reasonable to assume that this ‘absolute’ use also occurs in classes [F] and [M], so that the typical interpretations of the ‘absolute’ demonstratives in [F] and [M] may again be considered to reflect inherent semantic properties of these classes.

3.1.2. Frequently-occurring ‘absolute’ relativizations

The picture of the inherent values of the nominal agreement classes obtained so far can be confirmed and refined by the study of other modifiers in the ‘absolute’ use. Of particular interest are a series of relativizations of stative verbs that are the regular device used for the expression of a handful of basic types of (chiefly human) animate beings (‘person’, ‘female’, ‘male’, ‘child’, ‘young woman of marriageable age’, ‘young man of marriageable age’, ‘shaman’, ‘hunter’, and possibly a few more). Although these relativizations may be used to modify a syntactically present noun (or a more complex NP containing a noun) as in (6a) or in anaphoric reference to a syntactically absent but contextually retrievable noun as in (6b.i), they more frequently occur on their own or as the head of a complex NP as in (6b.ii), without anaphoric reference to any noun. In the latter case, they can be said to occur in an ‘absolute’ use.

- (6) a. wí’á yá=yarí yá=bū-’è
 INDF LK.(M/S)=tamarin LK.(M/S)=be.young-REL.S
 ‘a baby tamarin monkey’ [lit. ‘a tamarin monkey that is young’]
- b. wí’á yá=bū-’è
 INDF LK.(M/S)=be.young-REL.S
 i. ‘a baby one, a small one’ [e.g. with anaphoric reference to
 the noun *yarí* ‘tamarin monkey’]
 ii. ‘a baby, a small child’ [lit. ‘a [being] that is young’]

These ‘absolute’ relativizations may all be assigned to several classes (from two to four) in discourse, and their resulting interpretations can again be considered to reflect the inherent semantic and pragmatic values of the corresponding classes. The four different inflectional forms of the ‘absolute’ relativization based on the verb *bū* ‘be young’ and meaning ‘child’ or ‘young (of an animal)’ are listed in TABLE 4 along with their respective typical interpretations.

TABLE 4: inflectional forms of the ‘absolute’ relativization of *bû* ‘be young’ with their corresponding interpretations

F	<i>bû-kū̄</i>	be.young-REL.F ¹²	‘[female] child’
M	<i>bū-kū̄</i>	be.young\SBJV-REL.M	‘[male] child’
N	–	–	–
S	<i>bū-’è</i>	be.young\SBJV-REL.S	‘[baby or smaller] child’ or ‘child [who is a close relative]’
NS	<i>bū-’ù̄</i>	be.young\SBJV-REL.NS	‘[older] child [or teenager]’ or ‘child [who is <i>not</i> a close relative]’

The typical interpretations of the [F] and [M] forms of the ‘absolute’ relativization of *bû* ‘be young’ confirm the inherent semantic values of these two classes as found above, namely that [F] implies an animate female referent and [M] an animate male referent. The typical interpretations of its [S] and [NS] forms, although somewhat idiosyncratic, are also in line with those of the [S] and [NS] forms of the demonstratives in their ‘absolute’ use: a ‘[baby or smaller] child’ is typically perceived as comparatively dearer than an ‘[older] child [or teenager]’, and a ‘child [who is a close relative]’ is perceived as comparatively closer socially than a ‘child [who is *not* a close relative]’. Finally, as was to be expected, the [N] form of this ‘absolute’ relativization does not occur,¹³ which is probably to be interpreted as the effect of a semantic incompatibility between the meaning of the verb *bû* ‘be young’ (which can apparently only be predicated of animate referents) and the inherent value of [N], which implies an inanimate referent.

The two possible inflectional forms of the ‘absolute’ relativization based on the verb *dū̄* ‘be a human’ and meaning ‘person’¹⁴ are listed in TABLE 5 along with the typical interpretations they may receive.

¹² Suffixing the relativizer to a verb regularly requires the latter to be inflected in a category that I label ‘subjunctive’, which is primarily achieved through the application of a set of tonological alternations to the last (or only) syllable of the verb stem (hence the lexical form *bû* ‘be young’, but *e.g.* *bū-kū̄* ‘[male] child’, with a different toneme on the first syllable). The presence of this form of suprasegmental inflection is signaled by ‘\SBJV’ in the gloss. The [F] form of the relativizer, however, prevents in most cases the application of these tonological alternations, which is what distinguishes it from its [M] counterpart (see end of Section 2.2; hence the [F] form *bû-kū̄* ‘[female] child’ which, by preserving unaltered the lexical toneme of *bû* ‘be young’, contrasts with the [M] form *bū-kū̄* ‘[male] child’).

¹³ This form (*?bū-’ù̄nè* ‘be.young\SBJV-REL.N’) would most likely be considered unacceptable by Tikuna speakers. Note that I have not tested it explicitly, however.

¹⁴ The ‘absolute’ relativization based on *dū̄* ‘be a human’ may in fact occasionally refer to *non-human* animate beings; on the contextually variable extent of the Tikuna notion of *dū̄*, see Goulard (2009, pp.65-66 in particular).

TABLE 5: inflectional forms of the ‘absolute’ relativization of *dùù* ‘be a human’ with their corresponding interpretations

F	–	–	–
M	–	–	–
N	–	–	–
S	<i>dùù-’è</i>	be.a.human\SBJV-REL.S	‘[specific] person’, ‘[familiar] person’, ‘[Tikuna or Native American] person’, ‘[well-meaning or respected] person’
NS	<i>dùù-’ù</i>	be.a.human\SBJV-REL.NS	‘person [in general]’, ‘[unfamiliar] person’, ‘[non-Tikuna or non-Native American] person’, ‘[not especially well-meaning or respected] person’

It is interesting to note, first, that speakers explicitly reject the [F] and [M] forms of the ‘absolute’ relativization of *dùù* ‘be a human’. This can be interpreted as the effect of a semantic incompatibility between the generic and therefore sexually unspecified meaning of the verb *dùù* ‘be a human’ and the inherent values of [F] and [M], which entail the specification of the sex of the referent. The typical interpretations reported here for the [S] and [NS] forms are again in line with the [S] and [NS] forms of the demonstratives in their ‘absolute’ use: the use of the [S] form *dùù-’è* generally implies a comparatively more individualized, more familiar, dearer, or more respected referent, while the use of the [NS] form *dùù-’ù* generally implies a less individualized, less familiar, less dear, or less respected referent. Again, the [N] form of the ‘absolute’ relativization meaning ‘person’ does not occur, presumably because of a semantic incompatibility between the meaning of the verb *dùù* ‘be a human’ and the inherent semantic value of [N].

3.1.3. Outline of the system of inherent values of the nominal agreement classes of Tikuna

Besides modifiers in the ‘absolute’ use, on which this section is focused, note that noun phrases assigned to a different class than the lexically-assigned reference class of their head noun and the resulting interpretation effects also shed light on the inherent values of the classes. However, because the examination of such noun phrases requires the introduction of the notion of lexically-assigned reference class, they will be dealt with in the next section.

The analysis of the inherent values of the nominal agreement classes of Tikuna leads to the general picture outlined in FIGURE 1.

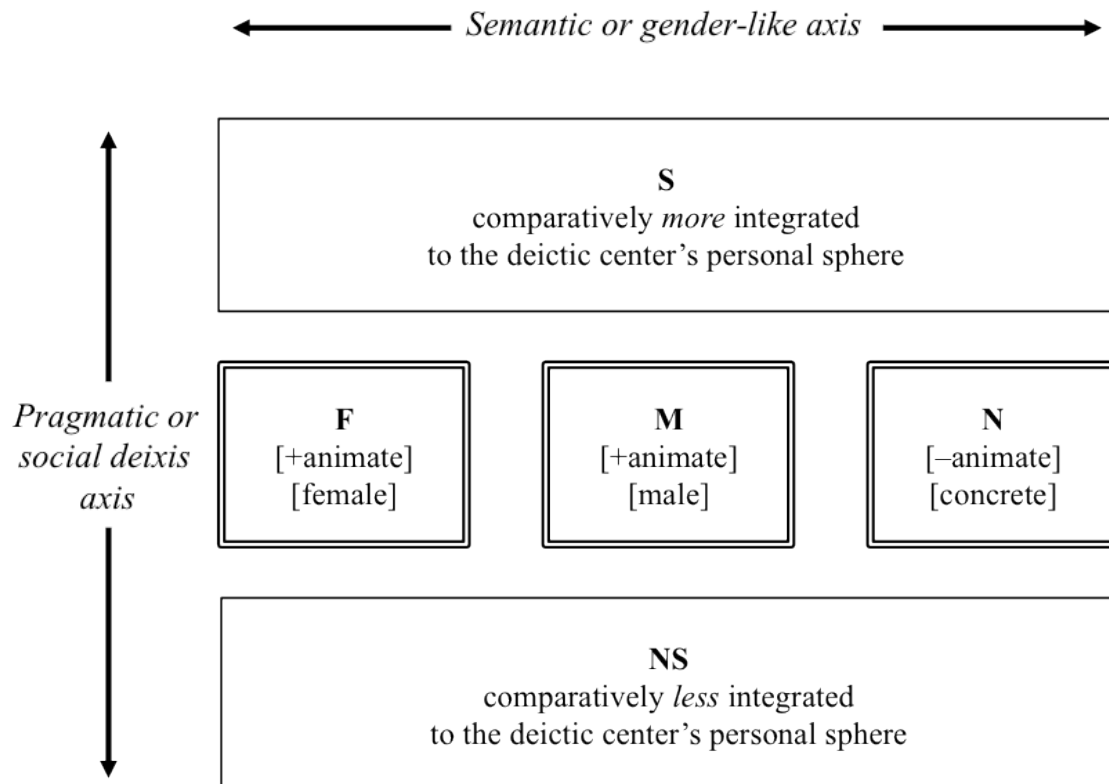


FIGURE 1: outline of the system of inherent values of the nominal agreement classes of Tikuna

As shown in FIGURE 1, although the five classes of Tikuna constitute a homogeneous category from a morphosyntactic perspective, the analysis of their inherent values suggests that they can be considered to be organized along two functionally distinct axes. The inherent values of [F], [M], and [N] are chiefly semantic, *i.e.* the indication that these classes bear in themselves mainly relates to the nature of the referent itself. By contrast, the inherent values of [S] and [NS] are chiefly pragmatic, and more specifically of an evaluative nature, *i.e.* the indication that these classes bear in themselves mainly relates to the subjective perception of the referent by the deictic center. Conversely, [F], [M], and [N] are evaluatively underspecified and do not in themselves bear any indication as to the subjective perception of the referent by the deictic center. Similarly, [S] and [NS] are semantically underspecified and do not in themselves bear any indication as to the nature of the referent itself.

I will call ‘gender-like axis’ the semantic functional dimension of the system of nominal agreement classes of Tikuna, given how similar the broad categories that this axis defines are to those typically distinguished in the noun class systems traditionally called ‘gender’ systems. This is why I label [Feminine], [Masculine], and [Neuter] the three classes that can be distinguished along this dimension.¹⁵ On the other hand, I will

¹⁵ The positioning of the boxes corresponding to [F], [M], and [N] in FIGURE 1 should not be taken to imply that these three classes are organized in a polarized fashion, ranging

tentatively call ‘social deixis axis’ the pragmatic functional dimension of the system, as the categories that this axis defines are broadly related to a notion of greater or lesser inclusion of the referent in the personal sphere¹⁶ of the deictic center. For practical purposes and because this notion is akin to one of socio-cultural salience, I tentatively label the two poles that the social deixis dimension defines as [Salientive] and [Non-Salientive]. Importantly, note that while the gender-like axis defines absolute categories, the social deixis axis defines relative categories: while the inherent semantic values of [F], [M], and [N] are essentially independent from contextual information, the inherent pragmatic values of [S] and [NS] cannot be fully apprehended without contextual information.

3.2. Taking into account lexically-assigned reference classes

Beyond the inherent values of the classes, what can be characterized as lexically-assigned reference classes also have to be taken into account for adequately assigning a given participant to a given class or interpreting that assignment.

3.2.1. How the lexical reference class of a noun influences its class assignment in discourse

Lexical nouns, whether independent nouns or bound nouns (a class of nouns that cannot occur independently), tend to have a preferred or default class. When a participant designated by a given noun is assigned to the preferred or default class of that noun, the inherent value of the class selected for is not expressed. The assignment of the participant to that class is treated as arbitrary and therefore meaningless. It is only when the participant is assigned to another class than the preferred or default class of that noun that the inherent value of the class selected for is expressed: deviation from the preferred or default class *is* considered meaningful. Because it is only with reference to the preferred or default class of a lexical noun that the assignment of the participant it designates to a given class in discourse may be correctly decided or interpreted, I will call the preferred or default class of a noun its ‘reference class’.

The reference class of the independent noun *téré* ‘parrot sp. (unidentified)’, for instance, is [F]. When a participant designated by means of this particular noun is assigned to [F], the inherent value of this class is not expressed and the corresponding referent is not normally implied to be female (except if the speaker is contextually known to be fully aware of the sex of the referent, *e.g.* if the referent is a beloved pet,

from [F] at one extreme to [N] at the other. At this stage, I am agnostic about the existence of such an organization among the three categories of the gender-like axis. Conversely, the positioning of the boxes along the social deixis axis *is* intended to reflect polarization.

¹⁶ By “personal sphere” I refer to the set of entities that can be viewed as closely surrounding an individual (corresponding to the deictic center), whether physically, socially, in terms of ownership, in terms of familiarity, emotionally, culturally, or in several of these ways at the same time.

in which case assignment to [F] may imply that the referent is specifically female). When that participant is assigned to [M], on the other hand, the inherent value of class [M] *is* expressed and the corresponding referent is explicitly implied to be male. The inherent values of [S] or [NS] are likewise expressed when that participant is assigned to one of them. These effects are summarized in TABLE 6 (where the row corresponding to the reference class of the noun is highlighted in light gray).

TABLE 6: possible class assignments of participants designated by means of the noun *téré* ‘parrot sp.’ (reference class = [F]) with their corresponding connotations

F	‘parrot sp. [of either sex]’
M	‘[male] parrot sp.’
N	–
S	‘[special, e.g. personified, mythical, or pet] parrot sp.’
NS	‘[ordinary, e.g. non-specific or wild] parrot sp.’

The reference class of the independent noun *kōwú* ‘deer sp. (*Mazama americana*)’, by contrast, is [M], yielding the mirror image of *téré* ‘parrot sp.’ When a participant designated by means of *kōwú* ‘deer sp.’ is assigned to [M], the inherent value of this class is not expressed and the corresponding referent is not normally implied to be male. When that participant is assigned to [F], on the other hand, the inherent value of class [F] *is* expressed and the corresponding referent is explicitly implied to be female. Again, the inherent values of [S] or [NS] are likewise expressed when that participant is assigned to one of them. These effects are summarized in TABLE 7.

TABLE 7: possible class assignments of participants designated by means of the noun *kōwú* ‘deer sp.’ (reference class = [M]) with their corresponding connotations

F	‘[female] deer sp.’
M	‘deer sp. [of either sex]’
N	–
S	‘[special, e.g. personified or mythical] deer sp.’
NS	‘[ordinary, e.g. non-specific or wild] deer sp.’

The effects of reference class on the interpretation of the assignment of participants to specific classes in discourse is further illustrated in TABLE 8 through TABLE 10 in the cases of the independent nouns *nái* ‘tree’, *irú* ‘baby banana’, and *chǐ’nú* ‘pineapple’, whose reference classes are [N], [S], and [NS] respectively. Note that assigning to [S] participants designated by means of nouns whose reference class is [N] or [NS] (as is done in TABLE 8 and TABLE 10), although possible, is in practice exceedingly rare. One consultant remarked that it could be considered as a feature of women’s speech that is virtually only used to indicate extreme affection toward the referent (e.g. if talking about an especially valued tree one has planted oneself and taken care of for years as if it were one’s own child). Note also that, for reasons I still fail to understand, inanimate participants designated by means of nouns whose reference class is [S] may generally also be assigned to [F] (although this

rarely occurs) without the usual inherent effects of [F] (as shown in the first row of TABLE 9).

TABLE 8: possible class assignments of participants designated by means of the noun *nâi* ‘tree’ (reference class = [N]) with their corresponding connotations

F	–
M	–
N	‘tree’
S	‘[special, e.g. mythical or especially dear] tree’
NS	‘[ordinary, e.g. non-specific or wild] tree’

TABLE 9: possible class assignments of participants designated by means of the noun *irú* ‘baby banana’ (reference class = [S]) with their corresponding connotations

F	‘baby banana’
M	–
N	–
S	‘baby banana’
NS	‘[ordinary, e.g. non-specific] baby banana’

TABLE 10: possible class assignments of participants designated by means of the noun *chí’nú* ‘pineapple’ (reference class = [NS]) with their corresponding connotations

F	–
M	–
N	–
S	‘[special, e.g. mythical or especially dear] pineapple’
NS	‘pineapple’

The semantic effect of assigning to [N] a participant designated by means of a noun whose reference class is not [N]—which in practice hardly ever occurs—is illustrated in TABLE 11 with the bound noun *-èrú* ~ *-érú* ‘head’. Assignment to [N] in this configuration implies that the referent (in this case a head) is exceptionally viewed as a physical inanimate object (e.g. because that head has been severed from a dead body and is being made use of as if it were an ordinary object).

TABLE 11: possible class assignments of participants designated by means of the noun *-èrú* ~ *-érú* ‘head’ (reference class = [NS]) with their corresponding connotations

F	–
M	–
N	‘head [e.g. severed from a dead body]’
S	–
NS	‘head’

Examples (7) and (8) illustrate with textual occurrences the interplay of the reference class of nouns and the system of inherent values of the classes in the process of class assignment in discourse. (7a) and (7b) are two immediately consecutive utterances from a staged narrative about a

man going hunting. In (7a), the hunter has just come across a capybara and shot it.

(7) a. CAPYBARA=[NS]

Nò-'rī ġè'rí-gú
3M/N/NS-GEN bag-LOC2

yà=ú-kùchí-ǎ-'ú
PC7.3M/N/NS.SBJ.SBJV=put.SG-in.SG-3(M/N/NS.OBJ\SBJV-SUB

ná-'wètā-gù
3M/N/NS-carrying.container-LOC2
'He put it in his bag, in the rucksack.' [JSG C74-75]

b. CAPYBARA=[S]

tū=yà=pe-kúchí-'ú
3S.ACC=PC7.3M/N/NS.SBJ.SBJV=cram-in.SG\SBJV-SUB

gá=yí'è-má kōpīwārà [...].
LK.PST¹⁷=MED.S-ANAPH capybara
'He crammed the capybara in [it].' [JSG C76]

At the moment where the hunter encounters the capybara, which briefly precedes (7), the word used to designate the capybara was naturally the noun *kōpīwārà* 'capybara', whose reference class is [M]. However, from the encounter itself down to (7a) included (*i.e.* for about 10 seconds), the capybara is in fact explicitly assigned to [NS] (through the use of the unambiguously [NS] form *tò* 'other' in reference to it; see TABLE 2). Because the reference class of *kōpīwārà* is [M], not [NS], the inherent value of [NS] applies: the capybara is initially being talked about as an unidentified wild animal, as is to be expected. But in (7b), once the hunter has taken possession of what has now become his game, the capybara is reassigned to [S]. Again, because the reference class of *kōpīwārà* is [M], not [NS], the inherent value of [S] applies: the capybara is now being talked about as a referent integrated in the personal sphere of the deictic center (in this case, the hunter). Because the status of the capybara will not change again from the perspective of the hunter, the animal will remain assigned to [S] in further mentions within the same narrative.

Utterances (8a) and (8b) are excerpts from a spontaneous narrative that happens to also involve a man going hunting.¹⁸ The man is walking in the forest in search of game and comes across a troop of monkeys.

¹⁷ In this speaker's subdialect, *gá=* is the unique allomorph of the linker with its value [+pre-hodiernal past] and therefore does not give any indication of class (contrast the paradigms presented in TABLE 1).

¹⁸ This narrative is published extensively in Bertet, Ángel Ruiz & Ángel Ruiz (2019).

(8) a. **MONKEYS=[NS]**

Yě-à nũ=nà=dău-’ũ=ã’a
DIST.LOC1-DEM 3(M/N)/NS.ACC=3M/N/NS.SBJ.SBJV=see\SBJV-SUB=QUOT

gá=ômé=ã’a
LK.(F/M)/NS(/S).PST=monkey.sp.=QUOT

gá=mù-’ũ=ã’a [...].
LK.(F/M)/NS(/S).PST=be.several\SBJV-REL.NS=QUOT
‘There he saw a troop of woolly monkeys [...].’ [LAR D119]

b. **MONKEYS=[M]**

Tău=ã’a pã’ă
NEG=QUOT be.quick

ĩ=nà=rũ=gă-gũ-’ũ
SP=3M(/N/NS).SBJ.SBJV=PCrũ=get.down-PL\SBJV-SUB

gá=<yî’êm...> yĩ-má ômé=ã’a
LK.(F/M)/NS(/S).PST=FS MED.M-ANAPH monkey.sp.=QUOT

gá=nũ=gũchă’ũ-’ũchĩ-kũ.
LK.(F/M)/NS(/S).PST=3M/N/NS.BEN=arouse.desire-genuinely\SBJV-REL.M
‘These... these woolly monkeys he so wanted to hunt would not go
down quickly.’ [LAR D126]

Although the reference class of *ômé* ‘monkey sp.’¹⁹ is [M], the monkeys are first assigned to [NS] in (8a), which underlines their status of unidentified wild animals at that point of the story. A few seconds later, however, the speaker reassigns the monkeys to [M] in (8b). Because [M] is their reference class, the effect of this shift is a negative one: it only prevents the inherent value of [NS] from continuing to apply. The speaker’s decision to no longer present the monkeys as unidentified wild animals presumably relates to the fact that, between (8a) and (8b), the hunter is forced to await for a long time the right moment to shoot them: at that point of the story, the monkeys no longer are just any wild monkeys, they now are the hunter’s well-identified prey (but note that they are not his game yet, which is why they are not reassigned to [S] here, but to their reference class only).

3.2.2. *What determines the reference class of a noun*

Lexically preferred or default classes—or ‘reference classes’—are in most cases attributed to nouns based on semantic principles, *i.e.* based on the nature of the referents that these nouns denote. A number of semantic categories that tend to cause nouns to belong to a specific reference class are listed in TABLE 12 along with one or two examples for each. Note that several of the nouns shown in the third column of TABLE 12 to

¹⁹ *Lagothrix lagotricha*.

illustrate this semantically-based distribution can be easily identified as loanwords,²⁰ loans are indeed regularly attributed a reference class when entering the lexical stock of the language.

TABLE 12: inventory of semantic categories of nouns by typical reference class

F	female human beings, most smaller birds, arthropods (?)	e.g. <i>chũrã</i> ‘lady’, <i>mãmã</i> ‘mum’, <i>mũ’u</i> ‘hummingbird’, <i>b’erũ</i> ‘butterfly’, <i>ãẽ</i> ‘chigger (<i>Trombiculidae</i> sp.)?’
M	male human beings, most bigger birds, mammals, palm trees	e.g. <i>yâtũ</i> ‘man’, <i>pãpã</i> ‘dad’, <i>gũnũ</i> ‘bird sp. (<i>Cracinae</i> sp.)’, <i>âi</i> ‘wild felid’, <i>ômé</i> ‘monkey sp.’, <i>gõ’pè</i> ‘palm sp. (<i>Iriarteia deltoidea</i>)’
N	most internal organs, body parts, liquids, plants other than palm trees, objects made of wood or palm fiber, vehicles, machines, geographical locations, buildings	e.g. <i>-kà</i> ‘liver’, <i>-ãpũ’ũ</i> ‘knee’, <i>kãpé</i> ‘coffee’, <i>tũ’è</i> ‘manioc’, <i>wõtã</i> ‘wild cashew (<i>Anacardium excelsum</i>)?’, <i>ĩẽ</i> ‘blowgun’, <i>gè’rĩ</i> ‘bag’, <i>gũẽ</i> ‘canoe’, <i>mũtũrũ</i> ‘motor, motorboat’, <i>-’tã’a</i> ‘lake’, <i>-pãtã</i> ‘house’
S	most sharp metal objects	e.g. <i>kũ’chì</i> ‘knife’, <i>yũēmã</i> ‘metal axe’, <i>tãrã</i> ‘machete’
NS	sexually unspecified human(-like) beings, abstract entities	e.g. <i>kõrĩ</i> ‘non-indigenous person’, <i>g’õ’o</i> ‘spirit’, <i>yũ’ũ</i> ‘puberty ritual’, <i>pũrãkũ</i> ‘activity’

However, the reference class of a large number of nouns is not easily predictable semantically in today’s Tikuna, or is even directly at odds with the semantically-based distribution outlined in TABLE 12. For instance, the reference class of *dĩẽrũ* ‘money’ is [S], rather unpredictably. That of *chẽrã* ‘saw’, which denotes a sharp metal object, is [M] instead of the expected [S].²¹ That of *nã’i* ‘palm sp. (*Astrocaryum chambira*)’ is [S] instead of the expected [M]. That of *kãrũ* ‘rubber tree (*Hevea brasiliensis*)’ is [S] instead of the expected [N]. That of *dẽ’ã* ‘water’ is [NS] instead of the expected [N], etc.

On the other hand, the reference class of a limited number of nouns can be confidently predicted from the phonological shape of their last syllable. Nouns ending with the syllable *-kũ*, in particular, typically have [M] as their reference class (e.g. *mũkũ* ‘high-water season’, *tãunẽkũ* ‘year’, *tãwēmãkũ* ‘moon’, *ũqkũ* ‘sun’). In fact, the final syllable of these

²⁰ *Kũ’chì* ‘knife’ and *yũēmã* ‘metal axe’ < Old Omagua **kífì* ‘id.’ and **juéma* ‘iron’. *Pũrãkũ* ‘activity’ and *kõrĩ* ‘non-indigenous person’ < Língua Geral Amazônica *purakí* ‘work’ and *kar[í?]wa* ‘id.’ *Chũrã* ‘lady’ and *tãrã* ‘machete’ < Portuguese *senhora* ‘id.’ and *terçado* ‘id.’ *Kãpé* ‘coffee’ and *mũtũrũ* ‘motor’ < Portuguese or Spanish *café* ‘id.’ and *motor* ‘id.’ The Old Omagua forms are identified based on O’Hagan (2011) and Michael & O’Hagan (2016) and the Língua Geral Amazônica forms based on Stradelli (1929).

²¹ *Dĩẽrũ* ‘money’ < Portuguese *dinheiro* ‘id.’; on *chẽrã* ‘saw’, see footnote 7.

nouns is most likely a fossilized occurrence of the homonymous [M] inflectional form of the relativizer (see Section 2.2): *tàwēmàkū* ‘moon’, for example, is probably a lexicalized relativization based on a predicative phrase composed of *tāu* ‘be gray’ and *-ēmā* ‘light’ (lit. ‘[the] gray-lighted [one]’). This diachronic scenario would explain why these nouns are among the few in the language that prevent agreement for any other class than their reference class.²² Importantly, however, these nouns have become unanalyzable in today’s language.

Thus, although the distribution of nouns among reference classes within the Tikuna lexicon can be said to be generally based on semantic principles, these examples show that this distribution is also, to a certain extent (and at least from a synchronic perspective), semantically opaque or based on phonological criteria.

3.2.3. *Reference class: a fuzzy property that does not determine class assignment on its own*

In any case, the importance of the lexical component among the principles that determine the assignment of participants to a given class in discourse should not be overestimated. In practical terms, it is often uneasy to ascertain the reference class of a noun based on occurrences in naturalistic speech only, or even to elicit it artificially, given the flexibility of class assignment in discourse and the relative subtlety of the semantic and pragmatic effects of that flexibility. Unsurprisingly, speakers do not always coincide in their attribution of nouns to a given reference class and not infrequently have difficulty when asked about the effects of assigning a given noun (especially a comparatively rare one) to class X or Y in a given context. As a result, it would prove hard, for instance, to systematically provide the reference class of nouns in a lexicographical description of the language.

My understanding of the principles of class assignment in Tikuna discourse is that the inherent values of the classes are almost always at play in the process—albeit to varying extents. On the other hand, lexical information—which can only come into play where third person participants designated by means of lexical nouns are present—is rather to be regarded as an interference or constraint (of varying strength) to be taken into account in order to *adjust* one’s use or interpretation of the system of inherent values associated with each class to the specific instances of participants designated by particular nouns. While knowledge of the system of inherent values of the classes is, in certain cases, sufficient to correctly assign (or to correctly interpret the assignment of) a given participant to a given class (as in the cases shown

²² Interestingly, this small group of nouns stands in a unique position with respect to the system of class agreement of the language: while the assignment of participants to specific classes in discourse is usually a complex process involving grammatical, lexical, and discourse considerations, the assignment of participants designated by means of these particular nouns is entirely determined by the lexical properties of these nouns (specifically, their phonological shape). In other words, these few nouns give rise to a situation where class would seem to be a stable, essentially lexical and arbitrary feature as in typical Indo-European gender systems.

in Section 3.1), knowledge of the reference class of a noun is almost never sufficient for that same purpose (although see footnote 22).

3.3. Managing class contrasts between participants for ease of reference-tracking

Additionally to the inherent values of the classes on the one hand (grammatical basis for class assignment) and to the reference classes of nouns on the other hand (lexical basis for class assignment), a careful examination of extensive texts shows that a third type of information contributes to determine the assignment of a given participant to a given class in discourse and the correct interpretation of that assignment. This third type of information is the class assignment of *other* participants in the immediate topical environment (discursive basis for class assignment).

This third type of information is indeed directly relevant for purposes of reference management. The general principle is that in cases where two (or more) different participants constituting simultaneously highly activated topics would tend to be assigned to the same class (or to largely syncretic classes, such as [M] and [NS]) by virtue of the grammatical and lexical bases for class assignment described so far, then one of these participants may be artificially shifted to a distinct class (exclusively along the social deixis axis of the class system; see FIGURE 1) to maintain a morphosyntactically clear-cut contrast between participants and thereby facilitate reference-tracking. The new class this participant is assigned to does not necessarily express its inherent values to an appreciable extent. Such class shifts are indeed understood to be essentially a discursive strategy, rather than a semantically and evaluatively meaningful process. The selection of the participant to be artificially shifted to a grammatically and lexically less expected class seems to be guided by the system of inherent values of the classes: this choice typically targets the participant whose shift can be expected to be the least noticeable, *i.e.* the one whose new connotations, once it is assigned to its new class, will be the least marked.

This general principle is illustrated in TABLE 13 with a schematic example abstracted from actual instances from my corpus (for an actual case, see example (9) below). The five columns labeled 'seq. 1' to 'seq. 5' represent five consecutive sequences of a given piece of discourse. In seq. 1, a first participant (P1) is introduced; it is assigned to [M] by virtue of the grammatical and lexical bases for class assignment. In seq. 2, P1 remains the main activated topic and retains its previous class assignment. In seq. 3, P1 is no longer talked about, while a new participant (P2) is introduced; P2 is likewise assigned to [M] by virtue of the grammatical and lexical bases for class assignment. For the moment, assignment to [M] of both P1 and P2 does not significantly impair reference-tracking. But in seq. 4, both P1 and P2 are now highly activated topics. P2, a newer and therefore still a less familiar participant, corresponding, say, to a less valued referent, retains its previous class assignment to [M]. P1, by contrast, now a comparatively more familiar participant, corresponding, say, to a more valued referent, is a better

candidate for shifting to [S]. P1 therefore undergoes this artificial shift in order to secure a contrast between P1 and P2 and facilitate reference-tracking. In seq. 5, although P2 is no longer talked about, P1 may retain its new class assignment to [S].

TABLE 13: shift in the class assignment of a participant (P1) as a reference-management strategy: a schematic illustration (“seq.” and “anaph.” respectively stand for “sequence” and “anaphora” in this table)

	seq. 1	seq. 2	seq. 3	seq. 4	seq. 5
F					
M	P1 (noun)	P1 (anaph.)	<i>P2 (noun)</i>	<i>P2 (anaph.)</i>	
N					
S				P1 (anaph.)	P1 (anaph.)
NS					

Example (9) provides a naturalistic occurrence of this phenomenon in a slightly different form. This example features a summarized version of the whole traditional story of Peta-Peta, which relates how the Tikunas discovered the metal axe. I was told this story by Loida Ángel Ruiz and recorded it in November 2017. Only the passages relevant for our purposes are transcribed in Tikuna and fully interlinearized. The morphemes that encode the class assignment of the relevant participants are highlighted in bold.

(9) a. **STRANGER (i.e. PETA-PETA)=[NS]**

Pētā-Pētā=gá [...] wí’á
Peta-Peta=PST INDF

gá=dùũ-’ú
LK.(F/M)/NS(/S).PST=be.a.human\SBJV-REL.NS

nî=î [...] gá=tû-mà-ka
3M/N/NS.SBJ.PCì=be LK.(F/M)/NS(/S).PST=3S-ANAPH-CAUSE

ǵó-’ú gá=nũ’kúma
be.visible\SBJV-REL.NS LK.F/M/NS/S.PST=past.time

gá=yá’gũ-tá [...].
LK.F/M/NS/S.PST=ancestor-COLL
‘Peta-Peta [...] was a person [...] who appeared to the ancestors in ancient times [...].’ [LAR E2-6]

b. [The Tikunas would sight him at sunset making loud metallic noises.] [LAR E7-9]

c. **TIKUNA MAN=[M]**

Dũ’wá=ã’a=gá wí’á <gá=... gá=...>
at.last=QUOT=PST INDF FS FS

gá=dùũ=ã'a=gá
LK.(F/M)(NS/S).PST=be.a.human=QUOT=PST

ĩ=yà=dǎu-'ũ [...].
SP=AM.3(F/M)(N/NS).SBJ.SBJV=see\SBJV-SUB
'At last, a, uh... a man went to have a look [...].' [LAR E10-12]

- d. [He found out that the source of the noises was a human being hitting a tree trunk with some unknown tool. The Tikuna man devised a plan to steal the tool: he covered himself with bird down and lay in the stranger's way.] [LAR E13-33]

- e. **STRANGER=[NS] — TIKUNA MAN=[M]**

Yè-má=ũkũ=ã'a **nũ=ĩ=gá,**
DIST.NS-ANAPH=I.mean=QUOT 3M/N/NS.SBJ.PCĩ=be=PST

ĩ=ná=gũ **gá=yè-má**
SP=3(M/N/NS).SBJ=arrive LK.(F/M/NS)(/S).PST=DIST.NS-ANAPH

dùũ-'ũ **rù=ã'a** [...]
be.a.human\SBJV-REL.NS and=QUOT

yé-à=ã'a
DIST.LOC1-DEM=QUOT

nũ=nà=dǎu-'ũ=ã'a
3M(N/NS).ACC=3(M/N/NS).SBJ.SBJV=see\SBJV-SUB=QUOT

gá=ná-mā-gù=ã'a [...] **kà-kũ**
LK.(F/M)(NS/S).PST=3N/NS-path-LOC2=QUOT lie-REL.M

gá=dùũ [...].
LK.(F/M)(NS/S).PST=be.a.human
'At that point [lit. 'This having been', ...], the person [*i.e.* the stranger] arrived and [...] saw at a distance the [Tikuna] man lying on the path [...].' [LAR E34-37]

- f. **STRANGER=[NS] — TIKUNA MAN=[S]**

Tũ-mà-ka=ã'a **ná=rũ=kã'-áchi**
3S-ANAPH-CAUSE=QUOT 3(M/N/NS).SBJ=PCrĩ=lean-TELIC

[...] **rù=ã'a** [...]
and=QUOT

tũ=nà=dǎu-á-'ũnē-'ũ
3S.ACC=3(M/N/NS).SBJ.SBJV=see-PLURILocal-body\SBJV-SUB

gá=gũ-'ũ-wá=mā.
LK.F/M/NS/S.PST=finish\SBJV-REL.NS-LOC1=precisely
'He [*i.e.* the stranger] crouched next to him [*i.e.* the Tikuna man] [...] and [...] examined his body from every possible angle.' [LAR E38-40]

- g. [*As the stranger was examining that weird feathered creature's rump, the latter suddenly farted. The startled stranger could do nothing to stop the Tikuna man, who stole his tool—which turned out to be an axe—and ran away with it. With the help of this new tool, the Tikunas were able to start practicing slash-and-burn agriculture.*] [LAR E41-79]

A first participant, specifically a stranger (in fact Peta-Peta himself), is introduced in (9a) and assigned to [NS] based on the inherent evaluative value conveyed by this class (the referent, a stranger to the Tikunas, is inevitably little integrated to the latter's personal sphere). In (9b), this stranger remains the center of attention, and retains his class assignment. A new participant, namely a Tikuna man, is introduced in (9c) and assigned to [M]²³ (the referent, a certain Tikuna man, is left unmarked for social deixis, as he is felt as neither especially integrated nor especially little integrated in the speaker and hearer's²⁴ personal spheres). In (9d), this new participant remains the center of attention, and retains his class assignment. In (9e-f), a direct encounter between the stranger and the Tikuna man occurs, so that both participants are now simultaneously highly activated topics. At first—in (9e)—both participants retain their class assignment. But because the [NS] and [M] forms of the targets of agreement for class are to a large extent morphologically syncretic, a fact that would quickly give rise to reference-tracking issues in this discursive situation, the speaker soon shifts—in (9f)—one of the participants to [S], a more distinctive class. It is obvious to both speaker and hearer that the better candidate for shifting to [S] is the Tikuna man, who by definition stands culturally closer to them than the stranger. Note, however, that virtually nothing has changed in the situation depicted nor in its evaluation by speaker and hearer: this class shift is an artificial and meaningless discursive strategy. The clear-cut class contrast between the main two participants established in (9f) is preserved throughout the remainder of the story in (9g).

²³ Strictly speaking, the class assignment of the Tikuna man in (9c) could be interpreted as either [M] *or* [NS] from the morphological elements present in that utterance. However, because he is explicitly assigned to [M] in (9e) (in the relative clause *kà-kū* 'lie-REL.M'), it makes more sense to assume that he already featured assignment to [M] in (9c), although this point would remain undecidable from a strictly morphosyntactic perspective. Note that the class assignment of the stranger is equally ambiguous in (9f) ([NS] *or* [M]), but may likewise be extrapolated to be [NS] on the basis of his morphologically explicit assignment in (9e) (in the words *yě-má* 'DIST.NS-ANAPH' and *dùũ-'ũ* 'be.a.human\SBJV-REL.NS').

²⁴ I was in practice the only hearer to attend the storyteller's performance. I deem it reasonable to assume here that she was telling the story in essentially the same way—from a grammatical perspective at least—as she would have told it to native Tikuna-speaking hearers.

4. Conclusion

In this tentative description of the dynamics of nominal agreement class assignment in Tikuna, I have adopted an unconventional approach centered on the role of the inherent values of the classes as grammatical categories, rather than on lexical information. As I have shown, lexical information (the ‘reference class’ of nouns) does play a role in class assignment in the language, but it does not by itself determine it and can be generally viewed as a mere (secondary) constraint interfering with the (primary) process of class assignment based on the inherent values of the classes. In fact, what the classes of Tikuna appear to ultimately classify are participants (*i.e.* the representations of given referents in discourse)—not lexemes. And this classification depends to a large extent on the speaker’s intentions and may be revised whenever needed (and even for purely discursive purposes if necessary). Nominal agreement class in Tikuna thus resembles both gender and number in well-described Indo-European languages: like the latter, nominal agreement class is a contextual feature, but unlike it and in a way that is more reminiscent of gender, nominal agreement class is also partially determined by lexical information. Although the provisional description of nominal agreement class assignment in Tikuna sketched out in this paper will certainly be found to require important refinements in future research, I hope it will minimally achieve its goal of drawing attention to the typologically unfamiliar features of that grammatical phenomenon.

Amazonian nominal classification systems have been considered a ‘challenge’ for the general typology of nominal classification systems (see Grinevald & Seifart (2004) in particular). A direction for future research regarding the Tikuna system of nominal agreement classes could now be to examine how it compares cross-linguistically with relatively well-known noun class and classifier systems on the one hand, and, on the other hand, how similar or dissimilar it is to lesser-known systems of nominal classification in geographically close (but genetically unrelated) Amazonian languages.²⁵

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²⁵ See Grinevald & Seifart (2004:279-280) for descriptive references on Amazonian nominal classification systems.

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