

Non-human animates and non-selective interrogative pronominals

Dmitry Idiatov



dmitry.idiatov@ua.ac.be

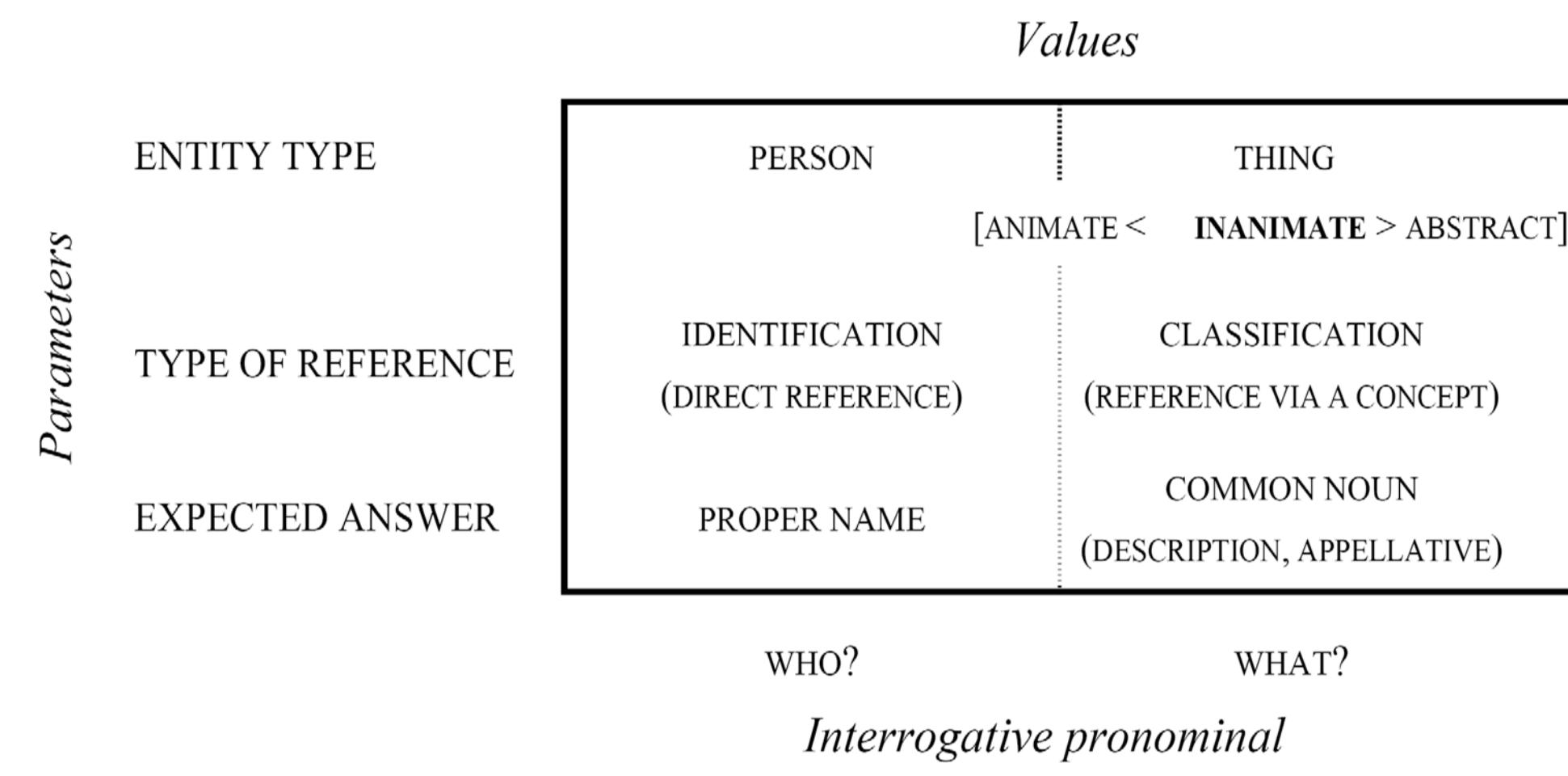
Goals

- To examine the cross-linguistic variation in the use of non-selective interrogative pronominals (NIPs), such as English *who?* and *what?*, in questions about non-human animates, i.e. non-human biologically living entities.
- The focus is on languages using ‘*who?*’ or a special NIP for non-human animates
 - their geographical and genetic distribution
 - possible correlations with other manifestations of the animacy hierarchy in these languages
 - the ways grammatical animacy in the context of a question may differ from grammatical animacy elsewhere in the grammar of such languages

Typology of NIPs (Idiatov 2007)

- For purposes of cross-linguistic comparison, ‘*who?*’ and ‘*what?*’ are best defined as idealizations resulting out of the interaction between several parameters within a single conceptual space, as in Fig. 1.

Figure 1. Conceptual space for delimiting the prototypical functions of NIPs



- the prototypical interrogative ‘*who?*’ is an interrogative pronominal asking for the identification of a person and expecting a proper name as an answer.
- the prototypical interrogative ‘*what?*’ is an interrogative pronominal asking for the classification of a thing and expecting a common noun as an answer



Strictly speaking, the third parameter EXPECTED ANSWER is somewhat redundant, since its values can be defined in terms of prototypical correlates of the second parameter TYPE OF REFERENCE. However in some cases expected answer does play an irreducible role in the choice of an interrogative pronominal, as in (1).

- The combinations of values [person + identification + proper name] and [thing + classification + common noun] are **prototypical combinations of values** with respect to the choice of a non-selective interrogative pronominal.
- What to do with **non-prototypical combinations of values**? (cf. Fig. 2)
 - use ‘*who?*’, as in Kgalagadi (1), Russian (2)
 - use ‘*what?*’, as in English (1-3)
 - use something else, as in Hausa (3), which is an avoidance strategy

Kgalagadi (Niger-Congo, Bantu S30; Botswana; Kems Monaka, p.c.)

- (1) [A:] *Libizho la lehelo lo ke anye?* [B:] *Ke Hughunsi*
name of place this is **who** is Hukuntsi
‘*What* (lit.: ‘*who?*’) is the name of this place?’ ‘It’s Hukuntsi (a village name)’

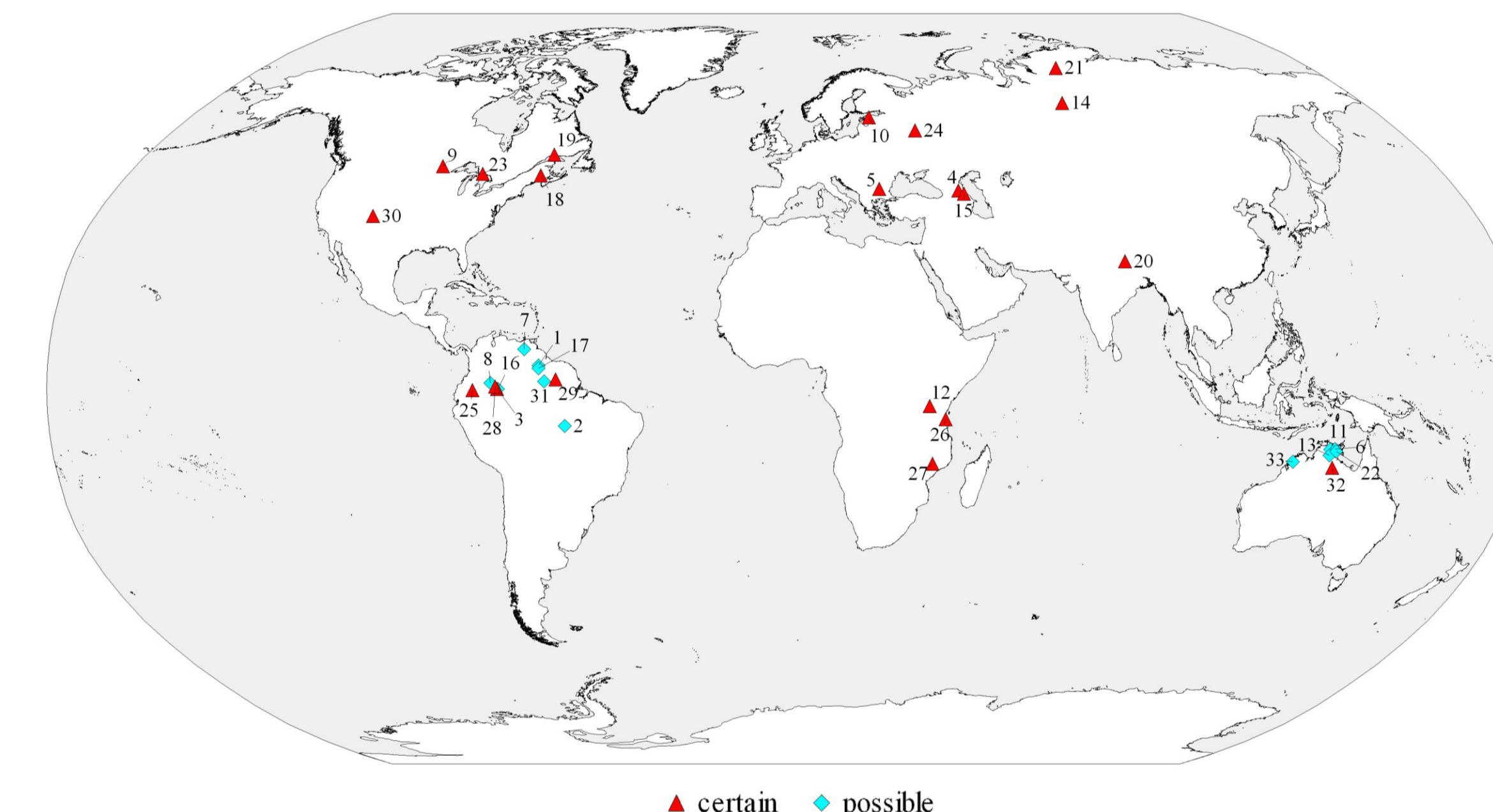
Russian

- (2) *A on kto voobšče? Doktor?* (3) *lnaa / Yaya suuna-n-ka?*
and he **who** actually doctor where / how name-of-2SG
‘And *what* (lit.: ‘*who?*’) is he actually? A doctor?’ ‘*What* (lit.: ‘*where?/how?*’) is your name?’

Typology of NIPs & non-human animates

- Non-human animates fall in between persons and prototypical things (concrete biologically nonliving objects).
 - In questions, most languages tend to assimilate them to things rather than humans opting for ‘*what?*’, as in (4) both in Alawa and English.
- Alawa (Maran; Australia; Margaret Sharpe, p.c.)
- (4) *Nganjini-rrt galnari nyamba*
what-ERG bite.3SG.M.PST 2SG.OBL
‘[Someone walks into a room with a swelling on his arm, a wound or whatever. A:] **What** bit you?’
- A small minority of languages uses ‘*who?*’ assimilating non-human animates to humans as regards the use of NIPs, as in (5) and (6).
- Russian
- (5) *Kto eto tebja ukusil? Osa?*
who this you bit wasp
‘[Looking at a swelling on someone’s hand clearly caused by an insect bite:] **What** stung you? A wasp?’
- Kathmandu Newar (Sino-Tibetan, Tibeto-Burman; Nepal; Kazuyuki Kiryu, p.c.)
- (6) *Chanta su-nā: nya:ta?*
2SG.DAT **who**-ERG bite.PST.DISJUNCT
‘[Looking at a wound on someone’s arm presumably caused by an animal bite:] **What** bit you?’

Map 1. Languages allowing ‘*who?*’ in questions about non-human animates



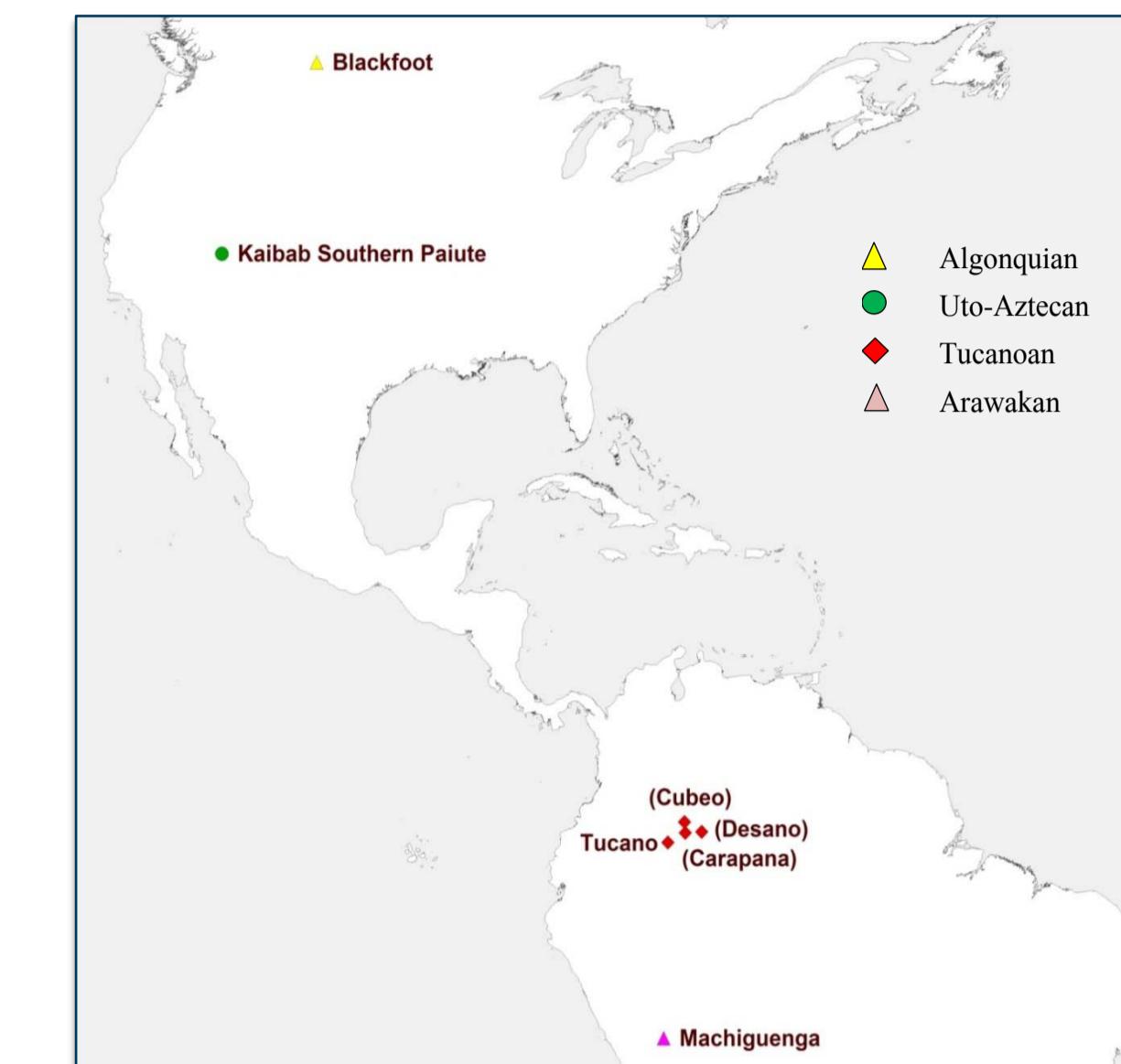
- Particularly important numbers of languages with ‘*who?*’ in questions about non-human animates:
 - Algonquian languages in North America
 - Carib & Tucanoan languages in South America
 - Eastern Bantu languages in Africa
 - Slavic languages in Europe
 - Yeniseian languages in northern Asia
 - presumably, various non-Pama-Nyungan languages of northern Australia
- However, in both languages with ‘*what?*’ and languages with ‘*who?*’, the in-between status of non-human animates is still manifested indirectly in that many languages are reported to tend to avoid using ‘*who?*’ and ‘*what?*’ in questions about non-human animates, as in (7a), especially in certain constructions, as in (8a).

Danish (Allen *et al.* 2003:195)

- (7) [An animal must have made these tracks.]
- a. **Hvem* / **Hvad* er det? b. *Hvad* er det **for** et? ‘What is it?’
who / **what** is it **what** is it **for** one
- Russian
- (8) [An animal must have made these tracks.]
- a. **Kto* / **Cto* eto životnoe? b. *Cto* eto za životnoe? c. *Kto* eto?
who / **what** this animal **what** this **for** animal **who** this
‘What is this animal?’ ‘What animal is this?’ ‘What is it?’

- Several languages have been found to use special NIPs for non-human animates.

Map 2. Languages with specian NIPs for non-human animates



Tucano (Eastern Tucanoan; Brazil & Colombia; Ramirez 1997:328-332)

- (9) *noá* ‘*who?* (human SG or PL)’
yē’ē ‘*what?* (inanimate SG or PL)’
yamī ‘*what?* (non-human AN.M.SG)’
yamō ‘*what?* (non-human AN.FSG)’
yamārā ‘*what?* (non-human AN.PL)’

Animacy correlations

- Languages with ‘*who?*’ or special NIPs in questions about non-humans normally have **gender systems based** (at least in part) **on animacy**:
 - with a special animate gender, as in Trío or Tucano
 - with a special animate subgender, as in Russian
 - with an emergent gender system with an animate agreement class, as in Kathmandu Newar
- The few exceptions can mostly be accounted for:
 - by loss of gender, as in Lezgi
 - by contact, as in Estonian (with Russian) or Hadza (with Eastern Bantu)

Animacy in NIPs and elsewhere

- In NIPs, animacy tends to be manifested in a **more restricted** way than elsewhere:
 - not all entities denoted by nouns that are grammatically animate can be questioned with ‘*who?*’, as in (10c), although e.g. *sakime* ‘mosquito’ belongs to the animate gender
- Southwestern Ojibwa of Ponemah, Minnesota (Algic, Central Algonquian, Ojibwa; USA; Schwartz & Dunnigan 1986:304)
- (10) a. *Awenen kaa-takkwamaat?* b. *Awenen-an kaa-takkwamaat?*
who PAST-bite.DIRECT.3OBJ ‘Who bit him/them (person)?’ ‘What (“a large animal”) bit him/them (person)?’
- c. *Awekonen kaa-takkwamaat?*
what PAST-bite.INVERSE.3OBJ ‘What (e.g., an insect) bit him/them (person)?’
- in languages with special non-human animate NIPs, humans are grammatically animate
- In NIPs, animacy assignment tends to be **less fixed** than elsewhere:
 - E.g., in Russian all nouns belong to either the animate subgender or the inanimate one. Roughly speaking, the distribution is humans & fauna vs. the rest. As a rule of thumb, the NIPs *kto* ‘*who?*’ and *čto* ‘*what?*’ are distributed similarly, but in practice there are many complications, such as:
 - the larger the animal the more likely it is that *kto* will be used rather than *čto*.
 - kto* tends to be used with mammals and *čto* with birds, reptiles and especially fish and insects. However, when insects, etc. act on humans (e.g. when they sting or bite), *kto* will normally be used
 - čto* may be preferred to *kto* if the animal is perceived as unpleasant, repulsive, etc., and on the contrary, *kto* may be preferred if the animal is nice or pleasant in some way
 - if the animal is perceived as food *čto* may be preferred to *kto*