

Assamese

In Assamese, Kakati (1941) and Goswami (1968) suggest that classifiers occur to a limited extent in the first 14th century Assamese documents, and both increase in syntactic functions and proliferate lexically over a period of some six centuries. The following examples suggest the scope of classifiers in present-day Assamese:

(a) tini bati pani	<i>three cups of water</i>
(b) tini gosi huta	<i>three pieces of thread</i>
(c) tini gos zori	<i>three pieces of string</i>
(d) tini dal rosi	<i>three pieces of rope</i>
(e) tini dal pensil	<i>three pencils</i>
(f) tini khon kapor	<i>three pieces of cloth</i>
(g) tini khon nao	<i>three boats</i>
(h) tini khon bozar	<i>three markets</i>
(i) tini khoni gamosa	<i>three towels</i>
(j) tini zopa am	<i>three mango trees</i>
(k) tini ti am	<i>three mangoes</i>
(l) tini ti lora	<i>three (nice) boys</i>
(m) tini ta lora	<i>three (not-so-nice) boys</i>
(n) tini ti koloh	<i>three (small) jars</i>
(o) tini ta koloh	<i>three (larger) jars</i>
(p) tini ta goru	<i>three cows</i>
(q) tini ta bhikhari	<i>three beggars</i>
(r) tini zoni sowali	<i>three girls</i>
(s) tini zon xokhi	<i>three (respected) friends</i>
(t) tini goraki mohila	<i>three (respected) women</i>
(u) tini zona roza	<i>three (very respected) kings</i>

Example (a) shows the parallel between measures and proper classifiers (b-u). An interesting feature of Assamese classifiers, particularly in more literary varieties, is the assignment of the quasi-feminine ending -i as a diminutive formative (cp. (b,c); (h,i); (r,s)). The set zon, zoni, zona is somewhat skewed: the first term refers respectfully to human males of normal rank; the second, to female animals or disrespectfully to human females; the third, deferentially to high-status humans of either sex. Another classifier goraki can be applied with respect to humans of either sex. Finally, either ti or ta may occur with non-respected humans, with ti indicating a measure of endearment, e.g. of a small child; cf. Bengali above.

In some cases numbers themselves behave syntactically as classifiers. Thus in Assamese:

du zon manuh *two men*
two CLF person

but: du xo manuh *two hundred men*
two hundred person

One presumes this is similar to expressions like 'two pairs' or 'three score'. (Note also that in Burmese certain changes in normal order are required when this

collective use of numerals occurs (Haas 1951:195). It may be noted here also that Thai and Chinese have a special classifier for one of items usually coming in pairs.) Assamese is similar to Bengali in that for the modern language, both in its standardised literary form and in its colloquial varieties, classifiers are not only tolerated but are in many cases syntactically obligatory. The languages also agree in having somewhat tenuous systems of plural marking, in many situations optional. Thus classifiers, in addition to their use in enumerative expressions, have the function of marking specific singulars, as we see below.

The presence of classifiers in considerable numbers in Assamese and in more modest or marginal terms in Indo-Aryan languages to the west raises the possibility that somehow classifiers have entered Indo-Aryan from the east, and their use is spreading westwards. Emeneau (1956, 1965) cites versions of this argument suggested by Sir George Grierson, and the 1934 speculation of Bloch which went so far as to implicate 'substratum influence' from Tai (Emeneau (1956:11). Bloch's suggestion is couched in rather vague terms, but it deserves careful attention in view of the social history of Assam.

According to local historical accounts, the Ahom and Assamese buranjis (Barua 1930), the Tais entered the Brahmaputra valley in the mid 13th century and gradually established control over some of what is now Assam. In spite of lack of critical scholarship, the main lines of Tai-Ahom history in the buranjis appear to be in general accord with what is known about Tai migrations and social organisation elsewhere. From the earliest recorded evidence and from comparative reconstruction, Tais have arranged themselves in a social hierarchy with a king/ chief overseeing a local aristocracy with titles like *khũn* and *thãn*. The buranjis indicate another common situation, that of Tai overlords with people of other ethnic groups, in various subservient feudal relationships. In the 16th century the Tai-Ahoms came into conflict with Muslim Bengalis and at the same time began to assimilate with Hindu Assamese, who had had a kingdom in Kamarupa in Western Assam. Gradually the dominant Tai-Ahoms took over Assamese for daily-life purposes, leaving the Tai-Ahom language for ceremonial and literary purposes. This situation continued until the British annexed the Tai-Ahom kingdom in 1826 (Phukan 1964).

Earlier stages of Assamese and Tai-Ahom perhaps exerted influences on each other through partially bilingual populations. A socially dominant group 'mispronouncing' or otherwise modifying another language can set norms for a favoured speech style, which is then imitated by lower-strata native speakers, spreading the innovations throughout the speech community. In the case of modern Assamese phonology, such a model could account for the merger of dental and retroflex consonants in a compelling way, since this is exactly the type of merger one would predict for Tais attempting to speak early Assamese.

One would be tempted, on the basis of observations like those above, to follow Bloch in attributing Assamese classifiers to a borrowing process. The problem is that on careful examination three difficulties arise from the linguistic facts.

(1) Of the common contemporary Assamese classifiers (*zɔn*, *zɔni*, *zɔna*, *to*, *ta*, *ti*, *khɔn*, *khɔni*, *sola*, *solli*, *dal*, *dali*, *zopa*, *zupi*, *gɔs*, *gɔsi*, *goraki*, *pat*, *khila*, *sita*, and *sɔta*) none has a direct Tai cognate; rather several have Indo-Aryan cognates. On the other hand, there are a good number of Tai-Ahom loans into Assamese (Barua and Phukan 1964:203-205), and one would expect that if numeral classifier constructions were being borrowed, at least a few actual forms would be borrowed as well. For example, the Dravidian languages Malto and Kurukh as mentioned above have borrowed nearly all of their classifier forms from

neighbouring Indo-Aryan nouns (Emeneau 1956:13). Note also widespread borrowing of forms in South-East Asia (below).

(2) The Assamese word order normal for counting is the reverse of Tai-Ahom order (Phukan 1971).

(3) A cognate of the Assamese classifier for humans (zɔn, etc.) occurs in Nepali as a classifier and was also borrowed from Nāḡpurī into Kurukh as we have seen above; there is a similar use in Marathi. Also, above we have shown that cognates of ti, ta, to occur far to the west of the Magadhan area. An Assamese origin for these forms cannot be entirely ruled out, but in view of the wide areal spread and the comparatively short period of time involved, it seems improbable.

Another indirect but perhaps more conclusive objection involves general morphological complexity in Assamese. Although like other modern Indo-Aryan languages it has greatly simplified earlier inflexional patterns, it has retained a half dozen case endings (the actual forms are not necessarily conservations) and a fairly extensive verbal morphology. A language contact situation conducive to wholesale importation of classifiers would be expected to lead to morphological simplification in the same way. If Tai-Ahom speakers were doing a poor job of keeping their Assamese free of Tai-Ahom influences, one would perhaps look to morphological simplification even before such 'peripheral' changes as initiating the use of classifiers for counting.

A better approach might lie in seeing how language contact conditions could amplify and elaborate structural tendencies already present before contact. Above we have reverted to discussing classifiers in terms of their counting function only. At this point we recall that in Assamese they also serve to indicate distinctions such as definiteness/indefiniteness. (Some examples below are suggested by G. Goswami (1968) where further illustrations may be found.)

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|-----------------------------|---|
| (a) manuh ahise | (<i>person/come</i>) A person has come. |
| (b) mɔi kitap pariso | (<i>I/book/read</i>) I am reading a book. |
| (c) manuh-zɔn ahise | (<i>person/CLF/come</i>) The man has come. |
| (d) mɔi kitap-khɔn pariso | (<i>I/book/CLF/read</i>) I am reading the book. |
| (e) bhal-zɔn | (<i>good/CLF</i>) The good one (of a man). |
| (f) tini khɔn kitap pɔrhilo | I have read three books. |
| (g) kitap tini khɔn pɔrhilo | I have read the three books (mentioned). |

A 14th century A.D. text in an Indo-Aryan variety close to the Magadhi Apabhramsa taken to be the ancestor of Assamese, Bengali and Oriya has been described by U. Goswami (1966). Among the features illustrated are ancestors of the modern Assamese forms khɔn and apparently ti used as postposed particles to indicate definiteness (p.204). A resource of this sort was perhaps felt necessary since Assamese was undergoing a good deal of readjustment in nominal morphology. Old cases merged, the original means of marking singular and plural fell out of use, and new post-positions began to take on the functions of the distinctions being lost. In particular, the ending -e was problematic. Former instrumental, locative and nominative singulars, and also nominative-accusative plurals all underwent phonological leveling and fell together in -e (Chatterji 1926:739-751). In Bengali the plural function as an obligatory category was lost, however the -e, now becoming obsolete, retained a generic-indefinite flavour. A different situation occurred in Assamese, where a strong tendency toward ergativity (associated with instrumental-case actor with past participles, later extended) took the -e in a different semantic direction. It is quite tempting to speculate that it was this ergative development of the -e ending that required a compensatory

means of definite/indefinite marking. It is perhaps this use of 'classifiers' that we first see in the old texts, although more research in this area is needed. If this was indeed the case, then Assamese was 'prone' for internal reasons to develop classifiers for definite-marking, and in fact several were in use before contact with Tai-Ahom. It happens that the definite-marking structure had the same constituent order as Tai-Ahom classifiers used for the same purpose. It was therefore rather natural for Tais learning to speak Assamese to proliferate somewhat the items typically occurring in classifier position. Later the present system of optional plural markings, all innovations, was added, and perhaps as a back-formation an old Indo-Aryan masculine/feminine distinction in -a/-ī (or consonant/-ī) was applied to the classifiers to cross-categorise taxa along a 'large-small' dimension as well as whatever semantic core originally characterised the particular classifier. Perhaps the human classifier *zon* (*zona*), *zoní*, which can be traced back to Prakrit or Sanskrit *jan*, *janí*, served as the impetus. Finally, in the definite postpositional construction the classifiers have become more and more 'grammaticalised' and now phonologically they are essentially post-clitics. In fact certain case endings now can occur suffixed to the noun + classifier unit.

Although details of classifier development in Assamese and the evolution of classifiers in Eastern Indo-Aryan in general remain problematic, in terms of synchronic conditions these languages clearly occupy a pivotal position. As one moves to the west, classifiers decrease in number and in normative acceptability, until one reaches standard Hindi and its associated western dialects where they do not occur at all (apart from in measuring expressions, which are undoubtedly universal). In the following sections we move to the east, where classifiers increase in number, in syntactic function and in normative and stylistic evaluation.

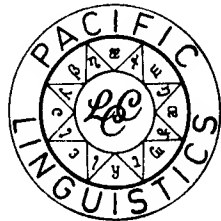
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First Published 1985

Typeset by Sue Tys

Printed by A.N.U. Printing Service

Bound by Adriatic Bookbinders Pty Ltd

The editors are indebted to the Australian National University for assistance in the
production of this series.

This publication was made possible by an initial grant from the Hunter Douglas Fund.

National Library of Australia Card Number and ISBN 0 85883 325 5