

Bengali

In modern standard Bengali indefinite reference is regularly indicated through the formula *æk (one) + classifier + noun*; definite reference, by *noun + classifier*:

æk-khana boi a book
boi-khana the book

where *khana* classifies *boi book* (hyphens are used to suggest the unstressed post-clitic character of classifiers in these constructions).

The assignment of specific classifiers to nouns in these languages is quite flexible and is best seen as a communicative resource available to speakers to convey certain stylistic nuances, thus:

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boi-khana the book (thinking of the slab-like physical object)
boi-ṭi the book (the nice little one)
boi-ṭa the book (the big boring volume I must read)

Similarly, *jon*, *ṭi*, or *ṭa* may classify people, depending somewhat on attitude, although the first is normatively preferred for the written language.

The Bengali classifiers *ṭi* and *ṭa* seem to reflect wider Indo-Aryan phenomena where what were previously morphological endings to show a grammatical masculine-feminine distinction have become reanalysed as a rather vague semantic opposition between small-nice-likeable and large-coarse-devalued (cf. Oriya *ghadi-ṭi the watch*; *ghadi-ṭa the clock*; Tripathi 1959).

The classifier *khana* raises special questions. Many speakers of Calcutta Bengali accept it for portable, hand-sized items, such as books, bottles, plates, pictures, lamps, etc. but may feel it 'dialectal' for other larger items. The taxa acceptable for this classifier appear to increase through Bangladesh Bengali varieties and in Assamese the classifier (now pronounced *khon*) is normal not only for small items but also for boats and for local expanses such as shops and markets. More problematic is the fact that in Calcutta Bengali a 'double classifier' construction is occasionally heard:

boi-khana-ṭi the book (the actual volume referred to)

The order is specified as above, and this leads one to speculate that a realignment of the classifier form class may be occurring.

The evolution of these forms from nominals in earlier Bengali has been discussed by Chatterji (1926), and it is an interesting confirmation of the Sanchez-Greenberg observation that the use of classifiers appears to have been stronger as obligatory plural-marking became weaker.

In archaic Sanskritised varieties of Bengali classifiers are not used even though they may well have been common in ordinary speech. Vivid confirmation of this occurs in Kṛṣṇadās Gosvāmī's *Caitanya Caritāmṛta*, a 16th century work at the apogee of the Sanskritised style of Bengali. A careful perusal of the verses of this biography of the Hindu saint Caitanya has failed to turn up even one classifier either in the poet's descriptive verses or in the conversations of Caitanya with his followers. On the other hand, classifiers appear in the quoted speech of people expected to use a non-Sanskritic, purely colloquial type of language. For example, a Muslim Pathan soldier says to Caitanya (Bhaktivedanta 1975, vol.7:220-221):

"*ei ṭhak cāri-jana*"
these rogues four-CLF
 "(Here are) these four rogues."

Caitanya's reply has no classifier:

"*ei cāri dayā kari karena pālana*"
these four mercy having done do maintenance
 "These four (men) by their mercy maintain (me)."

Kṛṣṇadās Gosvāmī's attitude toward the classifier harmonises very well with the inclination to suppress the classifier already noted for literary forms of Maithilī, up to and including the 19th century, and Avadhī, at all periods. In any event, in modern literary Bengali, as well as in colloquial forms, the classifiers *ṭi* and *ṭa* (or *khana*, *jon*, *gachha*, *goṭa*, *than*, etc.) are not only acceptable but syntactically obligatory, and certainly to be considered part of the modern standard language.

Although origins are not always clear for these forms, they appear to be derived from Indo-Aryan nominals. The forms *ṭi* and *ṭa*, for example, perhaps come from *guṭi small round object* (Chatterji 1926:779).

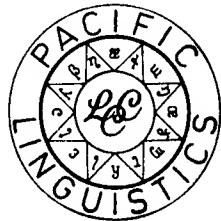
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The Secretary
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Department of Linguistics
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