A Comparative Study of Classifier Expression in Assamese and Bengali Languages

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Abstract: Classifiers are affixes that are used in various languages to indicate the grammatical or semantic classification of words. "Classifiers are generally defined as morphemes that classify and quantify nouns according to semantic criteria. Classifiers classify a noun inherently. They designate and specify semantic features inherent to the nominal denotatum and divide the set of nouns of a certain language into disjunct classes "(Senft 2000: 21). Classifiers system are found in the languages of Asia, Oceania, Australia, Africa and America. Among the New Indo Aryan languages Bengali, Assamese , Oriya, Mithili and Marathi and among Munda family Santhali, Kurka and Malti made limited use of classifiers. Assamese although an Indo Aryan, like other Tibeto Burman languages - Boro, Garo, Rabha, Dimasa, Kokborok makes use of large number of classifiers for almost everything or for every shape. The present paper makes an attempt to compare and contrast the occurances and the use of classifiers among the sister language-Assamese and Bengali. Although, both Assamese and Bengali have SOV word order but they share some common and uncommon facts about classifiers. The study is confined to standard Bengali and standard Assamese.

Keywords: Numeral classifiers, Sortal classifiers and Mensural classifiers

I. INTRODUCTION

Both Assamese and Bengali belongs to the Eastern group of Indo Aryan language family. Both are directly descended from Magadhi Aparamsa and Magadhi Prakrit which have been originated from Sanskrit. Assamese is the official language of Assam and is spoken in its neighbouring states such as Meghalaya, Nagaland, and Arunachal Pradesh. Bengali is the official language of West Bengal, Tripura and national language of Bangladesh. The variety that is spoken in Kolkata is taken to the standard form. In Bengali there are two standard forms- one is shadhu bhasa also known as suddho bhasa and colti bhasa also called colito bhasa or the colloquial form. Suddho bhasa is spoken in formal context. Here in this paper I shall concentrate on standard colloquial form.

II. METHODOLOGY

The researcher have collected the datas from the primary and secondary sources. The primary data was collected in the form of conversation and questionnaire with the informants of the language. Telephonic conversation was also made to obtain the valuable information from speakers of the language. The secondary data was gathered from the libraries in the form of books, articles research papers etc.

III. CLASSIFIERS AND ITS TYPES:

Both Assamese and Bengali are classifier language. In comparison to Bengali, Assamese is very rich in classifiers. Classifiers in Assamese and Bengali can be categorised into (a) Numeral classifiers (b) Sortal classifiers and (c) Mensural classifiers.

3.1 Numeral classifier: They are the most common type of classifiers. They appear in context of quantification and are always sound to the number or quantifier. Assamese and Bengali allows the following construction.

**Numeral + classifiers + Noun**

**Assamese**

1. a) du- zzn manuh
   two- CL man
   'two men'

**Bengali**

b) du-djon manuj
   two - CL man
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'two men'

**Assamese**

c) du-gərəki mohila  
'two- CL woman'  
'two women'

**Bengali**

d) du-
ʤən mohila  
'two CL woman'  
'two women'

**Assamese**

e) du-ta kɔlɔm  
'two –CL pen'  
'two pens'

**Bengali**

f) du to kɔlom  
'two - CL pen'  
'two pens'

**Noun + Numeral + Classifiers**

**Assamese**

2. a) pʰul e-pah  
flower one-CL  
'one flower'

b) kitap tini- kʰɔn  
book three-CL  
'three books'

**Bengali**

c) boi tin -te  
book three CL  
'three books'

b) botam pāc-ta  
button five CL  
'three buttons'

It is to be noted that a noun with a numeral classifier is always singular in form in both the languages unlike English. This can be supported by the following illustration from both the languages.

**Bengali**

h) tini -zoni suwali  
'three- CL girl'  
'three girls'

i) tin- dʒon meye  
'three- CL girl'  
'three girls'

Thus the construction Noun+Num+CL and Num +CL+Noun construction in both the languages convey the similar meaning.

**Demonstrative pronoun +Noun+Numeral+Classifier**

**Assamese**

3. a) ei kitab du kʰɔn  
DEM book NUM CL  
'This two books'

**Bengali**

b) ei boi du to  
DEM book NUM CL  
'This two books'

**Demonstrative pronoun+ Noun + classifier**

**Assamese**

4. a) ei kitab -kʰɔn  
DEM book CL  
'this book'
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Bengali
b) ei boi ta
DEM book CL
‘this book’

Demonstrative pronoun+ numeral+ classifier+ Noun
Demonstrative pronoun precedes numeral classifiers in both Assamese and Bengali. This can be shown through the following illustration.

Assamese
5. a) ei du kʰɔn kitab
DEM NUM CL book
‘This two books’

Bengali
b) ei du to boi
DEM NUM CL book
‘This two books’

Assamese
c) hei tini -zɔn tirata
DEM NUM CL women
‘those three women’
d) ei du-zɔn suwali
DEM NUM CL girl
‘this two girls’

Bengali
e) hei tini-ti meye
DEM NUM CL girl
‘that three girls’
f) ei pæ¢-dʃɔn manuʃ
DEM NUM CL man
‘this five girls’

Possessive pronoun and Classifiers

Assamese
7. a) mur du-kʰɔn kitap
my two CL book
‘my two books’
b) tumar cari-kʰɔn bohi
your four-CL copy
‘your two copies’

Bengali
c) amar du kʰana boi
my two CL book
‘my two books’
d) tomar du to boi kotʰae
your two CL book where
‘where are your two books’

Genetive case and classifiers

Assamese
8. a) skul-or tini-zɔn hikʰɔk
school gen three CL teacher
‘three teachers of the school’

Bengali
b) fskul-er tin-dʃɔn fikʰɔk
school gen three CL teacher
‘three teachers of the school’

Relative Pronoun and classifiers
Classifiers can also occur with relative and interrogative pronoun. This is exemplified in the examples given below.

Assamese
9. a) kun tini-zɔn manuh ahisil
which three CL man come PST
'which three men came'

**Bengali**

b) kon tin-dgon manuʃ eʃe-chilen
   which three CL man come PST
   'which three men came'

### IV. SORTAL CLASSIFIERS

'Sortal classifier is one which individuates whatever it refers to in terms of the kind of entity that it is. (Semantics: John Lyons 1977). Thus sortal classifiers in Assamese and Bengali can be used with the nouns to indicate the notion like shape (long or round), size (large or small) dimension (flat thick thin or wide or broad). While Assamese makes use of a large number of sortal classifiers, Bengali has only a few. This can be shown through the following illustration.

**zon, zona zɔni** - are used in Assamese to indicate human being. Whereas -zon is used against masculine and -zɔni for feminine. Some examples are cited below.

10. a) manuh-zɔni ahile (Mas)

   man - CL came
   'The man came'

   b) lora-zɔni kot ? (Mas)

   boy-CL where
   'where is the boy'

   The extension of zɔn is zɔna

   c) guru-zɔna amar gʰar ahile (Mas/Fem)
   superior CL our house came PST
   "Respectable and superior person came to our house"

   zɔni is used both for human and animals in Assamese

   d) manuh-zɔni gʰar ase

   woman-CL home be
   'the woman is at home'

   e) mekuri-zɔni pɔlal

   cat -CL ran
   'the cat ran away'

   Assamese - **zon is similar to -dgon** in Bengali. Thus

   **Bengali**

   f) rastae lok-dgon nei

   street people-CL NEG
   'there is no people in the street'

   -zdgon in both Assamese and Bengali can be suffixed to numerals, ostensives, question element and quantifiers. The following are some of the examples from both the languages.

   **Assamese**

   g) ei-zɔn manuh kali ah-isil

   this-CL man yesterday come TNS
   'this man came yesterday'

   h) kun-zɔni suwali gʰar gol

   which-CL girl home go PST
   'which girl went home'

   i) protek-zɔni suwali zabo

   each-CL girl go TNS
   'each girl will go'

   j) keiba-zɔni tirata goisil

   few-CL women go TNS
   'few women went'

   **Bengali**

   k) ei-dgon manuʃ kalke eʃe-chilo

   this-CL man yesterday come TNS
   'this man came yesterday'

   l) koʃk-dgon meye eʃe

   some CL girl come PST
   'some girls came'

   m) protek-dgon ʃ'ele
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each-CL boyTNS
'each and every boy will come'

-tu in Assamese can be suffixed to both humans, non human and ostensives.

Assamese

11. a) lora-tu kot gol
   boy CL where go
   'where did the boy go'
b) mur kolom-tu heral
   my pen CL lost
   'I lost my pen'
c) protʰom-tu muk nalage
   First CL I Acc NEG want
   'The first one I do not want'
d) ei-tu muk lag-isil
   DEM CL I Acc want TNS
   'This one I do not need'
e) hei-kʰɔn mur kitap
   DEM-CL I Acc book
   'That one is my book'

The classifier -ta can be used with cardinals, quantifiers in Assamese. All numerals in Assamese takes the- ta for example,

Assamese

12. a) e-ta
   one-CL
   'one'
b) du-ta 'two
   two CL
   'two'
c) tin-ta
   three-CL
   'three'
d) cari-ta
   four-CL
   'four'
e) pas-ta
   five-CL
   'five'

-ta in Bengali has three variations [a, [e],[o] as seen in the following combinations with numerals.

Bengali

a). ek-ta
   one-CL
   'one'
b). du-tɔ
   two-CL
   'two'
c). tin-[e
   three-CL
   'three'
d). gɔɾ-[e
   four-CL
   'four'
e). paʃ-[a
   five-CL
   'five'

In contrast to that, Assamese lexicon does not specify such features in relation to numeral -ta combination.

The classifier goraki in Assamese is used for respectable person irrespective of sex. For example,

Assamese

13 a) manuh goraki bhal
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...man CL good
'The man is good'
b) mohila goraki gʰɔrɔrt nai
woman CL home NEG
'The woman is not at home'
The classifier kʰon,kʰoni in Assamese are used with nouns which are flat and broad in size
14. a) kitap-kʰon dia
book CL give
'give me the book'
The classifier kʰana ,kʰani (similar to kʰon,kʰoni in Assamese) in Bengali are also used with a noun denoting broad ,flat objects as exemplified in the following examples.

Bengali
15. a) tomar gʰi-tʰi-kʰana phele diyechi
your letter CL drop pst
'I have dropped your letter'
b) notun gampʰa-a-kʰana amake dao
new towel CL I ACC give
'give me the new towel'

sota,sola,soli in Assamese are used with inanimate objects which are solid, broad and flat, for example,
16. katʰsota muk diya
wood CL I give
'Give me the plank of wood'
dal used with inanimate objects which are long round and solid
17. a) bāh-dal mug lagisil
bamboo-CL I want TNS
'I want a piece of bamboo'
b) cək-dal kət tʰola
chalk CL where keep
'I want a piece of chalk'
The classifier - tukura is usually used before with the pieces of an uncountable objects in Assamese whereas in Bengali it is -tukro.

Assamese
18.a) mas-tukura dia
fish CL give
'give me the piece of fish'

Bengali
19) pan - kʰila diya
betel leaf-CL give
'give me the betel leaf'
gas, gosi in Assamese is used with the nouns which are long ,round and flexible, as for example,
20) caki -gosi ana
earthen lamp-CL bring
'bring the earthen lamp'
gafʰa,gaʃi in Bengali is used with nouns denoting long and thin objects like,
21) gʰori-gafʰa amake de
stick CF I ACC bring
'bring the stick'
kon,koni in Assamese is usually used with human beings with the notion of love and affection like,
22. a) pona-kon tuponi gol
little boy CL sleep PST
'the little boy slept'
V. MENSURAL CLASSIFIERS

'A mensural classifiers is one which individuates in terms of quantity'(Lyons 1977). In other words mensural classifiers are those which categorise nouns in terms of measuring units. Both Assamese and Bengali have mensural classifiers. This can be shown through the following examples.

The classifier- dɔl is used with human referents indicating group or team and is common to both the languages.

**Assamese**

23. a) hena dɔl ahise  
soldier-CL come PST  
'a group of soldiers came'

**Bengali**

b) ek-dol ḍele eʃe-ʃe  
num-CL boy come PST  
'a group of boys came'

**zak/dyāk, pal** is common to both Assamese and Bengali and is used with animals refering to herd/flock or group.

**Assamese**

24.a) sorai zak uri gol  
birds CL fly PST away  
'a group of birds flew away'

b) e-zak bogoli uri gol  
num CL white crane fly PST  
'a group of white cranes flew away'

**Bengali**

c) ek dyāk pakʰi uʃe  
Num CL birds flew  
'a group of birds flew away'

The classifier-**brindo** refers to a group or association in both the languages like,

**Assamese**

25.a) satro brindo ahise  
students CL come TNS  
'A group of students came'

**Bengali**

b) ʧatro brindo aʃʧe  
students CL come TNS  
'A group of students came'

**tʰupa/tʰupi** denotes in Assamese denotes bunch.

26.a) mœ pʰul tʰupa anilu  
I flower CL bring TNS  
'I brought the bunch of flower'

In Bengali it is**goʃpa** which refers to bunch.

**Bengali**

b)jamipʰul-er goʃpa eneʃi  
I flower GEN CL bring TNS  
'I brought the bunch of flower'

c) ek goʃpa pʰul eneʃi  
NUM CL flower bring TNS  
'I brought the bunch of flower'

The classifier-**kap** refers to 'a cup full of' in Assamese language.

**Assamese**

27. sah kap kai bhal lagil  
tea CL drink like TNS  
'(I) liked the cup of tea'

The classifier-**kahi** refers to plateful

28.a) bhat  kahi dia  
rice CL give  
'Give me a plate of rice'

**-kaʃi** in Bengali also refers to plateful.
Bengali

b) ek kafi bhat dao
   Num CL rice give
   'Give me a plate of rice'

The classifier gal in Assamese refers to 'mouthful' for example,

29.a) bhat gal k'ai lua
   rice CL eat 2 take
   'Have one mouthful of rice'

In Bengali it is,
b) ek -gal b'at k'a-o
   Num CL rice eat 2
   'Have one mouthful of rice'

VI. CLASSIFIERS IN TIBETO BURMAN LANGUAGES AND ITS INFLUENCE ON ASSAMESE LANGUAGE.

Assamese although an Indo Aryan language shows a very close affinity with the Tibeto Burman languages and this can be supported through the following datas collected from the various TB languages like-Boro, Rabha,Garo,Liangmei,Rongmei, Dimasa,kokborok.

Classifiers of Boro language

phang-used for tree, herb and climbers.
gong- used for things, house, musical instruments, furniture, household articles, fishing
thai- used for fruits and vegetables.
pong- used for human speech, biting, kicking hands and beating with sticks.
duqng- used for long and flexible things like –hair, rope, necklace, tail, string and electrical
thong- used in Bodo language for cutting bamboo, and tree for posts.
dung- is used in Bodo language for hole of insects.
ghor- used for small and round things like – seeds, stones.
muzqm- used for handful of things like – rice, paddy seed, sugar, sand, soil and seeds.
haldinga- used for a string of meat, insects and fishes. Sometimes for fruits, vegetables.

Classifiers of Rabha Language

sak- is used for human being in Rabha language.
ma- used for all kinds of animal, birds, insects, water animals and creature.
phaN- used for tree, herb and climbers.
khon-used for leaves, pieces of cloths, wings, books and papers, all
thuka- used for the human speech.
tung- used for long and flexible things like – rope, hair, necklaces, tail, string and so on.
thok- used for drops of liquids.
bada- used for bunch of fruits like – areca nut, grapes, coconut and litchi.
pal- used for case of flock of birds, herd of cows, cattle etc.
zor- used for pair of peoples and birds.

Classifiers of Kokborok language

ma- used for all kinds of animals, insects, birds and creatures.
phang- used for all kinds of tree, herb and climbers.
khung- used for house, weapons, all kinds of household things, furniture, musical
   instruments, agricultural tools, hunting and fishing tools, utensils and any kind of things.
thai- used for fruits and vegetables.
pung-used for human speech and beating by hands, kicking by legs and with other things like
   stick.
tung- used for long and flexible things like rope, hair, tail and string.
kok- used for small round things like seed.
lam- used for hole of insects.
bar used for flower.
lai- used for leaves.
lap- used for small pieces of skin.
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Classifiers of Garo language
sak- used for people of all sorts
may-used for animals
ge- used for objects of daily use
kiŋ- used for thin flat things
pat-used for paper
miŋ-used for words, stories and songs
ron- used for round objects
poŋ- used for hollow cylindrical objects
din- for rope like things
goŋ- for bank notes
paŋ- for plants and trees
gar- for bunches of things

generative classification

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Classifiers of Dimasa
deb- for branches and twigs
do- for log
goŋ- for bamboo like objects
granŋ- for flat things like books, cloth, that is anything that is rectangular or square in shape
kro- for round objects
paŋ- for trees
saŋ- for man
soŋ- for group of trees or plants

VII. POINTS OF SIMILARITY
• Common classifiers used in both the languages are - ta/tə ,kaŋ/kaŋa, dzon/dʒon, zak/dʒak
• The following are some common construction operating in both the languages
  NUM+ CL+N
  N + NUM + CL
  DEM+NUM+CL+N
  DEM+ N+NUM+CL
  DEM+N+CL
• Moreover classifier can precede demonstrative pronoun, possessive pronoun, genitive case and relative pronoun in both the languages as in the example 5, 6, 7, 8 and 9.

VIII. POINTS OF DISSIMILARITY
• Gender distinction is there in Assamese in the use of this particular classifier- zon (Mas) zoni (Fem).
• The classifier - ta shows variation in the use of it with numerals whereas in Assamese it is not so.
• In case of Assamese the mensural classifier such as zak, kaŋ, kaŋa, gal and sortal classifier such - tukura permits a change in the word order that is they can precede noun which Bengali counterpart does not permit.
• Assamese allows the combination of demonstrative pronoun + classifier + noun (ei kaŋ kitab) which Bengali does not allow.

IX. CONCLUSION
From the above analysis it can thus be concluded that though Assamese and Bengali are classifier language, the use of classifiers in Assamese language is more frequent in comparison to Bengali language. Since this is the unique features of Assamese it should be preserved and thus be passed to the future generation. There is often a tendency of less use of these classifiers among the present generation due to the influence of non classifier language like English.

Abbreviation
AS- Assamese
ACC- Accusative case
ADJ- Adjective
BG- Bengali
CL- Classifier
DEM- Demonstrative Pronoun
EGS- Examples
Fem- Feminine
GEN- Genitive Case
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Mas-Masculine
NUM- Numeral
PST-Past tense
PRON-Pronoun
1- First Person
2-Second person
3-Third person

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