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SOME OBSERVATIONS ON THE DISCOURSE FUNCTION OF CLASSIFIERS

IN KARBI (PLAINS)

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ABSTRACT

A noun refers to an abstract concept and a numeral classifier classifies the referent of the noun on certain semantic parameters (such as, shape, size, animacy, etc.) and then instantiates the noun to facilitate its numerical quantification. Thus, classification and instantiation seems to be the basic function of numeral classifiers at the phrasal level. But when numeral classifiers are studied in the larger syntactic environment of discourse it becomes clear that they serve also as anaphor to the noun that is just classified and individuated. Second, by categorizing a noun with a numeral classifier which otherwise does not go with the noun, the speakers manipulates meaning. Furthermore, as discourse is basically talking about instances or individuals only a classified and individuated noun can be made topically salient or continuous in discourse. Thus, by leaving a noun unclassified the speaker manipulates meaning in discourse. In the present paper we focus on the discourse function of classifiers in the Karbi (as is spoken in plains of Assam especially in the Kamrup district) which is a numeral classifier language.

KEYWORDS: Classifiers, Discourse Function, Individuation, Karbi (Plains)

INTRODUCTION

As appeared in the existing linguistic literature it is evident that Numeral classifiers are the overt linguistic device of human conceptual categorization. Semantically numeral classifiers provide information about the physical and functional properties of objects, cognitive categories in a particular culture, and the perceptions of the speaker towards the objects (Dixon 1986). But apart from the semantic function, numeral classifiers provide pragmatic information about the relation between sentences and the contexts and the situation of written and spoken discourse. Discourse function of the classifier provides a counter argument against the notion of redundancy associated with numeral classifiers or noun categorization devices. Accordingly it is established that classifiers are not just for counting and individuation. They are often used to convey information about the discourse status of the referents. They are the primary means of conveying information about the preferentiality of the bare noun/NP with which they co-occur. The presence or choice of a classifier can be used to manipulate the status of a referent. This is usually devised as a reference tracking phenomenon. Thus the NUM-CLF pair may be used anaphoric ally in discourse. But classifiers do not have the sole function of discreetness facilitating numeral quantification. When studied in larger syntactic environment of discourse their diverse functions become apparent. Classifiers in its apparent function of individuation and classification make nouns prominent in discourse. To quote Hopper (1986: 323): "Classifiers give nouns a prominence in the discourse which derives from their ability to be topics and to be sustained participants. The semantic correlate of this is, to put it rather vaguely, something like individuation". Individuation is associated with how we conceive the entities of the world. In the present paper we make an attempt at studying the discourse function of the classifiers in Karbi. The study is confined to the dialect of Karbi i.e., the

plains variety as spoken in the Kamrup district of Assam.

Karbi: A Brief Introduction

Karbi also known as Arleng is the language of the Karbis, who mainly live in the Karbi Anglong district of Assam. Karbi belongs to the **Tibeto- Burman** group of the **Sino-Tibetan family of languages**. The area where the Karbis live is commonly known as the Mikir Hills. In their folk literature the word Karbi is used in place of Mikir. The number of Karbi native speakers according to the census of 2001are 419,534. Out of these, the numbers of Karbi (Plains) speakers are of 125,000. It is also known as Dumra Karbi. This variety is spoken in the plains of Kamrup, Morigaon districts of Assam and Ri-Bhoi district of Meghalaya. With their social head at Dimoria, culturally and customarily they have different sets of social behavior and functions to their counterpart at Karbi Anglong. To quote Phangcho (2003: 33) : "The Karbis are divided into four spatial groups-Amri, Ronghang, Chinthong and Dumurali. It is not exactly known at what time the Dumuralis began to settle in the plains. According to a tradition prevalent in Panbari, Chenimur, Sonapur and Jagiroad, a group of Karbis came down from the neighboring hills on the south and established a kingdom under the King named Dumura. Henceforth, these people came to be known as Dumurali or ('Thoi aso'-meaning plain dweller) by their counterparts in the Hills and 'Tholua' by the Assamese. Even now their area covering Sonapur, Khetri and Jagiroad lying between East Khasi Hills on the south and Kalang River on the North is called Dimoria". As for the writing systems Karbi does not have its own script and is written in the Roman alphabet.

Discourse Functions of NUM-CLF in Karbi (Plains)

Discourse refers to 'written or spoken communication.' By studying the discourse in Karbi (Plains) we have observed the following.

a) Proper names in discourse are not classified as they are inherently individuated.

b) There is persistency of classified nouns in discourse in order to be thematically salient participant.

c) Classifiers have the anaphoric function in discourse.

d) Pronouns are used as inherently definite participant of the discourse. They act as antecedent of the previous sentence.

e) Intrinsically quantified nouns are not classified in discourse.

All these points are discussed in the following section with suitable examples.

Proper Names Are Not Classified

In Karbi, in discourse, proper names are not classified as they are inherently fully individuated. So there is no need to individuate it with the help of a classifier. This is evident in the following example.

3)   *rongteresarpo*   *kiwan*   *atomopo*   *thanbang*

            rongteresar-po   ki-wan   a-tomo-po   than-bang

            the name of a God   NMLZ-come   GEN-story-DEF   say-POL

            'Let's tell the story of coming of the God Rong tere sarpo.'

4)   *lasi*   *inglongpo*   *amenke*   *pantisang*   *tang*

            la-si   inglong-po   a-men-ke   pantisang   tang

            that-FOC   mountain-DEF   a-name-TOP   Pantisang   POL

            'Therefore the mountain is named Pantisang.'

In the above examples the proper names *rongteresarpo* and *pantisang* are the proper nouns not classified in discourse.

Persistency of the Classified Noun in Discourse

A noun that is presented in a construction with a view to developing it into an individual in the subsequent discourse is always classified (see Borah 2008: 123). Numeral classifiers are often used to introduce a new referent. The use of a classifier is associated to the use of the existential particle 'there is/are' in discourse to introduce a new participant. The noun which is accompanied by such classifier is often the representative noun. It is also a participant of some importance to the discourse. Thus classified nouns always have a strong tendency to persist in the discourse. The following examples from Karbi illustrate this point.

5)   *ijon*   *mattu*   *kaselet*   *asangman*   *kidoq*

            i-jon   mattu   ka-selet   a-sangman   ki-doq

            NUM-CLF   very   NMLZ-lazy   GEN-spider   PAST-exist

            'There was a lazy spider.'

6)   *isi*   *arongalong*   *banghini*   *oso*   *kidoq*

            isi   arong-along   bang-hini   oso   ki-doq

            a/one   village-LOC   CLF-two   son   PAST-exist

            'There are two sons in a village.'

Thus, in the above example the numeral classifier construction *ijon* 'a/one' introduces the noun *sang man* 'spider' in the discourse (See Downing (1986), Hopper (1986). Classifiers often occur with nouns in NPs for initial mention of referents. This classified noun is the representative noun in the discourse as well as the one which is going to be persistent throughout the discourse. Here we can cite, for instance, Hopper and Thompson's Categoriality Hypothesis that the prototypical function of a noun is to "introduce a significant new participant in discourse. It is these nouns which will be concrete, countable, enumerated, preventatives, and, perhaps most importantly persistent in the discourse" (Hopper and Thompson 1984: 723). To quote Craig (1986b: 272-3): "There is a clear tendency for an indefinite NP with a classifier to refer to an important participant." Compared to the preventatives nouns, those which are not new in discourse are never classified.

Again classifiers may be used to show thematic saliency in discourse. A noun left unclassified in an ongoing discourse is going to be less salient than the one that has been classified. By classifying and leaving a noun un classified the speaker manipulates meaning in discourse. They may be used to indicate higher salience of one referent relative to other referents in discourse. As cited in Bisang (1993: 29): "the major function of the use of a classifier is to mark an NP as

referentially salient if this would not be obvious from the context". This may occur because of some inherent potential ambiguity in the context or because the speaker wishes to put forward a particular point of view. To cite Hopper (1986: 323): "classifiers give nouns a prominence in the discourse which derives from their ability to be topics and to be sustained participants".

7)   *inisi   alam   inglongpoyok   banghini   arleng*

            inisi   a-lam   inglong-po-yok   bang-hini   arleng

            a/one   GEN-tale   mountain-DEF-ACC   CLF-NUM   man

            phalang   kirotayok   damo

            phalang   ki-rot-ayok   dam-o

            thatch   NMLZ-cut-DAT   go-PRES PERF

            'The tale of a day, two men went to the mountain to cut thatch.'

8)   *anali   chirono   inglongpoyok   phalang   kirotyok*

            anang-li   chiron-o   inglong-po-yok   phalang   ki-rot-yok

            He-PL   think-ppf   mountain-DEF-ACC thatch   NMLZ-cut-ACC

            kidam   ango   adung

            ki-dam   ango   adung

            NMLZ-go before   near

            'They have thought before going to cut thatch in the mountain,

        Thus in the above examples the noun *arleng* 'man'is classified as it is going to be developed in the subsequent discourse. But the noun *phalang* 'thatch' is not classified as it does not have the thematic saliency in discourse. Moreover, it is viewed here as an indiscreet noun which require a measure term to classify it.

Anaphoric Function of the Classifiers in Karbi

        Anaphoric reference is a referent of the NP in question to a previous sentence. To quote Trask (2004: 15): "Anaphor is a linguistic item which takes its interpretation from something else in the same sentence or discourse". Cataphoric reference refers to referent of the NP in question to a later sentence. To quote Trask (1993: 30) again: "Cataphor is a traditional name for an anaphor which precedes its antecedent, now rarely used".

        Downing (1986: 349) says: "the NUM-CLF pair may be used anaphorically, serving like a true pronoun, to carry identity of individuals who have already been mentioned earlier in the text". The anaphoric function of NUM-CLF is evident cross linguistically like Japanese, Burmese, Malay etc. (see Downing 1986, Becker 1986 and Hopper 1986). In Karbi also we observe the anaphoric function of NUM-CLF in discourse. This is evident in the following examples.

9)   *lamunke   inglongpolong   arlengta   laan   kangwedet*

            lamun-ke   inglong-po-along   arleng-ta   la-an   ki-ingwedet

that time-TOP mountain-DEF-LOC man-EMPH so many PAST-get finished

'At that time there were not so many men in the mountain.'

idon	*doni*	*danebak*	*danebaksi*	*kidoq*
i-don	don-ni	danebak	danebak-si	ki-doq.
NUM-CLF	CLF-NUM	somewhere	somewhere-FOC	PAST-exist

'There existed on or two household somewhere.'

The classifier –*don* refers to the referent of the previous sentence i.e., *arleng* 'man'.

Again in their anaphoric function classifiers in Karbi combine with a numeral. This is evident in the following example.

10) *kuchongmar* *akime*

kuchong-mar a-ki-me

Japi-PLDEF GEN-NMLZ-good

'The Japis are good.'

ipaklong *ingkol*

i-pak-long ingkol

NUM-CLF-LOC twenty

'One is twenty rupees.'

Since the classifiers in Karbi are inherently fully individuated they do not classify proper names as well as pronouns.

Use of Pronoun as Inherently Definite Participant in Discourse:

11) *ijon* *mattu* *kaselet* *asangman* *kidoq*

i-jon mattu ka-selet a-sangman ki-doq

NUM-CLF very NMLZ-lazy GEN-spider PAST-exist

'Once there was a lazy spider.'

anang *arnita* *nerloresi* *thurman*

anang arni-ta nerlore-si thur-man

he day-also till noon-FOC wake-PRES INDEF

'He wakes up at noon always.'

In the above examples the pronoun *anang* 'he' is used as antecedent of the previous sentence. The studies of topicality in discourse have shown that the referents most likely to be mentioned more than once (and therefore the ones

most likely to be referred to with a pronoun rather than a full noun phrase) are animate, especially human (see, e.g., Givón 1983: 22). Thus classifiers in Karbi play a significant role in discourse thereby numerically quantifying the noun. In the present study an analysis is made on how the meaning is manipulated with the help of numeral classifiers in Karbi when studied in larger syntactic environment of discourse.

Numeral one as an instance of an Indefinite participant in discourse:

12)   *ne   isi   atomo   nali   parjobang*

ne   isi   a-tomo   nail   pa-arjo-bang

I   a/one   GEN-story   you   PASS-make listen-POL

'I make you listen to a story.'

Nouns to be developed as individuals are classified rather than unclassified nouns. Such a noun may be given the status of a proper name in the subsequent discourse. In the following example we observe that the noun *sangman* 'spider' is classified because it is going to be the principal participant in the entire narrative.

13)   *ijon   mattu   kaselet   asangman   kidoq*

i-jon   mattu   ka-selet   a-sangman   ki-doq

NUM-CLF   very   NMLZ-lazy   GEN-spider   PAST-exist

'There was a lazy spider.'

But the same noun in the subsequent discourse is left unclassified as it now functions as a proper name. This is evident in the following example.

14)   *adung arel kidoq   apeqmarta   anangyoq*

adung arel ki-doq   a-peq-mar-ta   anang-yoq

Nearby   NMLZ-exist GEN-insect-PLDEF-also he-ACC

aporpo   arjuman

aporpor   arju-man

time   ask-PRES INDEF

'Also the insects living nearby ask him,

o   sangman,   retlong   konamte   soq   tiye

o   sangman   ret-long   konamte   soq   tiy-e

Hello   spider   field-LOC   when   seed   sow-FUT

'Hello spider, when you will sow the seed?'

Intrinsically Quantified Nouns are Not Classified in Discourse

The following examples show that intrinsically quantified nouns in Karbi are not classified in discourse.

15)   *tikilo   tikilo   tikilo   akoong   anengken   tikilo*

              tiki-lo   tiki-lo   tiki-lo   akoong   a-nengken tiki-lo

              do-PPF   do-PPF   do-PPF   long   GEN-year   do-PPF

              'has done, done, done, done for a long year.'

In the above example the intrinsically quantified noun *nengken* 'year' is not classified and is marked by the genitive or possessive prefix *a-*.

Count/Mass Nouns Have Similar Discourse Function

In discourse both count and mass nouns have similar functions. This is evident in the following examples in Karbi.

17)   *an   chobo   pusi   lahel   anbor   kibi*

              an   cho-bo   pusi   lahel   an-bor   ki-bi

              rice   eat-FUT   CP   that-PLDEF rice-MT   NMLZ-put

              athemayok   wangsuno

              athem-ayok   wang-sun-o

              place-DAT   come-name-PPF

              'to eat rice they have come to the place of keeping the bag of rice.'

In the above example the discourse function of the measure term *bor* 'bag' is similar to that of a classifier. As it enables the object *an* 'rice' which lacks individuation to be treated as a contoured, dimensioned entity or bounded entity. It allows the object to be deployed in the discourse (see Hopper 1986: 31).

Abstract Nouns and Classifiers in Discourse

Semantically classifiers are related to concrete or bounded objects as such further classification on the basis of parameters like 'human', round, long, rigid occurs. On the other hand abstract objects or entities are not contoured. Abstract objects are not semantically classifiable on the basis of above parameters. Moreover concrete objects, not abstract one, are capable of on-going participants in the discourse. Thus to quote Heine et al (1991: 43-44) as cited in Borah (2008: 130):

"Objects that are close to us are clearly structured [we can see them as that] and clearly delineated; they are less abstract than objects that are more distant, less clearly structured and/or delineated. Abstraction also relates to referentiality or manipulability in discourse. Objects that refer, that are autonomous speech participants, are less abstract than those that show a low degree preferentiality or manipulability". In our corpus, we have found that classified nouns are concrete and unclassified nouns are abstract. This is observed in the following example.

18)   *apinghanpo   alam   arjusi   apisope   aneng   arong*

              apinghan-po   a-lam   arju-si   apiso-pe   aneng   a-rong

Husband-DEF	GEN-talk	hear-INF	wife-F	mind	GEN-glad

anat	*hat*	*damo*
anat	hat	damo
intensity	market	go-PPF

'Hearing the husband's talk the wife has gone to the market being glad.'

CONCLUSIONS

Thus from the above discussion it is observed that classifiers in Karbi (Plains) are not just simple expressions of particular semantic properties of the noun being classified. They do not have the sole function of individuation in order to facilitate numerical quantification. In discourse communication they have social and context sensitive use. Classifiers in Karbi are, in fact, the linguistic resources with which the speakers of the language can create social meanings.

ABBREVIATIONS USED

ACC	Accusative case
CLF	Classifier
CP	Conjunctive particle
DAT	Dative
DEF	Definite
EMPH	Emphatic marker
FOC	Focus
FUT	Future
GEN	Genitive
INF	Infinitive
LOC	Locative
MT	Measure Terms
NMLZ	Nominalizer
NUM	Numeral
PAST	Past Tense
PERF	perfective
PRES INDEF	Present Indefinite
POL	Politeness
TOP	Topic

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