

Abstract

**Variability in the use and distribution of classifiers in Bishnupriya, a contact language**

*Shobha Satyanath*

Reader, Department of Linguistics  
University of Delhi, Delhi 110007, India.

E-mail: [satyanath@vsnl.net](mailto:satyanath@vsnl.net)

and

*Nazrin B. Laskar*

M.Phil. Student, Department of Linguistics,  
University of Delhi, Delhi 110007, India.

E-mail: [nazrinnaaz@rediffmail.com](mailto:nazrinnaaz@rediffmail.com)

The study reports the findings from a recently concluded study on change and variability in the use and distribution of the three classifier morphemes in Bishnupriya, a language that developed as a result of contact between Tibeto-Burman and Indo-Aryan in Manipur, India. The study assumes significance considering that (a) Tibeto-Burman and Indo-Aryan show significant differences in their phonological and morpho-syntactic patterns and Bishnupriya reflects properties of both the systems (b) though it seems to share some of the classifier morphemes with the Indo Aryan languages located in the Eastern and the North Eastern regions of India, it differs in their semantics and assignment in many important ways<sup>1</sup> (c) though many of the Tibeto-Burman languages use classifiers extensively, the classifiers reported from Bishnupriya do not appear to be shared with the languages spoken in and around Manipur (d) finally, the presence of classifiers in the Eastern Indo-Aryan languages itself remains problematic; though Indo-Aryan etymologies are frequently posited, (Chatterji 1926, Kakati 1941), these are contestable and multiple etymologies referring to other language families such as Munda, Tibeto-Burman, Tai, Mon-Khmer, Dravidian are equally plausible and appear to be more convincing.

The present study deals with the three classifier morphemes, (-go), (-han) and (-ta) that occur in a variety of morpho-syntactic contexts and primarily in a variety of noun phrases. The three classifiers occur as bound morphemes that can be realized either on the head noun or on some of its modifiers such as numerals, quantifiers, adjectives, demonstratives, interrogatives, relative pronouns and so on, or on both the head and its modifier(s). The principal findings of the analysis are listed below:

- (i) (-go) categorizes for animate nouns whereas (-han) and (-ta) categorize the inanimate nouns. Of the total marked instances (-go) accounts for 95% of the animate nouns and (-han) and (-ta) together account for 89% of the inanimate nouns. The remaining cases show a split based on lexical and

semantic factors. In some instances the same lexicon is variably split between more than one classifier.

- (ii) Which constituent in an NP a classifier selects appears to be variably conditioned by the category of the modifier and the ordering of the constituents in an NP. One categorical finding is that the instances of the unmarked modifiers happen to be the instances of premodifiers suggesting a close affinity with Tibeto-Burman word ordering patterns.
- (iii) The three classifiers are not uniformly distributed across various types of Noun phrases suggesting the crucial traits of each of the three classifiers. (-ta) for instance, never occurs with numerals, it occurs maximally with interrogatives and demonstratives followed by nouns. (-go) and (-han) both occur maximally with nouns and numerals but differ in their frequency occurrence with respect to the pronominals.
- (iv) The contexts in which the classifiers occur are only variably marked by the classifiers, thereby leaving many instances of zeros. The undetermined nouns show maximum variation.
- (v) The choice of a classifier is known to depend on semantic, morphological, phonological or lexical properties of the referent noun (cf. Aikhenvald 2000). In the case of Bishnupriya, while marking is determined largely by the semantic and lexical properties of the noun in consideration and to some extent by the syntactic considerations, the selection of a particular constituent in an NP seems to be conditioned by morphological and syntactic factors.

This is a quantitative study based on natural speech data drawn through sociolinguistic interviews from two Bishnupriya settlements from the Hailakandi district of Assam<sup>2</sup> and the available historical texts.

## Notes and References

1. The results reported in present study are strikingly different from the various accounts available of classifiers in various Eastern IA speeches (cf. Grierson 1903, Chatterji 1926, Kakati 1941, Ray 1966, Dasgupta 1983, Bhattacharya and Dasgupta 1996, Onishi 1996).
2. Though Bishnupriya developed in Manipur, a great majority of the Bishnupriyas today are scattered outside Manipur in parts of Assam, Tripura and Bangladesh where the dominant language is Bengali and not Meitei and Assamese, which their ancestors presumably spoke. Bishnupriya forms the home language and the ethnic group language within the Bishnupriya settlements.

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