Numeral Classifiers in Nepali

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Abstract

This paper presents a formal and functional description of numeral classifiers in Nepali. Nepali, like other classifier languages, has the feature of classifying nouns especially in two ways: General and Specific. General numeral classifiers in Nepali distinguish human nouns from that of non-human nouns while specific classifiers are there for the classification of inanimate nouns in terms of their sortal and mensural attributes. General numeral classifiers also differ from the specific one in that they are morphologically bound units which have no meaning in isolation whereas specific numeral classifiers are free morphemes with their own meaning and can sometimes occur as head of the noun phrases, though their distribution is strictly restricted to their referent nouns.

Keywords: Nepali, Numeral, Classifier, Noun, General, Specific

1. Introduction

Nepali is one of the major languages of South Asia which belongs to the Northern group of Modern Indo-Aryan languages. It shows a proximity in grammar as well as in lexicon to other cognate languages like Kumauni andGarwali. The other names for this language are *Khas Kura*, *ParbateBhasa*, *Gorkhali* and *Dzongkha Lhotshammikha*. It is spoken widely in Nepal, India, Bhutan and Myanmar.

Typologically, Nepali is an agglutinating language and structurally, Subject Object Verb phrase order dominant language. It is a language with nominal and verbal agreement system which inflects for number, person, gender, TAM and honorificity etc.

The Nepali language exhibit an attribute of classifying nouns on the basis of its semantic features. It is assumed that 'Nepali has developed this feature due to the influence of Tibeto-Burman languages like Newari which are in close contact with it since time unknown. Because

no other languages under western group of Indo-Aryan family has numeral classifier system' (Barz and Diller, 1985; Pokharel, 2054 B.S.).

2. Formal Description of Nepali Numeral Classifiers

Nepali is a Numeral Classifier language in terms of language classification based on the types of classifiers found in the language. 'Numeral Classifier languages are the paradigm type; they are so called because a classifier is obligatory in many expressions of quantity' (Allan, 2007). Nepali has only noun classifiers and 'it is estimated to have around 200 numeral classifiers for Nepali nouns' (Pokharel, 2054 B.S.:82).

Formally, the numerals of Nepali always precede the classifier morpheme and the head noun always follows the compound constituent. All types of classifiers follow the same sequence of [Number + Classifier + Noun] and it is rigid in Nepali as in *dui-ʤʌna manche* 'two-CLF men', *dui-vʌʈa kukur* 'two-CLF dog', *tin-vʌʈa kitab* 'three-CLF book', *ek poʈi lʌsun* 'one-CLF garlic' etc.

The sequence of [Number + Classifier + Modifier + Noun] can be attested in Nepali as in *ek-ʤʌna ʌglo manche* 'one-CLF tall man'. However, [quantifier + classifier] construction is restricted to some quantifiers only. For an instance, *dherʌi-vʌʈa kʌtha* 'many-CLF story' , *dherʌi-ʤʌna manche* 'many-CLF people' are grammatical but **thorʌi-vʌʈa kʌtha* 'less-CLF story' , **thorʌi ʤʌna manche* 'less-CLF people' are considered quite odd and ungrammatical in this language. Rather, instead of *-vʌʈa* and *-ʤʌna*, the morpheme *–tino* is used with *thorʌi* as in *thorʌi-tino* 'less-?'. But since *tino* does not occur with any other numerals and does not possess ability to categorize nouns semantically, it is feasible to consider it as an echo word.

Unlike other non-classifier languages, numerals cannot occur alone as the quantifier of the head noun in Nepali like, **ek manche* 'one man'. It is obligatory to have classifier morpheme in every numeral construction in Nepali and such construction without classifier is considered as ungrammatical. However, with increasing structural influence of non-classifier dominant language like Hindi, colloquial variety of Nepali can often be seen with such usage. However, in the constructions like *ek manche gʌhiro khaɖʌl* 'one man deep hole', *ek kitab vidhja* 'one book knowledge', *ek bhai chora* 'one brother son', *ek bʌhini chori* 'one sister daughter', the noun phrases like *manche 'man', kitab 'book', bhai 'brother', bʌhini 'sister'* respectively function as modifiers and such constructions do not require to use classifiers with their respective numerals.

There are two types of numeral classifiers in Nepali based on their morphological structure: *ʤʌna* and *vʌʈa/ʈa/ʈi/goʈa/oʈa* fall under the first type which are bound morphemes and have no meaning in isolation. Whereas remaining other many classifiers like *kosa, kesra, dana, ghʌna* etc. constitute second type which are free morphemes and they sometimes function as

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head of the noun phrase as in *kera-ko kosa* 'banana-GEN piece', *mʌkʌi-ko dana* 'maize-GEN grain'. Due to such tendency, there is confusion among the scholars about whether or not they are pure classifiers in Nepali. But since those classifiers are totally restricted to their respective referent nouns, we can consider them as classifiers.

It is fascinating to note that classifier *vʌʈa* has its feminine counterpart as well i.e. *vʌʈi/ʈi* as in *char-vʌʈi keʈi* 'four-CLF girl', *eu-ʈi chorni* 'one-CLF female theif' etc. Moreover, some classifiers in Nepali do agree with their referent nouns on the basis of number, such as – *ek thun-go phul* 'one-CLF (SG) flower', *dui thun-ga phul* 'two CLF (PL) flowers' etc.

3. Functional Description of Nepali Numeral Classifiers

Following the functional classification of the Newari Classifiers made by Shakya (1997), categories of Nepali numeral classifiers can be divided into general and specific. First kind of numeral classifiers distinguish non-human and inanimate nouns from human ones. Two classifiers *ʤʌna* and *vʌʈa/ʈa* come under this type.

Pokharel (2054 B.S) has provided four matrices for the distribution of these classifiers:

   I. [-vʌʈα, -ʤʌnα] = Mass noun;
   II. [+vʌʈα, -ʤʌnα] = Non-human noun;
  III. [-vʌʈα, +ʤʌnα] = Honorific human noun; and,
  IV. [+vʌʈα, +ʤʌnα] = Non honorific human noun.

These matrices formulate the whole system of Nepali Numeral Classifiers efficiently.

Second type of Nepali classifiers are specific to inanimate nouns and they categorize those nouns mostly in terms of their I. Measurement; II. Shape; III. Size; IV. Material; V. Thickness; VI. Dimension; VII. Arrangement; and VIII. Consistency. Instances for such Nepali Classifiers are as follows:
ek kjã ʈ pʌisa 'one CLF money', *ek lung dhago* 'one CLF thread' *ek turko ʤhol* 'one CLF soup', *dui ghʌna bã s* 'two CLF bamboo', *ek ɖʌllo bhat* 'one CLF rice', *tin gã sbhat* 'three CLF rice', *ek choiʈo daura* 'one CLF firewood', *ek phʌbljaʈo daura* 'one CLF firewood', *ek tar sun* 'one CLF gold', *ek sinko bã s* 'one CLF bamboo', *ek latko ghiu* 'one CLF butter', *ek pitko ghiu* 'one CLF butter', *ek sirko dudh* 'one CLF milk', *dui thopa dudh* 'two CLF milk', *ek ghʌri kera* 'one CLF banana', *ek har daura* 'one CLF firewood', *ek geɖo chamʌl* 'one CLF rice', *ek sito bhat* 'one CLF rice' etc.

Besides these, there is a category of Nepali numeral classifiers for abstract nouns such as *ek khitko hã̃sai* 'one-CLF smile', *ek chʌrʌn ghumai* 'one CLF visit', *ek ʤʌsko sʌmʤʌna* 'one CLF rememeberance', *ek phʌɽko hĩɽai* 'one CLF walking' etc.

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3. Conclusion

Among other types of classifiers, Nepali has only numeral classifiers which categorize nouns in two ways: General and Specific. General classifiers are for distinction between human and non-human nouns and they are morphologically bound which do not have meaning in isolation. On the other hand, specific numeral classifiers are for inanimate nouns which distinguish their referent nouns on the basis of sortal and mensural characteristics such as measurement, shape, size, dimension, thickness, arrangement and consistency. Nepali also exhibits specific type of classifiers for abstract nouns.

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