

Bare nominals, classifiers and the representation of definiteness in Bangla

Andrew Simpson (USC) and Priyanka Biswas (USC)

Much attention has been given to the encoding of definiteness in Bangla by means of structures in which the neutral order of classifier preceding noun shown in (1) is inverted to produce a sequence of noun before classifier, as in (2). Such N>CL forms in which no numeral occurs are often referred to as ‘bare classifier’ patterns. See, for example Bhattacharya (1999), Chacon (2012), Jiang (2014), Dayal (2012), among others.

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|-----|------------|-----|-----------|
| (1) | Ek Ta cabi | (2) | cabi Ta |
| | 1 CL key | | key CL |
| | ‘a key’ | | ‘the key’ |

Comparatively little attention, however, has been paid to an alternative way in which definiteness in Bangla may be represented via the use of bare nominals with no accompanying classifier, as illustrated in (3). Such forms frequently occur as apparently optional variants to the more commonly discussed noun-classifier pattern, and pose a serious challenge to certain theoretical models of the bare classifier pattern, as for example in Jiang (2014), where it is assumed that there is only one means to represent definiteness in Bangla (aside from the use of demonstratives and certain other strong quantifiers).

- (3) cabi
key
‘a key’, ‘keys’ or ‘the key’

This paper investigates the distribution and interpretation of definite bare noun forms in comparison to bare classifier patterns in order to determine whether the former are fully equivalent in their interpretation to the latter, and why such apparently redundant variation might exist within Bangla. The conclusion that the paper reaches after careful probing of a range of different contexts in which definite bare noun and bare classifier structures may occur is that the two nominal patterns actually represent different aspects of the notion of definiteness relating to familiarity and uniqueness, and that the spectrum of interpretation covered by definite determiners such as English ‘the’ is significantly distributed across two separate modes of representation in Bangla, rather than being collapsed in a single surface form as in English. In various instances in which optionality in the use of either bare classifier or bare noun forms appears to be possible, it will be argued that two different routes to the licensing of ‘definiteness’ are made use of, resulting in both bare classifier and bare noun forms being accepted by speakers in certain contexts. Elsewhere, it is observed that there are clearly dominant patterns of use, with either bare classifier or bare noun forms being the common means used to reference entities construed as definite and collocated with the definite determiner in English.

In instances of anaphoric definite reference such as (4), the strongly dominant pattern used by speakers is the bare classifier pattern:

- (4) ami jOkhon ram-er bari gechilam, Ekjon gayok ar Ekjon ukiler Sathe dEkha hoyechilo.
gayokTi beS bikkhEto kintu ukil-Ti beSi pOeSa rojgar korechen.
‘When I went to Ram’s house I met a singer and a lawyer. The singer was very famous but the lawyer had made more money.’

Where there is non-anaphoric reference to a specifically unique individual or entity which is not familiar to the speaker/hearer, bare noun patterns occur naturally, as seen in (5)

- (5) amar mone hOe amader age darogar Sathe kOtha bOla uchit.
'In my opinion, we should go and see the chief of police.'

In a third set of cases involving bridging cross-reference and definiteness by association with some other identified entity, where the definite article is used in English, it is found that the bare classifier pattern is most regularly made use of. However, such cases involve a potential complication, as Schwarz (2013) and others have pointed out that bridging cross-reference may either be seen as a subcase of either anaphoric definiteness, in which the definiteness of a referent results from an anaphoric-like dependency with some antecedent or be viewed as definiteness which arises from situational uniqueness. The latter kind of perception allows for uses of bare nouns as alternatives to the bare classifier pattern.

- (6) amar ei laptop-Ta khub pOchondo. screen-Ta khub bhalo.
'I like this laptop very much. The screen is very good.'

The paper also examines the role of familiarity in the choice of representation of definite NPs, where familiarity is construed as the speaker/hearer already having some mental representation of the referent at the time of speech. Familiarity of referent is shown to play a significant role in Bangla in the use of the bare classifier pattern, and links up with the use of such patterns in anaphoric definite reference. Other factors which the paper will show additionally affect the choice and availability of bare classifier and bare noun patterns are (a) the visibility of the referent and pointing to a referent, (b) honorification with human referents, (c) prosodic length, (d) contrastive focus, and (e) the subject vs. object position of referents.

All of the above phenomena are shown to conspire in a two-form referential system for definites in Bangla which interestingly shows strong parallels to languages in which either two distinct definite determiners (or two forms of a single determiner) are present and used in different ways, such as Fering and German (Schwartz 2013) or where a language employs a determiner that is specified for use with familiar entities, but does not occur with non-familiar, non-anaphoric, situationally unique referents, such as Akan (Arkoh and Matthewson 2013). Such a conclusion suggests that the different components of definiteness relating to uniqueness and identifiability discussed in Lyons (1999) may be manifested overtly not only in languages with multiple determiner forms, but also in languages such as Bangla which do not have any definite determiner.

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