

DETERMINATION OF THE INDETERMINATE BARE NOUN IN KARBI

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ABSTRACT

Nouns refer either to objects (i.e. things which are bounded in space, e.g. cars) or masses (i.e. things that tend to exist in space as something unbounded, i.e. water). Thus, semantically nouns constitute two broad groups. In a language like English this semantic distinction is grammatically encoded so that a *car*-type noun and a *water*-type noun have different grammatical behaviour. For instance, a *water*-type noun is already an NP; a *car*-type noun is not (e.g. *Water is transparent*; **Car is expensive*). However, in a language like Karbi, a Tibeto-Burman language spoken in different parts of Assam (a north eastern State of India), all nouns are NPs at the same time. But depending on the semantic context involved the bare noun (i.e. the noun as NP) in Karbi may designate any number of instances of the concerned kind (i.e. one or more than one) and also can have either a generic or non-generic reference. The main purpose of this paper is to show how the bare noun in Karbi is grammatically determined. For grammatical determination Karbi employs a set of imprecise quantifiers which are either inherently indefinite or definite. For precise quantification of the bare noun Karbi employs numerals along with classifiers and measure terms, which are, however, reference-independent. Thus it is the word order involved that determines the reference of a precisely quantified NP.

KEYWORDS: Cognitive Linguistics, Categorization, Prototypical Categories, Countability, Bare Noun, The Karbi Classifiers, Grounding, Discreteness

INTRODUCTION

Cognitive Linguistics is based on the assumption that language forms an integral part of human cognition. Linguistic organization i.e. grammar is not autonomous. Rather it is based on how the human agent perceives the outer world and categorizes it. Linguistic knowledge is part of our knowledge of the world. To quote Langacker (1987):

“Language is neither self contained nor describable without essential reference to cognitive processing. Grammatical structures do not constitute an autonomous formal system or level of representation; they are claimed instead to be inherently symbolic, providing for the structuring and conventional symbolization of conceptual content”.

Thus, a noun, on this view, is a linguistic counterpart of what are *things* to the ordinary human perception. To the ordinary human perception the phenomena of the world are either *things* or *actions*, or *states*. As a matter of fact, the ordinary human agent understands the phenomena of the world in terms of time-stability, which is a continuum. At one pole of the continuum are the phenomena that are most time-stable, which manifest themselves in space as in the form of concrete physical three dimensional entities not to change over time. *Nouns refer to such things*. At the other pole are the phenomena that lack time-stability, and we understand them as actions as referred to by verbs. A noun thus refers to the *concept* of things. Thus, the noun ‘dog’, for instance, does not directly refer to the world – it does not denote any individual dog of the real world. What it refers to is rather an abstract concept - the common properties of a set of similar individuals or “instances”. In other words, the noun ‘dog’ refers to the dog-kind or the type.

In our physical world the prototypical things are physical objects with clear-cut boundaries e.g., cows, men, books etc. The less prototypical things are abstract units such as happiness, illness, sorrow etc. Thus semantically distinction is made between two main classes of things-individuated objects and unindividuated substances. The criteria, on the basis of which, this distinction is made are-boundedness, internal composition and countability.

The criterion of boundedness treat an entity as having a clear perceptual boundary e.g., an entity such as car appear to us as discrete individuated objects. Substances such as milk, water, on the other hand have no inherent boundary. Rather they appear to us as continuous. The criterion of internal composition refers to the division of objects and substances on the characteristics of heterogeneity. Those things which have heterogeneous internal composition are referred to as objects and those which have homogenous internal composition are referred to as masses. Countability refers to the recognition of the different entities as members of the same category. So that they can be conceptually replicated and counted.

In a language like English count-mass distinction is grammatically encoded so that a car-type noun and a water-type noun have different grammatical behavior. For instance a milk-type noun is already an NP; a crow-type noun is not. Thus *Milk is white* is grammatical whereas *Crow is/are black* is ungrammatical. The noun crow, because it refers to an object, cannot be used as milk, which refers to a mass.

A BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO THE KARBI LANGUAGE

Karbi also known as Arlong is the language of the Karbis, who mainly live in the Karbi Anglong district of Assam (India). A **tonal language**, Karbi belongs to the **Tibeto- Burman** group of the **Sino-Tibetan family of languages**. As a matter of fact, the area where the Karbis live is commonly known as the Mikir Hills. Sir Charles Lyall in his work 'The Mikir' has mentioned about the origin of the language as such, "...they, therefore, belong to the common stock of the Tibeto-Burman languages of Assam and do not by themselves prove any close connection of Mikir with Bodo." They were formerly known as the Mikirs, who are one of the most numerous and homogenous of the Tibeto- Burman races inhabiting Assam. In their folk literature the word Karbi is used in place of Mikir. Accordingly the Govt. of Assam officially altered the name Mikir Hills District to the Karbi Anglong District.

The number of karbi native speakers are 353513 in Assam. The language that is spoken in the hills is called Hills-Karbi and that spoken in Plains, Plains-Karbi. Hills Karbi is the form of Karbi language that is accepted by the speakers as the standard Karbi language. The same is used in the school text books and other literature available. Plains karbi is spoken in the plains of Kamrup, Morigaon districts of Assam and Ri-Bhoy district of Meghalaya. The Karbis residing in the plains of Kamrup and Morigaon district of Assam, and the Ri-Bhoi districts of Meghalaya identify themselves as the Dumrali or Plains Karbis. With their social head at Dimoria, culturally and customarily they have different sets of social behavior and functions to their counterpart at Karbi Anglong. Linguistically they are a sub group of Mikir groups of the greater Tibeto-Burman family and class as Amri (the other being Karbi) in the latest grouping of the T-B family.

Karbi uses classifiers, which have both grammatical and discourse functions. The usual word order of Karbi is *SOV*. As for its script, there are two writing systems in Karbi. One is based on the Assamese alphabet, the other on the Roman alphabet. Some of the enumerated classifiers in the Karbi Language are as follows-

- Human-All the human nouns including ‘god’ take two classifiers, viz., *-nut* which is used with the numeral ‘one’ and *bang-* which is used with other numerals.

pincho i-nut ‘one man’

arlochobang-phil ‘four women’

- Animate- The animate nouns take the classifier

methan i-jon ‘one dog’

vo jon-kep ‘ten birds’

- *pak* occurs with nouns which refer to flat objects

coy pak-ni ‘two shirts’

kitab pak-thom ‘three books’

- *hong* occurs with long and hard objects.

theng hongni ‘two firewoods’

keng hongthom ‘three kegs’

- *dum* occurs with round objects

beteri i-dum ‘one battery’

hon dum-ni ‘two balls of threads’

- *hom* and *dop* are used with nouns meaning ‘packet’

ahom ‘cover’

adop ‘packet, small box’

However, in a language like Karbi, a Tibeto-Burman language spoken in different parts of Assam, all nouns are NPs at the same time. This is well exhibited in the following examples.

- *Vo* *keakik*

Vo *ke-akik*

Crow *be-black*

‘Crows are black’

- *chulank* *keakelok*

chulank *ke-akelok*

milk *be-white*

‘Milk is white’

- *teke inglong along doman*
teke inglong along doman
tiger forest LOC live
'Tigers live in the forest'
- *langshi ili aju*
lang-shi ili aju
water-EMPH our life
'Water is life'

In all the above examples object nouns *vo* 'crow', *teke* 'tiger' and mass nouns *chulank* 'milk', *langshi* 'water' are NPs designating the kind. It is clear from the above examples that mass-count distinction is not grammatically encoded here. Thus nouns in Karbi distribute like mass nouns in English. To quote Foley as regards the affinities between nouns in the numeral-classifier languages and the mass nouns in English,

"There are many languages of the world in which all or the great bulk of nouns behave like the [English] mass nouns rice and few or none like the [English] count noun book... The semantics of these nouns in numeral classifier languages are like those of mass nouns in English; they refer to stuff, substances or material without shape or a determinable unit in its own right". (Foley 1997:231)

The mass-object distinction in Karbi is captured at the level of quantification. Quantifiers are used to refer to an instance of a thing with information about its quantity. We may quantify both instances of objects and instances of substances. With the help of number quantifiers we quantify count noun and they are also known as count noun quantifiers. In English we use numerals- one, two, three etc. On the other hand, to quantify instances of substance we use amount quantifiers e.g., much, little etc. These are also known as mass quantifiers. Thus, in Karbi a classifier has to be used with the noun that designates an object to distinguish it from a noun that designates a mass. The following examples illustrate the point:

- *kitab pakni*
kitab pak-ni
book CLF-two (CLF = classifier)
'Two books'
- **kitāp ni*
- *Arvo epak*
arvo e-pak
leaf NUM-CLF
'One leaf'

Again depending on the semantic context involved the bare noun in Karbi may designate any number of instances of the concerned kind and can also have either a generic or non-generic reference. The following examples illustrate this point.

- *lo ador sodak*
lo ador sodak
book price high
'Books are expensive'
- *ne lo chipohesi akeme hangman*
ne lo chi-pohe-si akeme hangman
I book readlike
'I like to read books'
- *ne lo namo*
ne lo na-mo
I book buy-PERF
'I bought a book/books/some books'
- *bang kevang*
bang ke-vang
guest NOM-come-PERF
'A guest has/some guests have come'

In (8), (9) the bare noun/NP *lo* 'book' have generic references as it designates a type of entity. In examples (10) and (11) the bare nouns *lo* 'book' and *bang* 'guest' is independent of numerosity and reference. It designates some unspecified number of entities of the type.

But when we have to specify the number of books a classifier has to be used along with the numeral. This is exhibited in the following example.

- *ne lo epak namo*
ne lo e-pak na-mo
I book NUM-CLF buy-PERF
'I have bought a book'
- *ne lo pakthom namo*
ne lo pak-thom na-mo

I book CLF-three buy-PERF

'I have bought three books'

Thus for precise quantification Karbi employs numerals along with classifiers and the reference of a precisely quantified NP, whether it is definite or indefinite, is determined by the word order. If the numeral + classifier is placed after the noun it refers to definiteness and if it is placed before the noun it refers to indefiniteness. This is illustrated in the following examples;

- *neyok akeme cholsang pakthom pitha*
 neyok akeme cholsang pak-thom pi-tha Definite
 me-ACC beautiful shirt CLF+three give IMP
 'Give me the three beautiful shirts'
- *neyok kilangme pakthom acholsang pitha*
 neyok kilangme pak-thom a-cholsang pi-tha Indefinite
 me-ACC beautiful CLF+three a-shirt give IMP
 'Give me three beautiful shirts'
- *neyok pakni alo pitha*
 neyok pak-ni a-lo pi-tha Indefinite
 me-ACC CLF-two a-book give-IMP
 'Give me two books'
- *neyok lo pakni pitha*
 neyok lo pak-ni pi-tha Definite
 me-ACC book CLF-two give-IMP
 'Give me the two books'

In (14) NUM+CLF *pakthom* is placed after the noun *cholsang* 'shirt' to refer to definiteness while in (15) NUM+CLF *pakthom* is placed before the noun *cholsang* 'shirt' to refer to indefiniteness. Also in the indefinite expression the noun is prefixed by *a-* so that *cholsang* becomes *acholsang*.

For imprecise quantification Karbi employs quantifier e.g., *bikso* 'little/few', which is inherently indefinite. This is exhibited in the following examples.

- *Nephan karbi alam ethak bikso lo do*
ne-phan karbi alam ethak bikso lo do
 I-POSS karbi language on a few book be-PRES

'I have a few books on Karbi'

- *neyok bikso hanthor pitha*
neyok bikso hanthor pi-tha
me-ACC a few orange give IMP

'Give me a few oranges'

- *hathi pen neyok bikso ati wanpitha*
hathi pen neyok bikso ati wanpitha
shop from me-ACC a few egg bring

'Bring me a few eggs from the shop'

Again, imprecise quantifier *hal* is used for determination of the bare noun. The following examples illustrate the point:

- *neyok hanthorhal pitha*
neyok hanthor-hal pi-tha
me-ACC orange-PLDEF give-IMP
'Give me the oranges'
- *chomangarlenghal karb iarong long doman*
chomang-arleng-hal karb iarong long doman
khasi-man-PLDEF karbi village LOC live

'The Khasi men live in the Karbi village'

CONCLUSIONS

Thus, in this paper we try to show how the indeterminate bare noun in Karbi is grammatically determined. Karbi employs a set of imprecise quantifiers which are inherently indefinite, rather indefinitely vague quantifier. For precise quantification classifiers are used along with the numerals thereby instantiating the type-as discreet, individuated objects. The CLF used is reference neutral as in the examples (14) and (15) CLF 'pak' is used to show the boundedness of the entity referred to. Only difference is that to show definiteness and indefiniteness the position of the classifier is changed, but classifier is still used. This is a major aspect perceived in Karbi (a Tibeto-Burman language) which has been an endangered language. It is hoped that the present study will significantly contribute to the study of the language.

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