Classifiers in Surjapuri

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ABSTRACT

Surjapuri is a minor language of India, spoken in eastern part of Bihar. It is an Indo-Aryan language. The language has not been worked upon much. The language shares feature and lexical items with neighbouring languages like Maithili, Bhojpuri, Bangla and Assamese. However, the language has an interesting feature which is not found in the other Indo-Aryan languages. Surjapuri has a set of classifiers which get attached to not only nouns and numerals but also to modifiers in the presence of noun. Classifier getting attached to modifiers is a rare phenomenon. Surjapuri has around four classifiers, including noun and numeral classifiers. They all have different usages. Mainly they differentiate nouns on the basis of humanness, specificity, plurality and shape. Surjapuri classifiers share very close similarity with the classifiers of the neighbouring languages Assamese and Bangla. Assamese and Bangla have classifiers which can be said to be parallel to some of the classifiers found in Bangla and Assamese. The present paper describes the place of occurrence of the different classifiers in a Surjapuri sentence. It also explores the semantic range of the classifiers. Reference of Bangla and Assamese classifiers has been used widely in the paper for comparing Surjapuri classifier. This comparison has been used for the better understanding of Surjapuri classifier system.

1. Introduction

Surjapuri is a language spoken in India, in eastern part of Bihar, mainly in the districts of Katihar, Kishanganj and Purnia and also in some parts of West Bengal. Surjapuri is kept under the cover term Hindi in the census (2001), conducted by Government of India. However, Surjapuri is also taken as a variety of Rajbanshi (cf. Toulmin 2006:13-15; Clark 1970:70-71) or as a Sub-dialect of Northern Bengali (Arshad 2003).

According to Ethnologue, possible alternate names are Chaupal, Choupal, and Suraji. Grierson (1968) marks the other name of Surjapuri is Siripuria. Historically, it is said to be closely related to Kamta and Rajbansi languages (2006 M. Toulmin). The language share features and lexical items with neighbouring languages like Assamese, Bangla, Bhojpuri and Maithili. The effect of Bangla and Maithili is so strong that according to Grierson, "the dialect in question is, in the main, Bengali with an admixture of Hindi, but it is written in the Kaithi character of Bihar, in which Hindi and not Bengali is written” However Kaithi script is not used any more. Devanagari script has replaced it.

Genealogically, Surjapuri can be classified as a member of Eastern Indo-Aryan language. It is a sister language of Maithili and Bangla. As it is a sister language of Bangla and Maithili, it is descendent of Magadhi Prakrit. Consider the following map (in Fig. 1) to understand the position of Surjapuri.
Figure 1: Genealogical tree of Surjapuri

Surjapuri language is often related to Muslim community staying in the Kishanganj, Araria, Purnia and Katihar districts of Bihar. As per my survey, Muslims dwelling in these areas claim that Surjapuri is spoken only by the Muslims. The Hindus of this region do not relate themselves with this language. Arshad (2003) also marks that the Surjapuri dialect is principally spoken by Mohammadans, but Hindus to the east of the river still speak Maithili. He further states “the Musalmans, who are said to be of Koch origin, speak a mixture of Bihari and Bengali, closely resembling the Koch-Bengali of Malda. This dialect is called Kishanganjia or Siripuria”. However, it is not studied in detail whether there is really any difference between the speech of Muslim and Hindu communities of this region.

2. Methodology and Objective

The present work is based on primary data collected from Surjapuri native speakers of Katihar and Purnia districts of Bihar. Mainly questionnaire method was used to collect data. The questionnaire was made in both Hindi and English, however Hindi questionnaire was found to be most useful in this region. The sessions with the language experts were digitally recorded.

The main objective of this study is to explore the classifiers present in this language. Mostly Indo-Aryan languages are not very rich in classifiers. Surjapuri is one of the few Indo-Aryan languages which has many classifiers. This paper not only wants to describe the semantics of the classifiers of Surjapuri but also wants to focus on the syntactic patterns those are formed due to the presence of the classifiers in a sentence.

3. Previous works on Surjapuri

It is difficult to find detailed linguistic description of Surjapuri. This language is said to have evolved in the border area of Bangla and Maithili. Grierson (1968) marks “it is extremely difficult in many places to decide with which of the two languages the local dialect (Surjapuri) should be classed, for Bihari fades imperceptibly into Bengali and vice versa”. Arshad (2003) gives a brief introduction of the language Surjapuri in his work which is basically deals with the social development of Surjapuri Muslims in the districts of Kishanganj (Bihar) and Uttar Dinajpur (West Bengal). He also describes the speech community and its various features. Alam (2011a, 2011b) has worked on case system and word formation of Surjapuri. He gives a brief description of word formation processes of Surjapuri. While discussing case system of Surjapuri he mentions that like many other Indo-Aryan languages Surjapuri too uses both affixes and postpositions to reflect cases.

Other than these I could not find any academic work which is aimed at describing any
linguistic feature of Surjapuri. Though much academic work cannot be found about Surjapuri language but there are many non-academic written materials available which are written in Surjapuri. Mostly they are written in Devanagri script. Some songs and movies in Surjapuri are also being digitalized. Surjapuri has also good representation in social media.

4. Classifiers

Mostly every language categorizes its nouns. Some languages do it by using grammatical agreement classes based on features like animacy, humanness, gender etc. While other languages use certain morphemes to categorize their nouns based on some features of the noun like animacy, humanness, definiteness and/or depending on its shape, size and colour. These morphemes can get attached to nouns, numerals, verbs, deixis, adpositions etc. Though the classifier can get attached to units other than noun yet in all the instances it classifies only nouns. However, depending on its position, the feature of the noun on the basis of which the noun is being classified may change (as can be seen in the following examples).

Classifiers (Clf) are found in many Indian languages though it is not a common feature of Indian languages. They are mainly found in Tibeto-Burman languages yet they can also be witnessed in Indo-Aryan, Dravidian and Austro-Asiatic languages. Only few Indo-Aryan languages like Bangla and Assamese have classifiers.

a) kiṭap-kʰɔn (book-Clf) (Assamese)
b) zualί-ziṇo (girl-Clf)
c) ɕele-ra (boy-Clf) (Bangla)
d) mifi-ti-gulo (sweets-Clf)

Some of the languages use classifiers with both the noun and the numeral. Bangla, an Indo-Aryan language has both noun and numeral classifier, e.g. /tɑ/. When a numeral precedes the noun then the classifier gets attached to the numeral (Numeral + Clf Noun) otherwise it gets attached to the noun (Noun + Clf). If the classifier comes with the noun, then it denotes a specific object. But when the classifier comes with the numeral then it does not denote a specific object rather it denotes one object from the whole class of a particular noun. Like in the following examples, classifier with the noun (e.g. 1) points out towards a specific noun (specific umbrella) from the whole group of the particular noun (group of umbrellas). While when the classifier is getting attached to the numeral (e.g. 2) then it is denoting one (umbrella) from the whole group (group of umbrellas).

1. cʰɑt-a-tɑ ɗɑo (Bangla) give
   umbrella-Clf
   Give me the umbrella.

2. ɐk-tɑ cʰɑt ɗɑo (Bangla) give
   one-Clf umbrella-Clf
   Give me one umbrella.

S. K. Chatterji (1970) gives the example in Bangla where the noun precedes the numeral. In such cases too, the classifier is attached to the numeral (Noun + Clf Numeral). It is obligatory for the classifier to get attached to the numeral in Assamese and Bangla in the presence of numeral.

1. ɗu-jan manuʃ-er
   two-Clf man-Gen

2. manuʃ ɗu-jan-er
   man two-Clf-Gen
   Two men’s…

Some languages like Tagin and Galo (Tibeto-Burman) has only numeral classifiers. They
occur only in the presence of the numeral and get attached to the numeral. They can never get attached to the noun. Following are the examples (from Kumar, Lahiri, Saha & Shekhar 2011).

3. \( \eta o i \) \( p a \)-ken \( \) (Galo)
   Fish \( Clf \)-one
   One fish

4. \( t o r o p \) \( c a \)-\( \eta u \) \( \) (Tagin)
   ant \( Clf \)-five
   Five ants.

   Though classifiers get attached to many other units other than nouns like numerals, adpositions and verbs yet it is uncommon to find classifiers getting attached to adjectives in the presence of the noun. In Surjapuri, classifiers can get attached to nouns, numerals, demonstratives and adjectives. This rare phenomenon makes Surjapuri classifiers very interesting.

5. Classifiers in Surjapuri

Surjapuri does not have a gender or number agreement system but have a classifier system which is quite similar to that of Bangla. Surjapuri like Bangla has both the noun and numerical classifier but unlike Bangla the classifiers in Surjapuri can also get attached to the demonstratives and modifiers along with the nouns and numbers.

   This feature of classifiers getting attached to the modifiers in the presence of the noun (where the noun is not dropped) is quite an uncommon feature for the Indo-Aryan languages. Though, it can be found in other languages of the world (Aikhenvald 2000).

   When they are attached to the noun, the other suffixes like the case markers follow the classifier. It is not obligatory for every noun in Surjapuri to carry a classifier which is possible in many classifier languages (see Chierchia 1998 & Krifka 1995). So the noun can exist in a sentence without being followed by a classifier.

5.1 Classifier /\( t a /\)

Classifiers are used depending on the semantic feature of the noun. /\( t a /\) in Surjapuri can be used with any singular noun; somewhat to mark specificity or to denote a particular object.

7. \( h a t i \)-\( t a \) \( m o r e \) \( g e i l k e \)
   Elephant-Clf died went
   The elephant died.

8. \( t o p i \)-\( t a \) \( g i r e \) \( g e l c ^ { b i } \)
   cap-Clf fallen went
   The cap has fallen.

In the above examples (7 & 8) elephant (‘\( h a t i \)’) and cap (‘\( t o p i \)’) are specific one from the
whole class of elephant and cap. This specificity is marked by the classifier /tɑ/. So, it can be said that /tɑ/ classifier categorizes a particular noun as a specific one from the whole class, when attached to a particular noun.

When a modifier precedes the noun then the classifier gets attached to the modifier instead of the noun. But there is no change in the meaning of the categorization of the noun. Sentence 7 & 9 both categorizes ‘hati’ (elephant) as a specific elephant from the class of elephant.

9. burə-ta həti more gele
    old-Clf elephant died went
    The old elephant died.

10. bɔŋa-ta dal pʰeke ge
     broken-Clf stem throw give
     Throw the broken stem.

11. moto-ta beti-cʰoa
    fat-Clf girl-child
    The fat girl child.

In most of the Indo-Aryan languages it is not possible to attach the classifier with the modifier in the presence of the noun. It can be witnessed in the parallel sentences of Assamese and Bangla which are closely related to Surjapuri. It can be seen in the following sentences that the classifiers are being attached with the noun but not with the modifier like Surjapuri sentences.

12. burə həti-tu mori gol
    old elephant-Clf died went
    The old elephant died.

13. mota meje-ta
    fat girl-Clf
    The fat girl.

The classifier /tɑ/ can also come with the demonstratives (Dem) in Surjapuri. Aikhenvald (2000) categorizes the classifiers those occur with the demonstratives as Deictic Classifiers. In some languages when the classifier comes with the demonstrative then it states a particular feature of the noun. However, in Surjapuri no such function of the classifier can be marked when it comes with the demonstrative. The classifier /tɑ/ when occurs with the demonstrative then also it marks the characteristics of specificity of the noun like it does when it occurs with the noun and modifier.

14. o-ta lɔɾka jəɾ bukʰar cʰilki
    Dem-Clf boy whose fever had
    kal more gelki
    yesterday died went
    The boy who had fever died yesterday.

15. u-ta topi je-ta kʰuti se
    Dem-Clf cap Dem-CLA hanger Inst
    təŋal cʰilo gire gelcʰe
    hang Aux felt went
    That cap which was hanging from the hanger has fallen.

In Assamese too we can see such occurrence of the classifier /tu/ with the demonstratives in the presence of the noun.

16. zi-tu lɔɾai gilas-tu bʰəɲisil
    Dem-Clf boy glass-Clf broke
    The boy who broke the glass....
But it is not possible in Bangla.

17. jei c^ele-ta glas b^e^e
Dem boy-Clf glass broke

The boy who broke the glass…..

But in Bangla if the noun is dropped then the classifier chooses the demonstrative as its host as can be seen in the following sentences. While introducing the noun (book) to the context the classifier is being used with the noun. There after whenever the noun (book) is talked about then the demonstrative is used instead the noun. Then the noun is being dropped and the demonstrative hosts the classifier.

18. oi boi-ta je-ta ami porchilam o-ta kot^ae
That book-Clf Dem-Clf I read Dem-Clf where

Where is the book that I was reading?

When a numeral comes before the noun or the modifier then the classifier gets attached to the numeral. But when the classifier gets attached to the numeral then the classifier no more denotes a particular noun rather any one from that class of noun.

19. ek-ta bura hati more geilke
one-Clf old elephant died went

One old elephant died.

20. sita ek-ta pokka a:m kac^e
sita one-Clf ripe mango eating
Sita is eating a ripe mango.

When the classifier /tta/ is used with the number it gives the similar reading like that of Assamese /tu/ or Bangla /ta/ when used with the number.

21. ek-tu bura hati mori gol (Assamese)
one-Clf old elephant died went

22. ek-ta buro hati more gelo (Bangla)
one-Clf old elephant died went

One old elephant died.

In context, Bangla too can use classifiers with the modifiers. But it is only possible when the noun is dropped. Like Surjapuri, it is not possible in Bangla for classifier to occur with modifier in the presence of the noun as can be seen in the following example (23).

23. boro g^or-ta k^ub fungor kingu ami
big room-Clf very beautiful but I

c^oto-ta-e t^akbo
small-Clf-Loc live

The big room is very beautiful but I will stay in the smaller one.

5.2 Classifier /k^on/ or /k^an/

The classifier /k^on/ is used with inanimate flat like objects like letter, leaf, house, palm etc (Lahiri 2010). It denotes specificity like the classifier /tta/. This classifier can at times replaced with /tta/ however /k^on/ or /k^an/ strictly cannot be used with the curvy objects.

24. muk^ k^ot-k^on d^ede
me letter-Clf give
Give me the letter.

25. o g^or-k^on d^ek^ilki
S(he) house-Clf saw
He/she saw the house.
It can be also used with animate object to give an inanimate reading like in the following example where the boy is denoted as an inanimate object possessed by the (2nd) person.

26. ʃor ʃo-ɑ-kɔn ʃamon ʃok?
Your boy-Clf how is
How is your son?

It can also be used to classify abstract nouns like work, workshop, program etc.

27. ʃor ʃo-ɑ-kɔn ʃokʰ ʃɑn mør ʃo-ɡeîlke
My work-Clf end happen went
My work was done.

This classifier too can be used with numerals, modifiers and demonstratives.

28. ʃɑ-ʃo-ɑ-ʃo-ɡeîlke
S(he) one-Clf project show did
He/she presented a project.

29. ʃɑ-ʃo-ɑ-ʃo-ɡeîlke
S(he) one-Clf workshop called
He/she called a workshop.

30. ʃɑ-ʃo-ɑ-ʃo-ɡeîlke
S(he) red-CLA house saw
He/she saw the red house.

31. ʃɑ-ʃo-ɑ-ʃo-ɡeîlke
I that-Clf book buy came
I bought that book.

The classifier /kɔn/ of Surjapuri seems quite similar to that of Asamiya classifier /kɔn/ which also comes with the flat objects.

32. ʃɑ-ʃo-ɑ-ʃo-ɡeîlke
book –Clf table-Gen on-Loc keep
Keep the book on the table.

In Bangla too there is a similar classifier /kɔn/, /kʰa/ can be replaced with /tal/ in certain cases in Bangla. But /kʰa/ in Bangla is used only with inanimate objects. Racova marks that in Bangla, “khān, khānā, diminutive khāni is used by preference to specialize objects of rectangular or flat form, or objects which have a framework” (Racova 2007, 125). To some extend it can be said to be applicable for Surjapuri as well but in Bangla this classifier strictly cannot come with animate objects. However, in Surjapuri, at times it may be used with animate object (e.g. 26).

5.3 Classifier /la/

The classifier /la/ in Surjapuri can be used with almost every plural object. It also denotes specificity when it comes with the noun.

33. ʃo-ʃo-ɡeîlke
child-Clf ate
Children ate.

34. ʃo-ʃo-ɡeîlke
(s)he sweet-Clf finish did did
He/she finished many of the sweets.

But this classifier cannot be used with the number as it is denoting a group. It can be used with the quantifiers like ‘all’, ‘some’ etc.
35. o sɔb- la bɔgica ɗekʰilki
(s)he all-Clf garden saw
He/she saw all the gardens.

36. got-e la gacʰ kate ɗileʰe
all-Clf tree cut gave
(They have) cut all the trees.

It seems similar to Bangla classifier /gulo/ which can come with almost every plural noun but it cannot come with numbers. It can come with the quantifiers.

37. boi-gulo rekʰe ɗe
book-Clf keep
Keep the books.

38. sɔb-gulo gacʰ kete ɗilo
all-Clf tree cut gave
(They have) cut all the trees.

Like other classifiers of this language this one too can come with the demonstratives and adjectives.

39. ma-r wohi-la bɑʔ sunije
mother-Gen that-Clf talk heard
cʰoa kanwa lagil
boy cry started
Boy started crying after hearing all those his mother said.

5.4 Classifier /jɔn/ or /jʰɔn/

The classifier /jɔn/ which is also used as /jʰɔn/ is the numeral classifier. It is only used with the numerals but not with the nouns or the modifiers. It is used only with humans.

40. ram əɾ sita ɗonə-jɔn sinema dekʰwa gel
Ram and sita two-Clf cinema to see went
Ram and Sita both went to see a film.

41. ra:ɾ ek-jɔn neɣa kʰə:b pitwaicʰi
night one-Clf leader very beaten
At night one leader was badly beaten.

The classifier /jɔn/ is also there in Bangla. It has the same parameters like that Surjapuri.

42. ram əɾ sita dui-jɔn sinema dekʰe gelο
Ram and Sita two-Clf-Acc cinema see went
Ram and Sita both went to see a film.

43. ra:ɾ t-e aek-jɔn neta kʰə:b mar kʰelo
night-Loc one-Clf leader very beat ate
At night one leader was badly beaten.

Since this classifier can only be used with numerals so if a modifier precedes the noun then also the classifier will only be attached to the numeral.

44. ɗonə-jɔn moto larka sinema dekʰwa gel
two-Clf fat boy cinema see went
Those two fat boys went to watch a film.

Classifier /jɔn/ can serve as substitutes for nouns. As they occur with the number so the number and the classifier together can denote the noun and so the noun can be dropped.

45. ɗonə-jɔn sinema dekʰwa gel
two-Clf cinema see went
Those two went to watch a film.
Similar usage of this classifier is also possible in other languages like Bangla and Assamese.

46. *ora* ṣui-jon sinema ḍekbتجنب gælo (Bangla)
those two-Clf cinema see went

Those two went to watch film.

6. Conclusion

Surjapuri basically have four classifiers. Two among which (/ta/ & /k번/) can get attached to either noun or modifier or numeral. They are used to mark the object as specific when used with the noun or the modifier. However, when they are used with the numerals the sense of specificity is lost. The classifier /ta/ is used only with plural nouns or quantifiers. It cannot come with numerals as it denotes plurality. The classifier / itemCount / is a numeral classifier which can only be used with the numerals. It cannot be used with nouns or modifiers. It classifies nouns as humans so it can only be used when the noun is human. The following table shows the distribution of occurrence of the classifiers in Surjapuri.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Classifiers</th>
<th>Occurrence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>/ta/ &amp; /k번/ or /k번/</td>
<td>Noun- Classifier</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modifier- Classifier + Noun</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demonstrative-Classifier + Noun</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Numeral- Classifier + Modifier+ Noun</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/la/</td>
<td>Noun- Classifier (Not with numbers)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quantifier - Classifier + Noun</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/ItemCount / or /ItemCount /</td>
<td>Numeral-Classifier + Noun (Not with nouns)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These classifiers classify nouns basically on the basis of specificity, humanness and plurality. These classifiers /ta/ and /ItemCount/ can be used with the number and the noun can be dropped when they are used with the number. Example 45 (above) shows the dropping of the noun.

Classifier (/ta/ and /ItemCount/) plays a role when they occur in the sentences in the absence of the noun. It can be understood with the following Bangla examples (47 & 48).

47. *æk-ta* cole gælo
one-Clf walked went
One (inanimate, like bus) went (One bus left).

When the noun is dropped and the classifier is used with the number then the difference between the classifier /ta/ and /ItemCount/ becomes quite clear. When the classifier /ta/ is used with the number and the noun is dropped then the classifier cannot denote inanimate object. Similarly, when the classifier /ItemCount/ is used with the number and the noun is dropped then the classifier only denotes human noun. The two sentences 47 and 48 can be contrasted and seen that the only change between these two sentences is the change in the classifier. The change in the classifier brings change in the meaning. Sentence 47 denotes to an inanimate noun while sentence 48 only denotes animate noun.

48. *æk itemCount cole gælo*
one-Clf walked went
One (animate, like man) went (One man went).

The different semantics of the classifiers of Surjapuri has been plotted in the following table.
Table 2: Semantics of the Surjapuri classifiers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Classifiers</th>
<th>Use</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ta</td>
<td>+/--animate but when noun dropped –-animate, +specific with nouns, -specific with numbers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$k^\text{han}$ or $k^\text{an}$</td>
<td>--animate, flat objects like letter, leaf, clothes, house and concepts like project, conference, work, +specific with nouns, -specific with numbers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>la</td>
<td>plural nouns, quantifiers; +/--animate, +specific</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/$\text{j\text{on}}$/ or /$\text{j\text{on}}$/</td>
<td>+animate, -specific</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the above table it can be seen that /ta/ can technically be used for any singular noun. It is a general classifier which can get attached to all the four; noun, numeral, demonstrative and modifier. If the noun is dropped and it is used with the numeral or the demonstrative, then it is used mostly to denote inanimate noun. However, the classifier /$k^\text{han}$/ or /$k^\text{an}$/ is a classifier for inanimate objects. In contrast to it is /$\text{j\text{on}}$/ or /$\text{j\text{on}}$/ which is only used with human nouns only. It can also be noticed that wherever the classifiers get attached to the numeral they give a non-specific reading. So the classifier /$\text{j\text{on}}$/ or /$\text{j\text{on}}$/ can only give non-specific reading because it can only get attached to the numerals. Similarly, /la/ can only be attached to nouns and quantifiers but not to numerals so it always gives specific reading. Non-specific reading is not possible with /la/.

The classifiers system of Surjapuri shares similarity with Bangla and Assamese. Similarity can be found in both place of occurrence as well as in the semantics. Similarities can be found with Assamese but Assamese has greater number of classifiers than Surjapuri. However, the occurrence of classifier with the demonstratives in the presence of noun can be found in both Surjapuri and Assamese but not in Bangla. Comparison of the classifiers across languages gives a universal idea how the classifiers are used in the languages. It can be seen that most of the features of the classifiers of Surjapuri are in commonality with Assamese and Bangla though Surjapuri can use classifiers with the modifiers in the presence of the noun unlike Assamese or Bangla. But the use of the classifier with the modifier is similar to that of the use with the demonstrative which is also found in Assamese. So it may be said that Surjapuri is treating its modifiers like its demonstratives while dealing with classifiers. For Surjapuri classifiers, demonstratives and modifiers fall in the same class unlike Assamese and Bangla. This hypothesis needs more research. Exploring Surjapuri classifiers may even lead to some new findings about classifiers on the whole.

**Abbreviations**

- Auxiliary: Aux
- Classifiers: Clf
- Demonstrative: Dem
- Genitive: Gen
- Instrumental: Inst
- Locative: Loc

**References**


