

## On the diachrony of South Asian numeral classifiers

Numeral classifiers are found in many South Asian languages from all language families. In our talk we show 1) that systems where classifiers and grammatical gender co-exist are much more common than previously assumed, and 2) that the diachrony of classifiers in Indo-Aryan (IA) *may* point to a Tibeto-Burman (TB) source (Allasonnière-Tang and Kilarski 2020) or possibly Austro-Asiatic source, but it also suggests internal developments especially within Indo-Aryan itself which may be driven by register selection, with informal registers more prone to classifier usage.

1) Classifiers are found e.g. in eastern IA languages, where they are documented for early stages of these languages (Chatterji 1926: 779-780; Aikhenvald 2000: 379) and where they have replaced the original grammatical gender-based system with a classifier-based one (e.g., Assamese, Bengali, Oriya). In contrast, IA languages with both classifiers and gender (e.g. Standard Nepali) have generally been assumed to be uncommon (e.g., Tang 2019: 15), although our research suggests otherwise. E.g., the Nepali classifier system can be traced back to the 14<sup>th</sup> century (cf. Chalise 2015), and we also find elements which serve as classifiers in several western historical varieties (e.g. Braj), as well as in contemporary Gujarati, Marathi and Konkani, despite these languages all having fully-fledged grammatical gender systems (cf., e.g., Shibatani 2023). In contrast, some eastern IA languages (e.g. Maithili) lost grammatical gender quite early but have only very recently introduced classifiers (Barz and Diller 1985).

2) Our data also shows that the early development of classifier systems in eastern IA as well as in Nepali *may* perhaps be the result of pattern replication from TB or possibly Austro-Asiatic. However, it is also certain that the classifiers themselves derive from native IA lexemes, some of which have even been borrowed from IA into neighbouring non-IA languages. E.g., no Nepali classifiers appear to be of TB origin, but the TB language Newari has borrowed classifiers from Nepali. Furthermore, the fact that classifiers are found in Gujarati, Marathi and Konkani (see Point 1), all at a considerable distance from the present-day TB languages, forces us to reconsider our ideas on TB as the possible origin of classifiers in South Asian languages in general.

It is also noteworthy in this respect that the Dravidian languages Kannada – including Middle Kannada (12th century) – and Modern Standard Telugu also have optional classifiers with human referents. Furthermore, both of these languages have semantically based gender systems, calling both the role of gender and a TB origin into question.

Finally, there is considerable variation concerning the position of classifiers, and the elements they co-occur with, which require further discussion. E.g., contemporary eastern IA shows variation with respect to classifier position: pre-numeral (e.g. Awadhi; Sohail 1986: 132) vs. post-numeral (e.g. Bhatia; Sethiya 2023: 19). Similarly, in most languages, classifiers can follow only numerals, while in others (cf. Sadri; Peterson and Baraik, 2022) they can also follow demonstratives, correlatives or the head noun. We end our talk with a discussion of these issues with respect to the significance of their areal distributions.

[499 words]

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