

A Semantic and Morphosyntactic Analysis of Numeral Classifiers and Measure Terms in the Karbi Language

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Abstract: The Karbi language, a member of the Tibeto-Burman language family spoken primarily in the Karbi Anglong district of Assam, India, exhibits a rich system of nominal classification. This paper investigates the semantic and morphosyntactic properties of numeral classifiers and measure terms in Karbi. Based on primary field data collected in Karbi Anglong and Kamrup districts, the study identifies twenty-six distinct numeral classifiers and several measure terms. The analysis reveals that Karbi classifiers categorize nouns based on a universal semantic grid involving animacy, shape, consistency, and function. Furthermore, the paper highlights a unique morphosyntactic alternation in Karbi: the numeral "one" precedes the classifier as a prefix, whereas numerals denoting quantities greater than one follow the classifier. This research contributes to the broader typological understanding of nominal classification within the Tibeto-Burman language family and documents critical grammatical features of the Karbi language.

Keywords: Karbi Language; Tibeto-Burman; Numeral Classifiers; Measure Terms; Nominal Classification; Morphosyntax; Semantics.

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I. INTRODUCTION

The Karbi language, genealogically classified under the Tibeto-Burman branch of the Sino-Tibetan language family, is primarily spoken in the Karbi Anglong district and adjacent areas of Northeast India. The Karbis (formerly known as 'Mikir') identify themselves as *Arleng* ("human"). Despite the heavy influx of populations from mainland areas, the indigenous tribes heavily dominate the Karbi Anglong region, with a total population of over 813,000 (according to the 2011 census).

While early linguistic records of Karbi date back to the Linguistic Survey of India (Grierson, 1903), the syntactic and morphological intricacies of the language particularly its nominal categorization devices require modern linguistic documentation. The primary objective of this research is to identify, document, and analyze the different types of classifiers and measure terms in the Karbi language. Specifically, this paper explores the semantic domains these classifiers cover (e.g., animate vs. inanimate, specific shapes, functional objects) and the morphosyntactic rules governing their occurrence with numerals.

II. SOCIOLINGUISTIC AND PHONOLOGICAL CONTEXT

To understand the morphological behavior of Karbi classifiers, a brief overview of Karbi phonology is necessary. The phonemic inventory of Karbi consists of 24 phonemes: five vowels (/i/, /e/, /a/, /o/, /u/) and nineteen consonants.

The vowels distinguish tongue height (high, mid, low) and position (front, central, back). The consonantal inventory includes eight stops (voiceless/voiced and aspirated/unaspirated contrasts such as /p, p^h, b, t, t^h, d, k, k^h/) and eleven continuants, including nasals (/m, n, ŋ/), fricatives (/s, z, h/), an affricate (/č/), a trill (/r/), a lateral (/l/), and approximants (/w, y/).

Syllable structures in Karbi range from simple (V, CV) to complex (CCVV, CCVC). A critical feature of Karbi morphology is reduplication (complete and partial), which serves various semantic functions. It is upon this phonological foundation that the monosyllabic classifiers of the language operate.

III. METHODOLOGY

This research adopts a descriptive-analytical approach, utilizing both primary and secondary data.

➤ Primary Data:

Fieldwork was conducted among the Karbi community in the Karbi Anglong district (Diphu and Taralango) and Dalangguri (Biswanath District). Data collection methods included direct conversation, interviews, questionnaires, and observation. Native speakers were utilized to narrate stories and provide natural linguistic input.

➤ Secondary Data:

Contextual and cross-linguistic information was synthesized from existing literature, linguistic surveys, and historical accounts.

IV. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: NOMINAL CLASSIFICATION

Classifiers and noun classes are fundamental noun categorization devices. As Allan (1977) posits, classifiers are morphemes that denote salient, perceived, or imputed characteristics of the entity to which an associated noun refers. Langacker (2008) further notes that when nouns divide into semantically anchored classes, they are geographically manifested as classifiers.

Among these, *numeral classifiers* are the most prominent, frequently appearing next to numerals in expressions of quantity areal feature prominent in Southeast Asian languages (Bisang, 1999). Croft (1994) maps these systems onto a universal implicational hierarchy built around Animacy, Shape, Consistency, and Function. According to Adams and Conklin (1973), visual features of form (one/two/threedimensional shapes) predominantly dictate classifier assignment for inanimate objects.

In contrast, *measure terms* are utilized in combination with a numeral to indicate an amount or unit of a mass (uncountable) noun, although they can occasionally intersect with count nouns.

V. MORPHOSYNTAX OF KARBI CLASSIFIERS

In Karbi, numeral classifiers are obligatory when counting nouns. The syntactic distribution of the classifier in relation to the numeral exhibits a fascinating split based on plurality.

Unlike neighboring Indo-Aryan languages like Assamese where the classifier is reliably suffixed to the numeral (e.g., *sari-khan kitap* "four-CLF books"), Karbi exhibits a bidirectional affixation rule:

- When the numeral is one (*i-* or *e-*), the numeral acts as a prefix, and it precedes the classifier.
- When the numeral is greater than one (e.g., *ni* "two", *t^hom* "three"), the classifier acts as a prefix, and the numeral follows it. Ex.

- (Numeral '1'): *monit i-nut* → man one-CLF.HUM ("One man") Ex.
- (Numeral > 1): *monit bay-p^ho* → man CLF.HUM-five ("Five men")

VI. SEMANTIC CATEGORIZATION OF KARBI CLASSIFIERS

Based on the field data, twenty-six numeral classifiers were identified in Karbi. They can be semantically classified into the following fundamental categories: animacy, shape, botanical properties, and functional/ specific domains.

A. Animacy-Based Classifiers

Animacy is the primary semantic split. Karbi possesses specific classifiers for humans (including deities) and non-human animates.

- */nut/* and */bay/*: Used for humans and gods. */nut/* is explicitly restricted to use with the numeral one, while */bay/* is used for quantities of two or more.

monit i-nut (man one-CLF) 'One man' *monit bay-hini* (man CLF-two) 'Two men'

- */zon/*: Utilized for non-human animate nouns (animals).

mejkalu i-zon (cat one-CLF) 'One cat' *čainoŋ zon-ni* (cow CLF-two) 'Two cows'

B. Shape and Consistency-Based Classifiers

Following Denny (1976), physical geometry interacts strongly with human conceptualization.

➤ Dimensional (Long/Extended):

- */zeŋ/*: Long and flexible objects (grass, thread, split bamboo).

hon zeŋ-t^hom (thread CLF-three) 'Three strings of thread'

- */hoŋ/*: Long, hard objects (firewood, iron rods, but also ornaments like rings). *t^hej hoŋ-t^hom* (firewood CLF-three) 'Three firewoods'
- */kroŋ/*: Extended paths or roads.

towar i-kroŋ (road one-CLF) 'One road'

➤ Dimensional (Flat/Broad):

- */pak/*: General flat objects (books, letters).

kitap pak-t^hom (book CLF-three) 'Three books'

- */play/*: Objects with flat top and bottom surfaces (doors, soap, biscuits). *ijhap play-ni* (door CLF-two) 'Two doors'
- */zai/* and */loŋ/*: Broad, flat geographical expanses (fields).

hidi e-zai (field one-CLF) 'One field'

➤ *Dimensional/Round:*

- /*dum*/: Round objects without holes (batteries, packed spools). *betari i-dum* (battery one-CLF) 'One battery'
- /*pum*/: Symmetrical round biological objects (eggs, whole bamboos). *woti pum-ni* (egg CLF-two) 'Two eggs'
- /*mu*/: Small, round grain-like items (paddy, rice grains, seeds).

saj mu-ni (rice CLF-two) 'Two grains of rice'

C. *Botanical Classifiers*

Karbi has distinct classifiers to categorize parts of plants and vegetation, reflecting agrarian prominence (slash-and-burn cultivation).

- /*roj*/: Trees and creepers. (*tʰejpi roj-ni* - 'Two trees')
- /*ro*/: Branches of trees or cane-like stalks. (*nok ro-ni* - 'Two sugarcanes')
- /*tʰe*/: Fruits, vegetables, and functionally extended to 'words'. (*hipi tʰe-ni* - 'Two brinjals'; *lam i-tʰe* - 'One word')
- /*pʰu*/: Flowers. (*mir pʰu-ni* - 'Two flowers')

D. *Functional and Specific Classifiers*

Objects are frequently classified by how they interact with human culture.

- /*čum*/: Objects meant to be burnt (firewood bundles, cigarettes).
- /*hum*/: Structures/housing. (*hem i-hum* - 'One house')
- /*tʰan*/: Processed meat items. (*ok e-tʰan* - 'One piece of meat')
- /*čaj*/: Necklaces and worn strings. (*lek čaj-tʰom* - 'Three necklaces') • /*hom*/ and /*dop*/: Packed goods/packets. (*sigaret e-dop* - 'One packet of cigarettes') /*bej*/: Fragments or pieces (bricks, split bamboo).
- /*čo*/: Individual consumable sticks (cigarettes).
- /*roi*/ and /*bi*/: Bodies of water (rivers and ponds, respectively).
- /*zir*/: Abstract narratives/lore. (*tomo i-zir* - 'One story')

VII. MEASURE TERMS IN KARBI

While count nouns take classifiers, mass nouns in Karbi pair with measure terms (MT) that impose artificial boundaries on uncountable substances.

➤ *Containers Out of Substance:*

- /*bɔŋ*/ and /*laŋhan*/: Bottles. (*tʰulaŋ bɔŋ-tʰɔm* - 'Three bottles of milk')
- /*kɔlɔh*/: Jars for liquid. (*laŋ kɔlɔh-hini* - 'Two jars of water')

➤ *Quantifications of Mass-like Aggregations:*

- /*hom*/: Packets. (*sigaret hom-ni* - 'Two packets of cigarettes')
- /*du*/: Stacks. (*tʰap du-pʰili* - 'Four stacks of books')

- /*sikip*/: Handfuls for granular substances. (*saj sikip-isi* - 'A handful of uncooked rice') • /*bor*/: Sacks or large bags. (*an-bor bor-ni-si sun* - 'Two bags of rice only')

➤ *Collective and Paired Sets:*

- /*sem*/: Bunches. (*tʰul i-sem* - 'One bunch of hair')
- /*zor*/: Pairs. (*keŋɔp i-zor* - 'One pair of shoes')
- /*tʰap*/: Bundles. (*lɔi-tʰap* - 'A bundle of books')

VIII. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The classifier system of Karbi presents an intersection of highly grammaticalized syntactic rules and rich, ethno-centric semantic categorization. With twenty-six distinct numeral classifiers identified, the language clearly validates Croft's (1994) universal implicational hierarchy: it differentiates human/non-human animates, evaluates the spatial dimensionality of inanimate objects (1D vs 2D vs 3D), and applies specific classifiers derived from human functional interaction (e.g., burnable items, distinct architectural spaces, and narratives).

The most salient typological finding from the field data is the morphosyntactic behavior of numeral placement. The divergence based on singularity versus plurality (preceding vs. following the classifier root) creates a unique structural paradigm that warrants further historical-comparative study against neighboring Tibeto-Burman and Indo-Aryan contact languages.

Furthermore, the robust presence of distinct botanical classifiers reflects the traditional societal structures of the Karbis as a historically agrarian society, inextricably linked to their surrounding flora, a facet also evident in their culturally significant oral literature. Documenting these features is vital, not only for linguistic typology but also to preserve the conceptual matrices of the Karbi people before language contact forces further morphosyntactic leveling.

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