



Honorificity and Classifier in Assamese

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Introduction

Assamese is the easternmost new Indo-Aryan language mostly spoken in the Brahmaputra valley of Assam, and also in the other north-eastern states of India to some extent. It is creolised in Nagaland. In Assam, it shares a long areal contact with languages from various families like Tibeto-Burman and Austro-Asiatic. This paper investigates the role of honorificity in Assamese, with a special emphasis on its genitive and classifier constructions.

Honorificity is commonly expressed in Assamese through personal pronouns and verb agreement for honorific subjects. Its role in classifiers and pronominal affixes in genitive construction needs special mention. For these phenomena are often regarded as unique features of Assamese owing to non-Aryan influences especially from Tibeto-Burman languages of Bodo-Garo group in Assam. However, unlike Assamese, the role of honorificity is not found in these languages in classifiers and personal pronominal affixes. So there is a scope to study this phenomenon in a typological perspective.

Thus, the significance of the study lies in highlighting an important aspect of Assamese grammar which reflects the language contact situation of Assamese.



Keywords: *Assamese, Bodo, Honorificity, Classifier, Language Contact*

The Indo-Aryan language Assamese, with geographical position in the centre of Northeast India, known as the hub of Tibeto-Burman speakers, apart from other language families like Tai-Kadai and Austro-Asiatic present a unique scope for a study on language contact. Among the contact induced changes in Assamese, the presence of a rich classifier system and personal affixes in the genitive construction are regarded as unique morphological features in Assamese by various scholars such as Kakati (1972), Goswami and Tamuli (2003). This paper investigates the role of honorificity, which is a genetic feature of Assamese, in classifier and genitive constructions of Assamese. Further, to examine the phenomena in an areal typological light, a comparison with that in Bodo, a Tibeto-Burman language of Assam that shows areal contact with Assamese has been provided. As classifiers and personal affixes are genetic features in Tibeto-Burman languages, especially of the Bodo-Garo group in Assam, it is interesting to compare Assamese and Bodo in this regard.

Language Background

Assamese is spoken mainly in Assam, and also some neighboring states like Arunachal Pradesh and Nagaland. It is creolized in Nagaland. Simon et al. (2017), in *Ethnologue*, reports 12,800,000 speakers of Assamese based on Census of India 2001 report. Bodo is spoken in almost all the districts of Assam. The western Bodo variety spoken in Kokrajhar, Bongaigaon and Dhubri is regarded as standard. There are 1,540,000 speakers of Bodo in India in the year 2007 (Lewis et al 2009). Among the Tibeto-Burman languages of Assam it is the most developed one in terms of its recognition as one of the scheduled languages in the 8th schedule of the constitution of India and also with regards to language documentation on the language. Most Bodo speakers are fluent bi-linguals in Assamese as the latter is a lingua franca among the various linguistic communities of Assam in the Brahmaputra valley. Figure 1 and Figure 2 present the genetic classifications of Assamese and Bodo respectively based on Simon et al. (2017).

Indo-European

Indo Iranian

Indo Aryan

Outer languages

Eastern Zone

Bengali-Assamese

Assamese

Figure 1: Classification of Assamese (Simon et al 2017).

Sino- Tibetan

Tibeto-Burman

Sal

Boro-Garo

Boro-Tiwa

Boro

Figure 2: Classification of Bodo based on Simon et al (2017)

Scope and methodology

This paper is based in the standard variety of the language, based on the one spoken in Sivasagar district as highlighted in the map. The variety spoken there is regarded as the benchmark of the standard variety found in both spoken and written form. However, standard colloquial Assamese is also spread till the Marigaon district in the middle Assam. The variety spoken in the BTAD district of Kokrajhar in Assam is regarded as the standard Bodo variety, although the speakers are spread in other districts too. Hence the standard varieties of both the languages have been collected for the sake of consistency. The Assamese data is obtained from the native speakers from various parts of the Sivasagar district through direct elicitation and participant observation.

Similarly, Bodo data has been collected from the fieldwork in the standard variety of the language in Kokrajhar district of Assam in the form of narratives and elicitation. The scope of the paper is limited to Assam and the standard varieties of the two languages specified.

Honorificity in Assamese

Honorificity is commonly found in Indo-Aryan languages in the form of verb agreement, and personal pronouns. In Assamese personal pronouns show a three-way distinction, viz. neutral, informal, and formal based on the semantic sense of honorificity; and verbs show subject agreement to them. Table 1 presents the personal pronouns of Assamese with honorificity distinctions.

First person	Singular			Plural			
	Neutral	Informal	Formal	Neutral	Informal	Formal	
Second person	tumi	tɔi	apuni	tomalok	t̃h̃ɔt	aponalok	
Third person	masculine	t̃ɔ	hi	tɛk ^h ɛt	t̃ɔlok	hih̃ɔt	tɛk ^h ɛt̃ɔkɔl
	feminine	t̃ɔ	tai	tɛk ^h ɛt	t̃ɔlok	hih̃ɔt	tɛk ^h ɛt̃ɔkɔl

Table 1: Personal pronouns in Assamese

As evident from the table, the pronouns show neutral, informal, formal distinctions in the unmarked singular form and corresponding plural forms. The plural markers -lok, -hõt, and -høkølare used only with human referents for neutral, informal, and formal distinctions respectively. However, as verbs do not inflect for number in Assamese, the subject agreement in honorificity is same in both singular and plural; as illustrated in examples (1)-(3).

(1) tumi/ tomalok ãh-a (Neutral)

2SG/2PL come-IMP.2P

‘You come.’

(2) toi/tõhõt ah-ø (Informal)

2SG/2PL come-IMP.2P

‘You come.’

(3) apuni/aponalok ah-øk (Formal)

2SG/2PL come-IMP.2P

‘You come.’

In the imperative sentences in (1-3), the verbs show different subject agreements for honorificity in the second person. Such agreements are also found in declarative sentences such as (4-7) for second and third persons.

(4) tumi b^hat k^ha-l-a (Neutral)

2SG rice eat-PAST.2P

‘You ate rice.’

(5) toi b^hat k^ha-l-i (Informal)

2SG rice eat-PAST-2P

‘You ate rice.’

(6) apuni-o b^hat k^ha-l-ε (Formal)

2SG-INCL rice eat-PAST-2P

‘You ate rice.’

(7) kintu hi/tai/tẽo / tɛk^hɛt etija-hɛ k^ha-bo

but 3SGM/3SGFF/3SG/3SG now-EXCL eat-INF

boh-i-s-ε (Neutral/Informal/Formal)

sit-NF-PRES-3P

‘But she has just started to eat now.’

However, as reflected in (7), third person has the same agreement form -ε for all the honorific and non-honorific personal pronouns; and this form is syncretic with second person formal agreement marker -ε as shown in (6).

Honorificity and Personal suffixes

In the genitive construction of Assamese, the possessed head noun is cross-referenced for the person of the possessor noun. These personal suffixes occur when the possessed and head noun is a kinship term. They are discussed as deictic markers in Goswami and Tamuli (2003) and are regarded as a unique feature of Assamese influenced by non-IA languages. Examples (8-10) show this phenomenon of Assamese for various persons. Honorificity plays a role here since the person suffixes show various degrees of honorificity.

(8) tomar deutara (Neutral)

[tumi-ar deuta-ra]

2sg-gen father-2sg



‘Your father’

(9) aponar deutak (Formal)

[apuni-ar deuta-k]

2sg.hon-gen father-2sg.hon

‘your father’

(10) tor deuta-r (Informal)

[toi-ar deuta-r]

2sg.Inf-gen father-gen

‘your father’

Thus, -ra, -k, and -r are personal affixes found for neutral, formal, and informal forms of the second person pronoun. In the third person -k refers to all the three as exemplified in (11-13).

(11) tẽo-r deuta-k (Neutral)

3sg-gen father-3sg

‘His/her father’

(12) ta-r /tai-r deuta-k (Informal)

3sg.mas-gen/3sg.FEM-gen father-3sg

‘His/her father’

(13) tek^het-ɔr deuta-k (Formal)

3sg.mas-gen father-3sg

‘His/her father’

Tibeto-Burman languages commonly show personal affixes. Among the Bodo-Garo languages in Assam, as Bodo shows a two way honorific distinction in second person pronoun, this phenomenon in Assamese may be compared with Bodo. However, examples (14-15) show that unlike Assamese, the honorificity distinction is not realised in the personal prefix in Bodo.

(14) $nu\eta$ -ni nu .p^h a p^huⁱ-du η mu η n (Neutral)

2SG-GEN 2SG.father come-PAST

‘Your father came.’

(15) $nu\eta$ ^ha η -ni nu .p^ha p^huⁱ-du η mu η n (Formal)

2SG-GEN 2SG.father come-PAST

‘Your father came’

In (14) the neutral / $nu\eta$ / ‘you’ and in (15) the formal / $nu\eta$ ^ha η / ‘you’ have the same personal prefix nu - in the possessed noun. Apart from nu -, Bodo has a - and bi - as personal prefixes for first and third person referents respectively, but without honorificity distinctions. It is exemplified in (16-17).

(16) $a\eta$ -ni a .p^ha p^huⁱ-du η mu η n

1SG-GEN 1SG.father come-PAST

‘My father came’

(17) bi -ni bi .p^ha p^huⁱ-du η mu η n

3SG-GEN 3SG.father come-PAST

‘His/her father came’

As the honorificity distinctions are absent for the first and second person pronouns they have one personal prefix each in (16) and (17) respectively. It is to be noted that both in Assamese and Bodo, these personal affixes are optional.

It is hard to determine from which non-IA language has influenced Assamese with regards to this phenomenon, but it is certain that in Assamese personal suffixes retain its honorificity degrees of the second person pronoun in the domain of kinship terms.

Honorificity and numeral classifiers

Assamese has a rich set of numeral classifiers which may be broadly divided into animate and non-animate. In the animate type, the human classifiers show honorificity distinctions. In fact, Assamese has a dedicated honorific classifier which may refer to men and women, viz. -gɔraki. It also has an honorific classifier, viz. -zɔna for higher humans such as saints and gods and goddesses.

The honorific classifiers in Assamese are -gɔraki and -zɔna which may be used for both the sexes as exemplified in (18) and (19).

- (18) tini- gɔraki mohila/ lok
three-CLF:HON woman/ person
'Three women/persons'

- (19) ε.zɔna gōhai-r protima
one.CLF:HON god-GEN altar
'An altar of god'

The human male classifier -zɔn also indicates formality.

- (20) du- zɔn manuh
two-CLF:male man
'Two men'

They may be contrasted with non-honorific classifiers -zɔni and -ta, referring to male and female respectively, as exemplified in (21) and (22).



(21) du- zɔni sowali

two-CLF:female girl

‘Two girls’

(22) du-ta lora

two-CLF:female boy

‘Two boys’

The honorificity is determined by various socio-linguistic factors like social status, age, and context of situation and emotion.

In an informal situation certain non-honorific classifiers may be sanctioned for the same referent, such as –ta vs. -zɔn for men. The former may also replace the latter when used in a sense of annoyance.

Social status of the referent determines the choice of honorific classifiers too. A professional is usually referred to by the honorific classifier, such as ε-gɔrakilik^{hɔk} ‘One writer’.

Age of the referent also calls for the honorific often. An old man or woman is usually referred to by the honorific classifier. Also, the elder sibling may often be referred to by the honorific and the younger one by the non-honorific classifier, such as, tini-ta b^haiti ‘three younger brothers’ vs. tini-zɔn dada ‘three elder brothers’.

Honorific classifiers are also found in various SEA languages such as Tai. It is absent in the BG languages which show a close similarity in terms of classifiers with Assamese. This might be a Tai influence in Assamese, (but the importance of honorificity as a genetic feature might also play a role here).

Thus, honorificity is expressed by not only the typological means of verb agreement and different personal pronouns in Assamese; but also finds its place in its contact induced features of numeral classifier and personal suffixes in kinship terms.



1P	First Person	INCL	Inclusive
2P	Second Person	INF	Infinitive
3P	Third Person	NF	Non-finite
ACC	Accusative	NOM	Nominative
ALL	Allative	NOMZ	Nominaliser
CAUS	Causative	NUM	Numeral
CLF	Classifier	PROG	Progressive
COP	Copula	PST	Past
DAT	Dative	PERF	Perfect
DEF	Definitive	PTCL	Particle
DIM	Diminutive	Q	Question
EMPH	Emphatic	REFL	Reflexive
EXCL	Exclusive	RLVZ	Relativizer
FUT	Future	SG	Singular
GEN	Genitive	TOP	Topic
IMPV	Imperfective		

Abbreviations



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