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Preservation and innovation of numeral classifiers in Malto

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1. NUMERAL CLASSIFIERS IN MALTO

The use of numeral classifiers as an areal feature of the South Asian subcontinent, covering a limited range, was first observed by Emeneau (1956:10) in his seminal work *India as a Linguistic Area*. Many different languages of Eastern India, from three languages families, including Bangla and Oriya from the Indo-Aryan group, Malto and Kurux from the Dravidian family, Juang, Mundari, Kharia and Santali from the Munda branch of the Austro-Asiatic language family, have numeral classifiers. The two ubiquitous classifiers are *jan* to indicate humans and *got(a)* or *-to* to indicate a generic class of count nouns. These lexical items of Indo-Aryan origin are used across language families.

Malto is unique among Dravidian languages in having an elaborate set of numeral classifiers. Numeral classifiers, both as a grammatical category and as lexical items, express the components of those categories and are a borrowing from Eastern Indo-Aryan languages. This prompted Krishnamurti (2003:405) to observe that the classifier system ‘must have entered Malto from Tibeto-Burman languages through Bengali.’ Although the link has not been established so far, numeral classificatory systems in Malto resemble similar systems in languages of the Southeast Asian region. At this point, it is much safer to analyse the evolution of numeral classifiers in Malto into an open set word category as an internal language development.

1.1. Semantic basis of classification

Semantically, classifiers represent some characteristic feature of the noun with which they occur. Animacy and physical attributes of the nouns are two broad criteria by which classifiers are recognised in Malto. All animate nouns are classified into two distinct classes, depending on whether they are human or non-human. Inanimate nouns are classified in terms of a combination of physical attributes, namely length, shape, relative size, flexibility, thickness, volume and density. These classes cover tangible entities that provide a sensory experience. When a noun does not fall into any of these predefined classes, it is classified using a distinct classifier to express miscellaneous entities. The following table shows numeral classifiers in Malto against the corresponding classification criteria for nouns and nouns that are typical exemplars of that class.

Table 1
CLASSIFIERS IN MALTO (based on Mahapatra 1997)

Classifier	Criteria	Corresponding nouns
jan	Human	mala:r 'men'
ma.a	Non-human animate	eḍa: 'goat', na:ra: 'spirit'
ḍa:ḍa	Long, large, rigid objects	ma:s 'bamboo'
kaṭi	Long, small, rigid objects	bi:ḍi ¹ 'cigar'
paṇḍa	Long, flexible objects	pa:v 'road', ca:ma 'song'
paṭa	Flat, broad, flexible objects	ṭaḍṭa: 'tongue'
paṭa	Flat, broad, thin, flexible objects	a:ṭa: 'leaf'
para	Long pods, fruits	simbi 'beans', kalḍi 'banana'
kaṇḍa	Textiles	komla 'blanket'
pula	Round, light objects	pu:pḍu 'flower'
pa:n	Large, hollow objects	hoḍḍu 'house', bas 'bus'
guṭ	Miscellaneous quantifiable objects	pa:kiṭ 'packet'

1.2 Morpho-syntactic manifestation of classifiers in Malto

The structure of a numeral phrase is:

Number + classifier + noun

- (1) *ḍas paṭa kaṭa-n bana-ṭar-ḍ-am*
 ten CLF cot-ACC make-CAUS-PRS-2P
 'You are making ten cots.'
 Elicitation 2005

Syntactically, a classifier precedes the noun and appears in combination with a numeral or a demonstrative. Classifiers are either preceded by demonstratives, as shown in example (2), or numerals as shown in example (3)².

- (2) *hani a:a-ḍ ha: pa:n hoḍḍ-ik hi:*
 Then crow-NOM that CLF house-DAT EMP

¹ *bi:ḍi* is a locally rolled cigar-like product with tobacco filling in dried, easily combustible leaves.
² The abbreviations used in this paper are ACC = accusative, CAUS = CAUSATIVE, CLF = classifier, DAT = dative, EMP = emphatic, EP = epenthetic, FUT = future, H = human, INF = infinitive, ITJ = interjection, M = masculine, NM = non masculine, NOM = nominative, P = plural, PRS = present, PST = past, RP = relative past, VRB = verbaliser, 1 = first person, 2 = second person, 3 = third person.

hoc-e-k-iṛ *surli-n* *ṭey-aṛ*
 take-EP-RP-3S.NM flute-ACC Throw-3S.M
 ‘Then, the crow took that flute and threw it into that particular house.’
 Story c3

Cardinal numerals in Malto are borrowed from Indo-Aryan languages. The numerals always precede the classifier if the number is larger than two, as shown in example (3). Numbers one and two can also be expressed as suffixes */-ond̪/* and */-s/* respectively, as shown in example (4). The suffix for one reflects the Proto-Dravidian root **on-* (Krishnamutri 2003: 262), but the origin of the suffix for two is unknown.

(3) *hoc-k-aḥ* *goha:l-no* *saṭ* *guṭ* *goha:l-no*
 take-RP-3S.M cow_shed-LOC seven CLF cow_shed-LOC
ḍuk-aṛ-ṭar-aṛ
 put-EP-CAUS-3S.M
 ‘Having taken (them), he put them in seven cow sheds.’
 Story C3

(4) *ḍaḍ-ond̪* *pa:la:n* *hoy-n-aṛ*
 clf-one spear-acc take-prs-3pl
 ‘They take a spear’
 Village

Malto is the only Dravidian language that uses numeral classifiers to express plurality in non-human nouns. Plurality in human nouns is encoded by a morphological marker *-r*. However, pluralized human nouns also take numeral classifiers when the number of human participants in an event is specified.

(5) *pac* *jan* *pel* *mae-r* *bar-an-ar*
 five CLF female child-P come-FUT-3P
 ‘Five girls will come.’
 Elicitation 2010

2. BORROWING AND INNOVATION

It is not just the system of classifiers that is borrowed, but also the various words that function as classifiers, in Malto, are borrowed from Indo-Aryan languages (IA) namely Hindi, Bangla and Oriya. The following table (2) shows the lexical meaning of the borrowed form and compares it to the class of objects it specifies as a classifier in Malto.

Table 2
Borrowed lexemes to express classifiers in Malto

Classifier	Description	Word in IA (Bangla and Oriya)	Meaning in IA languages
jan	Human	jan	People
guṭ	Miscellaneous quantifiable objects	goṭ	Whole objects
paṇḍa	Long, flexible objects	p ^h anḍa	Noose, network of ropes
paṭa	Flat, broad, thin, flexible objects	paṭṭa	Leaf
kaṭi	Long, small, rigid, objects	kaṭ ^h i	Stick, twig
ḍaḍa	Long, large, rigid objects	ḍanḍa	Baton
paṭa	Flat, broad, flexible objects	paṭa	Board

However, it is interesting to note that the borrowed lexemes that function as classifiers are used in Malto only as function words and have lost their lexical meaning. Although the use of numeral classifiers is an influence of the Eastern Indo-Aryan languages like Bangla and Oriya, the range covered by the Malto numeral classifiers is much more elaborate than in those languages. Of the various lexemes used as classifiers in Malto, only three words *goṭ*, *jan* and *kanḍ* function as classifiers in Eastern Indo-Aryan languages. Besides the above-mentioned classifiers, Malto also uses unique classifiers to describe some nouns like body parts.

- (6) *teṭ-s teṭu*
CLF-two hand
'Two hands'
Elicitation 2005

Doerse (1884) and Mahapatra (1979: 132) have observed that there are a handful of unique classifiers that classify individual objects against a class of objects, which is the general practice. One such commonly used unique classifier is *qep* for the noun *qep* 'village' (as in *qep-ond qepdu* 'a village'), which was noted by Droese (1884). I elicited a similar response during one of my fieldwork trips in 2010. These unique classifiers, also known as 'repeaters', 'self-classifiers', or 'auto-classifiers' (Aikhenvald 2003:103) render the numeral classifier system into an open set of class markers. This provision in the grammatical system appears to allow innovation in the use classifiers.

3. VARIATION AND PRESERVATION IN THE USE OF CLASSIFIERS

Malto has regional variation in terms of the choice of classifiers. The variation is twofold in terms of the choice of lexical items preferred in one region over others and the number of classifiers used. Speakers in the northern parts of the Malto speaking areas, that mostly cover Sahibganj district of Jarkhand state, prefer using *end* (examples (8) and (9)) in instances when no other classifier seems appropriate. Similarly, the Malto speakers who live further south, in Godda district, prefer *guṭ* (example (7)) when they are at a loss to classify the noun into any other category (see also Kobayashi 2011).

- (7) *hani saṭ guṭ goha:l-no ninḍ-ki: ba:c-ar-aḍ*
 Then seven CLF cowshed-LOC fill-RP left-VRB-3S.NM
 ‘Then, having filled seven cowsheds, (there was some more) left.’
 Story C3

During my fieldwork with the Pahariyas in Godda district, Jarkhand, I observed that the younger generation used fewer classifiers than the older generation. They tend to use one or two generic classifiers rather than identifying the specific classes. The more commonly used tokens are *jan*, *guṭ* and *ma.a*. For a further discussion of Malto numeral classifiers see Mahapatra (1997). For a detailed discussion of Bangla classifiers see Bandhopadyay (1999) and Sahoo (1996) for Oriya.

- (8) *to: en end-ond qe:ri-n tenG-oṭi ugley-in*
 ITJ I CLF-one story-ACC tell-INF want-PR.1S
 ‘I want to tell a story’
 Text 3-0’28: Kobayashi 2007

- (9) *...end-ond oydu essa ca:re menj-a*
 CLF-one ox very diligent Be.PST-3S.M
 ‘An ox was very diligent.’
 Text 3-1’38: Kobayashi 2007

4. CONCLUSION

I have often observed that Malto speakers are not always forthcoming in their use of classifiers – the generation below the age of 20 struggle to remember the few that they know, people between 30 and 45 need to be prompted to use classifiers, while the older generation (of 50 plus years) go on an innovation over-drive once they realize that the researcher is showing interest in documenting classifiers. This leads to the other question addressed in this paper about the frequency and distribution in the use of classifiers, given that the use of classifiers is optional in Malto.

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