Classifiers are affixes that categorize entities into common classes on the basis of shared properties. They are characteristic features of many Asian, American, and African languages. Though typically not occurring in Indo-European languages, they can be found in the Eastern group of New Indo-Aryan languages, namely Assamese, Oriya and Bengali. Emaneau pointed out that they probably started to be used under the influence of Southeast Asian languages in India. According to Chatterji in Bengali they were in use as early as its middle period (1200—1800).

This study attempts to provide information on the present occurrence and usage of classifiers in Bengali. The conclusions are based on the analysis of texts by seven Bengali authors. The relevant affixes are regarded as classifiers when they are attached to a noun and as numeral classifiers when they are attached to numerals. In the latter case they occur in various syntactic constructions. Besides their main function of classifying objects into classes Bengali classifiers serve as definitives, substantivizers and noun substitutes.

Key words: Bengali language, classifiers, numeral classifiers

1. Introduction

The Bengali language has a group of affixes that are usually described together in grammars and textbooks of Bengali, but different authors give them different names. None of the authors, except Bykova, as we shall see later, uses the term...
classifiers. Only S. K. Chatterji speaks about numeratives calling a basic group of these affixes enclitic definitives or numeratives. He gives a list of "common Bengali numeratives" and introduces their characteristics:

1. *khān*, *khāṇā*, diminutive *khāṇī* is used by preference to specialize objects of rectangular or flat form, or objects which have a framework.5

2. *gāch*, *gāchā*, diminutive *gāchī*, *gāchī* are used with reference to thin and long articles6

3. *goṭā*, diminutive *guṭī*, *guṭī*; in New Bengali its use is considerably curtailed7

4. *jan* is used to indicate men and women.8

Besides these he lists numerative *ṭān* and enclitic definitives *ṭā* (*ṭo*, *ṭe*), *ṭī*, *ṭi*.

Bykova9 calls these affixes numeral classifiers when they are connected with numerals. Otherwise she considers them definitive affixes which include *ṭā* (*ṭe*, *ṭo*), *ṭī*, *khān*, *khāṇā*, *khāṇī*, *khāṇī*, *gāch*, *gāchā*, *gāchī*; *goṭā*, *guṭī*; *ṭu*, *ṭuk*, *ṭuku*, *jan*.10

Other authors do not use either the term classifier or numeral classifier or numerative. They give these affixes neutral denomination (particles) or call them in accordance with the main function they assign to them.

For instance Page11 calls them particles and introduces the affixes *ṭā*, *ṭī*, *khānā*, *khāṇī*, *gāchā*, *gāchī*, *karā*, *jan*.

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5 CHATTERJI, S.K., op. cit., p. 365, gives the etymology of this classifier: *khān*, *khāṇā*<*khāṇḍā* "a piece". According to him this numerative was established in Bengali by the early Middle Bengali period at least, op. cit., p. 779.
6 CHATTERJI, S.K., op. cit., p. 779, says that it means a long piece, a "stick", a "tree" (MIA *gāchā*); it "seems to be established in its numerative function during late Middle Bengali period".
7 CHATTERJI, S.K., op. cit., p. 780; p. 779: the word is of uncertain origin, B. *guṭī* = a small globe or ball, a pill, a pearl, a pustule, the cocoon of the silk worm; it was extremely common in Early Bengali.
8 According to S. K. Chatterji, op. cit., p. 780, it means person and can be either *ṛ* or *ṛ*. The use of this word is found in early Middle Bengali, and in all likelihood it goes earlier.
9 BYKOVA, E.M. Bengali Language, p. 60.
11 PAGE, W.S. Bengali Language, pp. 115-121.
Gupta speaks about articles and introduces ŭā, ŭi, khānā, khānī; gula, guli, gan; jan.\textsuperscript{12}

Ray, Hai, Ray call them determiner suffixes which include ŭā (to, te), ŭi, ŭuk, ŭuku, ŭukuni, khānā, khānī, gāchā, gāchi, phālā, phāli, gulo, guli, rā, der.\textsuperscript{13}

Zograf gives them the name opredelitelno-ukazatelnye chastitsy and introduces khān, khānā, khānī, khānī, jan.\textsuperscript{14}

Radice considers them in connection with articles (ňū, ŭi, gulo, gulo; jan, khānā).\textsuperscript{15}

Chevkina pays special attention to the distribution of the affix ŭā and calls it the determiner.\textsuperscript{16}

Alekseeva mentions ŭā, ŭi, ŭi, gulo, guli when she speaks about the suffix of definiteness.\textsuperscript{17}

As can be seen in the following table, some affixes are listed by all authors and some only by several of them. The widest range of these affixes is listed by Ray, Hai, Ray who concentrate on their role of determiner affixes. They assign this function also to the affixes rā, der and gulo, guli in addition to their function of plural indicators.

Table

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From the understanding of these affixes by different authors as well as from Bengali texts it follows that they have various functions. They not only classify

\textsuperscript{12} DAS GUPTA. Learn Bengali Yourself, p. 58.
\textsuperscript{14} ZOGRAF, G.A. Morfologicheskiy stroy novyh indoarijskikh yazykov, p. 65.
\textsuperscript{15} RADICE, W. Teach Yourself Bengali, pp. 63, 72-73.
\textsuperscript{16} CHEVKINA, L.M. Distributivnye osobennosti determinativa –ćā v sovremennom bengali, p. 189-193.
\textsuperscript{17} ALEKSEEVA, E. A.: Učebnik bengalskogo yazyka, pp. 38-39.
referents on the basis of some shared, objectively perceivable property, which is considered a basic definition of classifiers, but can serve, as we shall see later, also as definitives, substantivizers and so on. And, strictly speaking, the very frequent affixes *ta, ti* cannot even be considered as classifiers in the sense of the above definition because they hardly help to categorize referents into classes on the basis of some shared characteristics. On the other hand, they occur in the same position as classifiers and can freely stand for them.

2. Classifiers, numeral classifiers and numeratives

2.1 Classifiers
Classifiers are affixes which categorize nouns into noun classes on the basis of shared, usually objectively perceived characteristic properties of objects they denote. In Bengali, these affixes make a semantic classification of entities based on personality, shape, and size. They are attached to nouns postpositionally. They are added directly to a noun (*mukkhānā* "the face", *gurujan* "the teacher", *sutogāchi* "the thread"). They become a part of the denomination, attach to it agglutinatively, preceeding eventual case suffixes, the emphasizing morpheme *i* or the inclusive morpheme *o*: *baikhānā* "the book", *baikhānār* "of the book", *baikhānāri theke* "just from the book", *baikhānāro theke* "also from the book".

Classifiers are a closed class. As Jugal points out, "it is not possible to add to the list of classifiers in a language". Although it could seem that in Bengali the same role as a classifier could also be played by some other words, for instance *mandal* "circular or spherical area, a sphere, a circle" which is, by some authors, in fact systematically attached to the word *mukh* "face", or the word *mānuś* "man" which is attached to the words *meye* "girl", *chele* "boy", and *puruś* "man". These words differ from the classifiers mainly by the fact that they do not become a part of a numeral classifier.

2.2 Numeral classifiers
Classifiers are attached directly to a noun only when they denote a unique object (*lokjan* "the person", *mukkhānā* "the face", *lāthigāchā* "the stick"). When denoting a sum of homogenous objects a classifier is attached to a numeral (definite or indefinite). A numeral plus a classifier constitute a numeral classifier in which the numeral gives a number of classified objects (*ekjan lok* "one person", *dukhānā mukh* "two faces" *cārgāchā lāthi* "four sticks" *kayekjan meye* "several girls").

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18 JUGAL, K.K. Shape Schematization in Assamese Classifiers, p. 3.

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A noun in the phrase with a numeral classifier is always in the singular form (tinjan meye - three-clf. girl “three girls”).

As a rule no morphemes are added to a numeral classifier in this construction. They are attached to the noun that denotes a classified object: ekjan mānuser “of a man”, ekjan mānuske “to a man”.

In Bengali, a usual syntactic construction with a numeral classifier is numeral-classifier + noun:

(1) tinjan mānus (three-clf. man).

When a syntactic construction with a numeral classifier is extended - including an adjective, this, as a rule, stands between a numeral classifier and a noun: numeral-classifier + adjective + noun

(2) tinjan bara mānus (three-clf. big man).

Demonstrative, possessive pronoun or noun in the Genitive case playing the role of an attribute usually precede a numeral classifier in the phrase:

(3) sei tinjan mānus (that three-clf. man)
(4) āmār duikhānā bai (my two-clf. book)
(5) gāyer tinjan meye (of the village three-clf. girl).

The construction noun + numeral-classifier is also quite common:

(6) mānus tinjan (man + numeral clf)

A syntactic construction in which a numeral classifier comes after a noun is also quite common in Bengali. In this case further morphemes (case suffixes) are attached to a numeral classifier and the phrase acquires a new shade of meaning. S. K. Chatterji gives the example dujan mānuser “of two men” compared to mānus dujaner “of the two men”.

Chatterji draws our attention to an obviously rare syntactic construction classifier-numeral + noun

(7) jandui mānus
or noun + classifier-numeral:

(8) mānus jandui

According to him the sequence with classifier before numeral instead of after it indicates the meaning of vagueness and indefiniteness as to the number: jandui mānus, mānus jandui = “about, some two men.” Such use of numeral classifiers has not occurred in our texts.

19 The term syntactic construction is used in the sense as introduced by Jones in his paper Classifier Construction in Southeast Asia.
As can be seen, the syntactic structures with numeral classifiers are subject to variation in Bengali. Here the Bengali language differs from the languages of Southeast Asia that are supposed to be a source of the spread of classifiers into Bengali. In these languages the syntactic constructions with numeral classifiers do not mix. There occurs either the syntactic construction numeral-clf. + noun or noun + numeral-clf. The variant use of syntactic constructions with numeral classifiers can be considered evidence of the fact that the usage of classifiers in Bengali is not original. This can also be proved by frequent occurrence of syntactic constructions in which a numeral showing a number of objects does not connect with a classifier.

A special role is played by the numeral ek (one) + classifier. It can tell us how many objects there are (i.e. one object) and in this case it is used as a numeral classifier (ekkhānā bai “one book”, ekjan mānus “one person”). But the same syntactic construction, i.e., ek-classifier + noun may be employed as an “indefinite article” (ekkhānā bai “a book”, ekjan mānus “a man”). The meaning of this construction follows from the context.

Numeral classifiers are usually added to countable referents. An exception is the numeral classifier with ekty “a little” or anek “much” occurring in the place of numeral (ektkhānī tāmāk “a little tobacco”, ektukhānī tel “a little oil”, anekkhānī jāl “much water”).

2.3 Numeratives
Quantity, time and distance are often measured with the aid of nouns called numeratives (du boṭal jāl two-bottle-water “two bottles of water”). Jones calls them “measure words” and draws our attention to the fact that “such measure words probably occur in all languages in one form or another.” But “they are relevant to a study of classifiers only in those languages which also make use of classifiers of the first type”, namely of the type which “consists of those bound morphemes which, broadly speaking, are sometimes shape-specific, but often arbitrary, and whose use is obligatory”. And further “it can be taken for granted that wherever the true classifiers /.../ occur the measure words will follow the same pattern. The reverse is not true.”

This is valid also for Bengali where many measure words occur: ek pyākē tās “a packet of cards”; ekguccha keś “a bunch of hair”, kayek hānṛi mistī “some pots of sweets”, biś hāt lambā ekṭa kumīr “a twenty hands long crocodile”, ekhāṭu kādā “mud up to knees”, du boṭal jāl “two bottles of water”.

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22 JONES, R.B. Classifier Construction in Southeast Asia, p. 3.
ek jorä juto “a pair of shoes”, ekgochä kāgaj “a heap of papers”, ek kāp cā “a cup of tea”, ek glās jal “a glass of water”, etc.

The function of these words as numeratives is proved by the fact that neither the determinatives ū, ū nor any other classifier can be added to the numeral when it is a part of numerative (du botal jal “two bottles of water” = numerative “quantity of water” in contrast to duū botal jal = numeral classifier “the number of bottles with water”).

3. Classes of Bengali classifiers

Bengali classifiers are divided into groups on the basis of the personality, shape, and size of entities they classify.

3.1 Personality

Personality is a primary characteristic of objects. On the basis of this criterium the classified entities are divided into the class of personal and the class of nonpersonal. The nonpersonal class includes not only inanimate objects but also animate objects (animals).

Personal referents take the classifier jan. In fact it occurred only with three various nouns in our texts (mānusjan “man”, lokjan “person”, gurujan “teacher”) and once it was added to the adjective apar “other, another” (aparjan “another one”).

On the other hand, the classifier jan functions more frequently as a numeral classifier, since it is added to the numeral which indicates the number of personal referents: ekjan aphisar “one/an officer”, duijan meye “two girls”, tinjan cāsī “three ploughmen”. (Thākur often writes the numeral ek used with the classifier jan separately: ek jan bhadralok “a gentleman”, ek jan mānus “a man”.)

A personal referent can be expressed by a personal pronoun, as a rule in the syntactic construction pronoun + numeral-classifier: tāhārā tinjane “they three ones”, āmrā duijanā “we two”.

24 In Bengali the opposition personal – nonpersonal is more important then the opposition animate – inanimate. It is reflected not only in the choice of classifier but also in the grammatical category of case. Personal nouns take the suffix –ke in the Accusative sg., while nonpersonal nouns have a zero suffix. Similarly the personality and nonpersonality is reflected in the choice of the indicator of plural of the noun. Personal nouns take the suffix –rā/der, nonpersonal nouns take the suffix gulo/guli.
As stated above the pattern noun + numeral classifier is also possible: 
chokrā tinjan young man three-clf. āmār sahapathī bandhu kayekjan my classmate friend some-clf.

Gupta’s conviction that “To imply jan respect is used with both the numbers singular and plural; as: ekjan bhadralok – one gentleman, tinjan mahīā – three ladies, päńcjan pāṇḍit – five scholars”25 has not been confirmed. In texts the classifier jan was added to nouns also in cases where the author’s intention obviously was not to express respect. Moreover, the classifier jan is added only to a noun in the singular. Plural is indicated by a numeral higher than one.

A classifier added to nonpersonal inanimate referents is chosen on the basis of their shape (see below).

There is no special classifier for nonpersonal animate referents (animals) in Bengali.

3.2 Shape
Nonpersonal inanimate referents are categorized into classes on the basis of their shape. They can be classified either as broad and flat or as long and thin.

Broad and flat objects are characterized by the classifiers khānā, khāni.

The classifiers gāehā, gāehi are added to nouns denoting thin and long objects.

The original classifiers for round objects gotā, guti, gutl, extremely common in early Bengali,26 are evidently used very sporadically in new Bengali. There was no incidence of them in our texts.

The occurrence of the classifiers khānā, khāni, gāehā, gāehi has also been very sporadic. However, the incidence of the classifiers khānā, khāni have been greater. In the sample of 105,000 words by seven analysed authors (15,000 by each) these classifiers and numeral classifiers occurred 7x in Thākur, 17x in Rāycaudhuri, 8x in Kar, 14x in Gangopādhyāy, 17x in M. Bandyopādhyāy, 59x in B. Bandyopādhyāy, and 10x in Mukhoppādhyāy. In many cases the same noun with the same classifier have been used by different authors as if they were a fixed combination, for instance mukhkhānā “the face”, hātkhānā “the hand”, gharkhānā “the room/house”, kāparkhānā “the dress”, cīthikhānā “the letter”, cādarkhānā “the cadar”.

For the most part the entities with the classifiers and numeral classifiers khānā, khāni can be arranged into a few groups:

25 DAS GUPTA. Learn Bengali Yourself, p. 73.
1. parts of human body: mukkhānā “the face”, hātkhānā “the hand”, pākhānā “the foot”, kapāikhānā “the forehead”, cokkhānā “the eye”, bukkhānā “the chest”, dāntkhānā “the tooth”
2. buildings: gharkhānā “the house/room”, bārikhānā “the house”, mandapkhānā “the pavilion”, kurekhānā “the hut”, grihakonkhānā “the corner of a house”, matkākhānā “the tusser”
3. cloth: kāparkhānā “the clothes”, eāāarkhānā “the cadar”, ghomtākhānā “the veil”, gāmehākhānā “the napkin”, mādurkhānā “the mat”
4. instruments with a blade: kṣurkhānā “the razor”, kastekhānā “the sickle”, jhinukkhānā “the spoon”
5. objects of paper: citthikhānā “the letter”, khāmkhānā “the envelope”, baikhānā “the book”, nabhelkhānā “the novel”, kāgajkhānā “the paper”, (mahābhāratkhānā Mahābhārata)
6. other: pattarkhānā, pātākhānā “the leaf”, kulokkhānā “the winnowing platter or tray”, thāiākhānā “the plate”, jutākhānā “shoe”, etc.

In opposition to an ideal conception\(^\text{27}\) that the classifiers khānā, khāni are used with a noun denoting a broad and flat object, they are also added to abstract referents: byāpārkhānā (Th, MB) “an incident, a matter”, atakhāni jñäner paricay “so much wisdom reputation”, anekkhāni ṭhāndā “much cold”, ekkhāni kaisor bibāho “an adolescent marriage”, etakhāni jñänarjan “acqurement of knowledge”, ekțukhāni hāsi “a little laugh”, etakhāni subidhů “so much happiness”. It contradicts Allan’s view, based on his study of many languages, that there is a universal restriction for classifiers, namely that “the characteristics denoted by the categories of classification must be perceivable by more than one of the senses”.\(^\text{28}\) This rule is not valid for Bengali.

The classifiers gāchā, gāchi occur only five times in our sample of texts, mainly in accordance with an ideal notion on their usage with the names of thin and long objects: īāthigāchā “the stick”, lāthigāchti, ekgāchā suto “the thread”, ekgāchī sāk “the creeper”, ekgāchā kānci “the bamboo twig”. Of interest is here the example lāthigāchti where the definitive affix ķi is unusually added to the classifier.

3.3. Size
A further objectively perceivable property of an object is its size. The variants of nonpersonal classifiers khānā and gāchā ended in ķ, namely khāni, gāchi are

\(^{27}\) The idea of ideal usage is used by JUGAL, K.K. in his paper Shape Schematization in Assamese Classifiers.

\(^{28}\) ALLAN, K. Classifiers, p. 298.
added to small objects, they serve as diminutives (here also another aspect – attitude of the speaker – inferior or, on the contrary, dear, plays a role). In fact, there is not the opposition big – small here, but the opposition neutral – small. There is no classifier for a big object – augmentative – in Bengali.

The usage of a classifier in the diminutive form does not exclude an explicit expression of “smallness”: baikhāni, choṭa baikhāni “the small book”.

4. The interchanging of classifiers

As has been shown, nouns are divided into classes on semantic bases, that is according to shared characteristic features of the objects they denote, therefore it could be expected that the classifiers would not interchange. In the main it is true: different classifiers are not used with the same noun. Nonpersonal classifiers khānā, khāni, gāchā, gāchi are never used with personal referents, the personal classifier jan is never used with nonpersonal inanimate referents. However, when a speaker wants to communicate a special meaning or to achieve a special effect, nonpersonal animate (animals) can get into the class of personal referents under certain circumstances. They can take the classifier jan; most frequently it happens in fairy tales or fables where animals behave like people: emni kare tārā du-jane (i.e. sījāl jackal and bāgh tiger) sīyāler garter kāche ela.29 Thus they two came to the jackal’s hole.

5. (Non)obligatory usage of classifiers

As it follows from a low occurrence of classifiers in texts, in Bengali, in contrast to true classifier languages, the usage of classifiers is not obligatory.

The appurtenance to a class on the basis of shape is implicit and so is appurtenance to a class on the basis of personality. However, it is reflected in a text in the choice of the Accusative case suffix and in the choice of plural indicators. The smallness and greatness are commonly expressed explicitly with the aid of adjectives such as barā, brihat, masta, bīṣiṣṭa, pradhān for big and choṭa, alpa, kṣudra for small.

But when an author uses a classifier, its usage is neither fortuitous nor arbitrary. He must adhere to settled circumstances. These circumstances include both the appurtenance of an object to one of the three above mentioned classes, and, primarily, the definiteness, taking an object out from a group of similar

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29 This intersection also manifests in case endings: Duṣṭu birāl dāṁt khinciye gāče lāphiye uṭhe ṭunṭunike (A pers.) dharte pārla nā (UR).
objects, its concreteness and individualness in contrast to unconcreteness and generality.

We must agree with authors who regard definiteness as the most general meaning of all postpositional particles (including classifiers). For instance hārgāchā differs from hār as “already known (that) necklace” from a “necklace” about which the speaker has no concrete idea.30

Some authors, for instance Bykova, put this very function of classifiers in the first place and regard them as definitive affixes.

Also due to this function the classifiers can be substituted by the definitive affixes tā, tī which are regarded as the most important definitives by Chatterji.31 Their use was already established in the early Middle Bengali period.32

The definitive affixes tā, tī are indifferent as regards personality and shape therefore they can stand for both personal and nonpersonal classifiers and in the case of nonpersonals for all shapes. Their usage is even much wider. The variant with i (tī) has the same function as the diminutive classifiers khāni, gāchī. Moreover, it can be attached to personal nouns in this function. (The personal classifier jan has no diminutive form.)

Classifiers can function as substantivizators of other parts of speech, most frequently of adjectives, but also of numerals and demonstratives (naturally, in a known context): Cārjane chūtiyā āse. The four ones are running here. Barakhānā cāi; e choṭokhānite kīchu habe nā. I want that big one; this little one be no use.

Classifiers can serve as substitutes for nouns: āmāder cenā ek bhadraloker kāch theke ceye nilen ekta rūpār tākā, ār ekjamer (i.e. bhadraloker) kāch theke ekta āmti. He asked for a silver rupee from a gentleman we knew, and a ring from someone else.

In these functions the classifiers are frequently substituted by the definitive affixes tā, tī.

The classifiers constitute an important and interesting part of the Bengali language. However, they are used rarely, it even seems that their usage is in retreat. The meaning of a qualitative (also emotional) evaluation and the

30 ZOGRAF, G.A. Morfologicheskiy stroy novykh indoariyskikh yazykov, p. 66.
32 The origin of this affix is not quite clear. According to Chatterji, op. cit., p. 685, it comes from the old Indo-Aryan varta (< vṛt) which changed into vatt in MIA and later to t. From it the suffix of nouns and adjectives tā, the feminine tī, tī has arisen. In the New Bengali period the category of gender of adjectives was lost and tī, tī had become the diminutive affixes.
meaning of definiteness combine in them. In the function of definitives, substantivizers, emphazizers, and noun substitutes they are often substituted by the much more frequent affixes tā, ti. They differ from known classificatory languages by their non-obligatory usage and by varied and not quite stable syntactic constructions numeral-classifier + noun. It could be understood as evidence of the fact that classifiers are not an original phenomenon in Bengali. Increased attention should be paid to them by native linguists who have both the theoretical knowledge and a feeling for different nuances in their usage mainly as regards various syntactic constructions with numeral classifiers.

Bengali texts:

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