



NOUN CLASSIFIER IN KOKBOROK

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ABSTRACT

Kokborok is a Tibeto-Burman language of the Bodo-Garo subgroup spoken mainly in Tripura, India, with speakers also found in Assam, Mizoram, and Bangladesh. A notable grammatical feature of the language is its rich system of noun classifiers, which are obligatorily used with numerals in counting expressions. This paper offers a descriptive analysis of noun classifiers in Kokborok by examining their semantic basis, morphological form, syntactic distribution, and grammatical function within the noun phrase. The study combines examples from published sources with the descriptive framework of earlier grammars and recent articles on Kokborok noun structure and classifiers. The analysis shows that Kokborok classifiers are independent morphemes, usually monosyllabic, and that they classify nouns according to semantic features such as shape, animacy, quantity, material, and part-whole relations. The paper also shows that the preferred pattern is noun + classifier + numeral, while classifier + numeral + noun is also possible in certain discourse contexts. Overall, the classifier system plays a central role in Kokborok nominal grammar and reflects both typological patterns common to Tibeto-Burman languages and language-specific semantic organization.

KEYWORDS: Kokborok, noun classifier, numeral classifier, Bodo-Garo, Tibeto-Burman, noun phrase, semantic classification.

1. INTRODUCTION

Kokborok is a Tibeto-Burman language of the Bodo-Garo sub-group, spoken mainly in the North-Eastern Indian state of Tripura, and also in parts of Assam, Mizoram, and Bangladesh. It is the largest tribal language of Tripura and recognised as one of the official languages of the state, with an expanding written tradition and increasing academic interest. Kokborok shows characteristic features of Bodo-Garo languages such as SOV word order, rich nominal morphology, and a productive system of numeral classifiers that categorize nouns based on physical and semantic properties.

In Kokborok, numerals are “always accompanied by classifier”, and classifiers classify nouns into several sub-groups according to shape, quality, material, animacy, and other features. Classifiers are separate morphemes that attach to numerals, and they form a tightly bound unit “classifier + numeral” which usually follows the noun and sometimes precedes it. This paper provides a descriptive account of noun classifiers in Kokborok, focusing on their semantic domains, morphological form, syntactic position, and their role in the grammar of the noun phrase. It also brings together examples from existing literature and field-based data to present a compact but systematic overview of Kokborok classifier usage.

2. KEYWORDS

- Kokborok, Noun classifier, Numeral classifier, Bodo-Garo, Tibeto-Burman, Noun phrase, Semantic classification

3. METHODOLOGY

This study follows a descriptive-analytical methodology, combining primary linguistic data from native speakers with secondary material from published grammars and research articles on Kokborok.

- Primary data collection:** Native speakers of Kokborok from Tripura and adjoining areas were consulted through informal interviews and elicitation sessions, focusing on how they count everyday items (people, animals, plants, body parts, household objects, liquids, food items, money, etc.). Elicitation used prompts such as “How do you say ‘three trees’, ‘five goats’, ‘two bundles of firewood’?” and picture-based tasks to obtain natural classifier-numeral-noun combinations.
- Secondary sources:** The analysis is informed by:
 - Devi’s paper “Some aspects of classifier in Kokborok” (SEL India), which provides an inventory of classifiers, example sentences, and a clear statement that classifiers in Kokborok always occur with numerals and may appear before or after the noun.
 - Debbarma’s Dr. Samir “Nouns in Kokborok” (Language in India, 2019), which describes noun morphology (gender, number, case) and confirms the central role of numeral classifiers in Kokborok noun phrases. etc
- Analytical framework:** The paper adopts a functional-typological perspective: classifiers are examined in terms of (a) semantic domains (shape, animacy, material, quantity), (b) morphological form (mono- vs disyllabic roots, historical relation to nouns), and (c) syntactic pattern (position relative to noun and pronoun, co-occurrence with other nominal markers). The Kokborok data are also briefly compared with classifier systems in other Tibeto-Burman languages to show broader patterns.



4. LITERATURE REVIEW

Early grammars of Kokborok noted the existence of classifiers but did not treat them in great detail. Pushpa pai's "*Kokborok Grammar*" and the CIIL grammar state that classifiers classify nouns into classes based mainly on physical features such as shape and quality, and that they are prefixed to numerals. The CIIL grammar specifically mentions examples like *kong* for long objects and *kang* for flat objects, and emphasises that classifiers are separate morphemes and numerous, with some sharing the same form as related nouns.

More recent work offers a fuller description. Devi's article "Some aspects of classifier in Kokborok" shows that Kokborok has a rich set of classifiers, many of which are copied from the second syllable of nouns, for example *bu-phay* 'tree' → *phay-* (tree classifier) and *be-dek* 'branch' → *dek-* (branch classifier). Devi argues that classifiers in Kokborok are always paired with numerals in counting expressions, forming a tight unit "classifier + numeral" that may appear before or after the noun or pronoun, though N CLF-NUM is the preferred order. The paper provides extensive examples with glosses and identifies semantic classes such as humans, animals, plants, grains, liquids, flat objects, bundles, pieces, fruits, and abstract units.

Dr. Samir Debbarma's "Nouns in Kokborok" focuses on noun structure but notes that noun morphology is "dominated by numeral classifiers", which are used extensively for enumeration. He describes how Kokborok nouns can take gender suffixes (e.g. *-la*, *-ma*), plural markers (e.g. *-rok*, *-song*), and a range of case markers (*-no*, *-ni*, etc.), and how numeral classifiers form part of the wider nominal system. General typological surveys of Tibeto-Burman languages classify Kokborok among languages where classifiers are independent morphemes linked to numerals, rather than bound affixes, and where they play a major role in everyday speech.

Taken together, these studies show that Kokborok possesses a well-developed classifier system whose semantic richness and syntactic flexibility merit detailed study. The present paper builds on this literature, summarising and organising the major findings while adding a clear presentation of classifier types and examples.

5. NOUNS AND THE NOUN PHRASE IN KOKBOROK

Like other languages, Kokborok has nouns as the largest open word class, functioning as subjects, objects, and complements. Nouns can be simple, derived, compound, or reduplicated, and they participate in a range of morphological processes including gender marking, pluralization, and case marking. Gender is occasionally specified via suffixes such as *-la* 'male' and *-ma* 'female', while plural is marked by suffixes like *-rok* and *-song*, and case by markers such as *-no* (accusative/dative) and *-ni* (genitive).

In the noun phrase, adjectives and numerals normally follow the noun. However, numerals almost always occur with classifiers, meaning that when a speaker counts entities, the structure typically includes a classifier slot:

- Noun + Classifier + Numeral (N CLF-NUM)
- or Classifier + Numeral + Noun (CLF-NUM N)

Classifiers do not replace plural or case markers; instead, they co-occur, producing complex noun phrases like "three

goats (CLF-three) of the man (genitive)", where gender, number, case, and classifiers are all present in the structure.

6. NATURE AND STRUCTURE OF NOUN CLASSIFIERS

6.1 Morphological form

Kokborok classifiers are independent morphemes, most of them mono-syllabic (e.g. *Kong*, *kang*, *mak*, *kol*, *tiŋ*) and some disyllabic. They typically appear as prefixes to numerals in forms such as *ma-sa* (CLF-one), *phay-tham* (CLF-three), *tiŋ-nui* (CLF-two). Many classifiers have forms identical or similar to the second syllable of related nouns, suggesting historical lexicalisation and copying from nouns into the classifier inventory.

6.2 Syntactic position

The most common order in Kokborok is N CLF-NUM: the noun comes first, followed by classifier plus numeral. For example, *pun ma-sa* 'goat CLF-one' means "one goat", and *buphay phay-tham* 'tree CLF-three' means "three trees". However, the sequence CLF-NUM can also precede the noun, as in *ma-sa pun* "one goat"; this variation is interpreted as a matter of information structure and focus. Importantly, the classifier and numeral form a single unit; the noun cannot intervene between them, and bare numerals without classifiers are strongly disfavoured in counting contexts.

6.3 Semantic basis

Classifier choice is primarily based on semantic features such as:

- Shape (long, flat, round, thin, voluminous)
- Material (wood, bamboo, cloth, metal)
- Animacy (human, animal, plant)
- Part-whole relations (branch, twig, leaf, node)
- Quantity type (pieces, drops, bundles, lumps, coins, fruits, swallows)

Thus, Kokborok classifiers encode a fine-grained categorisation of the physical and functional properties of objects and beings, and they provide semantic information that goes beyond raw number.

7. EXAMPLES AND TABLES

This section presents examples of Kokborok classifier usage organised into two tables: Table 1 for humans, animals, plants, and body parts; Table 2 for objects, quantities, and other domains. All examples follow the standard Kokborok orthography used in the sources.

7.1 Basic examples of classifier constructions

Devi (2024) illustrates typical classifier constructions:

1. *pun ma-sa*
 - *pun* 'goat'
 - *ma-sa* 'CLF-one (animal)'
 - Meaning: "one goat"
2. *buphay phay-tham*
 - *buphay* 'tree'
 - *phay-tham* 'CLF-three (tree/plant)'
 - Meaning: "three trees"
3. *malkhuj khuj-sa*



- *malkhuŋ* ‘vehicle’
- *khuy-sa* ‘CLF-one (voluminous object)’
- Meaning: “one vehicle”

The reverse order CLF-NUM N is also attested:

4. *ma-sa pun* → “one goat”
5. *phaŋ-tham buphaŋ* → “three trees”
6. *Phon-sa* → “piece of Flesh”

These examples show how classifier selection depends on the semantic class of the noun and how the classifier-numeral pair behaves syntactically as a unit.

7.2 Table 1: Classifiers for humans, animals, plants, and body parts

Table 1. Kokborok classifiers for humans, animals, plants, and body parts

Classifier form	Semantic domain / use	Example in Kokborok	Gloss (word-by-word)	Translation
<i>khoroK-NUM</i>	Humans (persons)	<i>borok khoroK-tham</i>	<i>borok</i> ‘person’ + <i>khoroK-tham</i> ‘CLF-three’	Three persons
<i>ma-NUM</i>	Animals (goats, rats, ducks, etc.)	<i>pun ma-sa</i>	<i>pun</i> ‘goat’ + <i>ma-sa</i> ‘CLF-one’	One goat
<i>ma-NUM</i>	Animals	<i>sinjo ma-sa</i>	<i>sinjo</i> ‘rat’ + <i>ma-sa</i> ‘CLF-one’	One rat
<i>ma-NUM</i>	Birds	<i>takhum ma-sa</i>	<i>takhum</i> ‘duck’ + <i>ma-sa</i> ‘CLF-one’	One duck
<i>phaŋ-NUM</i>	Trees, plants, herbs, weeds	<i>buphaŋ phaŋ-tham</i>	<i>buphaŋ</i> ‘tree’ + <i>phaŋ-tham</i> ‘CLF-three’	Three trees
<i>phaŋ-NUM</i>	Flowering plants	<i>khum phaŋ-sa</i>	<i>khum</i> ‘flower’ + <i>phaŋ-sa</i> ‘CLF-one’	One flower plant
<i>dek-NUM</i>	Branches of trees, plants, weeds	<i>bedek dek-tham</i>	<i>bedek</i> ‘branch’ + <i>dek-tham</i> ‘CLF-three’	Three branches
<i>cheŋ-NUM</i>	Twigs of trees, bamboo	<i>becheŋ ceŋ-ba</i>	<i>becheŋ</i> ‘tree twig’ + <i>ceŋ-ba</i> ‘CLF-five’	Five twigs
<i>kol-NUM</i>	Grains, seeds, small hard pieces	<i>bokol kol-tham</i>	<i>bokol</i> ‘grain’ + <i>kol-tham</i> ‘CLF-three’	Three grains
<i>kol-NUM</i>	Eyes (body part)	<i>mokol kol-sa</i>	<i>mokol</i> ‘eye’ + <i>kol-sa</i> ‘CLF-one’	One eye
<i>koŋ-NUM</i>	Teeth, fingers, limbs	<i>buwa koŋ-sa</i>	<i>buwa</i> ‘tooth’ + <i>koŋ-sa</i> ‘CLF-one’	One tooth
<i>koŋ-NUM</i>	Hands (body part)	<i>yak koŋ-nui</i>	<i>yak</i> ‘hand’ + <i>koŋ-nui</i> ‘CLF-two’	Two hands

This table shows how Kokborok classifiers group nouns into semantic classes and how one classifier can extend across related domains (e.g. *kol-* for grains, seeds, and eyes, all small and compact).

7.3 Table 2: Classifiers for objects, quantities, and other domains

Table 2. Kokborok classifiers for objects, quantities, and other domains

Classifier form	Semantic domain / use	Example in Kokborok	Gloss (word-by-word)	Translation
<i>tiŋ-NUM</i>	Long narrow/thin objects (rope, road, thread, tail)	<i>khutuy tiŋ -nui</i>	<i>khutuy</i> ‘thread’ + <i>tiŋ -nui</i> ‘CLF-two’	Two threads
<i>tiŋ -NUM</i>	Road	<i>lama tuy-sa</i>	<i>lama</i> ‘road’ + <i>tuy-sa</i> ‘CLF-one’	One road
<i>tiŋ -NUM</i>	Rope	<i>buduk tiŋ -sa</i>	<i>buduk</i> ‘rope’ + <i>tuy-sa</i> ‘CLF-one’	One rope



<i>thop-NUM</i>	Drops of liquid (water, blood, oil, sap)	<i>belej tii thop-ba</i>	<i>belej tii 'sap' + thop-ba 'CLF-five'</i>	Five drops of sap
<i>thop-NUM</i>	Oil drops	<i>thok thop-tham</i>	<i>thok 'oil' + thop-tham 'CLF-three'</i>	Three drops of oil
<i>kaŋ-NUM</i>	Flat objects (books, cloths, mats, fans)	<i>Kamchil iikaŋ-tham</i>	<i>kamchilii 'shirt' + kaŋ-tham 'CLF-three'</i>	Three shirts
<i>kaŋ-NUM</i>	Mat	<i>lamthai kaŋ-sa</i>	<i>lamthai 'mat' + kaŋ-sa 'CLF-one'</i>	One mat
<i>kaŋ-NUM</i>	Hand fan	<i>kisip kaŋ-ba</i>	<i>kisip 'fan' + kaŋ-ba 'CLF-five'</i>	Five hand fans
<i>phon-NUM</i>	Pieces of meat, fish, etc.	<i>bahan phon-ba</i>	<i>bahan 'meat' + phon-ba 'CLF-five'</i>	Five pieces of meat
<i>phon-NUM</i>	Pork pieces	<i>wahan phon-tham</i>	<i>wahan 'pork' + phon-tham 'CLF-three'</i>	Three pieces of pork
<i>bar-NUM</i>	Blossoms, flowers, buds	<i>khum bar-sa</i>	<i>khum 'flower' + bar-sa 'CLF-one'</i>	One flower
<i>khuy-NUM</i>	Voluminous objects (houses, vehicles)	<i>malkhuy khuy-sa</i>	<i>malkhuy 'vehicle' + khuy-sa 'CLF-one'</i>	One vehicle
<i>lai-NUM</i>	Leaves of trees, plants, herbs	<i>bilai lai-tham</i>	<i>bilai 'leaf' + lai-tham 'CLF-three'</i>	Three leaves
<i>lep-NUM</i>	Coins, flat baked items (bread, biscuits)	<i>puisa lep-sa</i>	<i>puisa 'paisa' + lep-sa 'CLF-one'</i>	One coin of paisa
<i>tii-NUM</i>	Eggs, tubers, underground roots, yam	<i>bitui tui-tham</i>	<i>butui 'egg' + tui-tham 'CLF-three'</i>	Three eggs
<i>khon-NUM</i>	Holes (in earth, tree, bamboo)	<i>hakor khon-sa</i>	<i>hakor 'hole' + khon-sa 'CLF-five'</i>	Five holes
<i>jor-NUM</i>	Pairs	<i>bojor jor-sa</i>	<i>bojor 'pair' + jor-sa 'CLF-one'</i>	One pair
<i>khon-NUM</i>	Swallows (mouthfuls) of food or drink	<i>mai khon-tham</i>	<i>mai 'rice' + khon-tham 'CLF-three'</i>	Three swallows of rice
<i>phak-NUM</i>	Bundles (bamboo, wood, firewood)	<i>bol phak-nui</i>	<i>bol 'firewood' + phak-nui 'CLF-two'</i>	Two bundles of firewood
<i>dul-NUM</i>	Clods, molded lumps, pellets, rice balls	<i>budul dul-sa</i>	<i>budul 'clod' + dul-sa 'CLF-one'</i>	One clod



<i>khok-NUM</i>	Rupees (money unit)	<i>rang khok-sa</i>	<i>rang</i> 'money' + <i>khok-sa</i> 'CLF-one'	One rupee
<i>en-NUM</i>	Nodes of bamboo, sugarcane	<i>wa en-sa</i>	<i>wa</i> 'bamboo' + <i>en-sa</i> 'CLF-one'	One node of bamboo
<i>mochom-NUM</i>	Fistful amount (single or double handful)	<i>gundak mochom-sa</i>	<i>gundak</i> 'husk' + <i>mochom-sa</i> 'CLF-one'	One fistful of husk
<i>tuk-NUM</i>	Pots of rice, rice beer	<i>maituk tuk-tham</i>	<i>maituk</i> 'rice pot' + <i>tik-tham</i> 'CLF-three'	Three pots of rice
<i>thai-NUM</i>	Fruits (mangoes, bananas)	<i>thaichuk thai-tham</i>	<i>thaichuk</i> 'mango' + <i>thai-tham</i> 'CLF-three'	Three mangoes

These tables demonstrate the extent of Kokborok's classifier system and how it encodes nuanced semantic distinctions in everyday enumeration.

8. TYPOLOGICAL AND FUNCTIONAL DISCUSSION

Typologically, Kokborok belongs to the family of classifier languages in South and East Asia where numerals are obligatorily accompanied by classifiers in counting expressions. However, unlike languages where classifiers are bound affixes, Kokborok uses independent classifier morphemes that attach to numerals, a property it shares with other Bodo–Garo languages. The semantic range of classifiers—covering humans, animals, plants, parts, shapes, quantities, and abstract units—indicates a high degree of elaboration and cultural embedding in daily life.

Functionally, classifiers serve both **enumeration** and **categorisation**: they specify how many entities are involved and what type they are. The flexibility in the placement of CLF-NUM (before or after the noun) allows speakers to manipulate focus and information structure, highlighting either the noun or the quantity depending on context. Classifiers also interact with other nominal morphology—gender, number, and case—so that Kokborok noun phrases show layered grammatical marking where semantic class, quantity, grammatical relations, and pragmatic emphasis are all encoded.

9. CONCLUSION

Noun classifiers in Kokborok form a central and highly structured part of the language's grammar. They are independent, mostly monosyllabic morphemes that attach to numerals and classify nouns based on shape, animacy, material, quantity type, and other semantic features. The usual order N

CLF-NUM, together with the alternative CLF-NUM N, shows that classifiers are closely bound to numerals but syntactically flexible around the noun, enabling expressive variation in discourse.

The system of classifiers interacts with Kokborok noun morphology (gender, number, case) and contributes to the typological profile of Kokborok as a Bodo–Garo language with rich nominal structure and a fully developed classifier system. Future work can explore dialectal variation, sociolinguistic factors (for example, younger vs older speakers), and comparative studies with neighbouring languages such as Bodo, Garo, and Rabha, which may help clarify the historical development and regional patterns of classifier usage in North-East India.

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