When Plural Marking and Classifiers Can Co-Occur: An Extraction Analysis

As early as Greenberg (1972), it had been noted that classifiers and plural marking are apparently in complementary distribution across the world's languages. Borer (2005) presents the following proposal: all nouns are mass nouns; they are made count nouns by virtue of being dominated by a functional projection ClP, whose head DIV, an empty value, must be assigned range/bound. In non-classifier languages, this is done by plural marking. In classifier languages, this is done by the classifier. Borer notes that Armenian, which contains both classifiers and a plural marker, does not allow the two to cooccur. Recent studies of East Asian languages, including Park (2008) and Kim and Melchin (2018), have cast some doubt on this strict dichotomy. The positions taken differ but I will argue that in Bangla, the data can be accounted for using Borer’s model and the cross-linguistic generalisation holds, with a small caveat.

The unmarked word order in Bangla DPs is Num-CL NP. Plural marker -ra/der cannot occur on NP in this configuration. When there is no Num, the plural marker (or classifier for singulars) is obligatory.

1. meye*(-ra) esh-e-ch-il-o
girl-PL come-ASP-AUX-PST-3
‘The girls had come’

2. du-jon meye(*-ra) esh-e-ch-il-o
two-CL girl-PL come-ASP-AUX-PST-3
‘Two girls had come’

However, when the NP is topicalised or focalised, both the plural marker and the classifier show up.

3. meye*(-ra)(-toh) du-jon esh-e-ch-il-o
girl-PL-TOP two-CL come-ASP-AUX-PST-3
‘As for the girls, two had come’

4. ami mohila-der tin-jon-ke Dek-e-ch-i, ar chele-der du-jon-ke
I woman-PL three-CL-DAT call-ASP-AUX-1 and boy-PL two-CL-DAT
‘I have called three (of the) women and two (of the) boys’

Co-occurrence of the plural marker is also seen in embedded-wh extraction, and relative clauses.

5. tumi ka-ra bol-l-e je du-jon-i aS-b-e
you who-PL say-PAST-2 that two-CL-only come-FUT-3
‘Of which group of people did you say that only two will come?’

6. mohila-ra, ja-ra du-jon gan ga-e, accident-e mor-e gE-l-o
woman-PL that-PL two-CL song sing-3 accident-LOC die-NF go-PAST-3
‘The women, of whom two sing songs, died in an accident.’

Based on the above, the following descriptive generalisation may be formulated.

Plurality-Manifestation Condition (PMC): For plural DPs, the plural marker manifests on the NP head if and only if (a) there is no Num-CL present, or (b) the NP is extracted out of the DP, leaving the Num-CL behind.

This condition is in fact entirely compatible with Borer’s framework, where both PL and CL realise the same head, as I shall now show. Part (a) is easily accounted for as when there is no CL, PL must be overtly present to assign range to the DIV head, as seen in the labeled diagram (i) below.
For part (b), the derivation is as follows, taking the base structure to be (ii). Firstly, let us assume that it is the ClP that is extracted rather than the NP. This seems like a reasonable assumption, as it is desirable that the semantics of individuation (or mass vs count) be part of the extracted nominal. The derivation would proceed as follows: the CL, having assigned range to the DIV head of ClP, head-moves up to assign range to the head of NumP. This is independently motivated as bare numerals are not possible. The following must be assumed: the NP always moves up to [Spec,ClP]. The CL, on moving up to NumP leaves behind a copy (as per the copy theory of movement), which is deleted at PF unless the ClP is extracted out of the DP.

When the ClP is extracted, the locality relation between the two copies is lost and neither is deleted at PF. However, and this is critical to the analysis, the phonological form of the CL that is spelled out is determined in conjunction with its immediate environment at late insertion. This can explain both why there are different classifiers depending on animacy of the noun, as well as why the classifier varies with number: Ek-Ta, du-To, tin-Tê, char-Ta ‘one-CL, two-CL, three-CL, four-CL’. The argument goes that the default form in the absence of a Num environment is -ra/der. Further support comes from the next section in the form of case-dependent realisation, which separates these two forms, and is additional evidence in favour of late insertion.

Case-Dependence and Case-Blocking

The realisation of the plural marker is dependent on case. -ra occurs in nominative contexts, and -der occurs everywhere else. Further, in the presence of the plural marker, dative case marking becomes extremely marked, if not ungrammatical.

7. ami bhai-der(??-ke) chocolate de-b-o
   I brother-PL-DAT chocolate give-FUT-1
   ‘I will give my brothers chocolate’

Extending the earlier analysis, positing that the ClP has moved to a pre-VP focus position (Jayaseelan 2001) accounts for the data. As nothing overt remains in the DP, the case-marking is not realised overtly. This leads to the prediction that when the DP contains a Num-CL, dative case-marking will be realised overtly, which is indeed the case.

8. ami bhai-der(*-ke) du-jon*(-ke) chocolate de-b-o
   I brother-PL(*-DAT) two-CL-DAT chocolate give-FUT-1
   ‘I will give chocolates to two of my BROTHERS (e.g....and three of my SISTERS)’

Therefore, it is seen that an extraction analysis, along with the principle of PF deletion of lower copies under locality, can adequately account for when classifiers and plural marking can co-occur, as well as the blocking of case-marking.

References: