

On the DP/NP parameter and nominal projection in Assamese

Rishab Borah (rborah2@illinois.edu)
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Abney (1987) introduces the analysis of languages using determiner phrases headed by determiners, rather than noun phrases headed by nouns. As Dees (2024) highlights, the concept of a determiner phrase (DP) has led to three major interpretations of linguistic structure across languages: that all languages have a DP; that article-less languages use NP and article languages use DP; and that there is no DP at all. Bošković (2008, 2012) proposes a series of structural generalizations across two types of languages: those with overt articles (such as English), and those without overt articles such as Bosnian-Croatian-Serbian (BCS). Bošković connects these generalizations to the existence of an NP/DP parameter across languages that is marked by the absence or presence of overt articles.

Syed and Simpson (2017) suggests a modification to this model, proposing that there are actually three types of languages, with the third type being languages that have no articles but having a DP layer in spite of this. Using generalizations from Bošković (2008, 2009), Syed and Simpson demonstrate that Bangla, an article-less Indo-Aryan language, shows syntactic patterns alike to DP languages, with nominal constituents projecting a DP-level of structure even while lacking overt articles. Similar studies across other languages find movement which triggers the need for a DP-layer, such as in Dees (2021, 2024) on head movement in Dholuo; Talić (2024) on Telugu; and Bošković (2018) on head movement in Bantu. In this paper, I argue that Assamese, an Indo-Aryan language related to Bangla, shows the properties demonstrated in Syed and Simpson (2017) indicating that nominals in certain article-less languages project a DP-level of structure, evidenced through phrasal movement that marks definiteness alongside Bošković’s generalizations.

Data is collected from four individuals, three identifying as native speakers and one heritage speaker. Examples (1) and (2) display word-order alternation in Assamese:

- (1) du khon xoru kitaph
 two CL small book
 “two small books”
- (2) xoru kitaph du khon
 small book two CL
 “the two small books”

The examples demonstrate that Assamese marks definiteness through the order of the numeral, classifier, noun, and adjective. The order *numeral* > *classifier* > *adjective* > *noun* in (1) creates an indefinite interpretation, whereas the order *adjective* > *noun* > *numeral* > *classifier* in (2) creates a definite interpretation. Anaphora proves these interpretations are definite rather than being specific. In addition, like Syed and Simpson for Bangla, I test Assamese for some of Bošković (2008, 2012)’s generalizations. Table 1 shows that Assamese patterns closer to English, which has articles, than BCS, which does not:

	Negative raising	Majority readings	Adnominal genitives	Inverse scope reading	Exhaustivity presupposition
Assamese	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
English	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Bosnian-Serbian-Croatian	N	N	N	N	N

Table 1: A side-by-side comparison of three of Bošković’s generalizations across Assamese, English, and BCS.

I find that Assamese patterns as a DP language rather than an NP language according to Bošković's generalizations. Furthermore, Bošković's generalizations and word-order alternations that mark definiteness suggest that nominal constituents in Assamese project a DP-level of structure. This is in-line with Syed and Simpson (2017)'s analysis of Bangla.

Additionally, following Despić (2013)'s analysis of Bosnian-Croatian-Serbian, Assamese is shown to have specific binding behaviors (based on Conditions B and C as per Chomsky 1980) that require there be layers above the NP in the nominal domain. Specifically, pronouns in Assamese are permitted to bind to R-expressions that would c-command them if there were no layer projected above NP. Finally, it is shown that the Assamese DP behaves as a phase based on Dayal (2012) and Syed and Simpson (2017)'s analyses of extraction via an escape hatch.

This lends support to the existence of a DP layer in languages like Assamese. It also supports the claim that certain languages are classifiable as DP-languages despite their lack of articles, suggesting that the DP/NP parameter proposed by Bošković (2008, 2012) is more fine-grained in nature.

Word Count: 599

References:

- Abney, Steven. 1987. *The English noun phrase in its sentential aspect*. Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology dissertation.
- Bošković, Željko. 2008. What will you have, DP or NP? *Proceedings of the Northeast Linguistic Society* 37(1), 101-114. Amherst, MA: GLSA Publications.
- Bošković, Željko. 2009. More on the no-dp analysis of article-less languages. *Studia Linguistica* 63. 187–203. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9582.2009.01158.x>
- Bošković, Željko. 2012. On NPs and clauses. In G. Grewendorf & T.E. Zimmerman, eds., *Discourse and grammar: From sentence types to lexical categories*, 179-242. Boston, MA: DeGruyter Mouton. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781614511601.179>
- Bošković, Ž. 2018. 2018. On affixal articles: An argument from Bantu for Bulgarian, Romanian, and Icelandic. In B. D. J. Steven L. Franks Vrinda Chidambaram & I. Krapova (Eds.), *Studies in bulgarian morphosyntax in honor of catherine rudin* (pp. 37–52). Bloomington, IN: Slavica Publishers.
- Chomsky, N. (1980). *On binding*. Lin 11. 1-46.
- Dayal, Veneeta. 2012. Bangla classifiers: Mediating between kinds and objects. *Rivista di Linguistica* 24(2). 195–226.
- Dees, J. 2021. Dholuo: Evidence of negative raising and sequence of Tense in an article-less language. Poster presented at the 2021 Annual Meeting of the Linguistic Society of America.
- Dees, J. (2024). Kannada through the lens of the NP/DP parameter. *Proceedings of the 13th formal Approaches to South Asian Languages*, 37-55.
- Despić, Miloje. 2013. Binding and the structure of np in Serbo-Croatian. *Linguistic inquiry* 44(2). 239–270. https://doi.org/10.1162/LING_a_00126
- Syed, Saurov. & Andrew Simpson. 2017. On the DP/NP status of nominal projections in Bangla: Consequences for the theory of phases. *Glossa: A Journal of General Linguistics* 2(1), 1- 24. <https://doi.org/10.5334/gjgl.186>
- Talić, A. 2024. You don't need a definite article to have a DP: A view from Telugu domain of N and A. Poster presented at the 2024 Annual Meeting of the Linguistic Society of America.