

# The pragmatic principles of agreement in Bajjika verbs

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Received 13 February 2012; received in revised form 31 July 2012; accepted 8 August 2012

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## Abstract

This article describes verb-agreement in Bajjika, an Eastern Indo-Aryan language, and explains the pragmatic principles that determine the agreement. Bajjika has one of the most complex and indeed uncommon agreement patterns in Indo-Aryan languages. The entities encoded in the verb are PERSON, HONORIFIC DEGREE, SPATIAL DISTANCE, and GENDER, not all equally encoded. The verb allows nominative as well as non-nominative (double) participants and non-participants to be simultaneously encoded in the paradigm. The double agreements pose severe analytical constraints as the agreement is unusually sensitive to social factors. The agreement consistently interacts with the social hierarchy that forms the foundation of the speech community. Besides, the absence of uniformity in marking PERSON poses constraints on the predictability of agreement and its subsequent interpretation. In the process of describing Bajjika verb-agreement and the underlying principles, this study examines the relevance of Bickel et al.'s (1999) proposal for interpreting the agreement paradigms, thus providing fresh data to empirically and conceptually further understand verb-agreement and the extent to which this phenomenon can be tied to factors relevant to tenor relation. The study concludes that while face is useful in explaining Bajjika agreement paradigms, the scale of empathy proposed by Bickel et al. is irrelevant to account for data from Bajjika.

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**Keywords:** Bajjika; Indo-Aryan; Bihari language; Verb-agreement; Systemic Functional Linguistics

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## 1. Introduction

The verb-agreement with non-nominative participants is not a common phenomenon in the languages across the world, nor is it common in Indo-Aryan languages which this paper focuses on (Masica, 1991; Verma, 1991:129). Even more uncommon is the 'multiple' agreement, i.e., more than one participant to be simultaneously encoded in the verb morphology, indexing the speaker, the addressee of diverse social statuses and a referent that is outside the discourse event. An example is the case of Hindi. Even if Hindi allows the verb to agree with Subject and Complement,<sup>1</sup> it does not allow the encoding of Subject and Complement at the same time: the verb agrees with either Subject or Complement (cf. Kachru, 2006; Kachru et al., 1976; Bickel and Yādva, 2000). The 'multiple' agreement is uncommon not only in other Indo-Aryan languages, but also in languages of other families spoken in India. A relevant example is Kannada, a Dravidian language, which has no non-nominative agreement at all. As Sridhar (1979:104)

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<sup>1</sup> The Complement in Systemic Functional Linguistics (henceforth, SFL) (Halliday, 1994; Halliday and Matthiessen, 2004; Caffarel et al., 2004; Taverniers, 2011) is what is traditionally known as the Object. This paper uses SFL as the theoretical framework and therefore uses SFL terminologies. The terminologies that are not overtly expressive will be explained at their first mention either in the body or in footnote, whichever appropriate.

observed in respect of the status of dative Subject, the dative nominal group in Kannada “does not govern agreement – agreement is with the nominative NP” only.<sup>2</sup>

A group of languages in the Indo-Aryan family, known as Bihari languages and grouped under the Eastern branch of Indo-Aryan family (Grierson, 1883, 1883–87, 1968 [1903]; Masica, 1991), primarily spoken in the Bihar province of the northern part of India that stretches up to the border of Nepal, shows that rather uncommon linguistic trait of ‘multiple’ verb-agreement, such that the agreement paradigms remain a ‘mystery’ (Verma, 1991:127) to many linguists. The verb-agreement in these languages is a very rich indicator of the tenor relations (Halliday, 1978; Halliday and Hasan, 1985): all human interaction can be reduced to the pragmatics of social roles and relations of interactants and non-interactant (Bickel et al., 1999). Linguists have shown this for Maithili (e.g., Bickel et al., 1999; Yadava, 1996; Singh, 1989), Magahi, and Bhojpuri (Verma, 1991, 1993), the three best described languages of this group. In this article, I examine data from another Bihari language, Bajjika, which is the most unknown and least described of all Bihari dialects (cf. Kashyap, *in press*), in order to describe the patterns of verb-agreement and discuss their social implications. Bajjika is spoken by approximately 15 million people in eight districts of Bihar and a small population in Nepal (Kumar, 2009; Arun and Sharma, 2008).

Bajjika, as is the case with other Bihari dialects described so far, has a very complex system of verb-agreement. The verb agrees not only with the nominative participant but also the non-nominative (i.e., accusative, genitive, dative, locative, and ablative) participant simultaneously, allowing up to two participants (double) to be encoded in the verb; the agreement cross-references the core participants as well as the non-participants, e.g., a circumstance realised in a postpositional phrase,<sup>3</sup> and other referents. The categories encoded in the verb morphology are PERSON (first person, second person, and third person), HONORIFIC DEGREE (high-honorific, mid-honorific, honorific, and non-honorific), GENDER (male vs. female) in the case of second and third person with certain restrictions, and SPATIAL DISTANCE (proximate vs. remote) in the case of third person. The following are representative examples to show ‘single’, (1a), and ‘double’ (nominative as well as non-nominative), (1b), agreement markings in the verb<sup>4</sup>:

- (1). a. bābu-ji khet me kām kar-ait ha-thin.  
father-h field LOC work do-PROG be.PRS-3hNOM  
‘Father is working in the field.’  
b. dosar kisān appan dos-ke uṭhā ke  
other farmer self friend-ACC wake CONV  
bata-lak-ai.  
inform-PST.3nhNOM-3nhNNOM  
‘The other farmer woke his friend up and informed him.’

While the verb-agreement indexes the participant that is overtly present in the clause, as in (1a) and (1b), it can also reference the participant of which there is no trace elsewhere in the clause, as in (2):

- (2) ek din ham dekh-l-i-aw. je ...  
one day 1.NOM saw-PST-1.NOM-2hNNOM that  
‘One day I saw that..’

As can be seen, there is no indication of a second person referent in the nominal groups of (2) nor does the ‘experiential’ aspect of this clause accommodate any role of the referent marked by the morpheme -aw ‘2hNNOM’, as can be seen in the English translation, the verb-agreement still makes reference to a non-nominative second person referent. This point will be taken up in the later part of this paper.

The agreement paradigm is further complicated by the fact that the person marking is not uniform across persons and honorifics, a feature that Bickel et al. (1999) also observe for Maithili. For example, while there is a clear distinction in the markings of first person, mid- and high-honorific second persons, and third person, there is no distinction between the first person and the mid-honorific second person reference in the verb: the first person and the honorific second person are encoded in the same morpheme (section 4.2).

<sup>2</sup> Nominal group is equivalent to well-known noun phrase, abbreviated as NP.

<sup>3</sup> The circumstance can be expressed by an adverbial group (e.g. English *slow*) as well as an adpositional phrase (Halliday and Matthiessen, 2004; Caffarel et al., 2004). The circumstance relevant to Bajjika verb-agreement is the one that is realised by a postpositional phrase, mainly because the postpositional phrase contains a nominal element.

<sup>4</sup> The following abbreviations have been used for interlinear glossing – 1, first person; 2, second person; 3, third person; ACC, accusative; Agr, agreement; AUX, auxiliary; DAT, dative; F, female; FUT, future tense; GEN, genitive; h, honorific; hh, high honorific; hum, human; INT, interrogative; IPF, imperfective; LOC, locative; M, male; mh, mid honorific; MOD, modality; NEG, negative; NFUT, non-future tense; nh, non-honorific; nhum, non-human; NNOM, non-nominative; NOM, nominate; PL, plural; POL, polar; PROG, progressive; prox, proximate; PRS, present tense; PST, past tense; PT, particle; rem, remote; VOC, vocative.

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