



Ergatives, antipassives and the overt light v in Hindi

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the nature of ergative case assignment in a type of complex verb construction in Hindi. This construction involves a verbal complex that contains a main verb stem followed by a light verb. It is shown that the ergative case assignment in this construction depends crucially on the light verb. The evidence presented in the paper is highly suggestive of a view of vP shells in which the external argument introducing little v is a distinct head from the case assigning little v. Furthermore, a study of a range of lexical exceptions to the canonical ergative case assignment patterns in Hindi provides an argument that ergative case in Hindi is an inherent case.

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1. Introduction¹

Hindi is an aspectually split ergative language, with the ergative case marker, *-ne*, appearing on the subject of transitive perfective clauses. The basic facts of Hindi ergativity are fairly well studied (see Davison, 2004; Kachru and Pandharipande, 1978; Mahajan, 1997; Mohanan, 1994; among others). In this paper, I discuss evidence from light verb constructions in Hindi which suggests that the light verb responsible for ergative case assignment may be distinct from that that introduces the external argument. I present an analysis of case assignment patterns in transitive and intransitive light verb constructions and discuss its ramifications for case assignment in simple verb constructions. I also suggest that overt intransitive light verbs in perfective clauses function as antipassive morphemes in Hindi. This proposal may be of significance since it deviates from the now (somewhat) standard assumption that the little v introducing the external argument is also responsible for ergative case assignment.

2. Background

A standard ergative construction in Hindi is shown in (1)—the verb is a transitive perfect participle, the subject carries the ergative case marker *-ne*, the object is unmarked and the participle agrees in gender (and number, not marked here) with the object. The type of construction that we will be of concern here is shown in (2), which mirrors (1) in most respects except that the predicate is a two verb sequence, called a “compound verb” in South Asian linguistic circles.

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¹ The following abbreviations are used in this article: erg, ergative case; acc, accusative case; masc, masculine gender; fem, feminine gender; perf, perfective aspect; pres, present tense; NEG, negation; caus, causative; pass, passive; and emph, emphatic.

- (1) Kabir-ne vah gaaṛii jəldii-se beṇii
 Kabir-erg(masc) that car (fem) quickly sell-perf-fem
 “Kabir sold that car quickly.”
- (2) Kabir-ne vah gaaṛii jəldii-se beṇ lii
 Kabir-erg(masc) that car (fem) quickly sell take-perf-fem
 “Kabir sold that car quickly.”

The light verb construction exemplified in (2) has been studied extensively in Hindi linguistics (see Bahl, 1964; Hook, 1974, 1978; Porizka, 1967–1969, among others). It is a two-verb sequence (referred to here as V1–v2) in which the first verb (V1) is morphologically bare stem and the second verb (v2) carries the usual clausal inflection. The V1 functions as the main verb, providing the bulk of meaning/thematic information, and the v2 is “relatively” light. This “light” v2 does provide certain subtle semantic information, mostly (though not entirely) aspectual/directional in nature (see Hook, 1974 for detailed information; also, Butt, 1995 for some more recent discussion). Some of the verbs that commonly serve as light verbs are: *jaa* = go; *aa* = come; *uṭh* = get up/rise; *bēṭh* = sit; *mār* = die; *nikāl* = come out; *ṇuk* = end; *ṇal* = walk; *pəṭ* = fall; *de* = give; *le* = take; *nikaal* = expel/extract; *choṛ* = leave/drop; *ḍaal* = put; *maār* = kill/hit; *dhār* = put; *rakh* = place/put (more details are provided in Hook, 1974: 119–120). Authors have identified anywhere from 8 to 51 verbs that can potentially act as v2’s in light verb constructions; Hook (1974) identified 24 productive v2’s, out of which at least 15 are quite common in Delhi Hindi. These v2’s combine with a large number of main V1s (see Butt, 1995 and G. Mahajan, 1989 for discussion of possible V1–v2 combinations) and light verb constructions (=compound verbs) of this type are used extensively in many Indian languages, often taken to be one of the defining syntactic features of Indian linguistics (cf. Masica, 1976).

3. Compound verbs and ergative marking

It has long been observed that ergative case marking in compound verb constructions is affected by the transitivity of the v2 (see Platts, 1874 and many others since then). McGregor (1972:104) notes that “Compound verbs are used in construction with *ne* when both the stem verb and the auxiliary (=v2, A.M.) are themselves used independently with *ne*.” Amritavalli (1979:77–78) comments “In sentences with compound verbs it is the transitivity (and perfectivity) of v2 that determines the ergative case-marking.” The basic pattern of compound verb constructions is given in (3)–(5), though it is shown below that neither of these statements is accurate.

- (3) Kabir-ne vo kitaab jəldii-se pəṭh lii
 Kabir-erg (masc) that book(fem) quickly read take-perf-fem
 “Ram read that book quickly.”
- (4) *Kabir-ne vo kitaab jəldii-se pəṭh gəyīi
 Kabir-erg (masc) that book(fem) quickly read go-perf-fem
 “Ram read that book quickly.”
- (5) Kabir vo kitaab jəldii-se pəṭh gəyaa
 Kabir(masc) that book(fem) quickly read go-perf-masc
 “Kabir read that book quickly.”

McGregor (1972:105), for example, notes that certain intransitive V1s do allow for ergative subjects when the light v2 is transitive (also noted by Amritavalli). Intransitive V1s that permit ergative subjects with transitive v2’s belong to the unergative *khāās-naa* “to cough” class of verbs. Verbs in this class of intransitives in Hindi independently permit ergative subjects and the choice of *-ne* subjects has been argued to be associated with properties of volitionality or conscious choice (cf. Butt, 1995; Mohanan, 1994).

- (6) Kabir(-ne) khāās diyaa
 Kabir (-erg) cough do-perf-masc
 “Kabir coughed.”
- (7) Kabir(-ne) khāāsaa
 Kabir (-erg) cough-perf-masc
 “Kabir coughed.”

The pattern in (6)–(7) is not surprising if *khāās-naa* “to cough” class intransitives may function as covert transitives (cf. Hale and Keyser, 1993 as well as Mahajan, 1987 in the context of Hindi ergativity).

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