

Relating Anti-Uniqueness and Non-honorificity to Definiteness Marking in Magahi

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Definite Markers in Bare Noun Languages

- In many languages, definites can be expressed as both bare nouns (BNs) or nouns with a definite marker.
- Typically, the definite marker is not used with ‘larger-situation unique’ definites like *sun*, *moon*, *president*.¹
- *Question*: Is this a kind of familiar/unique distinction (Schwarz 2009)?

(1) Vietnamese

a. *cái máy ảnh*

CLF camera

‘the camera’

b. (*#cái*) *mặt trăng*

#CLF moon

‘the moon’

(2) Akan

a. *papa nó*

man DEF

‘the man’

b. *awia (#nó)*

sun #DEF

‘the sun’

¹Simpson (2005); Simpson & Biswas (2016); Owusu (2022); Yip et al. (2023); Beryl Bui p.c. ▶ ≡ | = ↶ ↷ ↸ ↹

Definite Markers in Bare Noun Languages

There are two main proposals for how to explain the distribution of the BNs and definite marker.

- 1 Owusu (2022) proposes the Akan definite marker has an **anti-uniqueness presupposition**.

- $\llbracket \text{nó}_y \rrbracket^g = \lambda P \lambda x \lambda s : x = g(y) \wedge \underline{\exists s' s \leq s' | \{x | P(x)(s')\}} | > 1.P(x)(s)$

- 2 Yip et al. (2023) propose that definite BNs in Cantonese and Bangla are **quasi-names**.

- Similar to English *Mom*.

Non-honorificity

- In addition to anti-uniqueness effects, these definite markers often trigger a non-honorific interpretation.²

(3) Vietnamese

cái chủ tịch nước

CLF president country

‘the president’ (derogatory)

(4) Akan

Ghana màǹpàníń nó

Ghana president DEF

‘the Ghana president’ (derogatory)

²Beryl Bui p.c.; Forson (2022)

Demonstratives

- Anti-uniqueness and non-honorificity effects are well attested in demonstratives cross-linguistically.³

(5) English

the/#that sun

(6) German (Averintseva-Klisch 2016)

Diese Politiker sind (doch) alle korrupt/#fleißig!

those politicians are but all corrupt/#hardworking

‘All *those politicians* are corrupt/#hardworking, aren’t they?’

³Dayal & Jiang (2021); Ahn (2025); Averintseva-Klisch (2016)

Demonstratives

- These non-honorific uses also include affective uses.⁴

(7) English (spoken by a nurse to a patient)

How's that toe?

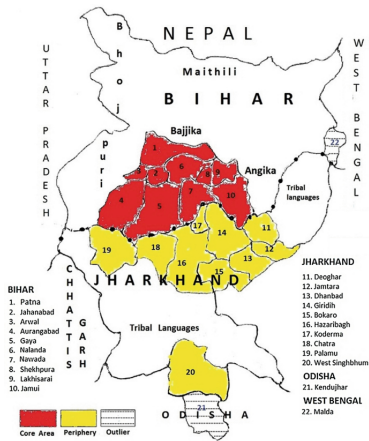
⁴Ahn (2017); Lakoff (1974); Potts & Schwarz (2010)

This Talk

- Focused on Magahi, an Eastern Indo-Aryan language primarily spoken in Bihar
- Data from elicitations with 5 native speakers



<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bihar>



(Sinha 2020)

Overview of Our Talk

- Magahi has both definite BNs and definites marked by $-w\bar{a}$.
- $-w\bar{a}$ definites are associated with anti-uniqueness and non-honorificity.

Proposal:

- Definites marked by $-w\bar{a}$ are indexed definites.⁵
- The presence of an index gives rise to anti-uniqueness and non-honorificity pragmatically.
 - 1 Anti-uniqueness as structural economy: indexed definites are dis-preferred when the index is referentially and pragmatically irrelevant.⁶
 - 2 Non-honorificity as directness: indexed definites are more direct, making them less polite in a pragmatic theory of honorification.⁷

⁵Schwarz (2009); Jenks (2015, 2018); Jenks & Konate (2022).

⁶Blumberg (2020); Ahn (2025); Schlenker (2005)

⁷Wang (2023)

Magahi -wā

- Magahi has a definite marker -wā (allomorphs: -bā/-(i)yā/(i)yā̃/-ā/mā).
- Magahi also has definite BNs.
 - Usually for unique or honored referents.

(8) a. *kut-wā*
 dog-DEF
 ‘the dog’

b. *admi-yā*
 man-DEF
 ‘the man’

(9) a. *rāspati-#yā*
 president-#DEF
 ‘the president’

b. *suraj-#wā*
 sun-#DEF
 ‘the sun’

-wā and (Quasi-)names

- Magahi (quasi-)names do not need to be BNs.
- Usually, *-wā* is used for referents who are close friends of the speaker and/or younger than the speaker.

(10) a. *Ram-mā*
Ram-DEF

‘Ram’ (if Ram is younger than
the speaker)

b. *Rām*
Ram

‘Ram’ (if Ram is older than
the speaker)

(11) a. *bhai-wā*
brother-DEF

‘brother’ (for a younger
brother)

b. *bhaiyā*
brother

‘brother’ (for an older brother)

-wā and Quasi-names

- -wā is also not used with “unique” superlatives.

(12) *duniyā ke sab se tej ādmi-#yā*
 world GEN all than smart **man-#DEF**

‘the world’s smartest man’

-wā and Quasi-names

- BNs also behave differently from (quasi-)names semantically w.r.t. rigidity.
- BNs have *de dicto* and counterfactual uses (cf. Yip et al. 2023).

- (13) CONTEXT: You thought Biden (who is from Delaware) was the president, but you are informed Trump (who is from New York) is actually the president.

Hamrā laglā hai ki rāspati Delaware state ke hai
 1SG.OBL seemed AUX COMP **president** Delaware state GEN is

‘I thought that the president was from Delaware.’

-wā and Quasi-names

- (14) CONTEXT: Candidate A lost the election last year. This year, he was found to have committed a murder.

agar ham okrā liye vote karitai hal, to rāspati khuni ādmi
 if 1 3SG.OBL for vote did AUX TOP **president** killer person
hote hal
 would.be COP

‘If we had voted for him, the president would be a murderer.’

- (15) CONTEXT: Your mom is the shortest woman in all the surrounding villages, so if your dad had married any other woman then your mom would’ve been tall.

Agar bābu-ji dosar aurat se sādi karthin hal, to #(hamni
 if dad-HON second woman INSTR wedding did COP TOP **1PL**
ke) mai-yā lambā hote hal
GEN mom-DEF tall would.be COP

‘If dad had married another woman, #(our) mom would be tall.’

-wā and Quasi-names

- (16) CONTEXT: You are comparing the size of the moon of another planet to the Earth's moon.

i cand-ā #(hamar) cand-ā se bara hai
 DEM.PROX MOON-DEF **1.GEN** **MOON-DEF** than big is

‘This moon is bigger than our moon.’

- (17) CONTEXT: You talking to your brother and are comparing the height of your friend's mom to your mom.

okar mai-yā mai-yā se lambā hai
 3NH.GEN MOM-DEF **MOM-DEF** than tall is

‘His mom is taller than Mom.’

-wā and Quasi-names

BNs in Magahi \neq quasi-names.

- (Quasi-)names don't need to be bare.
- (Quasi-)names are rigid; “unique” BNs are not.
- “Unique” superlatives are also BNs and unlikely to be names.⁸
- In non-unique scenarios, bare nouns are no longer used for “unique” objects.

⁸Coppock (2024)

Magahi *-wā* and Anti-uniqueness

- So, Magahi BNs are not quasi-names. But, *-wā* is anti-unique.
- We propose that this anti-uniqueness is pragmatic, rather than presuppositional.
- Changing the context to include multiple suns, moons, presidents, etc. allows for the use of *-wā* with “unique” nouns.

- (18) *jaun jaun des me ham geliai, (har des-wā ke) raspati-yā*
 REL RED country in 1SG went every country-DEF GEN **president-DEF**
dunni hal
 wealthy was

‘Whichever country I went to, the president was rich.’

- But, Dayal & Jiang (2021) propose that even if the set of situations under consideration for an anti-uniqueness presupposition is determined pragmatically, the anti-uniqueness requirement can still be presuppositional.

Magahi -wā and Anti-uniqueness

- Another reason to think anti-uniqueness is pragmatic is that speakers can “ignore” it for pragmatic purposes.
- For example, -wā can be used with unique nouns to show annoyance or contempt.

(19) **Pope-wā** *Amerika ke hai.*
Pope-DEF America GEN COP

‘The Pope is from America.’ + The speaker is disrespecting the Pope.

Magahi *-wā* and Non-honorificity

- Recall that *-wā* is only attached to the names of referents younger or of lower/equal social status than the speaker.
- Because of this, when used with an older referent, it is interpreted as disrespectful/contemptful.

(20) **Ram-*mā*** *await hai.* (Alok 2022)
Ram-DEF coming AUX

‘Ram is coming.’ + The speaker disrespects Ram.

- But, it can also be used affectively.

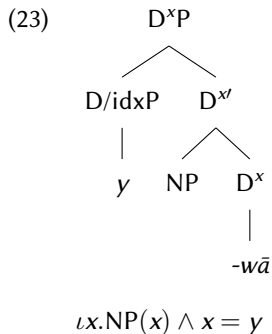
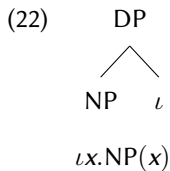
(21) ***Māṣṭar-wā*** *ail-thi(n).* (Alok & Ojaswee 2024)
teacher-DEF come-HON

‘The teacher came.’ + The speaker shows affection/intimacy with the teacher.

Proposal

Proposal:

- $-w\bar{a}$ definites have an index argument, while BN definites do not.⁹
- We adopt the syntax proposed by Jenks & Konate (2022).¹⁰



⁹Schwarz (2009); Jenks (2015, 2018); Jenks & Konate (2022); Chierchia (1998)

¹⁰This is a slight simplification of the Magahi facts. See Sharma (2025) for more discussion of the syntax of $-w\bar{a}$ definites.

-wā and familiarity

- -wā is licensed by weak familiarity (Roberts 2003)

(24) *Kut-#(wā) saṛak pār karaile chaho hai.*
dog-DEF road on cross want AUX

‘The dog wants to cross the road.’

- Also required for strong familiarity: anaphoric & donkey definites¹¹

(25) *Klās me e-go laṛkā au laṛki hai. Laṛka-#(wā) se kal milaliai.*
 class LOC one-CLF **boy** and girl are **boy-DEF** with y.day met

‘There are a boy and a girl in class. I met the boy yesterday.’

(26) *Agar kisān ke pās gadhā hai, to u gadha-#(wā) ke māro hai.*
 if farmer GEN near **donkey** AUX TOP 3 **donkey-DEF** ACC beat AUX

‘If a farmer has a donkey, he beats the donkey.’

¹¹cf. Jenks (2018: 510)

-wā as an Indexed Definite

- -wā definites must refer, i.e. they lack Coppock & Beaver's (2015) 'indeterminate readings'.

(27) CONTEXT: You are visiting another village, where you incorrectly assume that Ram is the village leader, and someone corrects you.

a. *Rām mukhiyā nai hai. ✓i gā-mā me koi*
 Ram **village.leader** NEG COP DEM.PROX village-DEF in any
mukhiyā nai hai.
 village.leader NEG COP

'Ram is not the village leader. ✓This village doesn't have a leader.'

b. *Rām mukhiya-wā nai hai. #i gā-mā me koi*
 Ram **village.leader-DEF** NEG COP DEM.PROX village-DEF in any
mukhiyā nai hai.
 village.leader NEG COP

'Ram is not the village leader. #This village doesn't have a leader.'

Deriving Anti-uniqueness from Indices

Proposal:

- Definites marked by $-w\bar{a}$ are dispreferred when a BN could be used instead.
- This preference for BN is due to *Minimize Restrictors!*.¹²

(28) *Minimize Restrictors!* (Schlenker 2005)

A definite description *the A B* (where the order of A vs. B is irrelevant) is deviant if A is redundant, i.e., if:

- the B* is grammatical and has the same denotation as *the A B* (=Referential Irrelevance), and
- A does not serve another purpose (=Pragmatic Irrelevance).

¹²See also: Minimize DP! (Patel-Grosz & Grosz 2017)

Deriving Anti-uniqueness from Indices

- Schlenker (2005) uses *Minimize Restrictors!* to explain why (29a) is infelicitous compared to (29b).

- (29) a. #the small American president
 b. the American president

- *American president* already suffices to identify a referent (*small* is referentially irrelevant).
- Our proposal is that an index is irrelevant for determining the reference of a larger situation unique noun, similar to what Blumberg (2020); Ahn (2025) propose for English demonstratives.

- (30) a. # $\iota x.\text{sun}(x) \wedge x = y$ (-*waa* definite)
 b. $\iota x.\text{sun}(x)$ (BN definite)

Deriving Non-honorificity from Indices

Proposal:

- The non-honorificity of *-wā* can be couched in a pragmatic theory of politeness.
- Wang (2023) derives honorific pronoun use from pragmatic maxims called *Taboos*, which prefer the use of presuppositionally weaker forms for honorification.
- For example: in languages that use a 2PL pronoun for 2SG honorification, this is due to the *Taboo on Atomicity*.

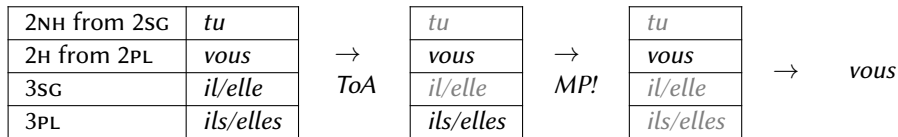
(31) *Taboo on Atomicity (ToA)* (Wang 2024: 4)

In honorific contexts, use a form that refers to non-atomic entities.

- In languages with honorific 2PL (e.g., French *vous*), this *Taboo* outranks *Maximize Presupposition!* in honorific contexts.

Deriving Non-honorificity from Indices

Honorific use of French 2PL *vous* (Wang 2024: 17).



Deriving Non-honorificity from Indices

- We propose the *Taboo* below to derive non-honorificity with $-w\bar{a}$.

(32) *Taboo on Indices (Tol)*:

In honorific contexts, use definite descriptions without indices.

- This is consistent with Wang's proposal that honorific forms should have weaker presuppositions.

(33) Presuppositions of indefinites and plain/indexed definites

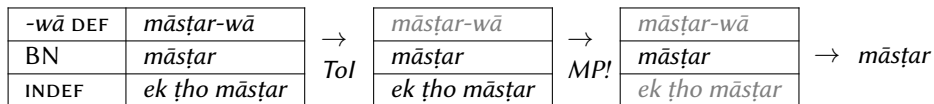
a. INDEXED DEF: $\exists!x[P(x) \wedge x = y]$

b. DEF: $|P| \leq 1$

c. INDEF: \emptyset

Deriving Non-honorificity from Indices

Honorific use of Magahi BN *māṣṭar* ‘teacher’.



Deriving Non-honorificity from Indices

- The *Taboo on Indices* states that for honorification, one should use a plain definite instead of an indexed one.
- Thus, using an indexed definite in an honorific context explains why *-wā* can be interpreted as pejorative and affective.

Conclusion

An old debate:

- Definites encode uniqueness (Russell 1905).
- Definites encode familiarity (Heim 1982).
- Both are relevant and encoded differently (Schwarz 2009; Jenks 2015, 2018; Jenks & Konate 2022).

Some newer ideas: we don't need two types of definites if ...

- Definite marking presupposes anti-uniqueness (Owusu 2022);
- BN definites are quasi-names (Yip et al. 2023).

This study: a return to the older ideas.

- The unique/familiar distinction of Schwarz (2009) and Jenks & Konate (2022) can be maintained with anti-uniqueness and non-honorificity are derived pragmatically.
- Such an analysis extends to similar effects with other indexed definites (including demonstratives) cross-linguistically.

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“Unique” Nouns are not Inherently Honored

- You can tease apart uniqueness and honorificity with verb agreement.
- Additionally, (quasi-)names of honored referents usually occur with an honorific particle, e.g., *ji*, *sāheb*.

(34) *Suraj purab me ugo h-ai.*
 sun east in rise COP-NH

‘The sun rises in the East.’

(35) *Bābu-ji har roj savere chau baje jag jā ha-thin.*
 dad-N every day morning six o'clock get.up go COP-N

‘Dad gets up at 6am every day.’

“Mismatches” Between *-wā* and Verb Agreement

- Alok & Baker (2022); Alok & Ojaswee (2024) propose that honorific “mismatches” are due stacked [HON] features.
- For example, Alok & Ojaswee (2024) propose that in the affective *-wā* example repeated below, there is a [-HON] feature associated with *-wā* and a [+HON] feature higher in the DP that triggers agreement.
- In our proposal, the non-honorific implication associated with *-wā* is derived pragmatically, while verbal agreement is due to morphosyntactic [HON] features.

(36) *Māṣṭar-wā ail-thi(n).* (Alok & Ojaswee 2024)
 teacher-DEF come-HON

‘The teacher came.’ + The speaker shows affection/intimacy with the teacher.

Magahi Transliteration

Consonants

	Bilabial	Dental	Postalveolar	Retroflex	Velar	Glottal
Plosive	p b	t d		ʈ ɖ	k g	
Nasal	m	n			ŋ	
Tap			r	ɽ		
Fricative		s	(ś)			h
Affricate			c j			

Approximants: w (labial), l (lateral), y (palatal)

Aspiration/breathy voice is indicated by h following a consonant.

Vowels

	Front	Central	Back
High	i		u
Mid	e	a	o
Low		ā	

Diphthongs: ai, au