



Bare Nouns in Magahi: Quasi-names or Anti-uniqueness?

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Background

- Some languages (e.g. Akan, Cantonese, Bangla) express definites either as bare nouns (BNs) or with a definite marker.
- Question:** How can we account for their distributions?
- One idea:** Owusu (2022) — the definite marker presupposes anti-uniqueness.
- Another idea:** Yip et al. (2023) — some bare nouns are quasi-names.

This study: **Magahi**

- Definite BNs: used with **unique** nouns and **honored** referents.
- wā definites: used with familiar **non-unique** nouns and **non-honored** referents.

Our proposal:

- BNs are plain definites, while definites marked by -wā are indexed definites.
- Anti-uniqueness and non-honorificity of -wā can be derived from the presence of an index.
- Similar anti-unique (Dayal & Jiang 2022) and pejorative/non-honorific (Averintseva-Klisch 2016) effects are also well attested with demonstratives.

Distinguishing Bare Nouns and Quasi-names

- Globally unique nouns are expressed with BNs, but names and quasi-names can be marked with -wā.

- (1) suraj-#wā (2) dhup-#wā (3) rāspati-#yā (4) Ram-(mā) (5) mai-yā
 sun-#DEF sunlight-#DEF president-#DEF Ram-DEF mom-DEF
 ‘the sun’ ‘the sunlight’ ‘the president’ ‘Ram’ ‘Mom’

- Superlatives are also expressed using BNs.

- (6) duniyā ke sab se tej ādmi-#yā
 world GEN all than smart man-#DEF
 ‘the world’s smartest man’

- BN definites ≠ quasi-names: they differ in rigidity.

- (7) Agar okrā le ham sab vote karatiye hal, rāspati khuni hote hal.
 if 3.ACC for 1 all vote did AUX **president** killer be AUX
 ‘If we had voted for him, the president would be a murderer.’

- (8) Agar bābu-ji dosar se sādi karatkhin hal, #mai-yā lambā hote hal.
 if dad other with wedding did AUX **mom-DEF** tall be AUX
 ‘If Dad had married another woman, #Mom would be tall.’

- (9) Hamrā lagalai hal ki rāspati Delaware state ke hai.
 1SG.DAT seemed AUX COMP **president** Delaware state GEN is
 ‘I thought that the president was from Delaware.’

Selected References

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-wā as an Indexed Definite Marker

- wā can be licensed by weak familiarity (Roberts 2003).

- (10) Kut-#(wā) sarak pār karaile chaho hai.
 dog-DEF road on cross want AUX
 ‘The dog wants to cross the road.’

- wā is also used in anaphoric definites and donkey definites.

- (11) Klās me e-go larḳā au larḳi hai. Larḳa-#(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.’

- (12) 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.’

-wā with “Unique” Nouns

- wā becomes felicitous with *president* in a context where it is no longer unique.

- (13) Jaun jaun des me ham geliai, raspati-#(yā) dumni hal.
 REL REL country LOC 1SG went **president-DEF** wealthy was
 ‘Whichever country I went to, the president was rich.’

- Emotive contexts also allow the use of -wā with unique nouns.

- (14) ham dhup-wā me nai jaibo
 1SG sunlight-DEF LOC NEG go
 ‘I won’t go in the sun(light).’ + The speaker is annoyed.

Deriving Anti-uniqueness

Proposal: Anti-uniqueness comes from competition between these structures (Jenks & Konate 2022).



Minimize Restrictors! (Schlenker 2005)

- (15) A definite description *the A B* is deviant if:
 a. *the B* is grammatical and the B = the A B.
 b. The inclusion of A has no pragmatic effects.

- Therefore: don’t use definites with -wā when a simpler BN can be used instead.
- Because BNs are used when uniqueness is satisfied, definites with -wā come with an anti-uniqueness inference when they are used instead.
- Anti-uniqueness also arises with other indexed definites cross-linguistically.
- Ahn (2025) makes a similar proposal to derive anti-uniqueness in English demonstratives (16).

- (16) **The/#That** author of *Waverley* also wrote *Ivanhoe*.

-wā and Non-honorificity

- The use of -wā is non-honorific: it is only used for referents who are close to and/or younger than the speaker, e.g. friends, close family members.
- wā is not used with elders/superiors, and doing so can indicate contempt.

- (17) Ram-mā await hai. (Alok 2022)
 Ram-DEF coming AUX.NHON
 ‘Ram is coming.’ + The speaker disrespects Ram.

- Against [HON]: one possibility then is since Magahi shows verbal agreement for person and honorificity, -wā should come with a [-HON] feature.
- But, you can still get honorific verbal agreement with an affectionate use of -wā.

- (18) Maṣṭar-wā ail-thi(n). (Alok & Ojaswee 2024)
 teacher-DEF come-HON
 ‘The teacher came.’ + The speaker shows affection/intimacy with the teacher.

Deriving Non-honorificity

Proposal: The non-honorificity of -wā comes from a pragmatic theory of politeness.

- According to Wang (2023), honorification arises when speakers choose a less direct/presuppositionally weaker element based on *Taboos*.
- We propose the *Taboo* in (19) to derive non-honorificity with -wā.

(19) *Taboo on Indices:* In honorific contexts, use definites without indices.

- Prediction: indexed definites are bad with honored referents cross-linguistically.
- (20) a. hāan sām̄paat phō̄ lūuk khūu niṅ Thai (Jenks 2015)
 Hans interview father son CLF:pair INDEF
 ‘Hans interviewed a father-son pair.’
 b. khāw khīt wāu (tua)-phō̄ (#khon nán) m̄y n̄a-sō̄ncay
 he think COMP SELF-father CLF that NEG interesting
 ‘He didn’t think the father was interesting.’

- Prediction: indexed definites can be used for affection/closeness.

- (21) How’s **that** toe? (Lakoff 1974)

Conclusion & Outlook

An old debate: what do definites encode?

- Russell (1905); Heim (1982): either uniqueness or familiarity.
- Schwarz (2009); Jenks & Konate (2022): both uniqueness and familiarity.

Some newer ideas: We don’t need two types of definites if ...

- Owusu (2022): definite marking presupposes anti-uniqueness.
- Yip et al. (2023): BNs are quasi-names.

This study: a return to Schwarz (2009); Jenks & Konate (2022).

- Their unique/familiar distinction can be maintained when anti-uniqueness and non-honorificity are derived pragmatically.
- Such an analysis extends to similar effects with demonstratives cross-linguistically.