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Postpositions and Noun Phrases in Hindi: A View from Acquisition of Agreement

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1 Introduction

The Hindi noun class system has a binary gender distinction of masculine and feminine, and a binary number distinction of singular and plural. These features appear in the form of inflectional agreement on verbal constituents, including main verbs, aspectual and modal auxiliaries, and tense marking copular forms. In a complex noun phrase, agreement shows up on an inflecting class of modifying constituents, such as adjectives, quantifiers and numerals, and particles marking modification by another noun. This paper concerns itself with the choice of nominal argument in the clausal and nominal domain respectively that controls agreement on these inflecting constituents.

Among the set of rules that determine agreement in Hindi on constituents on verbal constituents and within a complex noun phrase (CNP), a common rule applies restricting the choice of noun that controls agreement in both these domains. The language specific Case Blocks Agreement Condition (CBAC) as explicated in Pareek et al. (2016) (also described in Butt & King, 2004; Bhatt, 2005; Spencer, 2005; Kachru, 2006; among others), that has previously been understood in terms of overt case markers[1] disallowing verb agreement, can empirically be seen to extend in its application to the CNP as well. Inflectional particles in the language that mark modification relation by another nominal category also display a similar blocking effect in the CNP.

The CBAC then appears insufficient in its current form to characterize the agreement phenomena in Hindi, and a revised version is presented, so as to include a broader category of postpositions, a category P, that blocks agreement with the feature set in its complement. In addition to evidence from adult grammar, language acquisition data is presented where a subset of agreement errors suggests that children largely have this rule in the grammar, but some children appear to alternate between the grammatical and ungrammatical application of this rule.

The paper is organized as follows: Section 2 describes the system of agreement in a Hindi clause and CBAC is presented as the restriction by case markers on that system. This section then proceeds to the appearance of agreement in CNPs, specifically those with modifiers of a nominal category, where relational particles marking modification inflect for agreement. These particles are argued to be structurally similar to the case marking postposition in their capacity to restrict agreement, and the descriptive statement of CBAC is modified to PBAC (The Hindi Postpositions Block Agreement Condition). Section 3 presents the methodology with which a corpus of child language acquisition data was created. The different types of tasks are briefly described with their respective objectives and procedures. Section 4 discusses the findings in

[1] The term 'case' in this paper refers to overt morphology marking the syntactic and semantic relations of an argument in a sentence, and not the abstract CASE feature as often understood in linguistic theory.

the corpus, with respect to grammatical and ungrammatical appearance of agreement morphology in the child language data in both verbal and nominal domain. Section 5 concludes the paper with a discussion.

2 Agreement in Hindi

2.1 The Hindi Case Blocks Agreement Condition

In a Hindi clause structure, agreement on the verbal constituents is with the structurally highest nominal in its domain that is unmarked for overt case morphology (Bhatt, 2005). As can be seen in (1), when both the subject and the object of a transitive clause are unmarked for overt case morphology, the subject controls agreement on the verbal constituents.

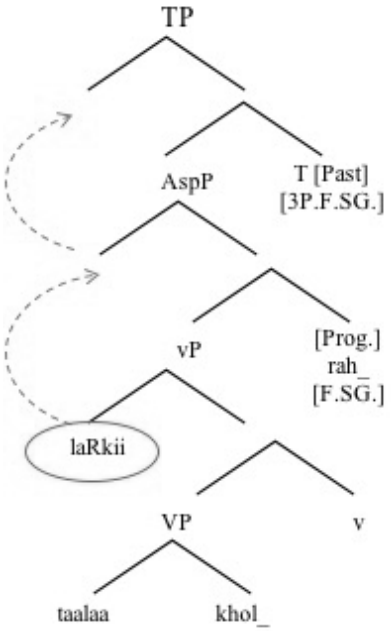
(1) *laRkii-ø* *taalaa-ø* *khol* *rahii* *thii*
girl.F lock. M.SG open PROG.F.SG AUX.PST.F.SG
'The girl was opening the lock.'

In the mono-clausal structure of an intransitive clause, the subject controls agreement if not followed by an overt case morphology, as can be seen in (2) below.

(2) *laRkii- ø* *girii*
girl.F fall.PERF.F.SG
'The girl fell.'

As adopted in Pareek et al. (2016), the *imperfective* aspect in Hindi is realized as a bi-clausal structure, where the aspectual head is merged higher than *v*P (Coon, 2010). Going by Chomsky's operation Agree (2000, 2001) in the Minimalist framework, agreement here is assumed to be a product of the feature checking mechanism, the result of which is that the gender and number features of the goal are morphologically realized on the progressive auxiliary and the past tense marking copula, as represented in (3), for the example in (1).

(3)

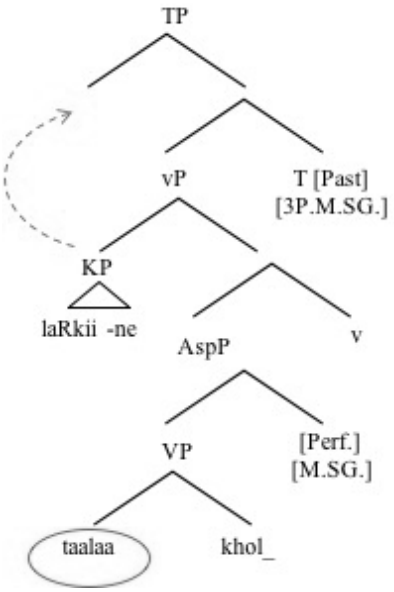


In (4), on the other hand, the subject has the ergative marker, in which case the object controls agreement on the perfective form of the verb. Hindi being a split-ergative language, the subject of a transitive/ditransitive clause appears with the *ergative* case. The perfective aspect, as

adopted by Pareek et al. (2016) from Anand & Nevins (2006), is realized as a mono-clausal structure, as represented in (5).

(4) *laRkii* *-ne* *taalaa-ø* *kholaa* *thaa*
girl.F -ERG lock.M.SG open-PERF.M.SG AUX.PST.M.SG
'the girl had opened the lock.'

(5)

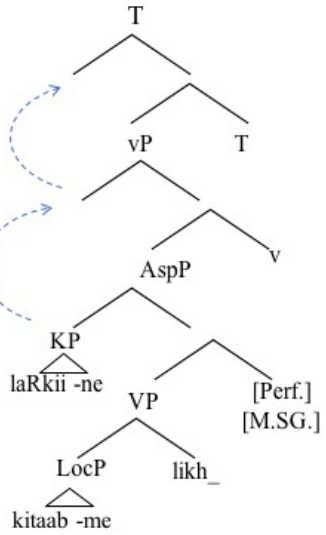


Where both the subject and the object have overt case morphology on them, as in (6), the verb agrees with neither the subject nor the object, and rather takes the *default* form, the structure for which is represented in (7).

(6) *laRkii* *-ne* *kitaab* *-me* *likhaa*
girl.F -ERG book.F.SG -LOC write-PERF.M.SG

'The girl wrote in this book.'

(7)



Without resorting to the ramifications of the different clause structures in the two aspectual conditions, a generalization emerges about verb agreement in Hindi, which is that verb agreement is with the nominal highest in the syntactic domain of the verb and which is unmarked by overt case morphology. This condition has been articulated in Pareek et al. (2016) as the

Hindi Case Blocks Agreement Condition: *Overt case marking renders the phi-features of nominal phrases invisible for agreement (i.e. to T and v probes)*.

As heads of a KP projection (Butt & King, 2004), overt case markers on sentential arguments in Hindi are assumed to be postpositional clitics that adjoin to the edge of the NP (Spencer, 2005; Otoguro, 2006). These postpositions are selected by a *v* projection fully specified for an argument structure, and owing to their non-projecting nature, the category of the NP remains an NP even after they are adjoined (Kidwai, 2010).

2.2 Complex Noun Phrase Internal Agreement in Hindi

In Complex Noun Phrases (CNPs) noun modifiers of nominal category (whether lexical or nominalized) require the presence of a relational particle to mark modification by noun[2] in the language, as seen in (8) and (9) below.

(8) *bandar* *kii* *kahaanii*
monkey.M.SG POSS.F story.F
'the monkey story (story of a monkey)'

(9) *phuul* *sii* *naazuk* *laRkii*
flower.M.SG COMP.F delicate girl.F
'girl as delicate as a flower'

The possessive marker and the comparative marker in (8) and (9) respectively, agree in gender and/or number with the modified noun. This structure may be described as N_{mod}+*P* +N^0, where N_{mod} is the noun providing modifying content, *P* the particle denoting modification relation, and N^0 the head noun in the CNP. The features of N_{mod} are observed to not control agreement on *P*.

An inflecting class of adjectives will also agree in gender and/or number with N^0 in attributive uses.

(10) *achii* *kitaab*
good.F book
'good book'

(11) *baRe* *kamre*
big.M.PL room.M.PL
'big rooms'

Other attributive modifiers of non-nominal category, such as quantifiers and participles, also show agreement in gender and/or number with N^0.

(12) *saarii* *tasviireN*
all.F pictures.F.PL
'all the pictures'

(13) *Tuutaa* *huaa* *Dabbaa*
broken.M.SG be.M.SG box.M.SG
'the broken box'

Noun phrase internal agreement also called as *concord*[3] in the descriptive literature (Greenberg, 1978, as cited in Corbett, 2006) has previously been attributed to the absence of Agree

[2] 'Modification by noun' is one of the four construction types on the Possession Modification scale proposed by Nikolaeva & Spencer (2010), the other three being Alienable Possession, Inalienable Possession and Canonical Modification.

[3] It may be noted that this paper excludes Oblique case morphology from the description, the inflections for which coincide with noun phrase internal agreement in the context of a postposition on the NP.

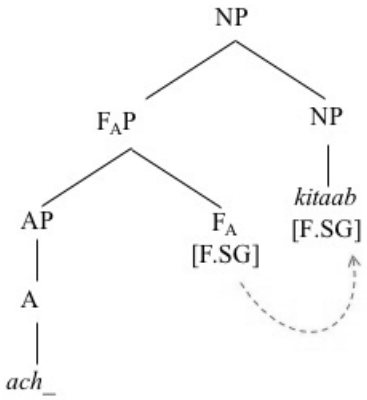
i. *choTe* *bacce* *-ko* *Dar* *lagaa*
small.OBL.M.SG child.OBL.M.SG -DAT fear feel.PERF
'the small child felt fear.'

relation between noun and modifier by Chomsky (2000). Carstens' (2000) approach, on the other hand, builds on the parallel drawn between the nominal and clausal structure (Abney, 1987; Kayne, 1994, 1998) and assumes an Agree based system in the DP. This system proposes the presence of *mid-level functional projections as a counterpart to sentential constituents*. Baker (2008) builds on this approach further in his analysis of lexical categories of nouns, verbs and adjectives, and proposes the *addition of a layer of functional structure above lexical heads where agreement morphemes are housed.*

The question that arises is if each of these modifier categories can also be assumed to be dominated by a functional projection of its respective category with uninterpretable features for agreement to take place. The presence of an agreement bearing functional projection F_AP dominating the AP, which is a potential probe with uninterpretable features, can provide an answer. This F_AP then adjoins to the N^0, probes upwards (instead of downwards as in a verbal projection), and in the process finds a goal to value its uninterpretable features (Baker, 2008), as seen in (15) for (14), repeated from (10).

(14) *achii* *kitaab*
good.F book
'good book'

(15)

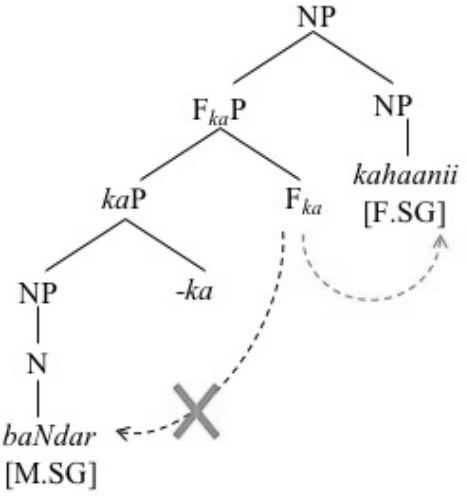


Assuming that each modifying category in a CNP, such as the quantifier and non-finite participle in (12) and (13) respectively, projects a functional projection responsible for agreement, the *P* in (8) and (9) will also project similarly to facilitate agreement with N^0. The availability of another set of interpretable features of N_{mod} in the domain for agreement does not prevent agreement with N^0, as represented in (17) for (16) below.

(16) *bandar* *kii* *kahaanii*
monkey.M.SG POSS.F. story.F
'the monkey story (story of a monkey)'

The author considers the two as realizations of two distinct phenomena and restricts the discussion to feature agreement as the product of an Agree relation with a set of uninterpretable phi-features getting valued with a matching set of interpretable features. Oblique morphology, on the other hand, appears as inflections only on *-aa* ending modifying constituents after agreement has taken place. Refer to Pareek (2020, 2022) for description of this grammatical feature in the language.

(17)



This suggests that these relational particles, that cliticize to the N_{mod} like the case marking postpositions in the language, also function to block agreement with the features in its complement. Looking at these facts for noun phrase internal agreement, the postpositional clitics appear to disable a noun's ability to control agreement. The CBAC can then be broadened in its scope to include these relational markers.

(18) **The Hindi Postpositions Block Agreement Condition (PBAC)**:

Postpositions render the phi-features of nominal phrases invisible for agreement (to functional projections with uninterpretable phi-features)

The category of postpositions in this descriptive statement includes case markers marking thematic roles of an argument, such as those marking *ergative, accusative, dative, instrumental,* locative postpositions and relational particles marking modification by noun.

Additional evidence for PBAC appears in the form of complex postpositions in Hindi that express spatial/temporal relations. The structure of complex postpositions such as those in (19) and (20) below, consists of a locative postposition expressing the spatial orientation of an object, preceded by the possessive marker.

(19) *table* *ke* *uupar*
table.F.SG POSS.OBL.M.SG above
'above the table/on top of the table'

(20) *table* *kii* *taraf*
table.F.SG POSS.F direction
'towards the (direction of) table'

Agreement on the possessive marker in these spatial postpositions is with the constituent denoting the spatial/temporal orientation rather than the noun whose orientation is being described. That the origin of these lexical items, such as *uupar* and *taraf* has been suggested to be from nouns (Masica, 1991; Payne, 1995; Svenonious, 2006; among others) accounts for the different agreement inflections on *P* in (19) and (20).

3 Language Acquisition Study

The corpus of child language data revealed instances of agreement with an incorrect argument of a transitive/ditransitive clause on the one hand, and on the other hand, agreement with the modifying nominal in a CNP structure. Having articulated PBAC in both of these structures, this section gives an outline for the acquisition study that forms the empirical basis for this descriptive rule in the grammar.

3.1 Language Acquisition Data

A corpus of primary child language data from 46 Hindi speaking children, in the age range of 23 months to 71 months, with a mean age of 49.9 months, was used for this study. The total number of analyzable utterances in the three tasks together were 13,804 of which 46.64 % were fragment utterances without an overt clause structure, and 53.35 % were utterances with an overt clause structure. The former of these were considered for CNP structures only, and the latter for agreement in both the verbal and the nominal domain.

The methodology for data consisted of a combination of (three) different elicitation methods, which targeted the production of structures with overt case morphology and nominal modifiers of different categories in various predicate structures in different tense/aspect conditions. The tasks consisted of 'Case Task', 'Bag Task' and 'Agreement Task'[4], each of which are briefly described in the following sections.

Prior ethical approval was obtained for all three tasks from the Institutional Ethical Review Board in Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, and an informed consent obtained from the parent/guardian of the participants, as well as the competent authority, in cases where fieldwork was conducted in a school.

3.2 Case Task

This task was adapted for Hindi from Ruigendijk's (2015) contrastive elicitation task, which was originally designed to capture the use of overt case morphology as part of a cross linguistic study. This task was a picture-based production experiment that targets the use of overt case marking postpositions with two sets of pictures in a descriptive format.

The first set targeted the use of nominative, ergative, accusative/dative, instrumental/comitative, and genitive markers in transitive and ditransitive sentences with full definite noun phrases through 15 picture pairs. The second set targeted the use of CNPs in possessive constructions and consisted of six items. The pictures were shown to each participant in a fixed random order and the ensuing conversation was video recorded for transcription and analysis in an anonymized form. The video recordings were transcribed using ELAN (version 4.6.2), an annotation tool for audio and video recordings.[5]

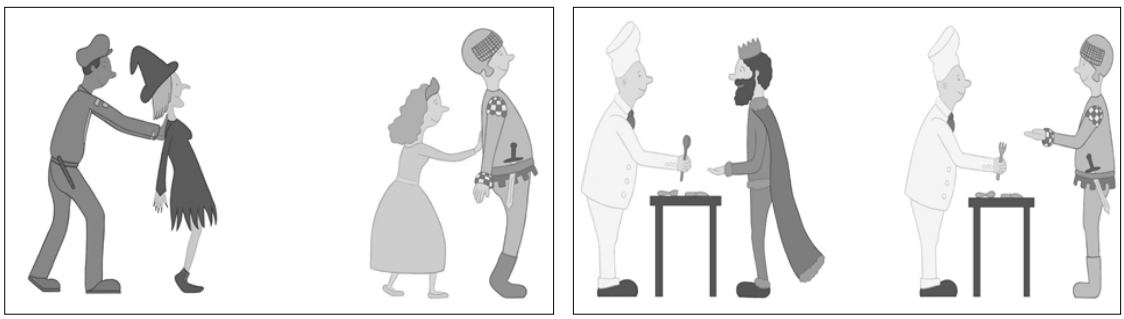


Figure1. Pictures for Case Task, for verbs *dhakka de* 'push' and *de* 'give'

[4] The first two of these tasks were part of a study titled 'The Acquisition of Hindi Case Marking' conducted in the Delhi region in 2013, under the supervision of Dr. Ayesha Kidwai and Dr. Sonja Eisenbeiss, funded by JNU/Essex Development Fund.

[5] ELAN (Version 4.6.2) [Computer software]. (2013). Nijmegen: Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics, The Language Archive. Retrieved from https://archive.mpi.nl/tla/elan

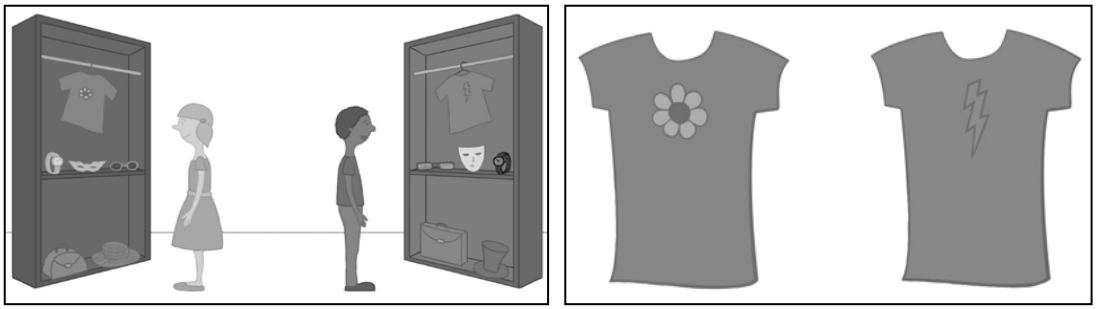


Figure 2. Pictures for possessives part of the Case Task

3.3 Bag Task

The Bag Task[6] was a semi-structured elicitation game (Eisenbeiss, 2009) that encourages the use of different nominal modifiers, locative expressions, possessive constructions including kinship relations, part-whole relations and ownership relations. The task involved the use of toy animals, a large bag and smaller pockets corresponding to each toy animal to be played as an interactive game between the researcher and the participant. Each session was video recorded for transcription and analysis in an anonymized form. The video recordings were transcribed using ELAN (version 4.6.2), an annotation tool for audio and video recordings.

Figure 3. The large duffel bag with pockets in the Bag Task

Figure 4. Pictures for toy animals and their pockets in Bag Task

[6] https://languagegamesforall.wordpress.com/examples-of-games/bag-game/

3.4 Agreement Task

The Agreement task was a picture based semi-structured production task (Pareek, 2018), which targeted the use of overt case morphology and agreement in several types of predicate structures in different tense/aspect conditions, as well as CNP internal agreement with different types of modifying structures. This elicitation task employed a combination of story-telling and picture description method for ten sets of pictures, each of which represented an activity/event or a chain of activities/events to prompt a narrative in complete sentences.

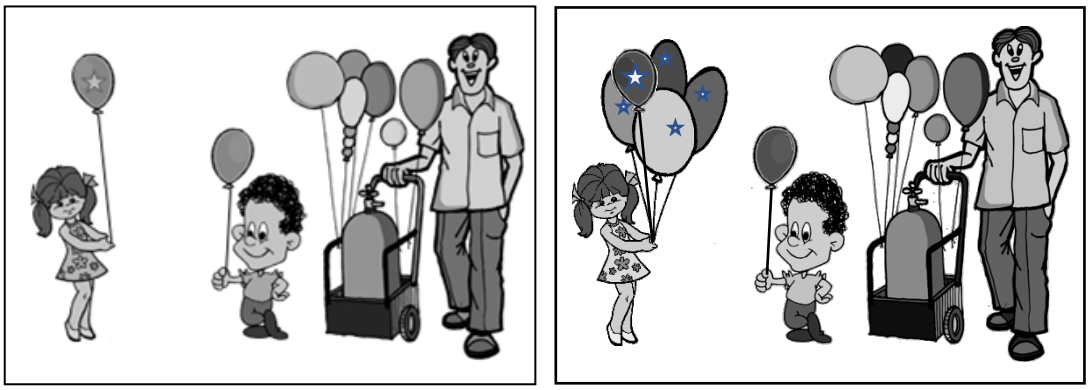


Figure 5. Pictures from the 'The Balloon Seller' set of Agreement Task

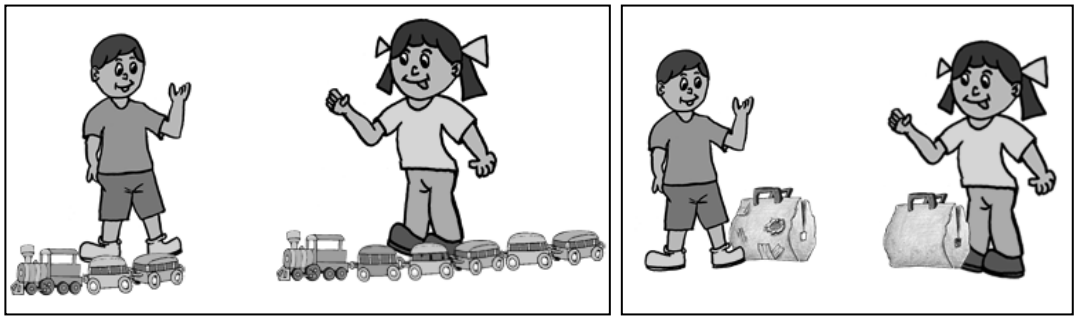


Figure 6. Pictures from the CNP set of Agreement Task

The pictures were shown to the participants through an interactive whiteboard application, Explain Everything, on an iPad, and the conversations were recorded along with the interactive screen view for transcription and analysis in an anonymized form. The video recordings were transcribed using ELAN (version 4.9.4), an annotation tool for audio and video recordings.[7]

4 PBAC in the Language Acquisition Data

For analyzing accuracy in verb agreement, all analyzable utterances from the three tasks with an overt clause structure were classified into *perfective* and *non-perfective*. This was necessary to keep into account the split-ergative typology of the language, since the different morphological case marking on the sentential arguments impact the appearance of agreement, as discussed in Section 2.1.

[7] ELAN (Version 4.9.4) [Computer software]. (2016). Nijmegen: Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics, The Language Archive. Retrieved from https://archive.mpi.nl/tla/elan

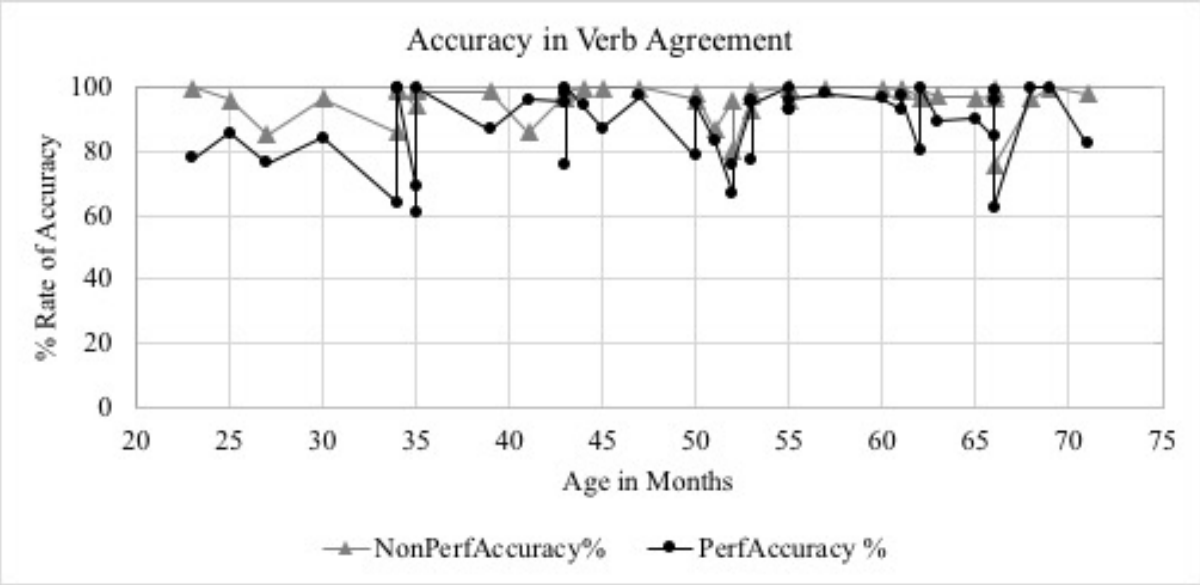


Figure 7. Rate of accuracy in verb agreement

One observation that can clearly be seen in Figure 7 is that the rate of accuracy appears to be higher in the non-perfective aspect, than in the perfective aspect across the age groups. The average rate of accuracy for verb agreement in the non-perfective aspect was 96.33 %, whereas that in the perfective aspect was 88.48 %. However, a scrutiny of these errors revealed that each of these could not be attributed to a single unambiguous deficiency in the developing grammar. A large number of instances of ungrammatical agreement could be attributed to one of the following ambiguous causes: incorrect gender value assigned to the borrowed English noun, an incorrect gender value assigned to the noun controlling agreement, or an overgeneralization of the default, as seen in (21) and (22) below, by participants of age 50 months and 55 months, respectively.

(21) *sister aur bhaai -ne to window toR diyaa
sister and brother -ERG EMPH window.F break give.PERF.M.SG
'sister and brother have broken the window.'

(22) *ye mEN kar luuNgaa
this I.F.SG do take.1P.M.SG
'I(F) will do this.'

A small subset of these errors, however, could be attributed to an unambiguous and consistent pattern. This subset of errors displayed instances of agreement with an overtly case marked object in the non-perfective aspect, instead of the null case marked subject, as can be seen in (23) and (24) below, by participants of age 43 and 52 months respectively.

(23) **laRkii laRke -ko uThaa rahaa hE*
girl boy.OBL -DAT lift PROG.M.SG AUX.PRS.3P
'the girl is lifting the boy'

(24) **raajaa is laRkii -ko khiiNc rahii hE*
king this girl -ACC pull PROG.F.SG AUX.PRS.3P
'the king is pulling this girl.'

Agreement on the progressive auxiliary in both these utterances is with the case marked object, instead of the null marked subject. Pareek et al. (2016) first reported this phenomenon for *-ko* marked objects in data from the Case Task, and subsequently this was also seen in data from the other two tasks. This type of ungrammaticality was largely observed in *-ko* marked objects, but this was because there were fewer instances of object arguments with other case markers, one of which is in (25) by a participant of age 50 months.

(25) *papa window -se dekh rahii hE
father window.F -INST see prog.F AUX.PRS.3P
'father is watching from the window.'

No clearly discernible pattern was found of agreement with ergative marked subject. Across the entire corpus, a total of 42 instances (6.89 %) of this type were seen in the language data of 14 participants, out of 609 utterances with a case marked object in the non-perfective aspect, and a break up of these errors across participants can be seen in Figure 8.

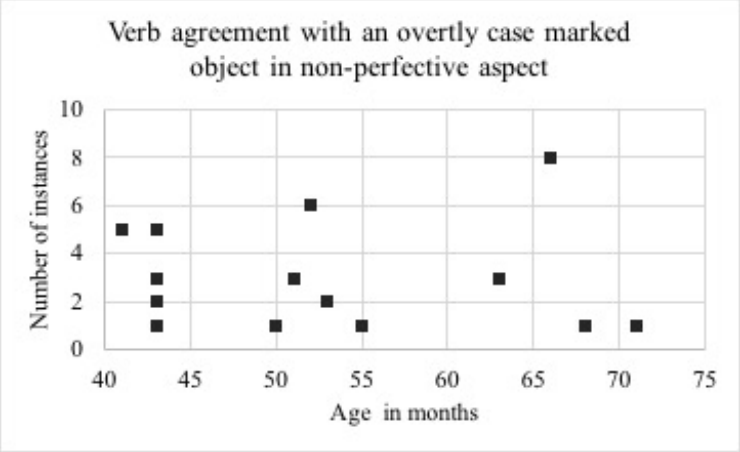


Figure 8. Number of CBAC violations on the object of a non-perfective clause

Pareek et al. (2016) attributed this type of error to CBAC being fallible for some children on the imperfective aspect, which is why they sometimes show agreement with the overtly case marked object.

With respect to agreement in CNPs[8], specifically in N_{mod}+*P* +N^0 structures, a high rate of accuracy was seen across the age groups in the corpus. The average rate accuracy was 86.03 % across the age groups, with ten participants having 100 % accuracy.

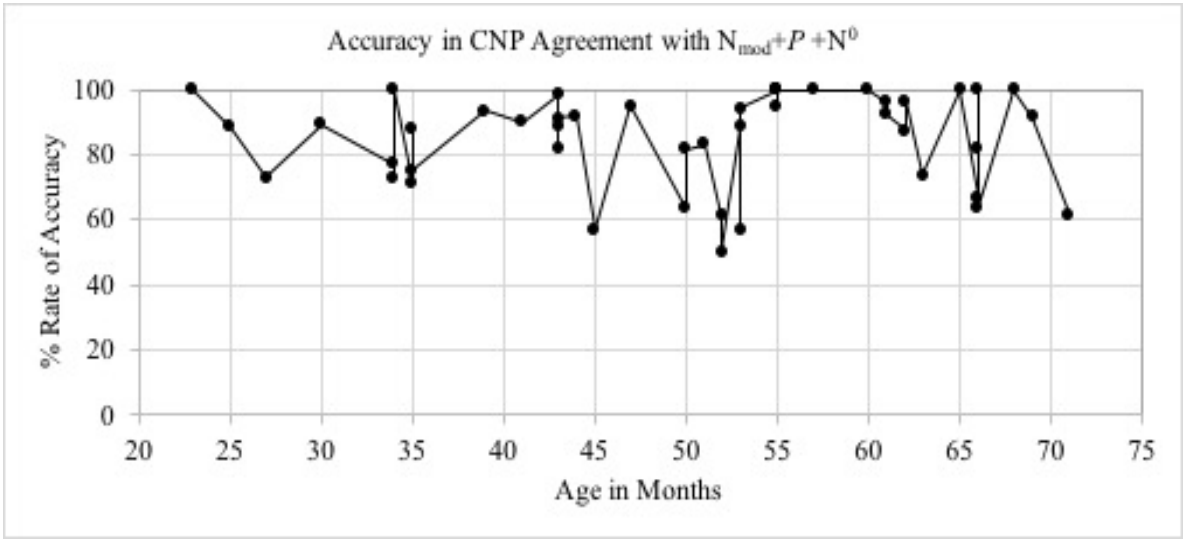


Figure 9. Rate of accuracy of agreement in N_{mod}+*P* +N^0 structures

A small subset of ungrammatical agreement in these structures could unambiguously be attributed to agreement with the possessor, instead of the possessed, that is, agreement with N_{mod}

[8] CNPs with canonical modification, such as those in (10), (11), (12) and (13), as described in Section 2.2, with modifiers of non-nominal category are not included in this discussion, since the paper focuses on postpositions and their ability to influence morphological agreement.

instead of with N^0. An example of such an utterance from the corpus can be seen in (26) below, by a participant of age 44 months.

(26) *ye* *laRkii* *-kii* *bag* *aur ye boy* *kaa* *bag*
this girl *-ka*.F.SG bag.M.SG and this boy *-ka*.M.SG bag.M.SG
'this the girl's bag and this the boy's bag.'

This pattern of ungrammatical agreement was not restricted to the possessive marker, but was also seen on the relational particle marking modification by noun and additional modifying constituents, as can be seen in the utterances in (27) and (28) by two participants, both of age 53 months.

(27) **laRkii* *-ko* *flower* *vaale* *(balloon)* *aur* *laRke* *-ko* *star*
girl -DAT flower *VAALA*.M.PL (balloon) and boy.OBL. -DAT star
vaale *(balloon)*
VAALA.M.PL (balloon)
'the girl (got the balloon) with flowers, and the boy (got the balloon) with stars.'

(28) **laRke* *-kaa* *baRaa* *aeroplane* *hE,*
boy.obl -KA.M.SG big.M.SG aeroplane.M AUX.PRS.3P
laRkii *-kii* *choTii* *aeroplane* *hE*
girl -KA.F small.F aeroplane.M AUX.PRS.3P
'the boy's aeroplane is big, the girl's aeroplane is small.'

In (27), agreement in number appears to be with *flower*(s) and *star*(s), as the pictorial stimuli consisted of singular balloon with many flowers, and another singular balloon with many stars. In (28) too, agreement on the possessive particle as well as the adjective in the second CNP is with the N_{mod}, instead of with the N^0.

In the entire corpus, there were 21 ungrammatical instances (1.86 %) of this type which are distributed across 12 participants[9] out of 1124 tokens of CNPs of N_{mod}+*P* +N^0 structure as seen in Figure 10.

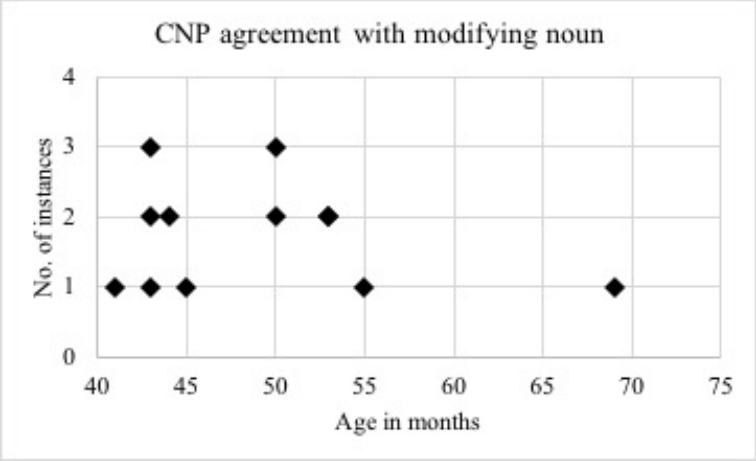


Figure 10. Agreement with N_{mod} in N_{mod}+*P* +N^0 structures instead of N^0

[9] The number of dots in Figure 10 is 11 instead of 12, because there were two participants of age 53 months with two errors each.

In the two types of errors discussed above: CBAC violation on the object of a non-perfective aspect, and agreement with the N_{mod} in N_{mod}+*P* +N^0 structures, eight participants made errors of the first type, six participants made errors of the second type, and six participants made errors of both types. This can be seen in Figure 11 below, even though the horizontal axis is not to scale.

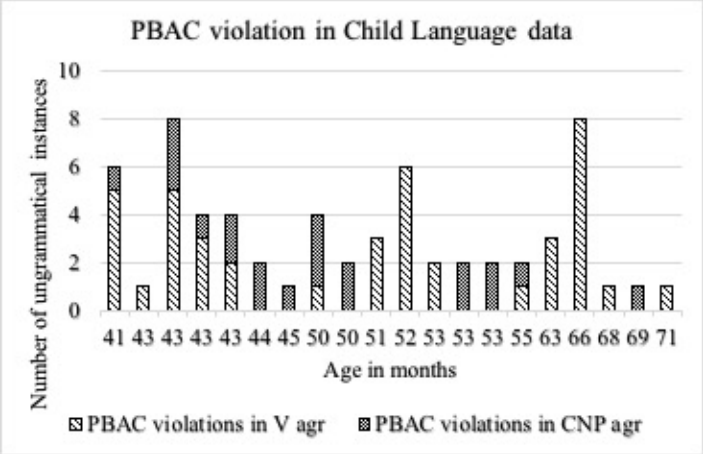


Figure 11. PBAC violation in the child language data

5 Discussion

A set of verb agreement errors in the non-perfective aspect can clearly be attributed to a developing system of agreement in which children sometimes agree with a morphologically case marked object. In Pareek et al. (2016) this was clearly stated as a CBAC violation on *-ko* marked objects. However additional acquisition data suggests that this is not restricted to *-ko*. No instances of clear and unambiguous agreement with a non-nominative subject were found. In CNPs of N_{mod}+*P* +N^0 structure, a subset of agreement errors had agreement on P with N_{mod} instead of N^0.

Both these types of errors can be attributed to a violation of this one rule in the developing grammar of some children. These children (up to the age of five years) sometimes allow agreement with a postposition marked nominal, in both the verbal structure (clearly with respect to the object position) and in the complex nominal phrase with respect to the modifying nominal. With empirical evidence from fluent adult grammar as well as child language data, this paper proposes to revise the existing understanding of morphological case markers blocking agreement, to extend its application to particles/postpositions marking nominal modification. The broad category of postpositions *P* makes the phi-features of its complement invisible for functional projections for agreement.

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