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Research Article

The Morphological Trade-Off: Honorific Expansion and the Loss of Number Agreement in Bhojpuri

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Abstract

This paper examines the typological shift in Eastern Indo-Aryan verbal morphology, focusing on the inverse relationship between number agreement and honorificity in Bhojpuri. While Old Indo-Aryan and modern Western Hindi maintain robust verbal number agreement, Eastern varieties have neutralised this feature entirely. Concurrently, Bhojpuri has developed a highly stratified system of verbal honorifics, encoding up to four levels of social distance and status (intimate, non-honorific, honorific, and high-honorific) directly onto the finite verb. Utilising syntactic data from the Saran-dialect region of Western Bihar, this study argues that the loss of number agreement represents a morphological trade-off rather than simple structural decay. The rigid encoding of sociolinguistic hierarchy demanded extensive structural space within the inflectional paradigm. To prevent extreme morphological congestion on the verb stem, the grammatical burden of number was offloaded onto the noun phrase via periphrasis. By mapping the syntactic architecture of Bhojpuri agreement phenomena, this paper demonstrates that the expansion of honorificity actively catalysed the expulsion of number agreement from the verb, highlighting a direct correlation between sociolinguistic pressures and diachronic syntactic restructuring.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Indo-Aryan language family exhibits a sharp typological divide regarding finite verbal agreement morphology. Western Indo-Aryan varieties, exemplified by Standard Hindi and Urdu, largely preserve the synthetic agreement paradigms inherited from Middle Indo-Aryan. These systems require verbs to rigidly encode the gender, number, and person of the syntactic pivot, whether operating under nominative or ergative alignment. Conversely, the Eastern Indo-Aryan branch, encompassing the Bihari languages of Bhojpuri, Magahi, and Maithili, has undergone a radical morphosyntactic restructuring. In these languages, verbal number agreement has been entirely neutralized. A singular or plural subject dictates no morphological alternation on the verb stem itself, representing a complete departure from the historical Indo-Aryan baseline.

The structural absence of number agreement on the finite verb creates a fundamental functional gap. Cross-linguistically, when an inflectional paradigm collapses, the grammatical function is typically outsourced to analytic structures to prevent ambiguity. In Bhojpuri, the burden of indicating plurality shifted entirely to the noun phrase through nominal periphrasis. Plurality is achieved via the agglutination of lexical items, primarily *log* (people) and *sabh* (all), which function as pluralizing enclitics attached to the right edge of nominals and pronouns. Because plurality is structurally resolved at the noun phrase level, the verb remains invariant regarding number, which frees the verbal morphology to prioritize other syntactic and semantic features.

The neutralization of number agreement in Eastern Indo-Aryan was not merely a process of phonological attrition or random morphological decay. Rather, it appears to be a direct consequence of a competing, overwhelming structural pressure: the grammaticalization of sociolinguistic hierarchy. Over time, Bhojpuri developed an exceptionally stratified honorific system. Standard Western Hindi utilizes a functional but limited three-tiered pronominal system (*tū*, *tum*, *āp*) with corresponding verbal markers. Bhojpuri, however, encodes up to four distinct levels of social distance, age, and status intimate, non-honorific, honorific, and high-honorific, directly onto the finite verb stem. Furthermore, this honorific agreement is not limited strictly to the subject; the verb often mutates to cross-reference the social status of the object or even a non-argument salient person in the conversational context, resulting in highly complex verb forms. This extensive encoding of social status requires significant morphological space within the verbal paradigm. The finite verb in Bhojpuri must host markers for tense, aspect, mood, person, and multiple tiers of sociolinguistic honorificity. Attempting to simultaneously maintain a synthetic paradigm for singular and plural agreement across all these existing nodes would result in severe morphological congestion, rendering the verb phonologically unwieldy. Therefore, this paper posits that the loss of number agreement constitutes a morphological trade-off. The structural demands of encoding a rigid, hyper-specific social hierarchy actively forced the expulsion of number agreement from the verbal complex.

Utilizing syntactic data drawn from the Saran dialect region of Western Bihar, this study maps the specific architecture of

Bhojpuri agreement phenomena. By examining the structural limitations of the finite verb alongside the development of periphrastic nominal pluralization, this paper argues that the expansion of honorific morphology was the primary structural catalyst for the diachronic loss of number agreement in Eastern Hindi.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The morphosyntactic evolution of the Indo-Aryan language family has generated substantial scholarly interest, particularly regarding the divergence of agreement systems across its geographical continuum. The transition from the highly synthetic inflectional paradigms of Old Indo-Aryan (OIA) to the increasingly analytic structures of New Indo-Aryan (NIA) is well-documented. However, the specific typological split between Western and Eastern Hindi varieties—where the former retained robust number agreement and the latter abandoned it entirely in favor of complex honorific marking—remains an area requiring specialized diachronic and synchronic synthesis. This review examines the existing literature across three interconnected domains: the historical decay of number agreement in Eastern NIA, the typological architecture of Bhojpuri honorifics, and the theoretical frameworks surrounding morphological trade-offs and paradigm leveling.

The foundational documentation of the Eastern Indo-Aryan typological shift originates in Grierson's (1903) ^[5] Linguistic Survey of India. Grierson systematically mapped the structural boundaries of the Bihari subgroup (comprising Bhojpuri, Magahi, and Maithili), identifying the invariant nature of the finite verb concerning the grammatical number of its arguments. Grierson noted that unlike Standard Hindi, which strictly enforces a singular/plural dichotomy on the verb stem, Bhojpuri delegates the expression of plurality entirely to nominal periphrasis. While Grierson's work was primarily descriptive and taxonomic, it established the baseline for future diachronic analyses by highlighting the regional exclusivity of this morphosyntactic gap.

Subsequent historical linguistics expanded upon Grierson's observations by tracing the mechanical causes of this divergence. Chatterji (1926) ^[3], in his analysis of Magadhan languages, and specifically Tiwari (1960) ^[8] in *The Origin and Development of Bhojpuri*, provided exhaustive diachronic tracings of verbal morphology from OIA through Middle Indo-Aryan (MIA) *apabhramsa* to modern Bhojpuri. Tiwari (1960) ^[8] demonstrated that the collapse of number agreement was initially driven by phonological attrition. The distinct plural verb endings of OIA, such as the third-person plural *-nti*, progressively weakened in MIA, eventually reducing to nasalized vowels (e.g., *-hi*) that phonologically merged with or became indistinguishable from corresponding singular forms or early honorific markers. Tiwari's analysis implies that the loss of number agreement was a downstream consequence of phonetic decay rather than an intentional syntactic restructuring. However, phonological decay alone is insufficient to explain why Western Hindi repaired its number paradigms while Eastern Hindi allowed them to permanently collapse. Masica (1991) ^[5] approaches this disparity through a broad typological

lens in The Indo-Aryan Languages. Masica categorizes the Eastern reliance on lexical pluralizers (such as *log* and *sabh*) as the adoption of an agglutinative plural strategy. He argues that this analytic shift was a necessary functional compensation for the collapsed verbal paradigms. Masica (1991) ^[5] situates Bhojpuri within a continuum of Eastern languages where inflectional simplicity on the verb is offset by syntactic complexity in the noun phrase. Yet, Masica's broad overview leaves room for deeper inquiry into why the verbal paradigm in Bhojpuri was unable to accommodate a secondary grammaticalization of number, a process that readily occurred in neighboring Western dialects.

The answer to this structural limitation is heavily indicated in the literature surrounding the sociolinguistics of Eastern Indo-Aryan agreement. The space vacated by number agreement on the Bhojpuri verb was rapidly occupied by an intricate system of honorificity. Montaut (2004) ^[7] and Davison (2002) ^[4] explore the mechanics of agreement features in Hindi and its regional varieties, noting that while Western Hindi utilizes a functional but limited three-tiered honorific system (*tū*, *tum*, *āp*), it remains fundamentally tied to plural morphology. In Standard Hindi, honorificity is syntactically expressed by borrowing the plural agreement forms.

In sharp contrast, the literature on Bhojpuri syntax, notably the localized studies by Verma (1971) ^[9] and subsequent analyses of Bihari morphosyntax, reveals a paradigm where honorificity has completely decoupled from grammatical number. Bhojpuri utilizes dedicated, morphologically distinct affixes to encode up to four tiers of social hierarchy: intimate, non-honorific, honorific, and high-honorific. Furthermore, cross-linguistic studies on allocutivity, the encoding of the addressee's social status on the verb, regardless of whether the addressee is an argument of the sentence, frequently cite the Bihari languages as prime examples of hyper-stratified agreement (Antonov, 2015) ^[1]. The Bhojpuri verb must routinely index the person and honorific status of the subject, and frequently the honorific status of the object or a non-argument listener, resulting in highly agglutinative and morphologically dense verb forms.

The intersection of these two phenomena, the loss of number and the expansion of honorifics, invites analysis through the theoretical lens of morphological capacity and paradigm leveling. Bybee (1985) ^[2], in her foundational work on morphology, posits that inflectional paradigms possess limits regarding the cognitive and structural load they can sustain. When a specific functional category expands, paradigm restructuring often forces the expulsion or leveling of competing categories to maintain efficiency. In the context of Bhojpuri, the sociolinguistic pressure to establish rigid social hierarchies during interpersonal communication possessed a high functional yield. Conversely, the functional yield of verbal number agreement was low, as plurality could be efficiently and unambiguously marked on the noun phrase via the aforementioned agglutinative clitics.

While independent literature thoroughly covers the phonological decay of Bhojpuri verb stems (Tiwari, 1960) ^[8] and the synchronic complexity of its honorific markers (Verma, 1971; Antonov, 2015) ^[9, 1], there remains a distinct gap in

synthesizing these historical events into a unified causal framework. Current scholarship largely treats the loss of number agreement and the rise of multi-tiered honorifics as parallel but isolated diachronic events. A targeted syntactic analysis is required to explicitly test the hypothesis of a morphological trade-off. By mapping the syntactic architecture of the contemporary Saran dialect, it is possible to demonstrate that the finite verb's node structure fundamentally cannot accommodate synthetic number inflection alongside multi-argument honorific indexing. Addressing this gap requires shifting the perspective from historical phonetic decay to modern structural limitations, proving that the expansion of honorificity actively catalyzed, or at least permanently cemented, the expulsion of number agreement from the Eastern Hindi verbal paradigm.

DATA

The dataset for this analysis comprises elicited syntactic judgments and naturalistic phrase constructions representative of the Saran dialect of Bhojpuri, spoken primarily in the Siwan, Saran, and Gopalganj districts of Bihar. The data isolates the morphosyntactic behavior of the lexical items *log* and *sabh* within various nominal and pronominal environments. To demonstrate the absence of verbal number agreement, baseline singular forms are juxtaposed with their pluralized counterparts. Standard Leipzig Glossing Rules are applied for morphological breakdown.

1. Baseline singular subject with invariant verb

Kisan Khet Me Gail
Farmer field in went .3
"The farmer went into the field."

2. Human nominal pluralisation utilising 'log'

Kisan log khet me gail
farmer PL field in went. 3
"The farmers went into the field."

3. Nominal pluralization utilizing 'sabh'

laikā sabh ām khāla
boy PL mango eat.3.HAB
"The boys eat mangoes."

The distribution of *log* and *sabh* is structurally conditioned by animacy and semantic features. *log* is strictly restricted to [+human] referents, whereas *sabh* demonstrates a wider distribution, attaching to [+human], [+animate, -human], and [-animate] nouns. When applied to first- and second-person pronouns, *log* is obligatorily selected to form plurals.

4. Pronominal pluralization

- a. Ham kitab parhani
1SG book read.1.PST
"I read the book."

- b. ham log kitab parhani ja¹
1SG PL book read.1.PST HON
"We read the book."

To determine the syntactic independence of these items, we must test structural adjacency constraints. If *log* and *sabh* remain independent nouns heading a compound phrase, they should permit intervening lexical material, such as adjectives or determiners.

5. Adjectival modification constraints

- a. Barka kisan log aibāl
big farmer PL come. 3. FUT
"The big/senior farmers will come."
b. Kisan barkā log aibāl
farmer big PL come. 3. FUT
(Intended: "The big/senior farmers will come.")

Finally, observing the interaction between these plural markers and case-marking postpositions reveals their hierarchical position within the noun phrase (NP). In Bhojpuri, the dative/accusative case is marked by the postposition *ke*.

6. Postpositional attachment

- a. Maṣṭar laikasabh ke pīṭal
teacher boy PL ACC beat.3.PST
"The teacher beat the boys."
b. Maṣṭar laikake sabh pīṭal
teacher boy ACC PL beat.3.PST
Intended: "The teacher beat the boys."

The data in (6) demonstrates that the plural marker must strictly precede the case marker, establishing the structural sequence: Noun + Plural Marker + Postposition.

Analysis

To ascertain the precise syntactic categorization of *log* and *sabh*, the data must be evaluated through the continuum of grammaticalization proposed by Hopper and Traugott (2003). Grammaticalization represents the diachronic process whereby an independent lexical word loses its semantic autonomy and structural independence, eventually becoming a grammatical marker or affix. The diagnostic criteria for this shift include semantic bleaching, decategorization, and morphological bonding.

Semantic Bleaching

The primary indicator of grammaticalization is the erosion of lexical meaning, rendering the item a purely functional morpheme. Historically derived from the Sanskrit *loka* (world/people), *log* retains its independent nominal status in highly restricted contexts in Bhojpuri (e.g., *kuch log*, "some

people"). However, as a plural marker, it exhibits severe semantic bleaching. This is most evident in pronominal constructions like *ham log* (1SG + PL). If *log* retained its lexical meaning, the literal translation "I people" would yield semantic anomaly. Instead, *log* functions exclusively to supply the [+plural] feature to a pronoun lacking inherent number.

Similarly, *sabh* derives from the Old Indo-Aryan *sarva* (all). As an independent quantifier, it dictates totality. However, when functioning as a plural enclitic, it loses its universal quantification. In Example (3), *laikā sabh ām khāla*, the subject does not translate to "All the boys in existence eat mangoes," but simply functions as a definite or generic plural ("The boys / Boys"). The semantic weight of "all" has bleached entirely into a binary number feature.

Syntactic Decategorization

Decategorization refers to the loss of morphosyntactic properties characteristic of the item's original word class. Nouns natively permit independent modification by adjectives. If *log* and *sabh* functioned as the lexical heads of a compound noun phrase (e.g., [farmer [people]]), they would structurally permit direct adjectival modification.

The ungrammaticality of Example (5b), *kisan barkā log*, proves that *log* has lost its nominal category status. The adjective *barkā* (big) cannot intervene between the noun and the plural marker, nor can it modify *log* directly. Modification must occur at the left edge of the entire noun phrase, as seen in (5a), *barkā kisan log*. This strict adjacency requirement confirms that *log* and *sabh* are no longer independent syntactic constituents. They have decategorized into functional heads occupying the Number Phrase (NumP) node immediately above the Noun Phrase.

Morphological Bonding and Cliticization

While *log* and *sabh* are no longer independent words, they have not fully grammaticalized into inflectional affixes (suffixes). True affixes in Indo-Aryan languages undergo high degrees of phonological fusion, often triggering morphophonological stem alternations (e.g., oblique vowel shifts). Furthermore, affixes cannot carry independent phonological stress.

In Bhojpuri, the host nouns (*kisan*, *laikā*) undergo no morphological mutation when *log* or *sabh* is attached. The markers retain their distinct syllabic weight and do not trigger vowel reduction in the noun root. Therefore, they lack the phonological integration characteristic of word-level affixes. However, their syntactic integration is absolute. As demonstrated in Example (6a), *laikā sabh ke*, the plural marker intervenes between the noun and the postposition. The case marker *ke* assigns accusative case to the entire preceding structural unit (*laikā sabh*). The unacceptability of (6b), *laikā ke sabh*, confirms that the plural marker cannot scope over a noun that has already been case-marked.

This behavior defines *log* and *sabh* as phrasal enclitics. They exhibit phonological independence but strict syntactic dependence. They attach specifically to the right edge of the bare noun stem, forming a complex nominal stem (*laikā-sabh*)

¹ Note: 'ja' is a non-argument honorific enclitic frequent in Saran Bhojpuri, not a number marker.

onto which subsequent phrasal clitics, such as case-marking postpositions, are sequentially layered.

Synthesis

The analysis reveals that the mechanism compensating for the loss of verbal number agreement in Eastern Hindi is a system in active grammatical transition. *Log* and *sabh* occupy an intermediate position on the grammaticalization cline. They have undergone complete semantic bleaching, functioning purely as number operators rather than quantifiers or nominals, and strict decategorization, rejecting independent modifiers and demanding rigid structural adjacency. While they have not eroded phonologically into true suffixes, their syntactic behavior as rigidly ordered phrasal enclitics demonstrates a highly systematized, analytic method of encoding plurality. This structural reliance on enclisis allowed Bhojpuri to abandon synthetic number agreement on the verb entirely, reserving the finite verbal morphology for the complex encoding of sociolinguistic allocutivity.

3. DISCUSSION

The syntactic behavior of *log* and *sabh* in the Saran dialect provides a clear window into how Eastern Indo-Aryan languages restructure their grammatical architecture to compensate for lost inflectional paradigms. The data demonstrates that these items are not merely lexical add-ons used for clarification, but obligatorily grammaticalized elements occupying a specific functional node (NumP) within the noun phrase. This structural reality has profound implications for how we understand the typological divergence between Western and Eastern Hindi.

First, the classification of *log* and *sabh* as phrasal enclitics rather than bound affixes highlights a specific typological trajectory. When a language loses a morphological feature like verbal number agreement, it faces a functional deficit. To repair this deficit, Bhojpuri did not attempt to rebuild a synthetic paradigm (e.g., by fusing *log* directly into the noun stem to create a new declension class). Instead, it opted for a strictly analytic solution. By adjoining the plural marker to the right edge of the bare noun phrase, prior to case assignment, the language maintains highly regular, unmutated noun stems. This analytic strategy contrasts sharply with the complex, fusional oblique plural nominal forms found in Standard Hindi (e.g., *larkā* → *larkō*), suggesting that Eastern Hindi relies on syntactic syntax rather than word-level morphology to process nominal arguments.

Second, this nominal restructuring cannot be analyzed in isolation from the verbal paradigm. The grammaticalization of *log* and *sabh* is the direct structural consequence of the morphological trade-off discussed in the literature. Western Hindi utilizes the finite verb stem to encode gender, number, and person. Bhojpuri reallocated that identical morphological space to encode person and an exceptionally dense system of honorificity. The Bhojpuri verb must routinely cross-reference the social status of the subject, the object, and occasionally a non-argument addressee (allocutivity).

Attempting to conjugate a single verb stem for tense, aspect, person, four tiers of honorificity, and grammatical number would violate basic principles of morphological economy. The verb would become computationally heavy and phonologically unwieldy. Therefore, the grammaticalization of *log* and *sabh* was not a secondary, parallel development; it was a structural necessity. By permanently offloading the feature of [±plural] onto the noun phrase via enclitics, the syntax cleared space on the verb stem, allowing the sociolinguistically vital honorific system to expand without restriction. The invariant nature of the finite verb concerning number is not a sign of grammatical decay, but of highly efficient grammatical reallocation.

Furthermore, the strict ordering constraints observed in the data (Noun + Plural Enclitic + Case Postposition) indicate that Bhojpuri has stabilized a new phrase structure rule. The inability of adjectives to intervene between the noun and the plural marker proves that the marker scopes over the entire NP, not just the lexical noun. This rigid agglutinative sequence operates seamlessly with other areal features, such as Differential Object Marking (DOM). When a specific, animate plural object is marked with the dative/accusative postposition *ke*, the syntax cleanly processes the plurality before assigning case, preventing scope ambiguity.

Finally, analyzing *log* and *sabh* through the lens of grammaticalization raises questions about their future trajectory. According to Hopper and Traugott's (2003) unidirectionality hypothesis, grammatical items tend to become more bonded to their hosts over time. Currently, these markers exhibit complete semantic bleaching and decategorization, but lack phonological fusion. If the language continues along this diachronic path, we might eventually observe phonetic reduction, for instance, *log* reducing to an unstressed suffix *-l* or *-lo* that triggers stem alternations, transitioning Bhojpuri back toward a synthetic nominal plural system. For now, however, the system remains firmly analytic.

4. CONCLUSION

The divergence of Eastern Indo-Aryan from the rigid number agreement paradigms of Western Indo-Aryan represents a fundamental typological shift rather than mere phonological attrition. By examining the Saran dialect of Bhojpuri, this analysis confirms that the absence of verbal number agreement is structurally offset by the grammaticalization of the lexical items *log* and *sabh*.

Applying diagnostic criteria for syntactic status, the data demonstrates that these markers have entirely shed their historical lexical identities as independent nouns meaning "people" and "all." They undergo severe semantic bleaching, fail to permit independent adjectival modification, and demand strict structural adjacency to the noun phrase. Consequently, they must be classified as grammaticalized phrasal enclitics operating within the NumP projection.

This analytic mechanism of encoding plurality on the noun phrase is intricately tied to the broader architecture of the language. The expulsion of number agreement from the finite verb was actively catalyzed by the expansion of complex, multi-tiered honorific morphology. To maintain morphological

economy, the syntax transferred the burden of number marking away from the verb, utilizing the encliticization of *log* and *sabh* to fill the resulting functional gap. Ultimately, the Bhojpuri number system illustrates the dynamic capacity of syntax to recruit and restructure independent vocabulary, ensuring that vital grammatical features survive even when their historical inflectional paradigms collapse under competing sociolinguistic pressures.

FUTURE RESEARCH

While this paper maps the synchronic status of these plural markers in the Saran dialect, further investigation is required across the broader Magadhan language continuum. A comparative syntactic analysis charting the behavior of *log* and *sabh* against the pluralizing strategies of Magahi and Maithili, languages with even more complex allocutive verbal paradigms, would clarify whether the degree of verbal honorificity directly correlates with the speed and depth of nominal grammaticalization. Additionally, phonetic studies utilizing spectrographic analysis could definitively measure the prosodic integration of these enclitics, providing empirical data on their potential transition from phrasal clitics to true bound affixes.

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