

MARKERS OF (IN) DEFINITENESS IN MAITHILI¹

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Introduction

Attracted to the study of largely Sino-Tibetan hill languages of Nepal, most Western writers have either neglected the plains languages completely or else have lumped them together as 'dialects' of the languages of north Indian states. This paper is an attempt to describe the linguistic markers of definiteness in Maithili—an Indo-Aryan language spoken by 24.3 million 'first language speakers' (Grimes 1996:588) in the eastern and northern regions of the Bihar state of India and the southeastern plains, known as the *tarāi*, of Nepal.

Little has been published on definiteness in Indo-Aryan languages. The only published studies that use data from Indo-Aryan languages for illustration and that I have personal knowledge of are: Comrie 1979, 1981 on Hindi; Dasgupta 1983 on Bengali; Junghare 1983 on Marathi, Hindi and Bengali; and Yadav 1996 on Maithili.

The treatment of definiteness and referentiality in linguistics has certain antecedents in philosophy and logic. However, the earlier logic-bound philosophical treatments of Russell and Carnap are found to be too formalistic and too restrictive to render a full account of the facts of natural language.

Definiteness is a semantic notion which is conveyed not only through morphological and syntactic devices but also through discourse strategies. Definiteness is clearly a discourse-scope phenomenon. This paper however will discuss the linguistic devices that are used to uniquely identify the referent of the definite noun phrase in Maithili. Since the data base of this paper comes primarily from case-marking of direct objects, the morphology of the object-marking strategy in Maithili will be discussed in greater detail. Morphological formations of definite adjectives and encliticization as strategies of definitization/specificity will also be discussed. Besides morphological marking, some syntactic processes also convey definiteness in Maithili. Two such processes, e.g. relativization and topicalization, will

be discussed in this paper. In the end, the paper will discuss the word order of the major constituents of the sentence which also tends to serve the communicative purpose of conveying the semantic notion of definiteness in Maithili.

Before we proceed further it would be useful to clarify the concept of definiteness. In other words, how can we characterize the distinction between definite and indefinite expressions? In this regard, I could do no better than quote Givon (1984: 399) who offers the following definition of definite and indefinite referential nominals in terms of the communicative contract:

Indefinite: "Speakers code a referential nominal as indefinite if they think that they are not entitled to assume that the hearer can—by whatever means—assign it unique referential identity."

Definite: "Speakers code a referential nominal as definite if they think that they are entitled to assume that the hearer can—by whatever means—assign it unique reference."

Morphological Coding of Definiteness

Maithili has no article comparable to English 'a/an'. The cardinal numeral *ek* 'one' followed by the classifier *-ṭā* is used to denote indefinite (but specific) objects. Such indefinite object nouns are not marked for the accusative-dative case:

1. ham ek-ṭā gāi kin-ab
I one-CLAS cow buy-FUT-(1)
'I will buy a cow.'
2. tō ek-ṭā ām tor-ait ch-ē
you(NH) one-CLA Smango pluck-IMPERF AUX-PRES-(2NH)
'You are plucking a mango.'
3. u ek-ṭā cor pakar-l-ak
he(NH) one-CLAS thief catch-PST-(3NH)
'He caught a thief.'

Maithili has no article comparable to English 'the', either. Consequently, a number of linguistic devices are used to uniquely identify the referent of the direct object noun phrase. The object-marking strategy in Maithili is determined by a set of two extrasyntactic criteria, namely animacy (i.e. human/nonhuman; animate/inanimate) and definiteness. As a matter of fact, in Maithili an equally relevant characteristic, in addition to definiteness, is also specificity/individuation.

To begin with,

(i) All personal pronouns (i.e., excluding those labelled as indefinite) are definite pronouns. All object definite pronouns are obligatorily marked with the morphological accusative-dative case marker:

4. ham hun-kā dekh-al-iainh
I he(H)-ACC/DAT see-PST-(1+3H)
'I saw him.'

5. tō ham-rā dhakal-l-e
You(NH) I-ACC/DAT push-PST-(2NH+1)
'You pushed me.'

6. o to-rā piṭ-al-khunh
he(H) you(NH)-ACC/DAT beat-PST-(3H+2NH)
'He beat you.'

(ii) All human proper names are definite; these are obligatorily marked with the postposition *ke /kē* for the accusative-dative case:

7. rames mohan kē hās-ᵛ-l-ainh
Ramesh Mohan ACC/DAT laugh-CAUS-PST-(3H+3NH)
'Ramesh caused Mohan to laugh.'

8. māṣṭer usā kē sor pār-al-khinh
teacher Usha ACC/DAT noise do-PST-(3H+3NH)
'The teacher called Usha.'

(iii) Possessive noun phrases are deemed to be definite in many languages of the world. In Maithili, however, the possessed nouns (alienable or inalienable) which are modified by a possessive pronoun and encoded by the morphological genitive case are not marked for the accusative-dative case:

9. tō ham-ar deh chui-l-ē
you(NH) I-GENIT body touch-PST-(2NH+1)
'You touched my body.'

10. u o-kar gāi carᵛ-t-aik
he(NH) he(NH)-GENIT cow graze-FUT-(3NH+3NH)
'He will graze his cow.'

11. tō o-kar aūri phoṛ-l-ahak
you(MH) he(NH)-GENIT finger crack-PST-(2MH+3NH)
'You cracked his fingers.'

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12. ham hun-k-ar thāri nai uthae-b-ainh
I he(H)-GENIT dish not lift-FUT-(1+3H)
'I will not lift his dish.'

(iv) The demonstrative pronouns also have the function of marking definiteness through their deictic or article-like functions, e.g., *u ādmi* (that man) 'the man'; *i kitāb* (this book) 'the book'.

(iva) Generally speaking, one would expect an object noun phrase comprising a demonstrative pronoun followed by a human common noun to be marked for the accusative-dative case for the simple reason that the noun phrase in question would be both definite and human in reference. Such, however, may not be the case in Maithili:

13. tō u ādmi dekh-l-ah i(k) ?
you(NH) that man see-PST-(2NH+3NH)
'Did you see that man?'

14. tō i maugi cinh-b-ahak ?
you(MH) this woman recognize-FUT-(2MH+3NH)
'Will you recognize this woman?'

(ivb) Nonhuman and inanimate object noun phrases preceded by a determiner-like demonstrative pronoun are never marked with the accusative-dative case:

15. tō u gāi banh-l-e
you(NH) that cow tie-PST-(2NH)
'You tied the cow.'

16. ham i kitab paṛh-l-ahū
I this book read-PST-(1)
'I read the book.'

17. tō u khet jot-l-ah
you(MH) that field plow-PST-(2MH)
'You plowed the field'

18. u i g.ch kaṭ-l-ak
he(NH) this tree cut-PST-(3NH)
'He felled the tree.'

Specificity

(i) The linguistic strategy used to turn the animate common noun objects (which are both indefinite and nonspecific) into definite and specific in

reference is to mark them overtly with the accusative-dative case.
Compare the following data:

Indefinite

19. ahā nokar tak-ait ch-i?
You(H) servant search-IMPERF AUX-PRES-(2H)
'Are you looking for a servant?'

Indefinite, specific

20. ahā ek-ṭā nokar tak-ait ch-i?
You(H) one-CLASservant search-IMPERF AUX-PRES-(2H)
'Are you looking for a servant?'

Definite, specific

21. ahā nokar ke tak-ait ch-i?
You(H) servant ACC/DAT search-IMPERF AUX-PRES-(2H+3NH)
'Are you looking for the servant?'

Indefinite

22. ham gāi bec-1-ahū
I cow sell-PST-(1)
'I sold a cow.'

Indefinite, specific

23. ham ek-ṭā gāi bec-1-ahū
I one-CLAS cow sell-PST-(1)
'I sold a cow.'

Definite, specific

24. ham gāi ke bec-1-ahū
I cow ACC/DAT sell-PST-(1+3NH)
'I sold the cow.'

Note that sentences [21] and [24], which have definite and specific object noun phrases, bear emphatic stress; they may also mean 'Are you looking for the *servant*?' and 'I sold the *cow*' respectively. Also, in a discourse situation, the speaker of sentences [21] and [24] assumes the hearer to share his presupposition and to uniquely identify and individuate the referent of the object noun phrase. Ambiguity may, for instance, arise if the hearer disavows such knowledge; the following types of questions may disambiguate the ambiguity:

25. kak-rā/kon nokar ke tak-ait ch-i?
 whom/which servant ACC/DAT search-IMPERF AUX-PRES-(2H+3NH)
 'Whom/which servant are you looking for?'

26. kon gāi ke bec-1-ahū?
 which cow ACC/DAT sell-PST-(2H+3NH)
 'Which cow did you sell?'

(ii) In addition, two morphosyntactic devices are systematically used to convey specificity (and definiteness):

(iia) All possessed object nouns (human and nonhuman, animate or inanimate, alienable or inalienable), preceded by a possessive modifier pronoun encoded by the morphological accusative-dative case, are obligatorily marked for the accusative-dative case. The following examples are illustrative:

27. (tō) ham-rā kakā ke kah-hunh
 you(NH) I-ACC/DAT uncle ACC/DAT say-IMP-(2NH+3H)
 '(You) tell my uncle.'

28. u ham-r, mahis ke banh-1-ak
 he(NH) I-ACC/DAT buffalo ACC/DAT tie-PST-(3NH+1)
 'He tied my buffalo.'

29. hun-k, jāṅḥ ke ke jāt-t-ainh?
 he(H)-ACC/DAT thigh ACC/DAT who press-FUT-(3NH+3H)
 'Who will press/massage his thigh?'

30. ham to-rā kursi ke ghuskau-1-iauk
 I you(2NH)-ACC/DAT chair ACC/DAT push-PST-(1+2NH)
 'I pushed your chair.'

(iib) All object noun phrases (human or nonhuman, animate or inanimate) preceded by a determiner-like demonstrative pronoun *ehi/ohi* 'this/that one' are obligatorily marked with the accusative-dative postposition:

31. tō ohi/ehi ādmi ke dekh-1-ahik?
 you(NH) that/this man ACC/DAT see-PST-(2NH+3NH)
 'Did you see the man?'

32. ham ohi/ehi kitāb ke paṛh-1-ahū
 I that/this book ACC/DAT read-PST-(1)
 'I read the book.'

33. tō ohi/ehi gāi ke duh-hak
 you(MH) that/this cow ACC/DAT milk-IMP-(2MH+3NH)
 '(You) milk the cow.'
34. u ohi/ehi maugi ke puch-al-kaik
 he(NH) that/this woman ACC/DAT ask-PST-(3NH+3NH)
 'He asked the woman.'
35. ham ohi/ehi ām ke tor-l-ahū
 I that/this mango ACC/DAT pluck-PST-(1)
 'I plucked the mango.'
36. ohi/ehi āig ke bujhā-u
 that/this fire ACC/DAT extinguish-IMP-(2H)
 'Extinguish the fire.'

Definite and Indefinite Adjectives

Besides morphological coding of direct objects, definiteness/specificity is also conveyed through morphological formations of definite adjectives in Maithili. Adjectives are of two types: definite and indefinite. In general, definite adjectives are formed by adding the definite masculine suffix-*kā* or the definite feminine suffix-*ki* to the adjectival stem. For example:

37. nab 'new'
 38. nab-kā 'the new one (M)'
 39. nab-ki 'the new one (F)'
 40. moṭ 'fat'
 41. moṭ-kā marad 'the fat man'
 42. moṭ-ki janānā 'the fat woman'
 43. lāl 'red'
 44. lāl-kā chāgar 'the red young he-goat'
 45. lāl-ki pāṭhi 'the red young she-goat'

Alternatively, a few definite adjectives (especially the ones which are past participle adjectives) are formed by adding the definite masculine suffix-*āhā* or the definite feminine suffix-*āhi* to the adjectival base. Examples:

46. jaral 'burnt'
 47. jarl-āhā 'the burnt one (M)'
 48. jarl-āhi 'the burnt one (F)'

Indefinite adjectives, on the other hand, consist of the adjectival stems themselves, e.g. *lāl* (red), *lāl ghoṛa* (a red horse), *lāl ghoṛi* (a red mare), *paigh marad* (a tall man), *paigh maugi* (a tall woman), and so on.

Enclitic as Definitizer

The exclusive emphatic enclitic *-e* optionally accompanied with the classifier *tā* conveys the notion of definiteness/specificity in Maithili.

49. ham ghar-e tā bec- ab
 I house-EMPH CLAS sell-FUT-(1)
 'I will sell only the house.' (and not my land)
50. hunk-e tā di-aunh
 he(H)-ACC/DAT-EMPH CLAS give-(IMP)-(2H+3H)
 'Give (it) only to him.' (and not to others)

Definiteness through Syntactic Processes

Besides morphological coding, definiteness is also conveyed through some syntactic processes in Maithili. Two such processes, i.e., relativization and topicalization, are discussed below in brief.

Relativization

Maithili has both restrictive and non-restrictive relative clauses. Non-restrictive clauses are also marked with the relativizer *je*. But, unlike the restrictive relative clauses, non-restrictive clauses occur with proper nouns and personal pronouns (whose potential referents are by definition definite). Such non-restrictive relative clauses are of two types:

51. rādhā bābu [je mukhiyā ch- aith] āib ge-l-āh
 Radha HP REL village leader be-PRES-(3H) come go-PST-(3H)
 'Radha babu, who is a village leader, arrived.'
- 52a. janārdan pi eh di ka rahal ch - aith
 Janaradan Ph.D. do PROG AUX-PRES-(3H)
 [je nik bat aich]
 REL good matter be-PRES-(3NH)
 'Janardan is doing his Ph.D., which is a good thing.'
- 52b. ahā baḍ mehnat ka rahal ch-i
 you(H) much labor do PROG AUX-PRES-(2H)
 [je baḥhiyā bāt aich]
 REL good matter be-PRES-(3NH)
 'You are working very hard, which is a good thing.'

In sentence [51], the relative clause provides an added piece of information about the head NP whose reference is already specified because it is a proper noun. In sentences [52a,b], the relative clauses provide a comment on the entire proposition, i.e., the entire main clause.

Clearly, the non-restrictive relative clauses serve mainly to give the hearer an added piece of information about an already specified entity, but not to identify that entity.

Restrictive relative clauses

In a restrictive relative clause, the relativized NP consists of the relativizer *je* (in its various forms) with or without an accompanying common noun; when the latter is present, the relativizer serves as a determiner. The NP of the relative clause is coreferential with the head NP of the main clause. The head NP consists of the correlative pronoun *se* (in its various forms) or the demonstrative pronoun *i/u* (in its various forms), either with or without an accompanying common noun. Both the relativized and the head NP may be either present or suppressed--depending upon the relative word order of the head noun and the relative clause.

Basing our analysis on the relative position of the head NP vis-à-vis the relative clause, there are three types of restrictive relative clauses in Maithili: postnominal, prenominal, and extranominal. I am not discussing here such reduced relative clauses as the participial relative clauses.

Prenominal

In a prenominal relative clause the head NP occurs outside the relative clause and the relative clause precedes the head NP. The typical word order thus is: relative clause + determiner + head, as exemplified below:

53. [je kãilh rãit nãc-al] se/u naṭuã
 REL yesterday night dance-PST-(3NH) COREL/DEMONS dancer
 ekhan sutal aich
 now asleep be-PRES-(3NH)
 'The dancer who danced last night is now asleep.'

54. [je aḍḍā me nai ch-al] se/u
 REL office in not be-PST-(3NH) COREL/DEMONS
 karamcari haṭ-ã de-l ge-l
 officer move-CAUS I give-PSTPCPL go-PST-(3NH)
 'The officer who was not (present) in the office was sacked.'

Postnominal

In a postnominal relative clause the head NP (consisting of a determiner and a common noun or a personal pronoun) occurs outside the relative clause and the relative clause follows the head NP. The typical word order thus is: determiner+head+relative clause. The following examples are illustrative:

55. u karamcāri [je addā me nai ch- al]
 that officer REL office in not be-PST-(3NH)
 (se) haṭ-ā de-l ge-l
 COREL move-CAUS I give-PSTPCPL go-PST-(3NH)
 'The officer who was not in the office was sacked.'
56. rames- ak kakā [jin-k-ar ṭaṅ rel me
 Ramesh-GENIT uncle REL(H)-GENIT leg train in
 kaiṭ ge-l-ainh] (se) æ -l ch- aith
 cut go-PST-(3NH+3H) COREL come-PERF AUX-PRES-(3H)
 'Ramesh's uncle whose leg got cut in the train has come.'
57. to-rā bhāi ke [jak-rā pulis pakair
 you(NH)-GENIT brotherACC/DAT REL-ACC/DAT police catch
 le-ne rah-auk] (ok-rā) āi
 take-PERF AUX-PST-(3NH+2NH) he(NH)-ACC/DAT today
 choir de-l-kauk
 leave give-PST-(3NH+2NH)
 'Your brother who was arrested by the police was released today/The
 police released today your brother who was arrested.'
58. o [je hun-k-ar jamæ ch-athinh] (se) āb
 he(H) REL he(H)-GENIT son-in-law be-(3H+3H) COREL now
 baj-t,h
 speak-FUT-(3H)
 'He who is his son-in-law will now speak.'

A third type of relative clause, termed the 'extranominal relative clause', also exists in Maithili. In such a construction, the head NP contains an indefinite determiner; the indefinite determiner is usually the numeral *ek* 'one' followed by the classifier *ṭā*, or an indefinite pronoun—both of which may optionally be followed by such pronominal adjectives as *ehan/ohan* 'of such type'. The relative clause is marked by the relativizer *je*, and it follows the main clause:

59. ek-ṭā ehan nokar rākh-u [je O achop
 one-CLAS such servant keep-IMP-(2H) REL untouchable
 nai ho-e]
 not be-OPT-(3NH)
 'Hire (such) a servant who is not an untouchable.'
60. kono bidyārthi æ-l ch-al [je O ahā
 any student come-PERF AUX-PST-(3NH) REL you(H)
 ke tak- ait ch- al]

ACC/DAT look-IMPERF AUX-PST-(3NH+2H)

'A student had come who was looking for you.'

61. hun-kā, kono ehan kaniya, /ka d- iaunh
 he(H)-ACC/DAT any such bride do give-IMP-(2H+3H)
 [je O hun-kā thikthāk ka d-ainh]
 REL he(H)-ACC/DAT right do give-OPT-(3NH+3H)
 'Marry him to such a bride who may set him right.'

Note that the restrictive and non-restrictive relative clauses are radically different in semantic and pragmatic terms. Thus, a restrictive relative clause consists necessarily of a head NP and a restricting clause. The head NP in itself has a certain potential range of referents, but the restricting clause uses presupposed information to restrict this set and thereby identify the unique referent of a noun phrase (NP).

Finally, it appears that accessibility to definiteness in Maithili relative clauses forms a hierarchy of the following type:

Non-restrictive relative clause	Most Definite
Postnominal relative clause	
Prenominal relative clause	
Extranominal relative clause	Least Definite

Topicalization

Maithili also employs topicalization as an important device to focus a theme and thereby to convey an element of definiteness. The topic markers are : *ta*, *da* and *je* (+copula+pronoun). Examples:

62. i chṣṛa ta ham-ar bāt-e nai sun- ait
 this boy TM I-GENIT saying-EMPH not hear-IMPERF
 aich
 AUX-(3NH)

'This boy, he doesn't listen to me at all.'

63. nokri da ki bhe-l ?
 job TM what become-PST-(3NH)
 'As for the job, what happened (about it)?'

64. i chṣṛa je aich se ham-ar bāt-e nai
 this boy TM Aux-(3NH) he I-GENIT saying-EMPH not
 sun-ait aich
 hear-IMPERF AUX-(3NH)

'This boy, he doesn't listen to me at all.'

Definiteness and Word Order of Basic Constituents

The basic unmarked word order of the major constituents of the sentence in Maithili is SOV (i.e. Subject, Object, Verb in that order):

65. rām ām khāe-l-ainh
Ram mango eat-PST-(3H)
'Ram ate a mango.'

It is sometimes claimed that word order in Maithili is fairly free – that the order of the constituents in a sentence can be changed without causing an appreciable change in meaning. Thus the constituents of the sentence [65] may be rearranged as shown below:

66. ām khāe-l-ainh rām OVS
67. ām rām khāe-l-ainh OSV
68. rām khāe-l-ainh ām SVO
69. khāe-l-ainh ām rām VOS
70. khāe-l-ainh rām ām VSO

However, sentences [66-70] are all marked sentences, since any permutation of the constituents of sentence [65] will automatically lead to a change in stress and intonation patterns and hence a different assignment of semantic and/or pragmatic roles such as topic and focus to the constituents.

Having argued that Maithili is basically a SOV language, we now turn to word order variation in Maithili to signal one more pragmatic function, i.e., definitization. Compare the following sentences:

71. hari ghar -bec-at
Hari house sell-FUT-(3NH)
'Hari will sell a house.'
72. ghar hari bec-at
house Hari sell-FUT-(3NH)
'Hari will sell the house.'

Conclusion

Above was an analysis of a number of morphological, syntactic and in periphery discourse strategies used to convey the semantic notion of definiteness in Maithili. By way of conclusion, the following observations may suggest themselves:

First, in Maithili, like in other Indo-Aryan languages, definiteness seems to be an unmarked category and indefiniteness seems to be a marked one. Secondly, definite referents are obligatorily case-marked if they are animate, i.e. human. Maithili data may tend to conform to the typological

fact that if DO is higher on the hierarchy of animacy (i.e. humanness) and definiteness, it is more likely to be case-marked. Thirdly, the case-marked and (therefore definite) direct object triggers an obligatory use of secondary verb agreement in Maithili (Stump and Yadav 1988); more investigation needs to be made to quantify the contribution made by verb agreement to convey the notion of definiteness in Maithili. Fourthly, it appears that a thorough analysis of definiteness in Maithili would entail much more than the mere study of morphological and syntactic strategies; rather a detailed interactional linguistic analysis of conversational discourse and pragmatic strategies needs to be made. Finally, it is believed that the above discussion of the distribution of definite and indefinite noun phrases (NPs) in Maithili will contribute to the representation of (in)definiteness in linguistic theory of any persuasion.

Note

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