

On Braj Ergativity: Person through the Ages

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Western Indo-Aryan languages, known as aspect-based split ergative systems, do not usually exhibit person-based ergativity differences, except Punjabi (Bhatia 1993; Kaur 2015, 2016) and Marathi (Deo & Sharma 2006). This paper shows that (i) person was critical to case marking in Middle and early New Indo-Aryan including the early Braj era (4th B.C. to early 19th century) and (ii) synchronic varieties of Braj still exhibit person related case effects, though only in plural paradigms. We capture the diachronic role-shift of person at different stages and the corresponding case marking patterns through the changing nature and gradual loss of a unique person licensing (Participant) head.

From the period between 4th B.C till late 13th century, 1st/2nd pronouns displayed a double oblique system such that the same form of the pronoun was employed for the oblique subject of a past sentence and the accusative object of a present sentence, as shown for the 1st pronoun in (1) and (2) from Bubenik & Paranjape (1996).

1. *na me diṭṭha: naraga:*

not I+obl seen hell

‘I have not seen the hells.’ (Miyaaputte 20)

2. *suneha: me*

hear.pl I+obl

‘Hear me.’ (Mokkhamagge 4.6)

This navigation across tense specifications, overriding the grammatical functions of arguments was restricted to 1st/2nd singular pronouns. 3rd past subject pronouns had a form *te:na* (oblique), distinct from 3rd present object form *ta:* (accusative). We claim that the syncretic forms of 1st/2nd past subjects and present objects resulted from their obligatory movement to a Participant Phrase/PartP for person licensing, in line with the *Person Licensing Condition* of Béjar & Rezac (2003), as shown in (3). These pronominals received an oblique case at the specifier of PartP.

3. [TP_[past/present] [PartP 1st/2nd pronouns [vP [VP...]]]]

By the end of the 14th century, however, the language started isolating these two grammatical functions. This development can be attributed to the increasing use of postpositions for nominal marking. Consequently, the oblique form was discontinued for 1st/2nd objects, which were instead marked using *nai/rahai* and *hi*. Contrast (4) and (5) from Bubenik and Paranjape (1996).

4. *tai ra:ṣau hindua:n*

You.instr protect+PP hindus

‘You protected Hindus.’ (Raso 211.1.14)

5. [...] *na puchhai tohi phiri*

not ask.3.sg you.acc having turned

‘[...] he will not turn to ask you.’ (Raso 151.31.3)

We contend that 1st/2nd past subjects moved to PartP, while 1st/2nd objects remained within vP, receiving the accusative case *-hi*. The theoretical implication is that overt case marking by a postposition [+P] at the vP edge subsumed the person licensing requirement of the objects (in line with Rezac 2008). Interestingly, 3rd person subjects in the past were also marked with the oblique *-hi*, indicating their vP-internal position. These positions are depicted in (6).

6. [TP_[past] [PartP 1st/2nd subject [vP 3rd subject and 1st/2nd objects [VP...]]]]

↑

The period between 14th and 16th century was unstable in that the 1st/2nd past subjects were optionally marked with the nominative forms *hau* and *tu*. This indicates that the past subjects after getting person licensed at PartP, either got an oblique case in the same position, or moved higher to TP and received a nominative, as also demonstrated in (6).

With the advent of the literary language Braj in the 16th century, the demarcation of oblique and nominative 1st/2nd subjects was complete; oblique 1st/2nd subjects were restricted to the past tense, and their nominative counterparts to the present tense (Drocco 2016). Consider example (7).

7. [...] *maim* /**haum* *sunyau* *hai* [...]

1.sg.instr/*1.sg.nom hear.perf.m.sg be.aux.3sg

‘[...] I have heard, [...].’

(adapted from Prabodha Nataka, page 84)

16th-17th century Braj optionally marked its 3rd past subjects with an ergative *-ne*, which was never attested on 1st/2nd subjects. This is evidence of a person-based ergative split in the past tense. Table I summarizes the distribution of *-ne* on all pronouns during the 17th century.

Table I.

	1 st /2 nd pronouns		3 rd pronouns	
	Without <i>-ne</i>	With <i>-ne</i>	Without <i>-ne</i>	With <i>-ne</i>
Prabodha Nataka	100	0	52.54	47.46

We infer from the data that the PartP in early Braj licensed 1st/2nd subjects, with 3rd subjects either getting an inherent ergative from *v* (Legate 2008, 2012), or an unmarked default (Marantz 1991). Between 18th-19th centuries, Braj started losing person-based ergative effects. This is evident from the optional *-ne* marking on 1st/2nd subjects, as demonstrated in Table II below. By the end of this period, only aspect-based ergativity remained.

Table II.

	1 st /2 nd pronouns	
	Without <i>-ne</i>	With <i>-ne</i>
Caurasi Vaishnavana ki varta	26.05	73.95
Raja Niti	68.71	31.29

Aspect-based split ergativity is now an established feature of most synchronic varieties of Braj spoken in western Uttar Pradesh, where the subjects are marked with *-ne* and fail to trigger verbal agreement. This indicates the loss of PartP in current dialects; all perfective subjects are licensed at vP and get an inherent ergative. However, a micro-comparative study of synchronic Braj dialects reveals some person-based effects, though in concert with number features. In the Marehara variety, for instance, only 1st plural/honorific subjects remain unmarked, in contrast to all other subjects, which are obligatorily *-ne* marked. The Rasoolpur Kalan variant, on the other hand, has marked 2nd plural/honorific subjects that trigger verbal agreement. We contend that while these varieties do not host a PartP, the presence of a number (plural) head above vP forces 1st and 2nd subjects to a vP external position, wherein they are licensed with a plural/honorific reading, as in (8). These dialects differ on whether they case mark the DPs either before or after their displacement to NumP: Marehara subjects move prior to ergative case assignment whereas Rasoolpur Kalan ergative case marks DPs at spec, vP before their displacement to NumP.

8. [TP_[perfective] [NumP 1st/2nd plural/honorific pronouns_i [vP t_i [VP...]]]]

To conclude, we argue that middle and early new Indo-Aryan had a PartP to license 1st/2nd subjects, triggering person-based differential case marking. Our contention is that the PartP is lost in Braj and in some typologically related languages such as Hindi-Urdu and Haryanavi, but has been retained in some others such as Punjabi and Marathi. Person triggered case effects still exist in some Braj varieties. However, these effects are epiphenomena of 1st/2nd subject displacement to a NumP above the vP.

Select References: Bubenik, V. & Paranjape, C. (1996) Development of Pronominal Systems from Apabhramśa to New-Indo-Aryan. *Indo-Iranian Journal* 39: 111-132; Drocco, A. (2016). The restoration of the ergative case marking of ‘A’ in perfective clauses in New Indo-Aryan, In *Indo Aryan Ergativity in Typological and Diachronic Perspective*, eds. Dahl, E and Stronsky, K. John Benjamins: 201-236; Rezac, M. (2008). The syntax of eccentric agreement: The Person Case Constraint and Absolutive Displacement in Basque. *Natural Language and Linguistic Theory* 26: 61-106.