

Plural Licensing & Meso-variation

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Chierchia's (1998) Nominal Mapping Parameter/NMP sets up three different language types, based on the +/-arg(ument) and +/-pred(icate) features of the nominals - (i) [+arg, -pred] Type 1 languages with NPs directly corresponding to mass nouns, and with plurality indicated via classifiers, (ii) [-arg, +pred] Type 2 languages with DPs, and distinct plural morphemes, and (iii) [+arg, +pred] Type 3 languages with both NPs and DPs, and also with distinct plural morphemes. Assuming with Picallo (1991) that plurality emanates from an independent Number(Pl) head, a prediction of NMP is that Type 1 languages have NP structures that specifically lack this head. In this paper, we present evidence that the NP/DP demarcation is too strict, since not only do genealogically related and geographically proximate languages vary on the parametric values, oscillation between the values is witnessed even within the same language over a period of time. More specifically, using both diachronic and synchronic data from two Eastern Indo-Aryan languages Maithili and Bangla, we show that while Maithili and Bangla both started off as Type 3 languages, with both nominal and verbal plural inflection, their current/new varieties display Type 1 properties, particularly the lack of distinct plural morphology. Interestingly however, though they are sister languages, Bangla still carries remnants of the Type 3 properties, though in restricted domains. We investigate these domains closely to understand the reasons behind this meso-level variation on plurality.

To start, current-day Maithili and Bangla are Type 1 languages that lack plural inflection for both nouns and verbs, (1-2); instead, plurality is encoded in numeral classifiers. As per Chierchia, the absence of plurality on these nouns indicates that they are NPs, akin to mass nouns.

1. *du-Ta-chōri chōra-sab-ke dekhalkai*

two-CL-girl boy-all-Acc saw

'Two girls saw all boys'

(Maithili)

2. *du-To-meye chele-der dekhlo*

two-CL-girls boy-CL saw

'Two girls saw all boys'

(Bangla)

Such was however not the case for the older varieties of these languages. Consider the following instances that display both nominal and verbal plural inflection.

3. *besya-nhi*

(Old Maithili, *Varnaratnakara* 27)

woman-pl/'public women'

4. *nayake paera pakhal-aha suci bhae baisal-aha*

(*Varnaratnakara* 69)

'the master his feet washed-pl purifying perf sat-pl'

'the master washed his feet and purifying himself sat down'

5. *kaja-na*

6. *kare-na*

(Old Bangla, *Caryasas* cited in Chatterji 1926)

work-pl/'works'

'They give/He (honorific) gives'

Plural inflections in (3)-(6) are not the only pieces of evidence suggesting Type 3 status of Old Maithili and Bangla. These languages also had definite markers, as illustrated below by the Old Bangla example in (7).

7. *chaksu-Ta*

eye- the/ 'the eye'

(*Krttivasa*, 'Ayodhya-kanda, p.1' Early Mid Bangla)

The next question to answer is: what triggered this shift from a Type 3/DP language to a Type 1/NP language, with concomitant loss of plurality and the evolution of numeral classifiers? We contend that the shift occurred as a response to a general trend of morphological erosion/reduction that defined the middle stages of these languages. This is corroborated by Chatterji (1926, p. 715) who states, "Bengali, like most NIA languages may be said to have started *de novo* in its morphology, having preserved but very little of the declinational system of OIA." The lack of appropriate morphological cues (ala Lightfoot, 2010) forced the language learner to make corresponding changes in her mental representations. Assuming with Kayne (2000) that plurality on a noun is licensed by a higher functional head, plural expression is the result of obligatory licensing of a DP-internal Num(Pl) head by a higher functional C/T head (8). We conjecture that in the middle stages of the languages, the child had no positive evidence to continue the licensing, eventually leading to the disappearance of both nominal and verbal plural marking.

8. [C/T [... [DP D [NumP **Num(Pl)**]]]]

However, though both languages largely conformed to the changes – including the adoption of numeral classifiers, they continue to retain some idiosyncrasies. More specifically, while Maithili has undergone a complete change from DP to NP, and currently has only bare NPs obligatorily appearing without determiners (9), Bangla optionally allows DPs accompanied by definite classifiers, in instances with missing contextual information (10).

9. *chōri chōra-ke dekhalkai*

girl boy-Acc saw

'A/the girl saw a/the boy'

(Maithili)

10. *meye-Ta chele-Ta-ke dekhlo*

girl-CL boy-CL-Acc saw

'The girl saw the boy'

(Bangla)

Moreover, current Bangla also displays plurality in the genitive paradigm, as evidenced by the following structures.

11. *kukur-er chok*

dog-gen.sg eye

'A dog's eyes'

12. *kuker-der chok*

dog-gen.pl eye

'Dogs' eyes'

This difference between Bangla and Maithili is explained if Bangla genitive structures are DPs, with a D licensing the Num(Pl) head (13). Since Maithili only has NPs, this D head is missing in the language and hence, plural licensing fails to take place. In the movement from a DP to NP language, Bangla restrained D to specific constructions, which still bear instances of plurality.

13. [DP [DP D[NumP[NP N] Num(Pl)]]D[NP N]]

In the end, our study presents a critique of parameters as binary opposites (+/-feature), with languages making a strict yes-no choice between them. The data presented here suggests that feature values (here, plural) are realized in specific structural environments. Featural realization is blocked when these environments are affected during the acquisition period. However, languages may still retain some structures that provide the right conducive environment for the value to manifest itself.

References

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