“Differential =ko marking”: Case and object-marking in Hindi

The postposition =ko serves several functions in Hindi, chief among them: direct object marker. This study investigates the use of =ko as relates to the phenomenon of Differential Object Marking (DOM). Previous studies of DOM by Aissen (2003) and de Hoop and Narasimhan (2005) have shown that it arises from a balancing act between the need to distinguish the relative prominence of a direct object and a principle of economy whereby overt case-marking is avoided. Prominence is assessed along the two dimensions of animacy and definiteness/specificity. In deciding which objects to mark and which to leave unmarked, languages usually privilege one dimension of prominence over another. The question arises, then, of which dimension of prominence is paramount in conditioning the use of =ko in Hindi.

I argue that of the chief proposals for the object-marking function of =ko, namely that it marks primarily animacy and secondarily definiteness (Mohanan 1994; Kroeger 2005; Aissen 2003) or primarily specificity and secondarily animacy (McGregor 1995; Kachru 1980; Snell and Weightman 2003), the latter provides the best explanation of the available data. I present two main arguments in support of this position. First, use of =ko is required with specific animate NPs (1) and optional with specific inanimate NPs (2), while it is prohibited for both animate and inanimate NPs that are non-specific (3-4). Second, some have claimed that the choice to use =ko as an object marker is constrained by selectional restrictions of the verb on animacy, such that the verbs likhã 'write', pařhã 'read', pînã 'drink', and banãnã 'make', which take only inanimate objects, do not permit objects marked with =ko, while bulãnã 'call' and mãrãnã 'kill', which take only animate objects, require their objects to be marked with =ko (Mohanan 1994, Keine 2007). The data, however, show that the former verbs may all take =ko-marked objects even though inanimate while the latter may take objects that are not marked with =ko even though animate (5-6). This variation is left unexplained on the assumption that animacy is the primary determinant for the use of =ko.

Aissen (2003) has concluded that although DOM in Hindi involves both animacy and specificity, it is “‘driven’ primarily by animacy.” However, she also states that the data and literature on two-dimensional DOM systems are complex and contradictory, including the caveat that her discussion of DOM in Hindi is “incomplete and/or oversimplified in some respect(s)”
and “subject to clarification and correction.” The present study contributes toward just such a clarification of this complex issue.

(1) Zainab=ne    us=ko/    *vo    dekh-ä
   Zainab = ERG 3.SG = KO/ 3.SG.DIR see-PFV.M.SG
   ‘Zainab saw him.’
(2) Ilā=ne    paudhā(=ko)    uṭṭhā-ya
   Ila = ERG plant(=KO) lift-PFV.F.SG
   ‘Ila lifted up a/the plant.’
(3) darzī(=ko)    bulā-o
   tailor(=KO) call-IMP
   ‘Call a/any tailor.’
(4) Anu    kitāb(=ko)    nahī    pāṛh-egī
   Anu book(=KO) NEG read-FUT.F.SG
   ‘Anu won’t read a/any book(s).’
(5) is    <<love story>>=ko    rab    likh-ā
   this love story = KO God write-PFV.M.SG
   ‘God is writing this “love story.”’
(6) Rām=ne    murgī    mār-ī
   Ram = ERG chicken kill-PFV.F.SG
   ‘Ram killed a chicken.’