Relating Anti-Uniqueness and Non-honorificity to Definiteness Marking in Magahi

Overview. Some languages have an overt definite marker but still allow definite bare nouns (BNs) in some instances, raising the question of what governs the distributions of these definite BNs. This paper focuses on the Eastern Indo-Aryan language Magahi and presents data from elicitations with two native speakers. Magahi has a definite suffix *-waa* (allomorphs: *-(i)yaa/(i)yãã/-aa/maa*) but still allows definite BNs: (i) with nouns generally assumed to be unique e.g., *sun, moon, president*, and (ii) with honored referents e.g., older persons. Importantly, case (i) is not reducible to case (ii), i.e. unique nouns are not inherently honored, since Magahi has two 3rd person pronouns, one non-honorific and one honorific, and the non-honorific one is used to refer to these unique nouns.

Background. Akan has a definite determiner *nó* that does not co-occur with nouns generally assumed to be unique. Owusu (2022) proposes that *nó* has a presupposition which requires there to exist a larger situation containing the current situation in which the NP denotes a non-singleton set of individuals. We term this the 'anti-uniqueness' approach. Cantonese/Bangla express definiteness with "bare classifier" constructions, which Yip et al. (2023) report is usually available but not for unique nouns. However, Yip et al. also note that nouns like *teacher*, *boss* also surface as BNs. Yip et al. propose these BNs behave like quasi-names (name-like expressions like *Mom* in English). We term this the 'quasi-name' approach. This paper argues that, at least for Magahi, the 'anti-uniqueness' approach is superior, but anti-uniqueness should be derived pragmatically.

Anti-uniqueness of *-waa*. Magahi definite noun phrases are generally suffixed with *-waa*, which is compatible with immediate situation uses (1), anaphoric uses (4), and donkey sentences (5). However, unique nouns such as *raaspatii* 'president' (2) and *suuraj* 'sun' (3) occur bare.

(1) kutt-#(waa) saṛak par karailai chaho hai.
dog-WAA road on cross want AUX
'The dog wants to cross the road.'

(2) raaspatii-(#yaa)
president-#WAA
'the president'

(3) suuraj-(#waa)
sun-#WAA
'the sun'

(4) class me e-go laṛaka au laṛakii hai. ham laṛak-#(waa) ke kal milaliai.
class in one-CLF boy and girl are 1SG boy-WAA ACC yesterday met
'There are a boy and a girl in class. I met the boy yesterday.'

(5) agar kisaan ke paas gadha hai, to uu gadha-#(waa) ke maaro hai.
if farmer GEN near donkey AUX TOP 3SG donkey-WAA ACC beat AUX
'If a farmer has a donkey, he beats the donkey.'

Further support for 'anti-uniqueness' comes from the fact that *-waa* cannot occur in superlatives (6). In addition, *-waa* occurs with proper names (7) and quasi-names (8), which offers morphological evidence indicating that BNs cannot be quasi-names in Magahi.

(6) duniyaa ke sab se tej aadmii-(#yaa)
world GEN all INSTR smart man-#WAA
'the world's smartest man'

(7) Ram-maa
Ram-WAA
'Ram'

(8) mai-yaa
mom-WAA
'Mom'

Magahi definite BNs can felicitously occur in counterfactuals and De Dicto (unlike in Cantonese/Bangla cf. Yip et al. 2023:260-261), showing they are not rigid and distinguishing them from quasi-names.

(9) agar ham okra liye vote karaitai hal, to raaspati khooni aadmi hote hal.
if 1SG 3SG.ACC for vote did AUX TOP president killer person be AUX
'If we had voted for him, the president would be a murderer.'

(10) agar baabu-jii dosar aurat se saadi karthin hal, #mai-yaa lamba hote hal.
if dad-HON second woman INSTR wedding did AUX mom-WAA tall be AUX
'If dad had married another woman, #Mom would be tall.'

Pejorative meaning of *-waa*. *-waa* is restricted in its use to non-honorific referents, which is evident from the use of non-honorific verbal agreement with *-waa* (Alok 2020). *-waa* can also be used to achieve a pragmatic effect of disrespect/contempt. For example, in a situation where the speaker is younger than Ram, (11) indicates that the speaker is intentionally disrespecting Ram.

(11) Ram-maa await hai.
Ram-WAA come AUX
'Ram is coming' + The speaker disrespects Ram. (Alok 2022:7)

Proposal. Since *-waa* is preferred when the referent is either familiar (4-5) or visually identifiable (1) (Sharma 2025), we propose that *-waa* takes an index and an NP as arguments.

(12) $[\![\text{-}waa]\!] = \lambda y.\lambda P.[\iota x.P(x) \wedge x = y]$

We propose that the anti-uniqueness presupposition of Owusu (2022) is rather weak, as it can be satisfied in any larger situation. A noun like *president* should satisfy this condition, since there is more than one president in the global situation. Accordingly, although *-waa* is normally infelicitous with *president*, in contexts with multiple presidents, *-waa* does become felicitous:

(13) Jaun jaun des me ham geliai, raspati-#(yaa) dunni hal.
REL REL country LOC 1SG went president-WAA wealthy was
'Whichever country I went to, the president was rich.'

So, while the statement of the presupposition just says that the noun must have more than one entity in it's extension in some larger situation, the largest situation under consideration seems to be constrained pragmatically. We contend that a fully pragmatic account is thus more parsimonious. This pragmatic account is built on the contrast between *-waa*, which takes both an index and NP argument, and BN definites, which come from ι type-shifting that takes just an NP argument. Then, following Ahn (2025)'s proposal for anti-uniqueness in English demonstratives, we propose that when a *-waa* definite and a BN definite denote the same individual, the BN definite is preferred because of a general economy principle: don't use a more complex expression when a simpler one can do the job (à la Patel-Grosz & Grosz's 2017 *Minimize DP!* or Schlenker's 2005 *Minimize Restrictors!*). If a BN definite and *-waa* definite both take the same NP argument, they denote the same individual if and only if the NP argument denotes a singleton. Thus, felicitous use of *-waa* implicates that its NP argument must not denote a singleton, giving rise to anti-uniqueness.

Implementation of non-honorificity. We follow the approach of Wang (2023, 2024), who notes that honorific pronouns cross-linguistically recycle existing φ-features that are less direct in referring to an individual, which is consistent with honorification as a manifestation of showing 'negative face' (Brown & Levinson 1978). Wang proposes that these choices are determined by pragmatic *Taboos*, which outrank *Maximize Presupposition!* in honorific contexts. We propose the following *Taboo* based on the idea that definite descriptions with indices are more direct than those without.

(14) *Taboo on Indices*: In honorific contexts, use definite descriptions without indices.

Adhering to this *Taboo* prevents using *-waa* for honored persons, so BNs are preferred if available.

Outlook. Our analysis provides two main advantages over the existing analyses of BNs. First, we don't introduce any unusual anti-uniqueness presuppositions. Second, anti-uniqueness (Dayal & Jiang 2021) and pejoration/non-honorificity (Averintseva-Klisch 2016; Hu & Van Olmen 2025) effects have been noted with demonstratives in many languages. Connecting these effects to the the building blocks of definiteness marking thus allows for a more coherent cross-linguistic picture.

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