Morphosyntactic Variation and Split Ergativity in Northern Hindko

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Abstract

Hindko, a prehistoric Indo-Aryan language with roots tracing back to the Vedic period, occupies a unique sociolinguistic and geographical space within Northern Pakistan and Azad Jammu & Kashmir (AJK). Belonging to the Northwest Lahnda group, Northern Hindko is spoken by over four million people across the foothills of the Western Himalayas, Pir Panjal ranges, and the Neelum and Jhelum valleys. This region serves as a critical contact zone between Indo-Aryan and Iranian language families, specifically Pashto, which has historically influenced the nomenclature and distribution of Hindko varieties. The present study investigates the argument-coding patterns of Northern Hindko, focusing specifically on its status as a split-ergative language. In line with the theme of morphosyntactic and lexical variation, this study analyzes how case-marking and verb-agreement mechanisms operate within the Hindko dialects spoken in the Neelum Valley, Jhelum Valley, and Mansehra. While Hindko aligns with the broader Indo-Aryan typological trait of split ergativity, where the alignment system shifts based on aspect, this research highlights significant internal variation and specific lexical constraints that govern these patterns. The data for the present study was collected via targeted questionnaires among native speakers across the three said regions. The findings reveal that the use of the ergative marker '-sun' is subject to intricate morphosyntactic constraints. The results also indicate that ergative marking in Hindko is not solely determined by the transitivity of the verb and the perfective aspect, but is also significantly influenced by person hierarchy, specifically showing a strong correlation with the third person. Furthermore, the study identifies a declining frequency in the use of overt case markers among contemporary speakers. Importantly, the findings suggest a lack of uniformity within the same speech communities, pointing toward an ongoing lexical and morphosyntactic shift. By documenting these variations, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of how Hindko interfaces with neighboring languages where Urdu and English exert significant educational and official pressure.

Keywords: Hindko, Split Ergativity, Morphosyntactic Variation, Indo-Aryan, Azad Jammu & Kashmir.