

# Structural Changes as a Result of Dialect Contact

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## ABSTRACT

It is commonly believed that “morph-syntactic structures are faithfully transmitted across generations, and are not transferred from language to language in normal linguistic development” (Labov 2007). The present paper focuses on two morpho-syntactic changes that Bajjika, traditionally considered a dialect of Maithili is undergoing due to dialect contact with Bhojpuri, a western Bihari Language. The study focuses on the new present tense marker *-la* and the new auxiliary *hawe*. These two forms in Bajjika are not attested in literary texts and nor in the first Linguistic Survey of India (Grierson, 1903). The strong hypothesis of the paper is that these forms are a comparatively recent arrival in the language in terms of diffusion from the West where Bhojpuri is spoken.

**Keywords:** Structural Changes, Dialect Contact, Dialect change and Regional Variation

## INTRODUCTION

Bajjika is a minority language spoken in the north-western districts of **Vaishali, Muzaffarpur, Sitamarhi, Samastipur, Sheohar, West Champaran** and **East Champaran** which are together called **Bajjikanchal** in Bihar state of India by around 15 million people and the adjacent areas in Nepal. This language region begins with the border of Hajipur, 20 kilometres north of Patna (the capital city of Bihar) across the Ganges. “The Bajjika speech community is surrounded by four other speech communities: Maithili in the east, Magahi in the south, Angika in the southeastern side, and Bhojpuri in the west. The Gandak River on the western edge of Bajjikanchal flows into the Ganges on the southern border of Bajjikanchal. That river thus functions as a line of demarcation between the Bhojpuri and Bajjika speech communities. In the south, the Ganges separates Bajjikanchal from the Magahi speech community” (Kashyap, 2014).

## BAJJIKA LANGUAGE AND SPEECH COMMUNITY

The Bajjika dialect, named after the ancient Vajji Kingdom of Vaishali in Bihar, is often referred to as the Maithili-Bhojpuri dialect by Grierson (1903), and while Ethnologue considers it a dialect of Maithili, it has been recognized as an independent language in Nepal since the 2015 constitution, where it is recorded separately from Maithili despite having no educational or institutional presence in Bihar, thus leaving much of its demographic and ethnolinguistic data unknown even in India, with significant gaps reflected in census reports, unlike Nepal's detailed enumerations in 2001 and 2011.

Bajjika was originally identified as a dialect of Maithili, but its speakers now assert it as a separate language; during the early 20th century, while Maithili proponents in Bihar sought Maithili-medium primary education, Angika and Bajjika speakers favored Hindi-medium education, and discussions on

Bajjika's minority status began in the 1950s, while in the following decades, Angika and Bajjika speakers countered demands for a separate Mithila state with calls for recognition of their languages, leading to increased linguistic awareness and movements for Bajjika's autonomous status.

Maithili proponents argue that the Bihar government and the pro-Hindi Bihar Rashtrabhasha Parishad have sought to diminish the Maithili language movement by recognizing Angika and Bajjika as separate languages; however, many still regard Bajjika as a Maithili dialect (Jha, 2017). Primarily, the Maithili Brahmins and Karan Kayasthas have backed this movement, while various other castes in Mithila assert Angika and Bajjika as their maternal languages to distance themselves from the Maithili identity. Some studies label Bajjika a Non-Brahmin dialect, and though its proponents have persistently sought official language recognition from both federal and state authorities, their efforts have not succeeded. The Bajjika-speaking community offers intriguing sociolinguistic insights and is located in the northern region of Bihar, known as Bajjikanchal, which encompasses an area of 20,045 square kilometers across seven districts with a rich linguistic heritage influenced by Maithili, Angika, Bhojpuri, and Magahi. This paper explores the morpho-syntactic evolutions in Bajjika over time, examining the social factors driving such changes among various age groups.

#### **MORPHO-SYNTACTIC VARIATION: THE EMERGENCE OF NEW FORMS IN BAJJIKA**

A null present tense marker was reported in Grierson (1903) which is still existent in Bajjika today in the speech of the older generation and children. Mainly, the adult population is favouring the newer form *-la* marking present tense as in '*ham toh-raa dekh-i-la*' 'I see you. The auxiliary verb 'chh' is also being replaced by *hawe* and *ha* 'be' in the speech of the adults. These are typical Bhojpuri forms which have travelled to Bajjika by diffusion and excessive language contact. (Grierson 1903). Interestingly there is a conflict between Maithili (closely associated with the Brahmin castes in Bihar) speakers and Bajjika speakers as Maithili have been considered as Brahmin's Dialect and Bajjika as Non-Brahmin dialect. This is one of the reasons why Bajjika is looking towards Bhojpuri for all types of borrowing lexical, structural and so on. Bhojpuri is the language associated with the war-loving people of Bihar (Grierson 1903). And it is hypothesized that the Bajjika speakers use the Bhojpuri auxiliary *ha/hawe* instead of Maithili *chh* to distance themselves from and as a reaction to the Maithili speakers.

#### **DATA AND METHODOLOGY**

This paper follows the **Inductive method** using both **Qualitative** and **Quantitative** approach and is based on data collected from 12 speakers based on four age groups: Three old speakers [aged 60-70] three middle aged speakers [40-60] two adult speakers [18-35], two younger speakers [14-18] and two children [8-12]. The important finding is that the children, the old aged speakers and the middle aged speakers form homogeneity and use the typical Bajjika null past tense marker and the Auxiliary verb *chh* 'be'. The adolescents have adopted some innovative forms and are using them at 20-22 percent in their speech. On the other hand the adult speakers are using the new Bhojpuri forms at 70 percent, in accordance with Labov (2007) that "diffusion are the result of the fact that most language contact is largely between and among adults" and that is the reason why the present innovation is typically the characteristic of adults' speech.

## RESEARCH DESIGN

The present paper is based on two kinds of data:

(i) The apparent time conversational data on Western Maithili (Bajjika), collected through interviews, questionnaires and narratives in Vaishali and Muzaffarpur Districts of Bihar. The data was collected from 12 speakers representing five age groups: Three old speakers [aged 60-70] three middle aged speakers [40-50] two adult speakers [18-35], two adolescent speakers [14-18] and two children [8-12]. Similar data was also collected from Bhojpuri.

(ii) 19th century texts from Linguistic survey of India, compiled and edited by George Abraham Grierson in 1903. The data comprises 66 specimens representing the three dialects and sub-dialects of the Bihari language namely –Maithili, Bhojpuri and Magahi.

## VARIATION IN MORPHOLOGICAL TENSE MARKING

In Maithili and Magahi Tense is not marked morphologically. The present form of the Auxiliary verb in the sentence indicates the tense:

Maithili: Specimen 1, Grierson (1903)

Ham bhukh sa marai chh-i.  
I hunger-From die PROG.AUX-1.S

‘I am dying from hunger.’

Magahi: Specimen 18, Grierson (1903)

Ham bhukh-e marait-h-i.  
I hunger-From die-PROG-AUX-1.S

‘I am dying from hunger.’

### Tense marking in Bhojpuri

In Bhojpuri Present tense is expressed in two ways:

#### (i) Through the use of auxiliary as in Maithili and Magahi

Ham bhukh-se mar-at baani. (Bhojpuri, Specimen 35, Grierson (1903)

I hunger-from die-PROG.AUX-(1)

‘I am dying from hunger.’

#### (ii) Tense is morphologically marked by *-la*:

U abahi jaa-la. (Specimen 35, Grierson 1903)

He. now go-IMPERF.PRES(3)

‘He goes now/he is going now.’

## TENSE MARKING IN WESTERN MAITHILI

It is interesting that the Western Dialect of Maithili behaves just like Bhojpuri in Marking the Present Tense. The tense can be either indicated by auxiliary verb or it can be morphologically marked on the verb by *-l(a)*:

Ham atek baras se apne ke sewa. karai-chh-i.

I so many years from your-honor’s service do-IMPERF.AUX-1.S

‘I have been doing your service for so many years.’

Ham bhukh-se mar-ai-l-e (Specimen 16, Grierson 1903)

I hunger-from die-IMPERF-PRES-(1)

‘I am dying of hunger.’

**TENSE MARKERS IN WESTERN MAITHILI/BAJJIKA**

<b>MORPHOLOGICAL MARKING OF TENSE IN THE DIALECTS OF MAITHILI (1903)</b>							
TENSE	Standard Maithili	Lower Caste Maithili	Southern Maithili	Eastern Maithili	Chhika Chhiki Boli(Angika )	Western Maithili (Bajjika)	Jolaha Boli
N	Nil (28)	Nil (10)	Nil (5)	Nil (15)	Nil (27)	Nil (28) -la (3)	Nil (21)
%	100	100	100	100	100	90.33 9.67	100

**MORPHOLOGICAL MARKING OF TENSE IN THE DIALECTS OF MAITHILI (2019)**

TENSE	Standard Maithili	Lower Caste Maithili	Southern Maithili	Eastern Maithili	Chhika Chhiki Boli(Angika )	Western Maithili (Bajjika)	Jolaha Boli
N	Nil (28)	Nil (10)	Nil (5)	Nil (15)	Nil (27)	Nil (65) -la (151)	Nil (21)
%	100	100	100	100	100	25 75	100

**MORPHOLOGICAL TENSE MARKING IN DIALECTS OF BHOJPURI (Grierson 1903)**

Tense	standard	northern	western	Nagpuria	madhesi	Total	
-la	50% (10)	50% (12)	44% (8)	35% (7)	38% (9)	44.6%	
Nil	10	12	10	13	12	55.3 %	

**MORPHOLOGICAL TENSE MARKING IN DIALECTS OF BHOJPURI (2019)**

Tense	standard	northern	western	Nagpuria	madhesi	Total	
Morphological marking	-la (18)	-la (15)	-la (17)	-la (11)	-la(12)	55%	
Nil	Unmarked (12)	Unmarked (13)	unmarked (14)	unmarked (11)	Unmarked (10)	45%	
Morphological	60	54	55	50	55		

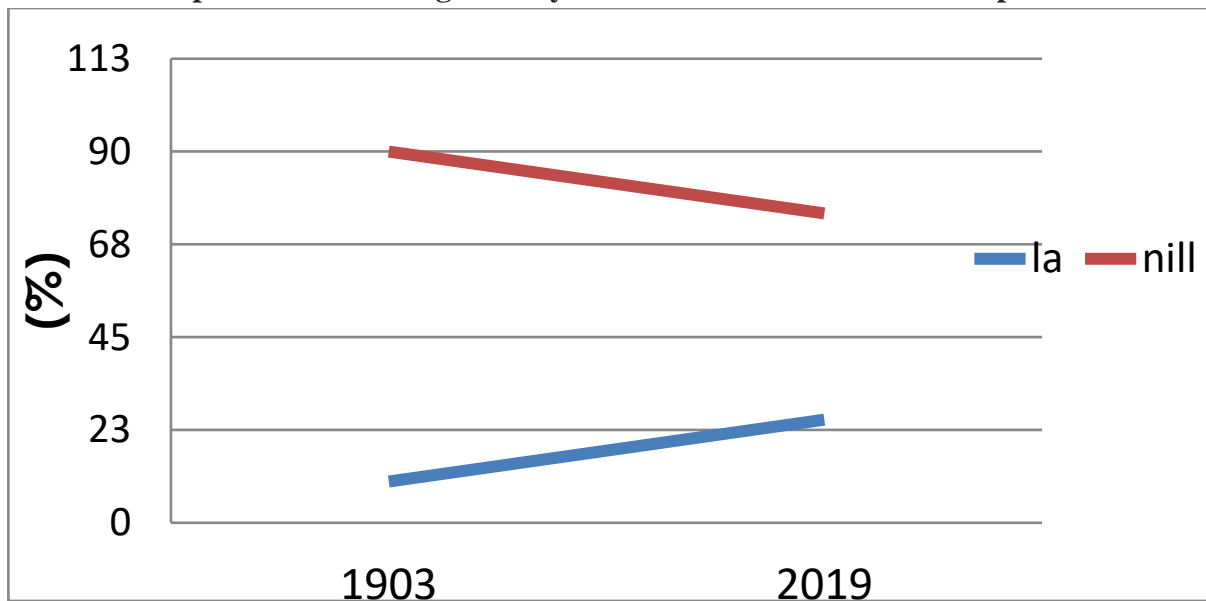
marking %							
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Table 1. (above) provides the distribution of marking or absence of it across Maithi and Bhojpuri dialect regions in two sets of data.

## DIACHRONIC SHIFT IN THE OVERALL PRESENT TENSE MARKING IN WESTERN MAITHILI

### The sociolinguistic dynamics of the diachronic development

Graph 1: The sociolinguistic dynamics of the diachronic development



The null present tense marking was the dominant pattern in the late 19th century and early 20th century. The presence of three tokens of *-la* is evidence of a new development in western Maithili. A comparison of the earlier data of 1903 with the data collected in 2019 suggests an **incrementation** in the use of the Morphological Present tense marker *-la* over the years and a slight decrease in the use of unmarked instances. So the results show that *-la* marking present tense started appearing in Western Maithili (Bajjika) at the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century but unluckily there appeared no sociolinguistic paper to document that change.

Where has this *-la* come from in Bajjika? – No paper has yet addressed this issue. According to Grierson(1903) the *-la* has come from Bhojpuri the neighbouring dialect. In Bhojpuri Present Tense is morphologically marked by *-la*. So it's from Bhojpuri that the present tense marker might have travelled to Bajjika speech community in the late 19th century.

If we map the geographic distance between the Bajjika speech community and Bhojpuri speech community, the Bajjika speech community is linked with the Bhojpuri speaking community by the Gandak River on the west and is situated only 5 km east of Sonapur, a city in the district of Saran, a Bhojpuri speaking area. The Geographic proximity between the two regions is so close that they share many linguistic features.

So if the presence of a pattern is simply due to the geographic proximity, then by default every generation should have been duly affected by the change but we find a different pattern. Not only this, the overall shift rather conceals and hardly tell us anything interesting about the sociolinguistic dynamics of this

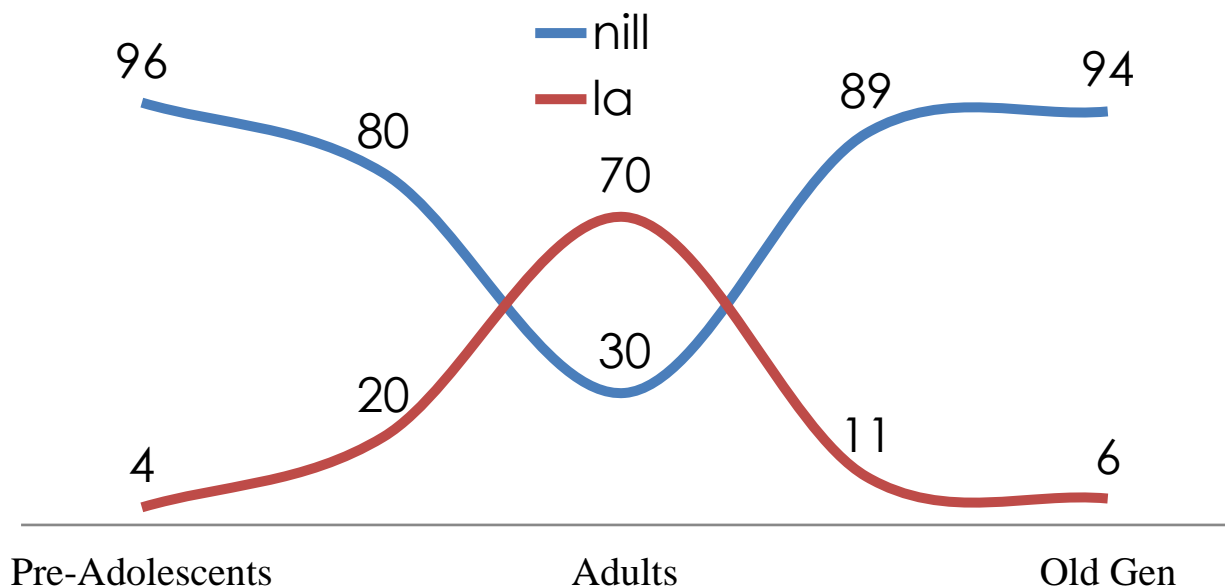
shift.

**Variation in the Morphological Marking of Present Tense Across Different Age Groups in Western Maithili:**

Age-group	Nil	-la	Tot
Pre-Adolescents	96% (48)	4% (2)	50
Adolescents	80% (53)	20% (13)	66
Adults	30% (15)	70% (35)	50
Middle Gen	89% (45)	11% (5)	50
Old Gen.	94% (47)	6% (3)	50
1903	90% (28)	9.67% (3)	31
Age-group	Nil	-la	Tot

**Table 2: Variation in the Morphological Marking**

This table shows that there is more to the geographic contact theory as there is clear variation across age groups. The adults are the guards of this new change. They are the ones behind the paradigm shift. They behave different from the rest of the language community. It seems that they are the ones who have supported the newer form or the overt marking of tense. The older generation and the middle generation favour the older form. Adolescents follow the adults in the overt marking of tense. This is more evident in the graph below:



**Graph 2: Locus of Change in Apparent Time**

The diachronic shift is evident only among a particular age group and not across the community as would be evident in any change in progress.

## CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSIONS

The adolescents and the older speakers show that they are more or less following the older pattern of Morphological marking of tense. It is the the adults (they are traders and businessmen) the centrally located age-group who show a deviant pattern. One can say that they are the leaders in its use in conformity with Labov's Curvilinear Pattern (Labov 1966) showing much greater use of *-la* marking as opposed to zero marking. These are the people who have broad social networks inside the community and also outside of the community. So while the **Nill marking** is strong overall, the adults are the leaders in the use of the morphological tense marker *-la*, followed by the teenagers. However, this is a rather unusual development. **There are multiple explanations** for why *-la* is the feature of adult speakers' speech alone. They are the ones who are involved in local trades and business. The contact is two dimensional. Hajipur has emerged as a good trade centre and it's a very good market place. So people from Saran District come to Vaishali for purchasing day-to-day goods and furniture. As of census (2011) service accounts for 55%, industry 9% and agriculture 35% of the economy of the city. The economy of Hajipur is largely service orientated, but it also has an agricultural base and industrial sector that attracts people from the surrounding areas for business. So the dialects mix and since Bajjika is the minority language and Bhojpuri is the Majority language, we find the **superstrate influence** on the **substrate language** of Bajjika (see Trudgill, 1986).

The second factor is **the identity** as evident from the perception tests. Earlier Mithilanchal formed geographically a much larger area which included Vaishali and Muzaffarpur . But later Vaishali and Muzaffarpur were taken out from Mithilanchal. The people of these districts were hurt and this resulted in the new Vajji identity formation. They found Bhojpuri speakers nearer and friendlier. They showed reaction to the Maithili Brahmins in form of avoiding the *chh* forms which are supposed to be associated with Mithilanchal in Bihar. They adopted the morphological tense marker *-la* from Bhojpuri. This reaction against the Mithilanchal is manifest in the form of the speech. The older generation were born and brought up in Mithilanchal and even after the reorganisation of Mithilanchal and separation of Vaishali and Muzaffarpur from it, they continue to consider themselves as part of the broader Maithili community (Perception Tests) and that's why they have retained the *nill* present tense marker in their speech.

The children in Mithilanchal are brought up generally by their grandparents and so their speech shows that they are following the older generation. One of the parents generally migrate to city like Delhi and Bombay for work and the other does all the domestic chores. So it is the grandparents who are the caretakers of the children in Mithilanchal. So their early speech is influenced by that of their grandparents. But when they are grown up a little more, they are aware of the Bajjika-Maithili conflict. They are taught that they belong to Bajjikanchal and they have Bajjika identity and that's why they adapt their speech after the adults who use most *-la*. This sociolinguistic explanation however needs more probing which is beyond the scope of this paper (under progress).

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