A Variationist Sociolinguistic Study of Copular Verbs in Magahi

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ABSTRACT

Magahi is a Bihari language that belongs to the Eastern Indo-Aryan language family. Historically, it has often been classified as a dialect of Maithili. Constitutionally, it has been included as one of the dialects of the Hindi language. However, its speakers assert its distinct identity. The copular verbs "rah" and "hal" have been documented in Magahi, as noted in Grierson's Linguistic Survey of India (1903). However, Grierson's study serves primarily as an initial exploration and does not account for the variation in copular forms with extralinguistic factors such as caste, class, education, and mobility. In the present study, we adopt a diachronic sociohistorical variationist approach to examine the longstanding linguistic variations within the Magahi language.

Keywords: Linguistic Variation, Dialect Contact, Dialect Continuum, Diffusion**.**

INTRODUCTION

This paper presents a variationist analysis of various copular verbs in the Magahi language. Different languages around the world exhibit diverse copula typologies. Some languages, like English (with "to be"), French (with "être"), and German (with "sein"), have a single copular verb. In contrast, languages such as Spanish and Portuguese utilize multiple copular verbs, like "ser" and "estar." Some Bantu languages, as well as Navajo, Lakhota, Burmese, Thai, and Khmer, also exhibit this pattern.

Certain languages employ an affix, typically a suffix, that functions as a copular verb, such as those in Turkic languages, Korean, Beja, and various Inuit languages, where the suffix attaches to the noun. In other instances, languages use a linking demonstrative or pronoun as the copula, as seen in Arabic ("hiya") or Quechua ("kay," meaning "this"). Some languages, like Japanese, Polish, Czech, and Slovak, adopt a mixed strategy, utilizing different approaches depending on the context. Austronesian languages often rely on a particle, while languages like Russian and Turkish may not have a copular verb at all in certain contexts.

Copular constructions have been the subject of many studies, such as the early works of Meillet (1906) and Benveniste (1950). Additionally, multiple language-specific papers have been published in the series of volumes edited by Verhaar (1967-72). More recently, studies focused on semantics, including those by Declerck (1988), Hengeveld (1992), and Stassen (1997), have provided valuable typological insights into intransitive predication, including some copula constructions.

In this paper, the copular verbs under discussion are the variations /rah/ and /hal/ found in the past tense, which function both as copulas in various non-verbal predicates and as auxiliaries alongside another verb. However, this dissertation specifically addresses the copular function of the "be" forms.

The earliest available literature on copular verb typology, as outlined by Higgins (1979), categorizes copular verbs into four major groups based on their semantic properties: Predicational, Specificational, Equative, and Identificational. This classification is grounded purely in semantic features and criteria. Ghosh (2019) extended this concept to eastern Indo-Aryan languages by adding three additional categories: existential, locative, and relational copular clauses.

This study proposes a mixed semantic-syntactic classification of copular sentences into the following five categories:

1. **Existential copula**: Indicates the existence of a noun, as in "There is a cinema hall," or introduces a new entity into the discourse, such as "There is a dog on the street."

2. **Equative/Nominal copula**: This clause equates two expressions that refer to the same individual, as in "She is Kanchan."

3. **Possessive copula**: This construction type indicates possession, as in "The girl has the book" or "The book is Ram's."

4. **Adjectival/Predicational copula**: In this type of copular construction, the post-copular phrase expresses a property of the subject, as in "The girl is cute." This construction is also known as a predicational copular construction.

5. **Locational copula**: This construction type places a referent in a specific location, as in "The beauty queen is in Vaishali."

DATA AND METHODOLOGY

This paper is based on two types of data:

1. Early 20th-century texts from the Linguistic Survey of India, compiled and edited by George Abraham Grierson in 1903. This data includes 66 specimens representing the three dialects and sub-dialects of the Bihari language: Maithili (which encompasses the sub-dialects Chhika-chhiki Boli, now known as Angika, and western Maithili, referred to as Bajjika), Bhojpuri, and Magahi. The scope of this study includes only the Magahi dialect specimens.

2. Conversational data on Magahi was gathered through interviews, questionnaires, and narratives from 9 speakers in Bodhgaya and Patna. Districts of Bihar. This data represents two age groups: the younger generation and the older generation.

- We have conducted face-to-face sociolinguistic interviews first in selected medium-sized cities to narrow the gaps left by the earlier study (Grierson 1903)

- We have conducted a few telephone interviews in the areas where it was not possible to conduct sociolinguistic fieldwork for some reason.

- Finally, we also conducted some additional in-person interviews in certain communities which were near the dialect boundaries for the sake of getting more contact-induced features.

This paper presents a variationist analysis of the copula in Magahi, a significant dialect of the Bihari language. Politically classified under the Hindi umbrella in the 8th schedule of the Constitution of India, Magahi boasts approximately 12.6 million speakers, yet it has not achieved constitutional recognition as a separate language. The 1961 Census saw Magahi legally absorbed into Hindi, despite its distinct characteristics. Its close relationship with Maithili is noteworthy; Grierson even suggested it be classified as a dialect of Maithili rather than a separate entity.

Magahi extends beyond the historical region of Magadh, encompassing areas in Bihar such as Patna and Gaya, as well as regions in Jharkhand, including Hazaribagh, Palamu, Singhbhum, Sarai Kala, Kharsawan, and Ranchi. Moreover, it is spoken in neighbouring states like Orissa, Chhattisgarh, and Bengal.

The dialectal landscape surrounding Magahi is rich and dynamic. To the west, it interfaces with Bhojpuri, prevalent in Shahbad and Palamau. In the northeast, it meets Chhika-chhiki or Angika, found in Monghyr, Bhagalpur, and the Sonthal Parganas. In the southeast, it borders Bengali as spoken in Manbhum and East Singhbhum. To the north, various forms of Maithili are spoken in the Tirhut region across the Ganges (Ethnologue).

There are mainly two sub-dialects of Magahi according to Grierson (1903):

1. **Standard Magahi,** spoken in Patna, Gaya, Bhagalpur, Monghyr, and Palamau districts of the state of Bihar and

2. **Eastern Magahi, is** spoken in the districts of Hazaribagh, Ranchi and Manbhum of the state of Ranchi, in the district of Malda, West Bengal and in the bordering state of Kharsawan State, Bamra State and Mayurbhanja of Chhatisgarh.

The current study is based on field works done in the two big cities of Bihar —Patna and Bodhgaya. The following map locates Magahi in Patna and Gaya districts of Bihar:

Map: Linguistic Map of Bihar (Magahi)

Magahi has the following copular verbs: a single copula in the present, two copulas in the past and a single copula in the future tenses:

Present Tense: *h*
Past Tense: *rah~hal*
Future Tense: *ho*

VARIATION IN COPULAR VERBS IN MAGAHI

The analysis of Magahi verb morphology reveals a lack of variation in the present and future tenses, as previously discussed in the earlier section. A noteworthy aspect of this morphology is the historical variation observed in the past forms of the verb "to be." Specifically, this variation occurs between two equally prevalent forms: "rah" and "hal." Due to the absence of written records from earlier periods, the earliest reference to Magahi can be attributed to Grierson's work from 1903. This variation has been documented in texts and specimens collected from the Bodhgaya region; however, only a single specimen from Patna is available, resulting in a deficiency of copular data from that area. The findings are as follows:

Region-Copula	*rah*	*hal*	Total
Bodhgaya	2 (33.3%)	4 (66.7%)	6
Total	2	4	

Table 1: Regional Distribution of the copula (past) in Magahi (Grierson, 1903)

Data (Grierson 1903, Specimens 18 & 19 on Magahi dialect of 'Bihari language')

O-kar badka betwa baadh-me h-al-ai.

3NH-GEn. elder son field-LOC COP-PST-3NH.S

'His elder son was in the field.'

Au kahio toh-ar kahana-se bahar na rah-l-i.

And never-ever 2MH-GEN words from outside NEG COP-PST-1.S

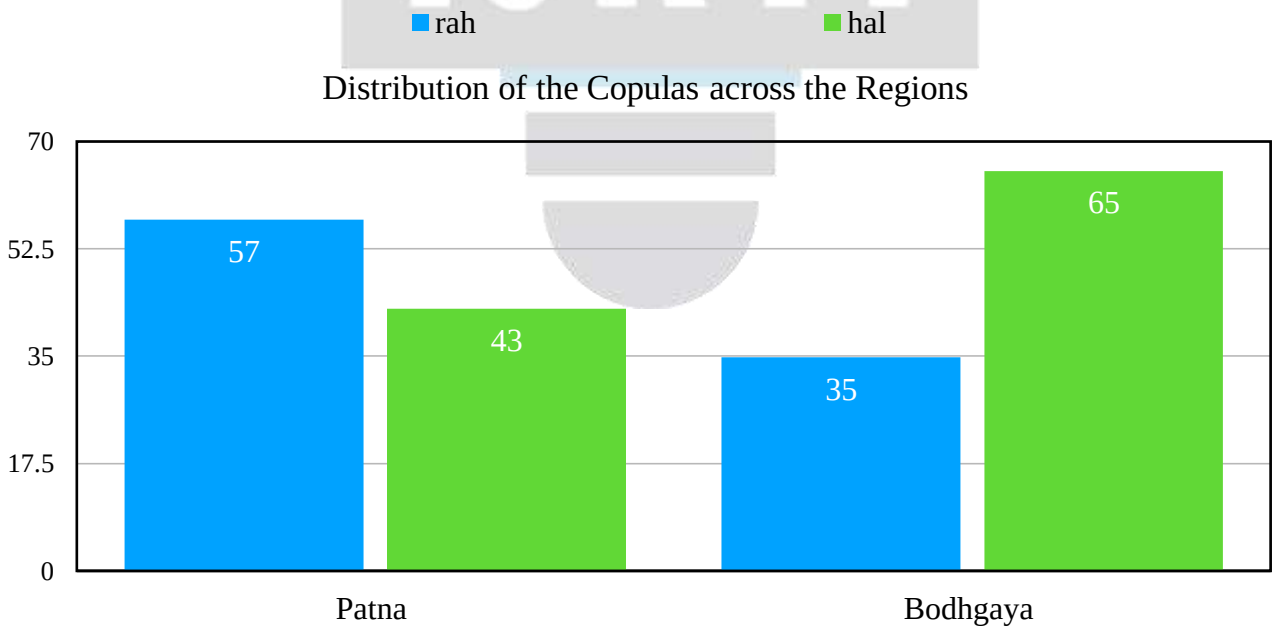
'And I never disobeyed your words.'

The important factor that conditions the variation (*rah~hal*) is geography as can be seen in the following table, the table shows the overall distribution of the copulas on the region axis:

Region	*rah*	*hal*	Total
Patna	67 (57.3%)	50 (42.7%)	117
Bodhgaya	39 (34.8%)	73 (65.2%)	112
Total	106	123	229

Table 2: Distribution of the Copulas (past) across regions in Magahi

Chart 1: Distribution of the Copulas (past) across regions in Magahi



The region in question is very important for understanding linguistic variations. The presence of the "rah" variation seems to be influenced by regional factors. Magahi is predominantly a "hal" language area. In Patna, the frequency of "rah" is higher at 57.3%, compared to Bodhgaya, which has a lower frequency of 34.8%.

Patna is surrounded on three sides by regions where "rah" is more prevalent, specifically the Bajjikanchal, Angika, and Bhojpuri regions. This proximity likely contributes to the higher occurrence of "rah" (57.3%) in the Magahi spoken in Patna, as it interacts with neighbouring dialects. In contrast, Gaya, which is situated

farther from Patna, shows a higher frequency of "hal" at 65.2% compared to "rah" at 34.8%. Geographical distance plays a significant role in these variations.

Another factor group that seems interesting is generation or age groups. The following table shows the overall distribution of the copula on the age-group axis :

Age-groups	*rah*	*hal*	Total
Young generation	65 (50.4%)	64 (49.6%)	129
Old generation	41 (41%)	59 (59%)	100
Total	106	123	229

Table 3: Distribution of the Copulas (past) across age groups in Magahi

The linguistic differences between the older and younger generations are relatively minor when compared to those found in Bhojpuri and Maithili. It appears that there are few age-based variations. However, a noticeable trend is that the younger generation tends to use "rah" more frequently than the older generation, which typically uses the literary form "hal." This pattern reflects the conservative form of the language that older speakers tend to represent.

Additionally, we observe that language use varies by region, as shown by the cross-tabulation of generation and region.

Further, we find that generation interacts with region. The interaction is shown by the cross-tabulation of generation with region:

Generation-Region	Copula	Patna	Bodhgaya	Total
Young Generation	*rah*	44 (62%)	21 (36%)	65
	hal	27 (38%)	37 (64%)	64
Total		71	58	129
Old Generation	*rah*	23 (50%)	18 (33%)	41
	hal	23 (50%)	36 (67%)	59
Total		46	54	100
Grand Total		117	112	229

Table 4: Cross Tabulation of Generation and Age-groups in Magahi (past tense)

Age groups are important in understanding linguistic usage. Our findings indicate that regional factors influence generational language preferences. In Patna, 62% of the younger generation uses "rah," while in Bodhgaya, only 36% of the younger generation prefers "rah." Conversely, the younger generation in Bodhgaya uses "hal" significantly more, at 64%, compared to Patna's 38%.

Similar trends can be seen among the older age groups. In Patna, the older generation uses "rah" and "hal" equally, with each accounting for 50%. However, in Bodhgaya, the older generation favours "hal," using it 67% of the time compared to just 33% for "rah."

The cross-tabulation of data shows that the linguistic distinctions between the old and young generations in Bodhgaya are less pronounced, while in Patna, there are noticeable differences. The younger age groups in Patna show a greater tendency to use "rah," which is likely influenced by neighbouring dialectal features.

Another factor group which seems to be very interesting is gender. The following table shows the overall distribution of the copulas on the gender axis:

Gender	*rah*	*hal*	Total
Male	44 (38.3%)	71 (61.7%)	115
Female	62 (54.4%)	52 (45.6%)	114
Total	106	123	229

Table 5: Distribution of the Copulas (past) across gender groups in Magahi

Gender plays a significant role in the usage of the terms "rah" and "hal." Research shows that "rah" is favoured more by women (54.4%) than by men (38.3%). In contrast, men use "hal" more frequently (61.7%) than "rah" (38.3%). This indicates a stable variation between "rah" and "hal" that seems to be influenced by the social factor of gender. The literary form "hal" is predominantly used by men, suggesting that men tend to be more conservative than women in the context of Magahi language usage.

BROAD OBSERVATIONS

(i) The rah and h-al forms are competing, alternating forms of copulas that serve as examples of stable variables. Both rah and h-al are versatile copulas that can be found across all types of copulas. While most examples are concentrated in the third person, these copular verbs have the potential to occur in all persons. Additionally, both rah and h-al inflect for person and honorificity.

(ii) There are significant regional differences between Bodhgaya and Patna. Bodhgaya is predominantly a hal area, while Patna is primarily a rah area, largely due to being surrounded by rah-speaking regions on three sides. Gender also plays an important role in the use of these forms; women tend to use rah more frequently than men.

(iii) When it comes to age-based linguistic differences, Magahi shows less variation compared to Maithili and Bhojpuri. Individual speakers exhibit different linguistic behaviours, with those from Patna being more likely to use the rah form than their counterparts from Bodhgaya. This suggests a linguistic and geographical closeness of Patna to rah-speaking areas, in contrast to Bodhgaya's distance from these regions.

(iv) Mobility has a less pronounced effect on linguistic variation in Magahi than it does in Maithili and, to some extent, Bhojpuri. However, Magahi still shows similar patterns; a longer duration of contact outside the community tends to correlate with a greater preference for the rah form.

(v) Overall, no significant linguistic factors emerged as influential in the rah~h-al variation. Instead, this variation appears to be a stable geographical phenomenon influenced by the social factor of gender.

QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS

The Varbrul Analysis selects region and gender as significant factors and eliminates Individual variation, mobility and generation while stepping down. The overall probability of *rah~hal* variation is the following:

Region	*rah*	Probability	Percentage	Total
Patna	67	0.609	57.3	117
Bodhgaya	39	0.386	34.8	112
Gender				
Male	44	0.421	38.3	115
Female	62	0.580	54.4	114

Table 6: Quantitative Analysis of Copula in Magahi (Past Tense)

Convergence at Iteration 4
Input 0.461
Log likelihood = -152.248 Significance = 0.001

The analysis reveals that while generational mobility has diminished, we observe an evident impact of age-grading in language use. Younger speakers tend to utilize "rah" more frequently than older generations. Additionally, individuals with a history of mobility show a preference for "rah" compared to those who are immobile.

The findings indicate that both "rah" and "hal" are stable linguistic variables influenced by two critical factors: geographical boundaries and gender. Specifically, Patna exhibits a higher likelihood of using "rah" (0.60) in contrast to Bodhgaya, which favours "hal" (0.38). This discrepancy can be attributed to the linguistic diversity present in Patna, which is surrounded by regions that predominantly speak Bajjika, Bhojpuri, and Angika—areas that are conducive to the use of "rah". Thus, regional factors are paramount in language variation.

Furthermore, gender significantly influences linguistic variation, as evidenced by women's higher usage of "rah" (0.58) compared to men (0.42). This trend is consistent across the three languages studied, each exhibiting two copulas: a standard representative form and an alternative form, either newly introduced as in the case of Maithili or as a colloquial variant. Overall, the data underscores the importance of gender as a social determinant in both Maithili and Magahi, with men displaying more conservative linguistic tendencies than women.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSIONS

In Magahi, as in other languages of the same group, the copulas "rah" and "hal" serve as all-purpose copulas. Interestingly, both "rah" and "hal" are inflectional and can change based on the person marking of the subject, object, and addressee, reflecting the honorific status of the referent. While honorificity and humanness have become less significant in the current variation, regional factors have emerged as the primary influence.

For instance, Patna exhibits a higher usage of "rah" (57.3%) compared to Bodhgaya (34.8%). Patna is surrounded on three sides by regions that predominantly use "rah," such as Bajjikanchal, Angika, and Bhojpuri areas. This geographical context likely contributes to Patna's greater frequency of "rah" over "hal." In contrast, Gaya, which is farther from Patna, shows a higher preference for "hal" (65.2%) compared to "rah" (34.8%). Bodhgaya, being more distant from the center, also uses the literary form "hal" more often (65.2%) than Patna (42.7%), influenced by its proximity to "rah"-dominated areas.

Moreover, we observed that the linguistic differences between older and younger generations in Magahi are relatively minimal compared to those in Bhojpuri and Maithili. The younger generation tends to use "rah" slightly more (50.4%) than the older generation (41%). Conversely, older individuals use "hal" more frequently (59%) compared to younger speakers (49.6%).

Another significant factor is gender. Women favour "rah" more often (54.4%) than men (38.3%), while men tend to use "hal" (61.7%) more than "rah." This finding indicates that men generally prefer the standard literary form, while women are more inclined toward the colloquial variant. This pattern differs from many findings in the Western world and even within other regions of India.

The preference for colloquial forms among women may be linked to their social roles in Patna and Bodhgaya, where they play a central role in maintaining social relationships within the family and neighbourhood. Additionally, the data from Bodhgaya was collected from families of teachers, with male members commonly working in education while women primarily took on roles as housewives. Since men are more engaged with teaching, art, and literature, they tend to utilize the literary form more frequently.

Similarly, in Patna, old women are mostly housewives while men are typically connected with artistic and cultural pursuits. The results therefore highlight the influence of both regional factors and professional backgrounds, suggesting that the profession could be a significant subject for future research.

In conclusion, the variation between "hal" and "rah" has historical roots and represents stable variables that are strongly conditioned by region and, to a lesser extent, by gender. Currently, there is no indication of change in the usage of Magahi.

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