# *Bhala* and the subordination of highlighted propositions

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## 1 Introduction

- This paper is about *bhala*, a discourse particle in Hindi-Urdu.

- *Bhala* has at least two senses. Under one of its senses, *bhala* translates to the English *good*. We explore the other sense; i.e., its use as a discourse particle.

- As a discourse particle, *bhala* can occur in *wh*-questions and imperatives.

  (1)  Party par kon  aaya  bhala?
       party on  who came bhala
       *who came to the party* BHALA?

  (2)  Novel parRh lo        bhala!
       novel  read    IMP.2PL bhala
       *(perhaps) read the novel* BHALA

- It never occurs in declaratives and exclamatives.

  (3)  # Barish ho rahi hai bhala.
       # *It is raining* BHALA

  (4)  # (Whoa), John kya lazeez desserts banata hai bhala!
       # *(Whoa), What delicious desserts John bakes* BHALA*!*

- What about polar questions? *Bhala* occurs in polars; however, for felicity, polars with *bhala* always receive rhetorical readings with the negative answer.

- In the next three sections, we take each one of these environments separately and get a better understanding of them. Pragmatic effects are noted along the way.

- The above distribution is puzzling. More specifically, it is puzzling that *bhala* is felicitous in polars only under a rhetorical reading.

- We present a semantic account.

- Theoretical upshot: we operationalize the notion of commitment in a novel way in the Table model.

## 2    *Wh*-questions

- In *wh*-questions, *bhala* seems to mark total ignorance w.r.t. the question asked.

- Take the context for (5) to be such that A is quizzing B on B's cricket knowledge.

   (5)    A: *Who won the 2019 World Cup?*
          B: Mujhe nahi pata. Kon jeeta tha bhala?
          B: *I don't know. Who won bhala?*

- The above context serves to show that *bhala* marks speaker ignorance. The addressee may know the answer to the question under discussion.

- However, the speaker need not believe that the addressee knows the answer.

- *Wh*-questions with *bhala* can be asked out of the blue as well.

- Context: It is common ground between A and B that A, B, and John, all live in the same building. A hasn't been to John's room ever. B says to A that it's great that John lives in the same building.

   (6)    A: *I'm so glad that John lives in the same building.*
          B: Voh kis floor par rehta hai bhala? Tumhein pata hai?
          B: *Which floor does he live on bhala? Do you know?*

- A tentative suggestion is that *bhala* seems to track lack of some type of commitment, which can be further corroborated via the following minimal pair.

- Context: A and B live together. A comes home at 5pm and B much later, at 10pm. There is a regularity to their coming home events. It's 9:30pm and A got some takeout food for A and B.

  (7) A: Mein pizza order karne ka soch raha hun. Tum kab vaapis aa rahe ho?
  A: *I am thinking of ordering in some pizza. When are you getting back?*

  (8) A: Mein pizza order karne ka soch raha hun. # Tum kab vaapis aa rahe ho bhala?
  A: *I am thinking of ordering in some pizza. # When are you getting back bhala?*

- The context is set such that due to the regularity of B getting back home at 10pm, A is taken to be biased towards B getting back at 10pm at the time of utterance.

- Tentative upshot: *Bhala* seems to signal lack of bias to a possible answer to a *wh*-question. Or *bhala* requires that the speaker not be committed to a possible answer.

# 3  Imperatives

- *Bhala* is appropriate to use in suggestion uses of imperatives as in (9).

- Let the context for (9) be such that A and B are in a long flight together. A has a novel in their bag. This is common ground.

  (9) A: I am so bored.

  B: Novel parRh-lo     bhala!
  B: Novel read-IMP.2PL bhala!

  B: *(Perhaps) read the novel bhala*

- To contrast, take a situation where A is proctoring an exam and B seems to be cheating. In such a scenario, it would be weird for A to utter the imperative *don't cheat* with *bhala* appended:

(10)  # Cheat na kar-o          bhala!
      # Cheat not do-IMP.2PL bhala!
      # *Don't cheat bhala!*

- Imperatives to which *bhala* can felicitously append are analogous to what Rudin (2018) calls *rising imperatives* as in (11b) (taken from (Rudin, 2018, 101)):

  (11)  A: I really like this present grandma gave me.
        a.  B: Write her a thank-you note.
        b.  B: Write her a thank-you note?

- Rudin describes imperatives like (11b) as *tentative* and *suggestiony*.

- Other imperatives where *bhala* is fine are invitations and offers.

  (12)  Novel parRh-o!
        Novel read-IMP.2PL
        *Read the novel!*

  (13)  Novel parRh-lo!
        Novel read-IMP.2PL
        *Read the novel!*

  (14)  Novel parRh-o          bhala!
        Novel read-IMP.2PL bhala
        *Perhaps read the novel!*

- We note that the Hindi-Urdu analogue to the English rising imperatives can be morphologically marked. The presence of the *-lo* in (9) instead of *-o* marks for tentativeness and suggestion.

- In the presence of the suggestion imperative form, *bhala* is licensed.

- Rudin gives an account for rising imperatives in terms of a lack of speaker commitment.

- For *wh*-questions, we saw that a lack of commitment or bias was necessary for *bhala* to be licensed. We witness something similar for imperatives.

- While in the case of *wh*-questions, it may be doxastic commitments that are relevant, in the case of imperatives, it would be teleological commitments.

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# 4 The puzzle

- So far, we have seen that *bhala* is sensitive to lack of speaker commitment to the content of its containing clause.

  i. *Bhala* is bad in declaratives.
  ii. *Bhala* is bad in exclamatives.
  iii. *Bhala* is fine in *wh*-questions when there is no public speaker commitment to an answer to the *wh*-question.
  iv. *Bhala* is fine in suggestiony uses of imperatives, but not in commands.

- Norms of assertion (Lackey, 2007; Brown, 2008) usually require that the speaker believe the asserted proposition or know it. Believing $p$ and knowing $p$ are two types of commitment.

- In asserting a declarative, due to norms of assertion, the speaker is taken to be committed to the content of the declarative clause. It is no surprise then that *bhala* is bad in declaratives.

- In exclamatives, the speaker is again required to be committed to the content of the exclamative clause (Zanuttini and Portner, 2003; Rett, 2011).

- Polar questions are a type of questions.

- There are polar question formation strategies in Hindi-Urdu that bias the formed question. This can be done by adding a tag or by adding a discourse particle like *na*.[1]

  (15)  Tum khush ho na?
        You  happy be na
        *Intended: You're happy, right?*

- In such questions, *bhala* is bad, as predicted.

- In unbiased polar questions, *bhala* should be fine, just as it is in *wh*-questions. This expectation is not borne out. We explain the polar question data in more detail below.

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[1]It is not clear whether these questions ought to be classified as interrogative clauses, as there's good evidence that *na* doesn't like interrogative environments. These clauses can be thought of as a clause-type similar to the English rising declarative. See Jabbar (2023) for more.

# 5   Polar questions and rhetoricity

- *Bhala* can be appended felicitously to polar questions only if the polar is interpreted under a rhetorical reading with the negative answer.

  (16)   Mujhe hike par jaana hai. # (Kya) Barish ho rahi hai bhala?
         *I have to go on a hike. # Is it raining bhala?*

- The polar question is preceded by a sentence that makes the polar to be interpreted as information-seeking.

- Before we see how a rhetorical reading salvages the felicity, a slight detour into rhetorical questions is in order.

- Rhetorical questions (RhQs) are said to have the following properties (Caponigro and Sprouse, 2007; Biezma and Rawlins, 2017): the answer to a RhQ is already common ground; RhQs have the feel of an assertion; RhQs can be answered optionally; RhQs are often used to extract commitment from the addressee.

  (17)   You should stop saying that Luca didn't like the party last night. After all, who was the only one that was still dancing at 3am? (Biezma and Rawlins, 2017, 304)

- The already common-grounded answer to the above RhQ is *Luca*.

- However, there's a class of RhQs that are answered only negatively. Take (18)-(19).

  (18)   Who cares about you? (Caponigro and Sprouse, 2007)

  (19)   Jim is a biologist. What does he know about physics?

- Now take the context to be such that yesterday, A said to B that it will for sure rain today at 9am. Both A and B went outside at 9am and it was sunny with no clouds in sight. B can felicitously ask (20).

  (20)   (Kya) (yeh) barish ho rahi hai bhala?
         *Is it raining bhala?*

- The context is set such that the question, for which the rhetorical reading was blocked in (16), can be interpreted rhetorically in (20).

- Moreover, (20) receives the negative answer, i.e. *no, it's not raining.*

- Polar RhQs with positive answers cannot be appended with *bhala*.

- Take the modified context from above. A said to B that it will for sure rain today at 9am. B expressed skepticism. Both A and B went outside at 9am and it was raining heavily. A cannot felicitously ask (20).

- To sum up, for a polar question $Q$ if a rhetorical reading is available such that $Q$ has a negative answer, *bhala* can occur sentence-finally with $Q$.

# 6  Taking stock

- Our account for *bhala* needs to make the following predictions:

  (21)  Derive felicitous *wh*-questions when the speaker hasn't signaled commitment to an answer in the discourse. (This happens to be the default with *wh*-questions.)

  (22)  Derive suggestion uses of imperatives.

  (23)  Block polar questions, unless a rhetorical reading with a negative answer is available.

  (24)  Block assertions and exclamative uses across the board.

- This is puzzling. While (21), (22), and (24) require a lack of commitment, RhQs with negative answers not only require a commitment but extract one too; and that too for a very specific answer, namely the negative answer.

- In the next section, we offer our proposal.

# 7  Proposal

- Roelofsen and Farkas (2015) propose an additional level of semantic representation, at which the declarative *it is raining* and the polar *is it raining?* have identical highlighted content, namely the proposition that it is raining.[2]

- To get a better understanding, consider the following dialogues:

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[2]We borrow this understanding from Theiler (2021).

(25)  A: It is raining.
      B: Yes(, it is)./No(, it isn't).

(26)  A: Is it raining?
      B: Yes(, it is)./No(, it isn't).

(27)  A: Who came to the party?
      B: # Yes(, it is)./ # No(, it isn't).

- While *yes* and *no*, termed *polarity particles*, across languages, can be used as responses to both declaratives and polar interrogatives, they cannot be used as responses to *wh*-questions.

- Roelofsen & Farkas argue that this reveals to us a level of semantic representation at which both declaratives and polar interrogatives are unified.

- They call this representation *highlighted content*.

- Their proposal can be understood in the following terms: a given clause $C$ denotes an $n$-place property as its highlighted content, where $n$ corresponds to the number of *wh* words in $C$.

- We couch our account in the Table model of Farkas and Bruce (2010) to make use of the projected sets $PS$.

- We bifurcate the Table in Rudin (2018)'s style by incorporating a teleological table $T_{tel}$, alongside a doxastic table $T_{dox}$.

- A discourse is an $n$-tuple, $\langle T_{dox}, T_{tel}, CS, PS, QUD, A, DC_a \rangle$, where $DC_a$ denotes the discourse commitments of each participant $a \in A$.

- We propose some additional machinery.

- Crucially, we take $x$'s commitment set to be ordered.

- More formally:

(28)  Let $W$ be a set of worlds.

(29)  $DC_x \subseteq (\mathcal{P}(W))^2$

- Spelled out in words, (29) just means that $DC_x$ contains propositions but with an ordering on them.

- For instance, if $\langle p, \neg p \rangle$ is in $DC_x$ but $\langle \neg p, p \rangle$ isn't, then we can say that the participant $x$ ranks $p$ higher than $\neg p$. In the case of doxastic commitments, this ordering may reflect $x$'s probability distribution over propositions.

- Further, we propose that each clause-type denotes a commitment function. $\mathcal{F}$ from projected sets to $DC_x$s.

- In other words, $DC_x$ is formed via consultation with the projected set.

- Conceptual motivation: via each clause-type use in the discourse, participants steer conversation in a certain direction. It is through how they steer the conversation that you infer their discourse commitments.

- $\mathcal{F}$ performs the following computation:

  (30)  $p \in PS \rightarrow \exists \langle \sigma, \tau \rangle \in DC_x$ s.t. $\sigma = p$ & $\tau = W - p$

- $\mathcal{F}$ can be thought of as populating $DC_x$.

- We take *bhala* to occur in the left-periphery; $[\![bhala]\!]$ scopes over $\mathcal{F}$.

- *Bhala* does the following:

  (31)  for $\sigma \in \Sigma$ for $\Sigma \in DC_x$, if $\sigma$ is the highlighted content of *bhala*'s containing clause, $\neg(\langle \sigma, W - \sigma \rangle \in DC_x)$.

- In other words, if $p$ is the highlighted content of *bhala*'s containing clause, *bhala* requires that $\langle p, \neg p \rangle$ be removed from $DC_x$.

- From (30), we see that what would be left in $DC_x$ depends on what's mapped from $PS$ to $DC_x$.

- In the case of a declarative with the content $p$, $\mathcal{F}$ maps to $DC_x$ $\langle p, \neg p \rangle$.

- In the case of declaratives, the projected set contains one future context set with the content of the declarative updated.

- Thus, $p$ is contained in $PS$. (30) requires for $DC_x$ to contain $\langle p, \neg p \rangle$.

- Removal of $\langle p, \neg p \rangle$ due to *bhala* means that the speaker is not committed to $p$, violating the norms of assertion and thus predicting infelicity.

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- In the case of polar interrogatives, what's mapped by $\mathcal{F}$ from $PS$ to $DC_x$ are two pairs, $\langle p, \neg p \rangle$ and $\langle \neg p, p \rangle$.

- The reason for this is that polars project two future context sets, $p$ and $\neg p$.

- Due to *bhala*, we remove $\langle p, \neg p \rangle$.

- The reason why we remove only $\langle p, \neg p \rangle$ is

  - because $p$ is the highlighted content of the polar;
  - and because *bhala* is well-defined only for highlighted contents.

- What remains after removal of $\langle p, \neg p \rangle$ from $DC_x$ is $\langle \neg p, p \rangle$. This amounts to commitment to the negative answer to the polar interrogative, thereby predicting a particular type of rhetoricity.

- As *wh*-questions do not denote highlighted propositions, the antecedent condition of *bhala* is false, thereby satisfying the condition trivially, and thus predicting felicity.

## 8 Limitations and future directions

- We haven't accounted for the distribution of *bhala* in suggestiony imperatives.

- However, we think that our account can be extended.

  - In the case of imperatives, take the content of an imperative to be a proposition $p$.
  - Uttering an imperative projects a future context set with $p$ updated.
  - As $p \in PS$, $\mathcal{F}$ populates $TC_x$ with $\langle p, \neg p \rangle$.
  - *Bhala* removes $\langle p, \neg p \rangle$ from $TC_x$, getting us no commitment to the proposition denoted by the imperative. This predicts weakening of the imperative force.
  - However, the above requires that due to uttering the imperative, its denotation becomes highlighted in the discourse. We have no evidence for the claim that $p$ with which $TC_x$ is populated is the highlighted proposition of the imperative.

- Other concerns that we have are due to variation in the data.

- Some speakers don't like *bhala* in information-seeking *wh*-questions, and only like rhetorical *wh*-questions.

- We report the variety where both are fine.

- Currently, we don't have a way to explain the variation. Future work seeks to do that.

If you have comments, please send them to
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