



Donning The Dative Dragon in Urdu

Nida Sheikh^{*a}, Dr. Baber S. A. Khan^b

a. PhD Linguistics Scholar, Department of English, University of Central Punjab, Lahore, Pakistan

b. Professor, Department of English, University of Central Punjab, Lahore, Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the syntactic and semantic functioning of the Urdu postposition 'ko' as a dative case marker, moving beyond its traditional treatment as an indirect-object marker syntactically and goal/benefactive semantically in ditransitive constructions. Drawing on Butt's (2005) Differential Case Marking Theory (DCT), the study sketches the range of implementations in 'ko's syncretism between accusative and dative cases, the alternation of dative with ergative marking in complex predicates, and its apparent and ultimately rejected alternation with genitive marking in experiencer subjects. The main concerns are dative subjects with conjunct verbs, copula constructions and non-finite clauses. The analysis further offers counter-examples to Butt's (2006) account of quirky case, arguing that dative marking in Urdu is not restricted to goal/benefactive roles but extends across transitive, intransitive, and non-finite domains. A brief comparison with Punjabi '-nu' marking situates these findings within a broader South Asian typology of differential case alternation.

1. Introduction

Dative case (DAT) in Urdu has fascinated an endless amount of descriptive attention lately, for its resistance of the over-generalization of the simple postposition 'ko' that surfaces on indirect objects of ditransitive constructions syntactically, or goal or benefactive arguments semantically (Butt, 2006; Woolford, 2006; Carnie, 2011). However, this squib mainly deals with the range of syntactic and semantic stipulation of dative case in Urdu constructions. This present work will show how postposition 'ko' takes its position among Urdu experiencer subject, non-finite clauses, causative formations, and psyche verbs. It also proposes some counter examples against the exemplification and analysis of Butt's (2006) quirky case. The study also shows a gratitude towards Butt's (2004) Differential Case Marking Theory (DCT) that helps me in providing a valuable set of illustrations of 'ko' syncretism between accusative and dative cases, the apparent alternation in ergative and dative cases in Urdu complex predicate, the deceptive alternation in genitive and dative cases in Urdu experiencer subjects. All of these observations are forming legitimate gateway for empirical survey of cross-linguistic typology of dative case.

2. Differential Case Marking Theory (DCT)

Differential Subject Marking (DSM) and Differential Object Marking (DOM) can be seen in several South-Asian languages like Urdu. It is seen that case marking system of a language creates the difference in semantic content in differentials/ alternations (Butt & King, 2004; Butt, 2006; Nordlinger, 1998) This explicitly elaborates the notion of syntactic-semantic structure of grammatical relations. Butt's Differential Case Marking Theory (DCT) has two parts:

* Correspondence to: PhD Linguistics Scholar, Department of English, University of Central Punjab, Lahore, Pakistan
E-mail address: L1F22PHDL0004@ucp.edu.pk (N. Sheikh)



- Subject to syntactically restricted
- Semantically predictable

DCT also assumes the default cases are NOM/ACC is structurally assigned when no semantic role or specific case marker has been used in the given construction (Chomsky, 1993). There are several cases and case markings that are having generalized rules, are known as 'quirky' (Butt, 2006). The obvious example for this 'quirky' case is the exceptional NOM instead of ERG on the subject argument in the transitive construction of 'laana'(to bring) in the perfective aspect in Urdu (1), where the object argument receives the regular ACC (Kachru & Pandharipande, 1980; Butt, 2006).

1. (a) Voh kitab laaya
He-NOM book-ACC bring-perf
He brought the book.
- (b) *Usne kitab laaya
He-ERG book-ACC bring-perf
He brought the book.

To summarize the above discussion of DCT, the syntactic-semantic interface is actually the interaction of structural and inherent case within Minimalist Program (MP). The current study analyses the key points:

- Like many other languages, does Urdu tend to use syntactic variation via case to show semantic alternation?
- Urdu does not show DAT/ERG alternation, is also not displaying any close association between DAT and GEN.

2.1. Differential Object Marking (DOM) of ACC/DAT

DAT is primarily assigned through semantic means, particularly in a grammatical construction that has indirect object (IO). In these constructions, the dative case marker '-ko' signifies theta-roles of goal/benefactive (2). Indirect objects in Urdu cannot receive a structural case due to inherent syntactic constraints. However, they are still required to bear some form of case to satisfy the case filter, as described in the theoretical work of Chomsky and Lasnik (1977). Thus, in Urdu, indirect objects default to acquire the dative case marker '-ko' to meet this requirement. This analysis fits within a broader linguistic theory, indicating how semantic roles drive case assignment in Urdu while ensuring syntactic requirements are upheld through default case assignment to indirect objects. Hence, DAT is a result of syntactic-semantic interface (Chomsky, 1993; Woolford, 2006; Davison, 2014). In Urdu, the postposition '-ko' indeed serves as a case marker for both the dative and accusative cases, but its use in each case differs based on the semantic roles of the arguments they are attached to. The accusative '-ko' is used to mark direct objects (DO) to show specificity (3b) (Aissen, 2003; Davison, 2014; Keine & Müller, 2015). So, the postposition '-ko' is considered form-identical marker (homonym) for both accusative and dative cases (Butt, 2006; Ranjan, 2016).

2. ladke-ne apne baap-ko khat likha
Boy-ERG his-poss father-DAT letter-ACC write-perf
The boy wrote a letter to his father.
3. (a) ladki-ne tasveer dekhi
Girl-ERG picture-ACC see-perf
The girl saw a picture.
- (b) ladki-ne tasveer-ko dekha
Girl-ERG picture-ACC see-perf
The girl saw the picture.
4. (a) ?maa-ko ladke-ko ladki-ko dikhana chahiye tha
Mother-DAT boy-DAT girl-DAT to show-inf should-mod past
The mother should show the boy the girl.
- (b) maa-ko ladke-ko **ladki** dikhana chahiye thi
Mother-DAT boy-DAT **girl-ACC** to show-inf should-mod past
The mother should show the boy a girl.
- (c) maa-ko **ladka** ladki-ko dikhana chahiye tha
Mother-DAT **boy-ACC** girl-DAT to show-inf should-mod past
The mother should show the girl a boy.
- (d) **maa** ladke-ko ladki-ko dikhana chahiye thi
Mother-ACC boy-DAT girl-DAT to show-inf should-mod past
The boy should show the girl a mother.

The sentence in example 4a displays the case marking of '-ko' with all three arguments, through which the sentence seems ambiguous. It is difficult to know who should show who to and whom. To remove the ambiguity, 4b, c & d display an optional

case marker ‘-ko’, assigned to DO for specificity. The sentence remains grammatical by removing ‘-ko’ (ACC marker), however, ‘-ko’ (DAT marker) is integral and sustains its position in the sentence, so removing it would lead to ungrammaticality (5).

5. (a) ladke-ne ladki-ko kitab di
Boy-ERG girl-DAT book-ACC give-perf
The boy gave a book to the girl.
- (b) *ladke-ne ladki kitab di
Boy-ERG girl-DAT book-ACC give-perf
The boy gave a book to the girl.
- (c) *ladke-ne ladki-ko kitab-ko dia
Boy-ERG girl-DAT book-ACC give-perf
The boy gave the book to the girl.
- (d) *ladke-ne ladki-ko bacce-ko dia
Boy-ERG girl-DAT baby-ACC give-perf
The boy gave the baby to the girl.
6. (a) Tum bacca pakro
tum-(NOM) baby-(ACC) catch-(IMP)
Catch the baby. (Non-specific object)
- (b) Tum bacce-ko pakro
tum-(NOM) baby-(ACC) catch-(IMP)
Catch the baby. (Specific object)

In ditransitive constructions, accusative case marker ‘-ko’ attached to DO for specificity makes the sentence ungrammatical whether the object is animate or inanimate (5d). Either animate or inanimate arguments take determiner for specificity in Urdu in the ditransitive constructions. This is typical in transitive sentences, where ‘-ko’ marks the direct object for specificity, but in ditransitive sentences, Urdu do not follow the same pattern for DO. Urdu requires demonstrative pronouns in ditransitive constructions (8b) to display specific DO, not the ‘-ko’ (ACC marker).

7. (a) ladki-ne yeh tasveer dekhi
girl-ERG this picture-ACC see-perf
The girl saw this picture.
- (b) ladki-ne is tasveer-ko dekha
girl-ERG this picture-ACC see-perf
The girl saw this picture.
- (c) *ladki-ne yeh tasveer-ko dekha
girl-ERG this picture-ACC see-perf
The girl saw this picture.
8. (a) ladki-ne ladke-ko yeh tasveer dikhai
Girl-ERG boy-DAT this picture-ACC show-perf
The girl showed the boy this picture.
- (b) ladki-ne ladke-ko is tasveer-ko dikhaya
Girl-ERG boy-DAT this picture-ACC show-perf
The girl showed the boy this picture.

2.2. Dative Subjects and Differential Subject Marking (DSM)

Urdu’s case alternation system offers a rich field for studying how morphosyntactic markers convey subtle distinctions in agency, affectedness, and volitionality, especially when influenced by animacy and verb type (Butt, 2006). Each case has nuanced functions that reveal the language’s flexibility in representing diverse syntactic and semantic relationships. There are some conjunct verbs N+V such as yaad aana (come to mind)/yaad karna (to remember) (9a & b), gusa aana (to have anger)/gusa karna (to get angry) (10a & b) that display DSM between DAT/ERG marking for syntactic-semantic interplay. The alternation displays the difference between agentive ERG/non-agentive DAT subjects. The agentive subjects indicate more active action form by using the light verb ‘karna’ (to do) in perfective verb form and they eventually acquire ERG, and the non-agentive subjects show less control on the action by using the light verb ‘aana’(to come) and they resultantly acquire DAT. Hence, DSM semantically states that DAT is associated with goal, while ergative case is with agent. Moreover, Urdu is a split-ergative language. DAT sustains its position in aspectual differences, while ERG cannot do so (9 c & d).

9. (a) usko kahani [yaad ai]
He-DAT story-ACC [memory-N come-perf]

The story came to his memory/he remembered a story. (passive recipient)

- (b) usne kahani [yaad ki]
He-ERG story-ACC [memory-N do-perf]
He remembered a story. (active agent)
- (c) Voh kahani [yaad karta hai]
He-NOM story-ACC [memory-N do-pre]
He remembers a story. (active agent)
- (d) usko kahani [yaad aati hai]
He-DAT story-ACC [memory-N come-pre]
The story comes to his memory/he remembers a story. (passive recipient)
10. (a) usko [gusa aaya]
He-DAT [anger-N come-perf]
He got angry. (passive recipient)
- (b) usne [gusa kiya]
He-ERG [anger-N come-perf]
He got angry. (active agent)

A quite strange subject alternation present in DAT/GEN occurs in the example 11. Both of the sentences seem grammatical. These constructions can be 'Kanta usee chubha/ Kanta us-ke chubha/ kanta us-ko chubha' with respect to its English translation in which 'Thorn' functions as a doer of an action (agent) and 'him' as experiencers.

11. (a) us-ko/usee kanta chubhaa
He-(DAT) thorn-(ACC) prick-(PAST)
Thorn pricked him.
- (b) *us-ke kanta chubhaa
He-(GEN) thorn-(ACC) prick-(PAST)
Thorn pricked him.

Verbs 'dikhna' (to be seen), 'milna' (to meet), 'chubhna' (to prick) and some conjunct verbs made up of combining N+V and Adj+V such as dar lagna (to get scared), gusa aana (to get angry), yaad aana (to come in memory), and acha lagna/bhaana/pasand aana (to like) are the verbs of goal/benefactive arguments. However, all of these verbs take dative subjects, not genitive in Urdu.

12. (a) Mujhe [dar laga]
I-DAT fear-N feel-perf
I felt scared.
- (b) *Mere [dar laga]
I-GEN fear-N feel-perf
I felt scared.
13. (a) Mujhe [dard hua]
I-DAT pain feel-perf
I felt pain.
- (b) *Mere [dard hua]
I-GEN pain feel-perf
I felt pain.
14. (a) Mujhe [gusa aya]
I-DAT anger-N get-perf
I got angry.
- (b) *Mere [gusa aya]
I-GEN anger-N get-perf
I got angry.
15. (a) Mene usko [maar diya]
I-ERG him-DAT hit-V give-perf

- I hit/kill him.
- (b) * Mene uske [maar diya]
I-ERG him-GEN hit-V give-perf
I hit/kill him.
16. Mujhko/mujhe kitab mili
I-DAT book-ACC find-perf
I found the book.
17. us-ko/usee ladka dikhaa.
He-(DAT) boy-(ACC) see-(PAST)
He saw the boy.

The dative and genitive cases do not alternate on subject positions in Urdu. After the genitive marker ‘-ka’, ‘-ki’, ‘-ke’, a nominal argument should appear to represent the relationship between possessor and possessed. If that argument is missing, the sentence becomes incomplete and ungrammatical. The sentences in 11b, 12b, 13b, 14b and 15b are ungrammatical due to the absence of the possessed. The sentences should be:

18. (a) [uske hath]-par kanta chubha
[His hand]-on thorn-ACC prick-perf
The thorn pricked in his hand.
- (b) [mere bhai]-ko [dar laga]
[My brother]-DAT fear-N feel-perf
My brother felt scared.
- (c) [mere sar] -me [dard hua]
[My head]-in pain-N be-perf
I had headache.
- (d) [mere bhai]-ko [gusa aya]
[my brother]-DAT anger-N come-perf
My brother got angry.

Hence, this investigation demonstrates that the conjunct verbs and their unique case-marking patterns favor DAT marking with the arguments that are passive recipients and experiencers in Urdu. In addition, there is no differential subject marking in dative and genitive case marking. Moreover, the copula ‘hai’ (to be) serves to link the subject (often a noun or pronoun) to its predicate, typically describing a state or property. The subject in these constructions, especially when describing physical or emotional states, often takes DAT rather than NOM in Urdu. This phenomenon is discussed in several studies, including the work by Butt et al. (2006) and Rizvi et al. (2008), which highlights the use of DAT in copula constructions.

19. Us-ko bukhar hai
He-DAT fever-ACC be-pre
He has fever.

Rizvi et al. (2008) provides an additional layer to this analysis by noting that certain physical states or emotional experiences require DAT in the subject argument. He argues that arguments representing physical sensations (such as zukaam (flu), bukhar (fever), garmi (heat), sardi (cold), etc.) or emotional states (like bhook (hunger), pyar (love), and nafrat (hate)) must be marked with DAT when used as the subject of a copula construction.

20. Mujhe pyar hai
I-DAT love-ACC be-pre
I am in love.

The above sentence is indicating that the subject is experiencing the feeling of love, rather than acting it out as an active agent.

2.2.1 Dative Subjects and Non-Finite Verbs

The light verbs like ‘lagna’ (to get), ‘hona’ (to be), and ‘aana’ (to come) always take DAT subjects. Non-finite verbs in Urdu also exhibit DAT subject marking. This marking pattern is particularly prominent in infinitival and gerundial constructions where an experiencer or non-volitional subject is assigned the DAT. In Urdu, the use of DAT marking in non-finite constructions reflects a distinction between volitional agents and non-volitional experiencers (Butt & King, 2007). In finite verbs, NOM and

ERG indicate subjects actively initiating actions. But in non-finite verbs, especially those expressing states, obligations, or needs, DAT marking implies a non-agentive, passive experience of the action, aligning with the subject's role as an experiencer in the constructions that express necessity, obligation, or intention.

21. (a) *bacce-ko maa-se milna hai*
 child-DAT mother-INST meet-inf be-pre
 The child wants to see the mother.
 (b) *ladki-ko gudiya-se khelna hai*
 Girl-DAT doll-INST play-inf be-pre
 The girl wants to play with the doll.

Multiple prominent studies are suggesting that this DAT/ERG alternation in non-finite constructions points to an interesting interaction between case marking and modality (Iqbal et al., 2016; Butt & King, 2007; Khokhlova, 2013).

22. (a) **mene kaam karna hai*
 I-ERG work-ACC do-inf be-pre
 I want to do work.
 (b) *mujhe kaam karna hai*
 I-ERG work-ACC do-inf be-pre
 I need to do work.
 23. (a) **usne khana khana hai*
 He-ERG meal-ACC eat-inf be-pre
 He wants to eat meal.
 (b) *usko khana khana hai*
 He-DAT meal-ACC eat-inf be-pre
 He needs to eat meal.

The alternation between DAT and ERG cases on the subject position is particularly interesting because Urdu employs a split-ergative system based on aspect (ERG for perfective aspect) and uses DAT in contexts that highlight experiencer roles and non-volitional states.

24. (a) *Nadya-ne zoo jana hai*
 Nadya-ERG zoo-ACC go-inf be-pre
 Nadya wants to go to the zoo.
 (b) *Nadya-ko zoo jana hai*
 Nadya-DAT zoo-ACC go-inf be-pre
 Nadya has to go to the zoo.

(Butt & King, 2004)

Here, *Nadya-ne* (*Nadya-ERG*) is actively controlling the action of going, marking it as a volitional agent. Compare this to the sentence in the dative case *Nadya-ko* (*Nadya-DAT*), where *Nadya* is not controlling the action, but going to experience it passively (Mohanani, 1994; Butt & King, 2004; Grimm, 2011). This notion is known as Differential Subject Marking (DSM) (Butt, 2006). Let's verify the above example whether volitionality is the semantic mean of the alternation between DAT and ERG by translating it into its sister language, Punjabi.

25. *Nadya-nu zoo jana ae*
 Nadya-DAT zoo-ACC go-inf be-pre
 Nadya has to go to the zoo.

In Punjabi, '-nu' is ACC/DAT marker rather than an ergative one. It is used for marking indirect objects, recipients, experiencers, and in some cases, it can also mark specific or animate direct objects for ACC. In contrast, Punjabi do not acquire an overt ERG marker, instead it has retroflex sound for 'ŋ'. The covert behavior of ergativity in Punjabi does not mean that there is no ERG marker, acquired by the subject argument in the language. In the below-mentioned example (26), the verb 'khaadi' (ate) does not display agreement with the subject argument, it means there is some case marker available, covert but present that blocks the subject verb agreement. That's why, the verb agrees with the second argument (DO) 'roti' (bread) in gender and number.

26. *Oŋ roti khaadi.*
 He-ERG.M.Sg bread-ACC.F.Sg eat-perf.F.Sg
 He ate a bread.

Back to the sentences in 24 are the sentences that display the want of receiving an item. Urdu has a modal verb 'parna' (has to) to display the forced or obligatory action and 'chahiye' (should/need), in all these means, it does not require the ERG marker '-ne' for such semantic associations.

27. (a) Nadya-ko zoo jana hai
 Nadya-DAT zoo-ACC go-inf be-pre
 Nadya wants to go to the zoo.
- (b) Nadya-ko zoo jana para
 Nadya-DAT zoo-ACC go-inf has to-pre
 Nadya has to go to the zoo.
- (c) Nadya-ko zoo jana chahiye
 Nadya-DAT zoo-ACC go-inf should/need to-pre
 Nadya should/need to go to the zoo.

Urdu has specific verbs to demonstrate the overt modality with a case marker and a non-finite verb (Butt, 2014). The verb 'chahiye' (should/want) provides two modal expressions; one for desire or wish of the subject, and the other for obligation. In these kind of constructions, subject arguments usually assume dative subject (Bhatt, 2007).

28. (a) Uzma-ko voh libaas chahiye.
 Uzma-DAT that dress-ACC want-pre
 Uzma wants that dress
- (b) Uzma-ko yeh kitab perhna chahiye
 Uzma-DAT this book-ACC read-inf should
 Uzma should read this book.

In Urdu, ERG marking is not compatible with non-finite constructions due to their lack of tense and perfective aspect marking. Non-finite verbs instead favor DAT marking based on the role of the subject as an experiencer, obligation holder, or agent. 24a is the example of Punjabi-ized Urdu (Urdu is influenced by Punjabi).

29. (a) Menu kam karna ae
 I-DAT work-ACC do-inf be-pre
 I want to do work.
- (b) unu khana khana ae
 He-DAT meal-ACC eat-inf be-pre
 He wants to eat meal.

In general, non-finite verbs in Urdu do not show agreement for person, number, or gender in the same way as finite verbs. Non-finite constructions, especially infinitives and participles, do not reflect the same subject-verb agreement features. They tend to be less inflected morphologically, particularly in terms of case marking. In finite constructions, the subject can be marked with nominative, ergative, or dative, depending on the verb's aspect and transitivity. The issue of non-finite verb inflection for case marking in Urdu is somewhat underexplored in the literature. This squib purposes that non-finite verbs do inflect for case marking in Urdu. Let's take an example,

30. Ali-ko film dekhne [ke liye] cinema jana chahiye.
 Ali-DAT film-ACC watch-inf for-PP cinema go-inf should-mod
 Ali should go to the cinema to watch the film.

In the above sentence, there are two non-finite verb forms: 'dekhna' (to watch) and 'jana' (to go). The non-finite verb 'dekhna' has been transformed into the non-finite form 'dekhne'. The presence of the case marker 'ke liye' (for) modifies this non-finite verb 'dekhne'. This inflected form 'dekhne' indicates the purpose of the action (watching the film), and it doesn't show subject-verb agreement. While, the second non-finite verb is 'jana' (to go) which remains in its base form due to the absence of case marker. This distinction shows that case marking can influence the form of non-finite verbs in Urdu. Non-finite verbs themselves do not typically inflect for gender, number, and person, based on the subject or object. This is an important syntactic characteristic of non-finite constructions in Urdu.

3. Conclusion

The study provides a critical range of syntactic and semantic stipulations of dative case in Urdu by analytically plunging against the traditional gravity that dative case marking is restricted to Indirect Objects (IOs) encoding goal/benefactive roles in ditransitive constructions. Mapping on Butt's (2006) counter examples, it demonstrates that the dative case marker '-ko' overtly checked across intransitive, transitive, and ditransitive constructions, indexing semantic aspects such volitionality, specificity, animacy, and affectedness, thus rejecting any monolithic IO generalization. The analysis sets Urdu case alternations within a Chomskyan apparatus (GB/Minimalism) while pressing beyond standard feature-checking accounts that tie case to narrow

syntactic positions alone. Further, it argues that dative-ergative and dative-genitive alternations are not just morpho-syntactic binding, but also are semantic implementation of modality-sensitive projections. Through this syntax-semantic interface, the dative is not a default “oblique” case but an independent case linked to modal and aspectual licensing conditions, especially in complex predicates.

The empirical findings cover three crucial alternations that underpin the modal-aspectual variation of dative case. The ergative ‘-ne’ often associates with agentivity/volitionality in perfective transitives, while dative ‘-ko’ surfaces with non-volitional, obligational, or experiencer subjects. Differential subject marking (DSM) also raises some alternations between genitive and dative case configurations that are refuted directly with critical analysis that treat genitive as a purely possessive marker. Since ‘-ko’ marks both accusative and dative, the study bends towards case syncretism and differential object marking (DOM) to show that specificity and animacy function differently on DO and IO in transitives and ditransitives. For specificity, Urdu has demonstrative pronouns, and quantifiers as well that encode volitionality, obligation, and control.

By penetrating inside the alternatives in case marking, Urdu posits multilayered analysis of dative case. Moreover, the account in which modal projections (obligation, volition, control) interact with aspect to license non-nominative subjects and non-accusative objects, is set to investigate semantic conditions (specificity, animacy, affectedness) featuring dative realization via DOM that undermines strict syntactic role-based case assignment; and case alternations. This interface stresses not only on the morphological rules, requiring a minimalist feature-valuation mechanism sensitive to modal and aspectual heads, but also opens a window into the syntax-semantics interface. It thereby broadens the theoretical landscape: dative marking is shown to be versatile, modality-sensitive, and semantically nuanced across many sentential domains, demanding analyses that integrate modal licensing, aspectual splits, and DOM into the core case-assignment mechanism.

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