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This paper will present the findings of a cross-sectional study on the acquisition of the objective and ergative case marker with foreign language (FL) learners of Hindi. In Hindi, the objective marking of the direct object (ko-marking) and the ergative marking of the subject (ne-marking) is conditioned by the factors animacy/specificity and transitivity/perfectivity, respectively (Kachru, 2006).

Learners cannot rely on one-to-one mapping but have to discern under which conditions a function will be marked or unmarked. Previous work on Hindi case acquisition (Montrul et al., 2012) has shown language attrition (in terms of lower accuracy rates) among heritage speakers of Hindi. The case loss is explained by a lack of exposure to native language use, which makes that heritage learners are less sensitive to the complex form-function mappings. Comparable results were observed in a study with Dutch-speaking FL learners of Hindi (Baten & Verbeke, 2015). This study investigated the acquisition of the ergative case marker within the framework of Processability Theory (Pienemann, 1998), and distinguished three developmental stages, from (i) no acquisition to (ii) overgeneralisation and (iii) functional case marking. Only a few learners reached the final stage.

The aim of the present paper is to investigate both the variation and the systematicity in the L2 acquisition of the Hindi case system. 31 FL learners were selected from two contexts with different amounts of exposure. All learners were administered an oral production task. The data will be analysed in terms of (i) accuracy rates (which reveal the variable mastery levels of the individual learners) and (ii) emergence (which reveals systematic developmental stages). Preliminary analyses suggest high variation among the individual learners, but at the same time also a systematic accumulation of developmental stages.

Keywords: Oral Language Production, Variation and Systematicity, Foreign Language Acquisition, L2 Hindi.