Maithili is an Indo-Aryan language spoken in India and Nepal. It has a complex agreement system in which many terms and non-terms including subjects, objects, obliques, and possessors of any of these can potentially control agreement on the verb. An example of an internal possessor controlling agreement on the verb is shown in (1):

(1)  ham tohər nokar-ke pita-l-iau
     I you.NH.GEN servant-ACC hit-PST-1>2NH
     ‘I hit your servant.’ (possessor internal to object)

Various kinds of evidence can be used to show that these non-term agreement controllers do not attain argument status when they control agreement on the verb, including internal possessors like the one in (1). Therefore, it must be stated that in Maithili, agreement controllers do not correspond one-to-one with grammatical functions. Instead, predicate-‘argument’ agreement is conditioned by the relative prominence of the potential controllers, such that the most prominent one will control secondary agreement.

The first part of our proposal is that formal or structural prominence of the internal possessor may play a role in enabling internal possessors to control secondary agreement. Possessors which control agreement on the verb may be associated with a more prominent position within the NP. Evidence for this comes from the ordering of possessors and determiners. The possessor can only control agreement when it precedes the determiner, as in (2a). When it follows the determiner, only the possessed noun can control agreement, as in (2b):

(2) a. tohər i nokar ae-l-au
     you.NH.GEN this servant come-PST-2NH
     ‘This servant of yours came.’

     b. i tohər nokar ae-l-ai
     this you.NH.GEN servant come-PST-3NH
     ‘This servant of yours came.’

The second part of the proposal is that the functional motivation for possessor agreement is to index a combination of honorificity and focus. Potential controllers which are higher in
honorific grade will control secondary agreement, even if they are more ‘lowly’ in their syntactic status. For example, in a context in which you are referring to an honoured person’s non-honorific possessions, and that person is present in the situation, it is infelicitous for the verb to show agreement with their non-honorific possession over them, as in (3):

(3) tu hunak nokar-ke pit-l-ahunh / #pit-l-ahi  
you he.H GEN servant-ACC hit-PST-2NH>3H hit-PST-2NH>3NH  
‘You (NH) hit his (H) servant.’ (Honorific possessor is present in the situation)

Agreement with honorific referents can also be ‘overridden’, however, if another potential referent is focussed. If a non-honorific possessor is focussed, it is possible (although not obligatory) it to ‘take over’ control of secondary agreement, even if the possessed noun is higher in honorific grade:

(4) a. tu kakar sikshak-ke pit-l-ahunh  
you who.GEN teacher hit-PST-2NH>3H  
‘Whose teacher (H) did you hit?’

       b. ham tohar sikshak-ke pit-l-iau  
       I you.NH GEN teacher hit-PST-1>2NH  
       ‘I hit your (NH) teacher (H).’ (teacher is absent, and the possessor is in focus)

These data show that (i) possessors which control verbal agreement in Maithili may be associated with a prominent structural position and (ii) possessor agreement is triggered by a combination of honorificity and focus.