Communication Across Castes

M. S. Thirumalai, Ph.D.

Caste Ranking – Three Facets to Retrieval

In this article, we identify and describe the factors that help individuals retrieve information from one another regarding their respective caste background—the factors that help individuals locate one another in a caste spectrum and thus regulate their behavior towards each other. We also identify and describe the factors that govern the choice and use of terms of address and reference by individuals based on their perception of each other's caste background. This article pursues an analysis of communication across castes within the Tamil society in Tamilnadu, India.

There are at least three facets to this retrieval process; the visual demonstrative part—paralinguistic—aiding in the retrieval process, the speech part (listening and speaking) that works as a diagnostic tool and as an identity marker, and the elicitation process. While the former two are 1an element offered subconsciously by each individual engaged in the interaction, the elicitation process is, in a sense, a deliberate act on the part of the individuals. The elicitation process involves use of language as an important tool. The identification and description of these factors would help describe a wider canvas of verbal communication processes in Tamil among members of various castes.

The description of the factors that aid retrieval of information regarding the caste background of individuals, and the choice and use of terms of address and reference are done under three categories—communication among castes viewing them as single wholes and ignoring the differences that exist between individual members of a caste, communication between individual members of different castes, and communication between individual members of the same caste.

The Labels – *Lower* and *Higher*

We use in this chapter two labels, namely, the *lower caste* and the *upper caste* without formally identifying the variables that go into viewing a caste as lower or upper. We do not establish or offer any formal criteria for these labels. These are relative terms and since we do not aim at either ranking the castes or identifying the processes of communication with reference to a particular caste, the terms will serve the purpose of description of any communicative context and our discuss ion in this chapter.

From the point of view of a caste, another caste may be superior or inferior to it, or of an equal status. It is also possible that a caste may have difficulty in assigning a ranking to another caste with reference to itself. This difficulty could be faced even when the castes involved have been in contact for generations in the same locality; a caste may face a similar difficulty in ranking another caste, not belonging to its locality/region, with which it has come into contact only recently. In this context, an indifferent ranking is attributed.

Some Additional Variables – Streets, Etc.

Some more variables require to be mentioned here. In a typical Tamil village, caste distribution and ranking is reflected also in the geographical contiguity of the habitats of individual castes. While there is a settlement called *agrahara* for Brahmins, generally away from the *terukkaḷ* 'streets' *(teru* 'Street') in which the non-Brahmin, so-called *touchable,* Hindu castes live, and generally located do closer to a water source such as a river, the members of so-called *untouchable* castes live further away from the 'streets' in another direction. Thus, a geographical distance is maintained between Brahmins, non-Brahmin *touchable* caste Hindus, and the so-called *untouchables.*

Generally speaking, most of the streets are single caste-occupied. Caste ranking is closely linked with geographical distribution of the castes within a village, or a small town. As already indicated in chapter 2, the ranking of a caste in terms of other castes may be judged based on the geographical distance the caste occupies from the "elitist" temple in the village or town. (See chapter *5* for *a* description of elitist temples.) It can also be judged in terms of its distance from the water source, in particular from tile river bed. Closer the caste settlement to the water source elitist temple, higher is its ranking in the caste hierarchy.

The Brahmin and the Non-Brahmin – Caste Ranking Consciousness

A clear distinction between the Brahmin castes and the non—Brahmin castes with the former occupying the superior position is acknowledged by all castes. Among other castes, generally speaking, castes with a vegetarian background are considered superior to castes with a non-vegetarian background. This variable requires to be modulated in several cases, the details of which are not relevant to our discussion here.

While there may be a general ranking based only on social factors (in which many castes may occupy the same slot of rank), ranking of non-Brahmin castes is also geographically determined in another sense What is considered a superior caste within a village, a small town, or a region, need not be considered an equally superior caste in another village, another town or another region; this is so in spite of tile possibility for an overall consensus of ranking. Moreover, note also that a ranking that a caste ascribes to itself need not be the same ranking given to it by other castes.

In addition, not all the members of a caste share the same notion of ranking that a caste ascribes to itself. All these indicate the complexity of ranking prevalent in Tamil society. So our use of the terms *lower caste* and *upper caste* should be taken as referring to the relative caste status of the individuals involved in an interaction as acknowledged by the individuals themselves.

Caste Memory

Each individual carries his caste within him, although many may deny it. The socialization processes an individual undergoes in the Tamil society are caste-based, even though the schooling processes may regulate the exhibition of such influences. These caste-based socialization processes also inculcate in the non-schooled certain processes of

adjustment and behavioral norms in interpersonal communication among members of different castes. These processes include both linguistic and nonlinguistic patterns. We argue that caste is omnipresent in all social behavior and suggest a *caste memory* as a factor guiding inter-personal and intra-personal relationship. This caste memory is acquired through socialization processes, both childhood and adulthood, through inter-personal contacts and experience.

Caste memory of one caste is not the same as that of another caste. The caste memory of each caste has two facets to it, one a perception of what their caste is and what behavioral norms are expected of them as members of their caste, and also what behavioral norms are expected of them in dealing with members of other castes. It also includes the notions regarding other castes with which the members of the caste come into contact. The second facet includes the notion a caste has about other castes with whom the members of the present caste may have no occasion at all to have any contact. The so-called upper castes have less knowledge of the so-called lower castes. In fact, members of one caste may have only a little knowledge of the structure, function and cultural norms of another caste. This knowledge generally consists of preconceived and stereotype notions, with only a few members of a caste changing their notions, if necessitated by acquisition of additional knowledge.

Geographical Contiguity

Geographical contiguity of the habitats of the castes is an important factor in the development of mutual knowledge among castes. Since geographical contiguity *is* spatial arrangement in some manner, geographical contiguity of castes results in a chain of knowledge, linking knowledge of one caste with that of another. Almost like the L-simplex chain suggested by Hockett (1958) to characterize mutual intelligibility between dialects, we have a chain of caste memories (and castes) linked to each other, with the village as a unit in the case of Tamil society.

Several L-simplex chains are created within a bigger geographical unit such as a small town. This characterization should not be taken to deny the existence of individuals and castes with L-complex characteristics. In general, caste A knows B and caste B may know both A and C and caste C may know both B and D, etc., and yet no single caste can be considered as having a thorough knowledge of another caste. Likewise only very few of the members of a single caste have an extensive knowledge of the structure, function and cultural norms of their own caste.

In most cases, an atmosphere of understanding in selected individuals of a caste results in an atmosphere of a syncretic understanding of the structure, function and cultural norms, and ranking of their own caste vis-à-vis others. This syncretic understanding may be considered as caste memory.

The growth of caste memory is guided also by recent past events and present socioeconomic and political conflicts, apart from the conflicts, between individuals, between members of different castes. Caste memory is strengthened and used when external threats, both physical and mental (socioeconomic, political, etc.) are faced from

members of other castes. Moreover, external threat, both mental and physical, acts as a force of internal unison between members of a caste.

It is also found that the characteristics of caste memory among men, women and children may differ. The intensity of Cat feeling is generally higher among men and is more frequently exhibited by men. This is due perhaps to a greater- role ascribed to males in Tamil society in all facets of life.

(See my article on **Address and Reference to Women in an Indian Language Context**, http://www.languageinindia.com/aug2002/addresstowomen.html.)

Women have greater difficulty of adjustment in terms of certain behavioral norms such as food habits, worship procedures and marriage customs. The caste memory has several consequences for the choice and Partaking of food and participation in public activities. We shall not go into these aspects here. We shall only consider how caste memory helps individuals retrieve information about each other's caste background and thus regulate their linguistic behavior.

Behavioral Consequences of Caste Memory for Language Use: Language Use Within Domestic Context

Caste memory influences the choice and use of address and reference terms in communication. Caste memory also influences the choice of content for communication between members of different castes. We shall now look into various aspects of this phenomenon when members of different castes come into contact with one another. It is necessary to visualize some geographical unit, either a village or a small town, where most people may be known to one another as to their caste or where some strategies could be adopted to locate an individual as to his caste. Within this unit, which we call *familiar context,* we could also posit a dichotomy between *domestic* and *external* contexts: familiar domestic context and familiar external context. This is similar to the distinction I have already made elsewhere between *family setting and public places.*

We shall first investigate the behavioral consequences of caste memory for language use within the unit of familiar — domestic context or family setting. Individuals involved in the interaction are here assumed to belong to different castes.

(i)   Not only men but women and children also of upper caste can address male adults of lower castes in non-honorific singular. While in certain face-to-face contacts there may be a hesitation to use the non—honorific singular, reference is always made in non-honorific singular terms.

(ii)   In some cases where usually the third person human singular is used indicating a lower status of the addressee and the person referred to, neuter term of reference and singular honorific neutral term of address both indicating a raised status in the context may be used where a social transition in favor of the addressee or the person is felt. The use of the neuter term of reference indicating a raised status in the context is governed by the **a** process, 'downgrading as a process of elevation.'

Note, however, that the 'raised status' does not necessarily mean here that a social status superior to the speaker is granted here. But this choice of term is done only in regard to addressing adult males, who are in the range of manhood, namely, beyond the adolescent period and up to middle age, and not for addressing the adolescent or the old. The females of lower castes are addressed and referred to in non-honorific terms only by upper caste people.

(iii)   Is there any attempt on the part of the speaker to switch over to the dialect of the addressee? There is generally no such attempt on the part of the speaker. Each one has his/her own dialect and is expected to use the same. Any switch, when attempted right in the beginning of the interaction is generally frowned upon, although in the course of the interaction one could do it occasionally and at lexical and finite verb levels. Lexical choice and choice of suffixes forms to inflect the finite verb for gender, number, person, and even tense provide maximal caste-marking in the speech. Thus as the frequency of contact increases and, depending upon the tolerance of the addressee, the speaker can effect a switch over to the dialect of the addressee.

The upper caste adult makes the choice with the intention of making himself/herself understood, whereas the lower caste adult attempts the switch over by way of imitation. There is hardly any extra attempt at making one-self understood on the part of the lower caste adult. This is so because since the topic of conversation is on already agreed-to and known content and thus the whole interaction is geared to purposive action, no need is felt for a lexical choice for making oneself understood specifically. The domains of language use of an upper caste adult are definitely more in number than the domains of language use of a lower caste adult generally engaged as help in the domestic context. This again forces the upper caste adult to appropriately modulate his speech for the occasion.

(iv) The quantum of sentences in a particular conversation between an upper caste adult and a lower caste domestic help is small. The uttered sentences are brief and to the point. There is no distraction from the topic. This is when the interaction is between the adults. There is occasional gossip for eliciting information and for reporting essential happenings. But this gossip is always kept to the point.

(v)   In general, the interaction adopts mainly a question-answer, and a reporting form. A question is raised by the upper caste adult, and the answer is provided by the domestic help. It is, generally, the domestic help who resorts to the reporting form.

(vi) The content of such interaction is generally restricted to enquiries about the family of the addressee, and the members of the family of the speaker. The upper caste-lower caste interaction is, generally, an employer-employee relationship, a master-servant relationship within the domestic context. This relationship in address context is a parallel also to the husband-wife relationship, elder woman-younger woman, and elder male and younger male relationship, in the sense that the terms of address used in all these relations are generally the same. There is some change in the choice of reference terms by the upper caste female spouse to refer to the male spouse vis-à-vis male servants or the females of the marital line to refer to males of the same line vis-à-vis the male servants. In these cases the forms of address and reference used to refer and address the spouses

are not used to a4dress and refer to male servants. See also (x) and 3.7 (v) for- additional details.

(vii) As already said, the content of the interaction is generally purposive and rarely touches other subject matters. Confiding language is not allowed. Going from the purposive interaction is generally frowned upon. If any one strays away from the purposive interaction, it is considered not fit for the caste hierarchy and the norm established for such interactions. A similar condition prevails also when a woman of a family speaks to an adult male of another family. Note the parallel. The communicative situation is pregnant with such perils between various social interactions and choice of terms - of address and reference.

(viii) Within the domestic context, the communication between members of different castes merges with the master-servant relationship.

(ix) What happens in some cases where a member of an upper caste or a person of an equal status caste is a servant in the household of a different caste in the domestic context? In such a case, **niir,** the second person singular neutral honorific, is used 'in address terms. If a person of an earlier generation, that is, if an elderly person is involved **niińkaḷ**, the second person honorific singular, may be used. In reference, the finite verb takes the corresponding suffix for **niir** and not the corresponding suffix for **niińkaḷ**.

(x) In the case of (ix) a process of making the verbal end a neuter expression (Shall I call it *neuterizing*?!) is also noticed in reference, as far as males are concerned. That is, an elderly male member of an upper caste or an equal status caste employed in a household may he referred to in third person neuter singular in place of the third person human plural used as an honorific. This is a process of avoidance—use of honorific is frowned upon but no disrespect is also allowed. Hence, avoiding both the honorific human plural and non-honorific human singular, the neuter singular is chosen to express respect as fit for the individual. As regards females, a soft tone may simply be adopted and the second person singular used. A "neuterizing" reference may also be made but in face-to-face communication the singular term of address is employed.

The fact that terms of address and reference would be changed to suit the caste background of the domestic help is an evidence that caste is an independent factor in guiding communication processes.

Language Use Within Familiar External (Non-Domestic) Context

As we have already suggested, the communication contexts in which members of different castes come into contact with one another may be classified into familiar and non-familiar contexts. Within the familiar context we have domestic and the external (non-domestic or public) contexts. The discussion earlier concentrated on the factors in the domestic context that impinge on communication and consequent choice and use of terms of address and reference. Within the familiar external context as well, the choice of address and reference terms is more or less governed in the same manner. The domains within this context include relationship between families of different castes, relationship between members of different castes in public events participated in by members of a

number of castes, transactional activities in the bazaar, nodding acquaintances in public places, recognition of individuals as so and so, and other types of recognition which do not lead to exchange of utterances between individuals involved.

Within the familiar external (public places) context, the members of different castes who come into contact with bite another may enter into any one of the following relations. Each one of these has its own language behavioral consequence in terms of choice and use of terms of address and reference.

(i) *Entering into a pseudo-blood relationship*

Members of two families belonging to two different castes, who by virtue of living in close geographical contiguity or who by other reasons have come into close contact (on their own by present members or because of contacts between the families in an earlier generation), may exhibit and acknowledge the closeness between the two by entering into a pseudo-blood relationship as if they belong to the same family. This relationship is revealed in the choice and use of reference and address terms modeled on the pattern found within a family.

There are, however, certain special characteristics, which reveal the pseudo-nature of the relationship entered into, especially among non-Brahmin caste Hindus. The male parent of one family chooses an appropriate term of address and reference to address and refers to the female parent of the other family, assuming brother-sister relations. The female parent of one family does the same by choosing an appropriate term indicating sister-brother relationship to address and refer to the male parent of the other family.

The choice and use of these terms at the linguistic level clearly forecloses the possibility of sexual contact between the two at the mental and social levels; this is a linguistic manifestation of a camouflage of the underlying prohibition. That the relationship entered into is a pseudo-blood relation is further confirmed by the choice and use of terms of address and reference among the children of the two sets of parents. The brother-sister/sister-brother relationship of the parents should have led to the choice and use of terms exhibiting potential for marital relations among the children.

However, children are asked to use only brother-sister/sister-brother terms of address and reference. Another evidence for the pseudo-blood relationship is that the couple never uses—or uses in rare cases—singular terms to address and refer one another, although within a true family context, the female, generally when younger than the speaker, is addressed and referred to in non-honorific singular.

(ii) *Entering into a pseudo master-servant, elder-younger relationship*

From the perception of a caste, another caste may be superior to it, equal to it or inferior to it in social status. A caste may also have difficulty in ranking another caste in terms of its own social status, thus leading to an assignment of an indifferent status to the other caste. The perception a caste has about its own social status vis-à-vis other castes need not be shared by other castes. Likewise the perception a caste may have about its own social status vis-à-vis other castes need not be shared fully by all members of the

same caste. The individual member's perception may be conditioned by the peculiar situations—the social, economic, numerical and physical strength of the other individuals confronting him, etc.—that he is faced with. His perception may be also influenced by the ranking consciousness peculiar to his geographical unit—small town, village or street.

Thus when two individuals of different castes come into contact with one another, a pseudo master-servant relationship (subsuming also the elder-younger spectrum within the same caste and within the same family) may be entered into by them, based on the perception the individuals have about the ranking of each other's caste in the peculiar situations in which they are placed. That it is a pseudo-relationship is revealed by the facile conditions of operations. While the elder-younger relationship within a family context does not insist upon switching over to a choice and use of honorific terms of address in a quarrel, the pseudo master-servant relationship when broken insists upon such a reversion on the part of the "master".

Reference in the absence of the person referred to and his supporters could be in non-honorific terms, however. To what extent the break in relationship forces the "master" of a definitely 'superior' caste to adjust and use honorific terms of address in the case of individuals definitely placed as belonging to an 'inferior' caste is not clear. It could vary depending upon the personality and socioeconomic factors of the younger/"inferior" person. However, the fact that change in terms of address and reference is demanded is proof enough of the pseudo-nature of the relationship. More than anything else, the choice and use of terms of address and reference act as an important diagnostic variable of the put-on relations between individuals. Changes in relations induce and are marked by changes in terms.

(iii) *Entering into an acquaintanceship*

This is yet another level of communication between members of different castes in a geographical unit. Exigencies of events could bring individuals into contact in fields, other working places, games, riverside, etc. One recognizes the other, with or without knowledge, of the caste background and then this recognition develops into acquaintanceship provided that the individuals consider such an acquaintance mutually appropriate.

Appropriateness is decided, among other things, by the deferential treatment meted out mutually, topics of common interest, the perception of usefulness of each individual to the other, and, more importantly, whether such an acquaintance is permitted by mutual caste memory of the castes of the individuals involved. Within this context, there could be elder-younger relationship as well as a neutral relationship—strict acquaintanceship. The elder-younger relationship is covered under (ii) above. When it is strictly an acquaintanceship, the age of individuals (of more or less equal age or one senior in age to another) as well as their educational and economic background may lead to the choice of honorific neutral term of address **niir** as well as its corresponding inflection in the finite verb.

Note that the second person pronoun **niir** has a restrictive use. Women do not use it to address one another. (An exception is reported in Sankaranarayanan (1975) wherein it

is stated that the Ayyangar Brahmin women in Tirunelveli district use it to address one another.) Note that women, however, might use it to address men in similar circumstances as described above. Note also that use of **niir** in terms (i) and (ii) would be considered as downgrading of the relationship already established, whereas the use of **niir** in the present relationship here has to be resorted to by the use of second person non-honorific singular fur and its corresponding finite verb inflection.

(iv) *Entering into a formal recognition relationship*

When contacts with one, another do not develop into an acquaintanceship or the relations of items (i) and (ii), the in4ividuals in the communication context may enter into only formal recognition relationship which is more or less governed purely by paralinguistic behavior than by any linguistic utterances. In other words, those who have entered into formal recognition relationship might show respect to one another with folded hands or might smile at one another in recognition or adopt some other non— linguistic strategies to show that they recognize one another. They may not give vent to such recognition through linguistic utterances. When communication demands linguistic utterances, the individuals may enter here into the conditions of operation appropriate for an. acquaintanceship.

In essence, there are several overlapping correspondences in the choice and use of terms of address and reference within the familiar contexts, namely, the context of domestic communication and the context of familiar external communication. Age, caste, economic and education factors may control the choice of use of these terms. Sex is another important factor, the influence of which has been presented in our chapter on address and reference to women. The pseudo-blood relationship and elder-younger relationship and master-servant relationship all seem to be governed by one common underlying process. The relationship of acquaintanceship and of a formal recognition seems to be governed by another common underlying process.

Communication between Members of Different Castes in Non-Familiar Contexts

The communication in non-familiar, contexts between individual members of different castes who are not known to one another reveals several strategies adopted by individual members as regards retrieval of information about one another's caste background. Consciously or unconsciously, when two individuals come into contact with one another, they somehow strive to identify each other's geographical and social background.

The individuals coming into contact with one another generally resort to two types of locating processes. The first is a locating process in which the individuals involved in communication locate each other in a group of castes. The second is locating each other in particular castes. The former is easier, since, based on linguistic utterances, one could easily distinguish whether an individual is a Brahmin, educated, has some family reference and such other information. The success in the second is conditioned by the closer geographic proximity of individuals to one another and by a more frequent contact between the two.

Retrieval of Information

Retrieval of information regarding one another is done in the following manner.

(i)   If the male individuals bear in their names the caste surnames as well, locating one another in terms of the caste they belong to is generally easier. It is only "generally easier" because a caste surname may be occasionally shared by two or more castes. Moreover individuals of some so-called lower castes have begun to use the surnames of so-called upper castes. Also not all are aware of the surnames of other castes and even the surnames of their own castes and thus may have difficulty in identifying the caste represented by the surname.

Note also only the male individuals bear their caste names. The married illiterate women and, in some cases even literate women, do not pronounce the names of their husbands or elder male in-laws. Several linguistic strategies are adopted by them to locate their husbands and male elder in-laws for the benefit of the addressee. These strategies are dealt with in another volume. Since the Tamils of all castes, due to schooling and other social processes, have started not using their caste name while uttering one's own name or while writing one's own name, information through caste surname is possible if there is occasion to elicit the male parent's name. More often than not, individuals do not fail to attach the caste name to their male parent's name. But even this is now slowly fading out.

(ii)   Another process to retrieve the caste of the individuals concerned is to ask of each other the Street in a particular village or town in which their house is located. As already explained, more often than not, the settlement pattern in a village or a small town indicates one's caste background since each street is generally occupied by a single caste.

(iii)   Complexion of the individuals concerned may also give some hypothetical in formation about each other's caste background. A Brahmin or a Vellala is generally expected to have rather a "fair" complexion. Fair complexion is associated with economically prosperous groups. However, this is not a foolproof mode of retrieving correct information about the caste background of the individuals concerned.

(iv) The facial marks applied on the faces of individuals would also reveal **at** least partially their caste background. The *naamam,* the Vaishnavite religious mark applied on the forehead, or *vibhuuti,* the Saivite religious mark applied on the forehead is a case in point.

(v)   The dialect used by individuals, coupled with knowledge of demographic distribution in terms of geography, certainly helps locating an individual as regards his caste background. The caste dialect marks generally overlap within a region. However, a distinction such as Brahmin and non-Brahmin would be easily made based on the utterances' of each individual.

(vi)   Further refining within the region and within the same dialect used by a group of castes is also possible on phonological, lexical and finite verb (affixes to finite verb) variables. The individuals living in the region develop an intuitive knowledge in some

ways of the accent and lexical behavior of different castes. Individuals exhibit their intuitive knowledge of a caste not their own through their derisive remarks on and imitation of the phonological, lexical and finite verb affixes variables of another caste.

(vii) Yet another interesting process that helps retrieval is the *suppression* and *revelation* of one's own dialect in the process of communication. Until some understanding is reached between the members in the communicative act, the individuals try to suppress any possible caste revelation through the use of their dialect. This situation is more common in large urban areas and between educated individuals who are strangers to one another. Once an understanding is reached or a tentative conclusion is reached between the two regarding each other's background, in order to confirm and partially reveal one's identity, certain phonological, lexical and finite verb affixes variables used exclusively by their castes may be used in the indication process. if the other individual responds to it favorably, this use is maintained. Otherwise, the individuals try to go back to a neutral form, something close to written/standard Tamil, or to the spoken form common in the area.

Suppression and revelation of one's dialect are two important dynamic processes in hiding and revealing one's social identity. Socialization processes in Tamil society in Tamilnadu impart such a skill to children at least of Brahmin castes (Thirumalai 1977).

Schooling processes appear to impart such a skill to children of other castes as well. With schooling, the spoken language, in terms of syntax and lexical choice, tends to get closer to the ordinarily written language, minus its retention in full form of endings of verbs and other words, plus the regional accent and abbreviated form of endings of words and verbs of spoken form of language. This is now leading to the evolution of a common standard spoken dialect of Tamil, deleting specifically regional and social markers.

Since one still has the facility to fall back to the regional and social markers (as these are acquired as part of the socialization processes just as the standard is being acquired in the school), and since asking about each other's caste is evolving (has rather evolved) to be a behavior not expected in public and at an initial encounter, in conjunction with the evolution of a standard spoken dialect and social norms, one tends not to reveal his identity through the use of his caste dialect. The caste dialect now takes on the function of a diagnostic tool to be used sparingly and to one's own advantage as per the individual's perception of the communicative context and the background of the other individual in the communicative context.

(viii) The individuals may try to give information about one another through identification of a person belonging to a particular caste well known in the locality as one's own relative. The individual who wants to know the caste of the other individual may also ask as to whether he knows such a well known caste-figure and also whether such a caste-figure is his relative.

(ix) One might ask for the caste of an individual straightaway or one might on his own straightaway state his caste. While this is usually avoided when two individuals come into contact, it can still be done.

(x) One could ask for the personal name, with or without caste surname. Some personal names are generally associated with particular caste or groups of castes. For instance, *Murugan* and *Vel* are not generally used as personal names among the Brahmins. Some non-Brahmin communities

by tradition may show a preference for a set of personal names. Such information might also help individuals to locate one another in a particular caste or a group of castes.

(xi) The mode of attire of individuals might also help locating individuals in a particular caste or group of castes.

(xii) The individuals involved in a communication context may retrieve information about each other's caste on the basis of their mention about festivals, religious rites, etc., in a manner of emphasis and approval/disapproval.

(xiii) Some festivals or rites can be referred to with different names in different castes. A choice of names to refer to these items in a communicative context may also reveal each other's caste background.

(xiv) The choice of finite verb endings in reference to parents, elders, etc., is another variable that might locate the individuals within a particular caste or within a group of castes. Members of some castes are in the habit of referring to their parents in non—honorific singular, while others may adopt either neuter singular or honorific plural.

(xv) Another variable is the linguistic behavior of individuals in addressing or referring to their mother. Some castes are given to address mothers by their names, some others with honorific terms and still others with non-honorific terms. Yet another category of castes may use only neuter terms with regard to mothers.

(xvi) Choice of kinship terms is another important variable that would reveal the caste background of individuals involved. For instance, the Brahmin and non-Brahmin distinction is easily discernible under this category. Within the non-Brahmin caste as well, choice of kinship terms of address and reference can help in locating an individual within a particular caste or a group of castes in a well-defined geographical unit.

(xvii) Yet another variable that helps the participants or.. an interaction locating each other in a particular caste or within a group of castes is the reference to kinship patterns mentioned by the participants. Among the kinship patterns, particular mention must. be made of the marital patterns. For instance, reference by the speaker or addressee to marriage with one's own sister's daughter could locate that individual as belonging to a particular caste or within a group of castes, in the locality. Such variables lead to more or less correct information about the speaker's/addressee's caste if the reference is done within a region.

(xviii) One could also locate the caste of an individual or place the individual within a group of castes based on information on food habits of the individual within his household, (since outside the family dining room one might indulge in food habits not sanctioned by caste practice). Within this compass we have information on vegetarian/non-vegetarian background of the participants of the interaction, their preference for certain types of food, frequency of cooking certain types of food, frequency of eating certain types of food, information on when the main meal is cooked, whether rice or millet is eaten as staple food, whether the rice cooked previous day is

eaten next day, etc. Individual castes or groups of caste in a geographical unit will have peculiar features of their own in the choice of the above. Individuals belonging to the same geographical unit are generally in a better position to exploit this information to locate each other on a caste canvas.

(xix) Manner of eating solids and of drinking liquids is another variable that would reveal the caste background of individuals. Certainly a distinction between the Brahmin and the non-Brahmin is possible within this variable In many contexts, the cup and the lips do not touch one another when a Brahmin drinks his liquids. When he eats, the morsels of rice or of solids are put in the mouth without the fingers touching the mouth—in a throw into the mouth. Things are changing, but this practice is something that is often admired. Some non-Brahmin communities socialize their individual's eating habits-individuals following the Brahmin model. Children are not allowed to have their palms dirtied by the food and are asked to use only their fingers. There are other modes of using the right palm for eating purposes. This variable could cut across various regions.

(xx) Skirting or avoiding contentious issues in conversation is another important characteristic attributed traditionally to certain castes or groups of castes. While this is a trait of individuals and families obtained through deliberate and not so deliberate acts of socialization, this trait is also ascribed to a number of castes. The manner in which one conducts himself or in facing issues enables the individuals to locate each other in a particular caste or group of castes.

(xxi) Some castes are traditionally perceived to be of a wrangling nature. Members of such castes are "seen" to indulge themselves in wrangling too soon by the members of other castes. This perception is also geographic unit-based; that is, the castes so-described in one region cou1d be regarded highly in their favor in some other region.

(xxii) Yet another characteristic exploited in the process of retrieval of information regarding one's caste background is the voice volume with which utterances are produced. Members of some castes are perceived to talk loud, some with subdued voice, some with measured tone, etc.

(xxiii) The manner in which ornaments are worn and the kinds of ornaments worn by women, manner of wearing flowers, the types of hair dress, the manner of wearing sarees and similar personal features also contribute to the retrieval of information as regards the caste background of the individual.

Filtering and Fine Tuning

If an individual is located within a group of castes, then a process of elimination commences with finer distinguishing variables until the correct/near correct location is made. The strength with which one pursues such finer location depends on the purpose the individuals have in their mind. If it is only for identifying the other individual and to regulate one's behavior vis-à-vis the other, near-correct location or even locating, within a group of castes is considered sufficient. However, if it is for other purposes, such as those for entering into marital relations or consideration of marriage proposals, finer locating is considered essential.

The Three Facets: Visual, Speech and Direct Elicitation

The factors and processes listed above clearly demonstrate that there are at least three facets to the retrieval of information about the caste background of individuals engaged in an interaction— the visual demonstrative part, the speech part and direct elicitation.

Note that retrieval of information as regards the caste of individuals encompasses every feature of culture— language and speech, food, kinship, etc.

Rural and Urban Factors, Etc.

A question may be raised as to whether this sensitivity to cues, both linguistic and non-linguistic, is found in an equal measure in all the members of the caste. Another question may be raised as to whether this sensitivity to retrieve information is of same level in both rural and urban areas or whether such sensitivity is indeed accentuated because of the constant suppression of exhibition of caste markings through sub-conscious effort in an urban environment.

For the first question, the answer is that not all the members of caste have an equal measure of this sensitivity to retrieve this type of information. The quantum of external contact an individual has, and the general features of cognition based on such exposure may contribute to the growth of this sensitivity.

As for the second question, while overt manifestation and exhibition of one's own caste in rural setting is accepted, and while such information is part of the knowledge of the environment in a rural setting, the urban setting does not provide an adequate contact to develop such knowledge among the members of different castes. Moreover, exhibition of one's own caste on a restricted scale and manner, and avoidance and pretension of such avoidance of exhibition are the desired standard in urban settings. And accordingly, more subtle processes than asking a direct question about one's caste are resorted to. Note, however, that such a resort to information is found in the rural setting as well in a non-familiar context.

Acquisition of This Sensitivity

How is this sensitivity acquired? There are at least three important mechanisms that help acquire this sensitivity.

The first one is the process of imitation, and instruction by adults. This is achieved through the socialization process. Caste memory is the result of this process. This knowledge is properly modulated by an interpersonal contact.

This interpersonal contact is the second mechanism. When opportunities for contact are less and when the individuals fail to modify their assessments based on their own interpersonal contact, no change takes place.

The third important process of acquisition is through comprehension and imitation of ordinary language in the latter-day Wittgensteinian sense (Thirumalai, 1979). A large body of knowledge of not only one's own caste but also of the entire society is available to individuals through ordinary language.

Language is a social institution *par excellence*. It preexists in individual and survives him as well. It provides the individual with an overall framework of knowledge of a society. Hence the use of language itself gives some sensitivity to individuals. This sensitivity is further sharpened, blunted, hidden and allowed to be exploited through schooling and personal experience.

Choice and Use of Address Terms between Members of Different Castes

We shall now look into the choice and use of address terms between members of different castes. Choice and use of address terms is based on the following.

(i) Choice and use of address terms is made based on the retrieval of information regarding the caste background of the participants. It is also based on the perception of the socioeconomic status, general posture, physical conditions, education, speech and gender placement of the individual spoken to.

(ii) It is also based on the choice of topic.

(iii) The choice of address terms is also based on the moods of the speaker.

(iv) It is also based on the intent of the speaker. This intent may include the need as well as the assessment of the addressee by the speaker in terms of his relevance, the need, etc.

(v) It is also based on the general personality of the speaker and his belief systems.

Reference to Individuals of Different Castes

The first thing that we notice is that the variables that govern the retrieval of information about the caste background govern the choice and use of reference terms also. Secondly the variables that govern the choice and use of address terms govern also the choice and use of reference terms as well. In addition, the following are noticed as strategies for reference in mixed-caste communication.

(i) Upper caste speakers always refer to lower caste individuals in singular, within "master-servant" relationship. This would change if the person referred to is perceived to be in a-higher status—holding a higher station in life than the speaker. This has changed considerably in the last 30 years or so, because of the spread of school education.

(ii) Lower caste individuals in the "master-servant" relationship may refer to upper caste males by using the word *saami* 'swamy.' While doing so, the lower caste individual within the master-servant relationship may qualify the male referred to as *periya* 'elder, big', *naDuvuLLa* 'the middle' and *cinna* 'small, the last, the junior most.' The order is generally based on the order of the age of the individual referred to. Women may be referred to with the word *ammaa*. The qualifying adjectives listed above are also used.

(iii) There is yet another mode of reference in which the individuals are referred to with their caste title only. Where the caste titles could be inflected for honorific endings, the lower caste individual while referring to the upper caste individual employs the titles invariably with the honorific ending in reference. The upper caste individuals may or may not inflect the caste title of the lower caste individual for honorific endings.

The factors that govern the choice and use of address terms operate here also. Members of all castes resort to this practice, but the strength of the prevalence of the practice varies from region to region.

Just as the caste title can be inflected for singular or plural with the gradation of respect shown to the addressee, the finite verb can also be inflected for singular/plural with the gradation of respect. In fact, the inflection of finite verb lends itself to finer gradation than the item occupying the subject slot in a sentence in Tamil. All in the interaction process exploits this facility, whether they belong to upper caste or lower caste.

(iv) The upper caste females refer to lower caste males in non-honorific singular where master-servant relationship is maintained.

(v) Even otherwise, the upper caste females refer to lower caste individuals in non-honorific singular, since it is expected of them to show the social distance between the two. This usage is followed also because of the insistence on avoidance of any contact between the two.

Any relation between the two, on matters other than business-like subjects, is not socially tenable and not acceptable to the males of the household. This taboo is entrenched in the language use as well. For, while the male spouses in such communities are addressed and referred to either in honorific or neuter terms by the female spouses, they refer to males in the servant slot of master-servant relationship always in singular non-honorific terms. The functions of forms take a different turn here. What a female spouse uses to refer to her own male spouse is not to be used to refer to male servants.

(vi) We must make a distinction between references made to an individual while talking to the family of the individual/ members of the caste of the individual/friends of the individual/acquaintances of the individual or a person belonging to a caste of similar status as opposed to references to the same individual within one's awn group. The former list of variables is valid for the first category, that is, for the references made to an individual while talking to the family of the individual, etc.

Within the lower caste in-group, there is no difference in reference between the behavior in the presence or absence of the upper caste individual, while a difference in reference is possible when individuals of two castes of equal status are involved. Changes are caused, however, by the moods of lower caste individuals.

Since the reference terms chosen and used by upper caste individuals to refer to lower caste individuals are already from the lowest slot in terms of respect shown, the members of the upper castes resort to abuse mentioning the caste background of the lower caste individual. This abuse may also be on the moral and physical character of the individuals, food habits, and poverty condition of the individuals referred to. The members of the upper castes will resort to the use of singular to refer to the members of the lower castes within their own group or family.

Reference to Public Figures

The reference to public figures such as politicians, government officials, artistes, etc., requires special investigation.

(i) The officers belonging to low castes are *not* referred to in singular either in the office premises or outside it. This is so because it is the title/designation of the officers with which the individual

is often referred to, as a mark of respect. And the official titles/designations are treated in the category of third person human plural neutral to gender and is considered respectable.

The finite verb inflection, accordingly, follows either the third person plural form, which is used as a mark of rest even for a single individual, or the third person singular *avar/ivar*, which is neutral to gender but considered respectable. This habit has also led to the inflection of finite verb in third person honorific singular or plural in third person even when the personal name of the individual officer is referred to. However, in anger, the officer of a lower caste is always is referred to in singular non-honorific. Also a reference to his caste is made in a derogatory manner.

(ii) The politicians of lower castes are addressed with non-honorific singular if they happen to be small time street politicians, and addressed with honorific singular if they happen to hold offices and wield much greater influence than the speaker. The reference to them is made in singular non-honorific within one's own group. Within the mixed group, reference is always made in honorific singular. However, the degree of personal attachment of the individual to the politician, the benefit the individual derives from the politician, the length of personal contact and the type of intimacy between the two, all lead to reference to the lower caste politician in honorific singular. When individuals start referring to a politician in honorific singular, such reference reveals the mark of attainment of leadership status by the referred to politician.

Investigation has not yet been done as to how this process is achieved. There are factors of power, status and general impression as a person all in play here. The factors that govern the choice and use of address terms are valid here also.

(iii) The choice and use of terms to address and refer to artistes offer another interesting domain to investigate.

Communication Between Members of the Same Caste

We shall now consider the communication processes between individual members of the same caste. These are governed by the following.

(i) Gender, age, whether related through kinship, length of acquaintance, education and other factors listed in the section on choice and use of address terms and the section on choice and use of reference terms.

(ii) There is a tendency noticed in which the participants enter into a pseudo-blood relationship. It may be pointed out that although individuals may belong to the same caste or even the same sub-sect they need not be related in blood. More often than not, individuals enter into **cittappaa-citti** 'uncle younger to speaker's father and aunt younger to speaker's mother,' **periyappaa-periyammaa** 'uncle elder to speaker's father and aunt elder to speaker's mother,' a non-marital kinship line of relationship, or **akkaa-matini** 'sister elder to speaker and brother's wife elder to speaker' a marital kinship line relationship. Pairs of such relationships branching out into marital and non-marital kinship lines, based on the age of the individuals involved, are formed. More often than not, the relationship entered into and the choice of terms for address and reference are based on the prohibition of sexual relationship. As a result, unless really related, until recently among the non-Brahmin castes, terms of kinship from the non-marital line are preferred in social interactions. At another level, members of both the families may enter into only a non-marital kinship line relations. That is, both the spouses of a family may address the spouses of the other family with items such.as annan/tampi/periyappaa/cittappaa, etc., (all terms to refer to males from

the non-marital line) and akkaa/tangkacci/periyanmaa/citti, etc., (all terms to refer to females of the non-marital line). This sexual taboo relationship prevails, only among the non-Brahmin castes, that too in rural and semi-urban settings. In the urban context the elitist groups adopt maamaa-maami, *'uncle-aunt'* relationships, without any connotation to blood relationship.

To Conclude

The use of address and reference terms may be considered symptomatic of the underlying socio-economic relations. At the same time, their use also reveals the other social and psychological status of the individuals involved in the interaction. The address and reference terms are, thus, symptomatic of the dynamic processes of these relationships.

We have identified a few dynamic relations such as the master-servant relationship, which also subsumes the elder-younger relationship and male-female spousal relationship. The directions in which relationships can be established are also revealed in the corresponding choice and terms of address and reference.

Where the linguistic norms are trespassed, physical conflict ensues. The linguistic utterances not only reveal the appropriate social and socio-economic relations, but individuals may also use such devices as a tool to show that they can disregard such conditions. Thus, linguistic utterances function both a diagnostic tool and as a tool to disregard the underlying socio-economic assumptions. Thus, in fact, when physical conflict is intended linguistic norms are trespassed deliberately. In addition, linguistic utterances are used for attaining anonymity as well as for retaining the identity of one's own caste. The choice and use of these terms, thus, are pregnant with several communication strategies.

M. S. Thirumalai, Ph.D., Bethany College of Missions, 6820 Auto Club Road, Suite C, Bloomington, MN 55438, USA

thirumalai@mn.rr.com