

The Transgender Language: A Case Study of the Hyderabadi Transgenders

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Introduction

In 1995, anthropologist and linguist William Leap edited “Beyond the Lavender lexicon”. The title explains “there is more to lesbian and gay communication than coded words with special meanings and more to lesbian and gay linguistic research than compilation of dictionaries or the tracing of single word etymologies.”

Transgenders are marginalised community whose gender expression is in opposition to the assigned sex. They are characterised by a distinct language of their own. In addition, the extreme pretension to be feminine sets them quite apart and unique from the majority of the other sexes. This pretension is reflected in their body movements as well as their language; what is often called "the queer language". Transgenders are usually men who might or might not have undergone castration. It seems to be the case that they have an inherent desire to be feminine and thereby behave very effeminate. Apparently even the gay men seem to be effeminate in their actions. But this feature is restricted to be “not dominant” male partner. The term gay is relatively new. Allen Walker Read in his book which he did in 1928, seems to have never sued the term gay which confirms the general belief among etymologists that the term did not exist in its popular meaning of homosexual, before the 1950s (p 398). Their language is popularly known as *Koti* or *hijara Farsi* language in the areas of *Afsal gunj*, the old city of Hyderabad.

The urban homosexuals have their own language which is not comprehensible to the outside world. The argot of the homosexuals is recorded to get knowledge of the socio-cultural behaviour of the group. It now becomes important to define what language is. The definitions of language have been quite varied. Each one has defined it in terms of features and functions it serves. Mutual intelligibility has been considered as the primary criteria for classifying a language as a language by sociolinguists. This criterion is however flawed for the reason of Hindi and Urdu, Dutch and German. As such, there is little or no agreement on how many the languages should differ in order to acquire an independent status. It is all political.

According to Chomsky, a language is a dialect with an army. Then how do we distinguish at all? Constitutional recognition is the answer to the Indian situation. The Indian state recognises some languages as language and others as dialects and sub-dialects. But where does *Koti* stand?

The Suraksha Community

Suraksha is an NGO that is situated in Afsal gunj, in the old city of Hyderabad. It houses several gays and transgenders. The transgenders usually do not prefer to stay with anybody, so they stay a few kilometres ahead of the NGO which they call it haveli. As I entered the NGO, two gay men seemed to talk in quite a strange language which was incomprehensible to me as well as my translator. On further interactions, I found that this language was spoken throughout the LGBT community and they call it Koti language. The orientation of this group seems to be entirely towards the female, where the behaviour, the names, gestures and even the word *Koti* seem to be centred around the concept of femininity. *Koti*, in their language means feminine.

The language acts as a survival tool in a society which often considers the transgenders as a matter of ridicule. “*We often make fun of people who give us looks when we go out to the streets. Nobody understands our language*” says Prema, a gay man and a member of Suraksha (a converted female). They live a closed knit group, usually as a family. Every household has one *guru* who in turn adopts one *chela* who acts like a daughter in law and does the entire job and one *beti* who is the daughter. They are found in the interior parts of the city is very old but clean houses. The fear of the antagonistic majority has led the LGBT to develop a language of their own which helps them to defend themselves.

Methodology

The present study has focused on the hijras of Afsal gunj. It included interviewing of three hijra men, six gays and two gurus, in an interval of two days with seven meetings. The gurus are the head and highly respected gays who are older in age. The interactions were friendly and lively. Besides, data collection did not pose a problem as the gay men were versed in English. I was accompanied by a translator who is a native speaker of Telugu, and this eased the conversation. The data was audio recorded. However, the *hijras* (transgenders) denied the permission to audio record their discussions. Kinesics study has been employed to study their sexual orientation.

Characteristics of Koti

The Koti language has more in common with Urdu and Hindi. It is also characterised by its own vocabulary and syntax. There are specific words to describe a man in the age group of 16-18 and another term for a man between 25-30. Beyond this age group a man is considered to be old. Specific terms for greetings are often used based on the age, for example, *pampadthi* which roughly translates to English “come” for elders and *salam aleekum* for youngsters.

Clap as a Symbolic Function

Tali, which means clap acts as a signal for their conversation. It serves several purposes like for example, identification of their own group members, to indicate the coming of police, while begging. A difference in clap exists i.e. the resonance of the clap increases or decreases for different purposes. Here, “clap” is a symbolic form of communication.

Counting System

Hijras do not seem to possess a counting system of their own. There is no one two three etc but only denominations of ten.

Table 1. Counting System in Koti

Rs 10	Pun
Rs 50	aadha tigri
Rs 100	Tigri
Rs 1000	Badma
Rs 100000	Peti

Generally, these denominations is an indication of the amount they take from their customers or people. Since they do not have any other denominations of ten, they don't really ask for those currencies.

Religion

They do not have any religious difference, but they seem to be devout of *shiva sakthi* which roughly means “possessed by God” and hence they justify their act of being feminine. They tend to exhibit their sexual orientation even in the Gods they pray and are extremely respectful of her.

Script

There is no script for their language. However, the social messages are written in *koti* using the script of Hindi or Telugu. The *koti* language has dialect differences but the vocabulary items are however retained.

Analysis and Outcome

Koti has nouns that are feminine, masculine, singular and plural; pronouns, verbs, adjectives etc. It was however observed that propositions and adverbs were borrowed from the neighbouring languages.

Table 2. Nouns in koti

Koti (sg)	Koti (pl)	Telugu	Urdu	Hindi	English
Moochiyā	Moochiyā	misam	mooch	mooth	Moustache
Chapta	Chaptiyān	-	-	-	Oriface
Nak	Nakrey	mukku	nak	nak	Nose
Chamrri	Chamrriyan	kallu	aānkh	aānkh	Eyes
Jaban	-	naaluka	zubaan	zubaan	Tongue
Chamki	Chamkiyan	carmam	jild	chamda	Skin

Chest		caati	sïna	sïna	Chest
Paet	-	poTTa	paet	paet	Stomach
Aadiyal	-	caala	bahut	bahut	Plenty

It is evident from Table 1 that the equivalent of *chapta* (orifice left behind after castration) does not find its equivalent in any of the neighbouring languages. This points to the view that a language closely reflects and portrays terms that are much needed in their community. Nouns like *jaban* resemble closely with the forms of Telugu and Urdu. Other nouns like *nak*, *paet* seem to resemble Hindi/Urdu closely. Plural and Singular differences are observed too with addition of *yan*. “Chest” does not have a word in their language and is known as chest in its own English name. Other nouns stand out as separate from any other neighbouring language.

Table 3. Verbs in Koti

Koti	Telugu	Urdu	Hindi	English
digar gaya	Caavu	marna	marna	Die
patra	Naduv	calna	calna	Walk
aana	Raa	aao	aao	Come
kaya	Tinu	khao	khao	Eat

The verbs are distinct but have a morphological resemblance. ‘Walk’ and ‘Come’ however are closely related.

For example, *to come* would be of the form *patke aara*, which combines the verb form *patra* to form *patke* and then takes the sentence *patke aara* which literally means walk and come. “Come” in itself is not used in a sentence. The verb “die” is significantly different from any other neighbouring language.

Table 4. Adjectives in Koti

Koti	Telugu	Urdu	Hindi	English
Shish	baagundi	khoobsurat	khoobsurat	Beautiful (M)
Shish	baagunadu	khoobsurat	khoobsurat	Beautiful (F)
Sulda	musalaayana	buda	burha	Old (M)
Suldi	musalamma	budiya	burhiya	Old (F)
Cowdy	cheDDa	buri	buri	Bad

The distinction between beautiful to refer to man and woman is made use of with the same noun. However, the distinction arises in the pronoun, for example, *naaran sheesh hein* (the girl is beautiful) and *panti sheesh hein* (the boy is beautiful). One striking fact is the Farsi adjective (used by the hijaras of Pakistan) makes a distinction for “beautiful”. The masculine form is *chisa* and feminine is *chisi*. This seems to be totally different from their neighbouring languages like Punjabi, Urdu and Siraiki. The same holds true of *Koti*. The nouns for beautiful are different from Telugu or Urdu. They do not have comparative and superlative forms. *Bahut* is added to quantify them. Even the adjectives *sulda* and *suldi* are no where close to Telugu, Urdu or Hindi.

Table 5. Adverbs in Koti

Adverbs and propositions however seem to be borrowed from Hindi/Urdu.

Koti	Telugu	Urdu	Hindi	English
kal	ninna	kal	kal	Yesterday
aaj	eeroju	aaj	aaj	Today
parso	Ellundi	parso	parso	Dayafter
hafta	Vaaram	hafta	hafta	Week

The adverbs are totally borrowed from Hindi/Urdu to facilitate communication.

The determiners are however a little varied.

Table 6. Determiners in Koti

Koti	Telugu	Urdu	Hindi	English
Inci	idi	ye	ye	This
Unci	adi	vo	vo	That
ispan/uspan	ikkada/akkada	yahan/vahan	yahan/vahan	Here/there

The Koti language does not have separate pronouns unlike its neighbouring languages. It uses the gender in the place of „she“ or „he“ and shows gender agreement.

Example, she

will come:

he

will come:

Naaran

aari

Panti

aara

The pronouns *ye* or *vo* is also used depending on the proximity of the speaker to the referent.

Koti language also, like most Indian languages, is an SOV language and has gender as well as number agreement.

Examples:

1. She will come tomorrow

Naaran kal patikate

S O V

2. It comes quickly

Vo jaldi patra

3. She will come

Naaran aari

4. He will come

Panti aara

The example 3 and 4 show gender agreement. First person however is retained as *mein*.
Example: I am coming

Mein patron

They are coming

Vo patren

Speech Pattern

It was most often observed that the gay men tried to use a variety of time fillers or hedges, like for example, like, kind of, i guess etc accompanied by intonation pattern often pulling the words too long to make it more feminine. When asked to name certain colour, they named certain shades of colours rather than direct naming, for example, misty grey etc. They seem to use a lot of mild forms like „would you please...” “i shall be glad...” etc.

Tentativeness is also a feature of feminine talk [Mulac, 2006]. They spoke about their family problems, disclosed personal issues, gossips etc. This perhaps they thought would make them more effeminate. The word “beautiful” and “lovely” were used at least ten times to describe other gay men. They also used more of quantifiers and tag questions. Their responses were always in a raised intonation pattern. For example, Noó... I dońt know, etc. This feature lets one identify gay men more easily. However, one is likely to be shocked to hear a total code switching, when they move outside their home. They talk in Telugu or Hindi and behave like other “men”.

Functions of Koti Language

The first and the foremost function of this language seems to be that it allows for identification. Of course, no human would like to be in isolation. The longingness to create bond is inherent in them. The LGBT community seeks for a belonging through the extension of their language. On the contrary, this language also sometimes let them portray who they are and hence saving their image in the society as any „normal” person. The language here is used as a survival tool and saves them from embarrassment by communicating certain essential information in their language, for example, when the police comes. Thirdly, this language acts as a signal to protect themselves from their rivals and to attain a sadistic pleasure when they are ridiculed upon. Lastly, this language contains euphemisms and code words that signals a man’s sexuality. The homosexual slang serves communicative functions where it reinforces the group cohesiveness and reflects common interests and problems.

Conclusion

The growing desire to identify themselves seem to be reflected in most of their activities. This however increases in the presence of people who are women. The women are considered to be a non-community member. On the contrary, they maintain their manliness in the surroundings. The language is secretive and queer as many as other aspects of their life is. When we begin to examine their language, we are often led to the problem of associating their

language to their sexual identity. This distracts us from the view that how this can be seen as linguistic resources available for the ‘others’, and merely pushes it down to seeing language in relation to one’s sexual identity.

While it may be too naïve to claim this to be a language in its own right, it nevertheless is slightly different from the neighbouring languages. The reason why it is referred to as ‘queer’ is owing to the unique and unusual characteristics it exhibits. This brings to the basic question of is there any actual difference in the language used by the heterosexuals and do people who identify themselves as queer, use language differently than the others? While they may have a ‘queer language’, is there really such a term as ‘queer’ is something we need to define. When heteronormativity is materialised, the binary classification of gender in the linguistic data arises. Thus, language must always be observed under a different light, one that ought be a resource of communication, and a way to understand the lives of others.

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