



USE OF LANGUAGE OF THE THIRD GENDER IN BANGLADESH: A SOCIOLOGICAL STUDY

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ABSTRACT

This paper tries to focus on the use of language of the third gender in Bangladesh in relation to the Bangladeshi society. The area is not limited to Bangladesh only. This paper also focuses on the language, Hijra Farsi of neighbouring country- Pakistan in order to identify some common characteristics in the use of this language by the communities of third gender in Pakistan and Bangladesh. This research activity is intended to show that how social factors, significantly, influence the use of language in the community of the third gender.

Keywords: Sociolinguistics, Third Gender, Style, Intra-speaker Variation, Diglossia, Inter-speaker Variation, Hijra Farsi or Koti.

INTRODUCTION

For a better understanding of this paper, keywords like sociolinguistics, third gender, style, inter group variation, intra-speaker variation, and Hijra Farsi or Koti should be elaborated.

At first, let me define the term ‘third gender’. According to Wikipedia, “Third gender or third sex is a concept in which individuals are categorized, either by themselves or by society, as neither man nor woman” (Third gender, n.d.). That means the third gender does not have fixity socially, and thus they suffer from the lack of language-fixity as well.

I had the opportunity to have the interview of a member of the third gender community. The interviewer was my cousin Mr. Ashiqul Islam Kanak. The interview took place at Merul Badda in Dhaka. With the help of the interview, I could be able to have a very good idea about the lifestyle of the third gender. In the interview, a member of the third gender community, Joy(a) talks about their rights like the rights of their voting, rights of talking freely. She also focuses on the poor condition of the third gender community in Bangladesh as social rights are not made available to them by the government of Bangladesh.

Now, Let me focus on the term “sociolinguistics” where the study of language takes its place in relation to the society. It also talks of language variation and of attitudes about language. My paper tries to do exactly the same thing.

Afterwards, the paper will be focusing on language variation. But, before that I will concentrate on a survey where ten members of third gender participated on 21st January, 2017, and the location was again Merul Badda near Rampura, Dhaka. I, myself, was the surveyor this time.

1. Are you comfortable with the language used by you?
 - Yes
 - No
2. Do you usually try to copy the language used by a gentle lady?
 - Yes
 - No
3. Do you have a secret language?
 - Yes
 - No
4. Do you ever use that secret language in public?
 - Yes
 - No
5. Are you ashamed of your secret language?
 - Yes
 - No
6. Then why do you avoid this secret language in public? Is the avoidance caused by the lack of social acceptance?
 - Yes
 - No
7. What is the reason behind following the female clothes and the female ways of talking? Is it because of the male-dominated society that you try to prove yourselves to be females?
 - Yes
 - No
8. Do all of you follow the same ways/style of talking in every situation?
 - Mostly
 - Not usually
9. Are you different from each other when you talk among yourselves?
 - Yes
 - No
10. Do you get aggressive sometimes just like most of the angry male characters of Bangladesh?
 - Yes
 - No

So, this question-answer session gives me the opportunity to understand language variation. Now, we are going to look at the terms Inter-speaker and intra-speaker variation. Inter-speaker variation suggests that, in a particular speech community or group, everybody does not speak in the same way though they use the language. They differ from each other in accent, use of sentence structure, choice of diction and the way of presenting the utterances. These differences refer to the inter-speaker variation.

And again, the language-use of a particular person differs according to different roles he or she plays, different situations he or she faces, different groups he or she maintains and so on. For example, a person's use of language is not the same at home and in office. Regarding the language-use he or she is more informal at home than office. These variations of language use in a person are called intra-speaker variation or "Diglossia".

Oxford Living Dictionaries (2017) define diglossia as:

A situation in which two languages (or two varieties of the same language) are used under different conditions within a community, often by the same speakers. The term is usually applied to languages with distinct ‘high’ and ‘low’ (colloquial) varieties, such as Arabic. (para. 1)

Nordquist (2016) quotes from Fasold (1984):

"A very significant aspect of **diglossia** is the different patterns of language acquisition associated with the High [H] and Low [L] dialects. . . . Most reasonably well-educated people in diglossic communities can recite the rules of H grammar, but not the rules for L. On the other hand, they unconsciously *apply* the grammatical rules of L in their normal speech with near perfection, whereas the corresponding ability in H is limited. In many diglossic communities, if speakers are asked, they will tell you L has no grammar, and that L speech is the result of the failure to follow the rules of H grammar." (Ralph W. Fasold, *Introduction to Sociolinguistics: The Sociolinguistics of Society*, Basil Blackwell, 1984). (ThoughtCo., para. 15)

Nordquist (2016) again quotes from Wardhaugh (2006):

"**Diglossia** reinforces social distinctions. It is used to assert social position and to keep people in their place, particularly those at the lower end of the social hierarchy. Any move to extend the L variety . . . is likely to be perceived to be a direct threat to those who want to maintain traditional relationships and the existing power structure." (Ronald Wardhaugh, *An Introduction to Sociolinguistics*, 5th ed. Blackwell, 2006). (ThoughtCo., para. 16)

These aspects are also found in the language use of the third gender community in Bangladesh.

The third gender community has a secret language called "Hijra Farsi" or "Koti" spoken by South -Asian Hijra or Koti community. The language is not at all similar to Farsi language. Despite its name, the language does not significantly overlap with Persian. The sentence structures are similar to Hindi, but not intelligible to Hindi speakers due to the distinctive intonation a large amount of distinctive vocabulary. It has no written form.

Farsi consists of about as many as ten thousand words. Farsi has nouns (feminine, masculine; singular, plural), pronouns, verbs, (feminine, masculine; singular, plural), adjectives (feminine, masculine; singular, plural), determiners, (feminine, masculine; singular, plural), etc of its own. However, it usually borrows adverbs, prepositions, etc from other languages in contact.

Awan & Sheeraz (2011) come up with a chart of Farsi nouns:

| | |
|-----------|------------|
| Farsi | English |
| Khomba | Face |
| Nak a | Nose |
| Cham ri | Eye |
| Dhhamb a | Tummy |
| Choochkey | Moustache |
| Reskey | Pubic hair |
| Nejma | Tooth |
| Chamki | Skin |

| | |
|----------|--------------------|
| Chhalka | Breast |
| Leeka | Penis |
| Vatal | Hips |
| Khalkian | Shoe |
| Firka | Women's wear |
| Kotki | Men's wear |
| Santli | Shawl |
| Vogna | To go or to walk |
| Chamna | To understand |
| Lugirna | To die |
| Chisa | Beautiful |
| Sudha | Old man |
| Sudhi | Old woman (p. 129) |

Awan & Sheeraz (2011) also say:

Apart from the linguistic facts presented above, Farsi has also developed some features to have a distinct identity for its speakers. However, Farsi's case is very strange because it is not visible in the society; it is limited to a community, therefore, only hijra community knows that Farsi is a separate language. Sociolinguists have devised different ways to view a language from social perspectives. (p. 132)

Awan & Sheeraz (2011) add more saying:

The notion of language being confusing and misleading the sociolinguists prefer to start with the notion of a speech community rather than a language and they define a speech community as any group of people who consider that they speak the same language' (Aitchison, 2003, p. 114; emphasis ours). On the basis of this assertion, power given to speech community by sociolinguists, a speech community has the right to consider what they speak – a separate language. (p. 132)

Though they have a particular language of their own, the inter-speaker and intra-speaker variations are available. Every person of this community does not speak in their language in the same way. Again, one individual does not speak in the same way all the time. Let's take a look at a real life example. Suppose, you are stuck in traffic jam, and you are in a public transport way back to your home. All on a sudden, you hear the familiar sound of clapping of some members of the third gender. They politely address you, "*ei Hero/ ei sundori / nayika, dos ta taka dao*" (Hi hero/ hi beautiful/ heroine, give me ten taka). If you give them 10 taka, it is fine. But, if you disagree, they simply insult you and bully you like anything. They get violent if you attempt to argue with them. And, they are very fluent in using slangs. So, we can see that they start with impressive words with the softness in their voice like a typical female character. Suddenly, they get furious, and start using aggressive dictions of a man in anger. Like their physical and genealogical features, the blend of male and female dictions is obvious in their utterances.

Rahman (2016) says in Pakistani context:

Having a language that creates a sense of a community is a necessity for hijras, who typically give up a great deal when they join the community. They consider themselves completely separate...from the general community," Khawar Pervez, who supervises outreach to the transgender community for Dareecha Male Health Society, a Pakistani NGO, told Muftah. "They call everyone else *dunya daar* [or, 'people of the world'].

That's why they have their own culture, and also their own language." Dr. Sheeraz echoed this observation. "Being hijra is speaking this language," he asserted. (para. 17) Both the mentorship of a guru and the mastery of Hijra Farsi are critical to a new hijra's success. Many hijras believe, however, that it is important to keep their language secret. "If we want to say something that we cannot say in front of 'people of the world,' we can say it in [Hijra] Farsi," Annie told Muftah. (para. 20).

"My own understanding is that this is the only way that they can protect themselves from a threat from the outside world," Khilji explained. This is one of the reasons why many hijras are reluctant to translate Hijra Farsi words for outsiders. "They don't like it when anyone else understands or speaks their language," said Pervez. (para. 21).

The same thing happens in Bangladesh. The members of the third gender in Bangladesh are not willing to talk about their secret language. They do not frequently use it in public as this secret language carries their secret identity. This secrecy of language is synonymous to the secrecy of their identity.

Rahman (2016), at last, says:

But there is much more to Hijra Farsi than just practicality and secrecy. It is a powerful symbol for the hijra community. Given the marginalization they face in South Asian society, hijras see the language as something that is truly theirs, and speak about it with pride. "This is our language," said Deemi. "And it's a very beautiful language". (para. 22)

The secret language of the Hijra community does not have the recognition of a language yet. The probable reason is their unstable position in the society. This community is marginalized and is not well established. Their language, one way or another, represents their unstable social background. As they do not have any strong social identity, the language used by them is also not well spread. It is used only within this community.

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