

Queer Linguistics
in the Indian Subcontinent
and
the Question of Gender

Enakshi Nandi
PhD Scholar, JNU
Zoomdemic Talks,
3rd April, 2020.

Audio Clip



About the Audio - FAQs

- ▶ *Who are the speakers? – Kotis and hijras*
- ▶ *What are they speaking? – Ulti*
- ▶ *Why does this language exist?*
- ▶ *What purposes does it serve?*
- ▶ *Are there any other languages like this?*

Semantic Domains of Ulti

- ▶ Parts of the human body: *likɔm*, *d̪ʰarki*, *cipti*, *kʰumur*, *akʰija masi*
- ▶ Sexual acts: *d̪ʰurano*, *kʰumur kɔra*, *battu d̪ʰurano*
- ▶ Gender expression and identity: *bʰelki koṭi*, *gupti koṭi*, *cʰibri*, *ḍubli*
- ▶ Transitioning and sex reassignment surgeries: *cʰibrano*
- ▶ Hijra/koti professions: *baḍʰai*, *cʰolla*, *kʰajra*
- ▶ Intimate items used by kotis/hijras: *iluilu*, *kʰauri jog*, *moḍa masi*
- ▶ Interpersonal relationships: *parik*, *ponṭʰi*, *girija*
- ▶ Relational/reference terms specific to the hijra gharana: *nanguru*, *goṭija*, *guru*, *naek*, *cæla*
- ▶ Customs (*ri:t̪*, *t̪ʰuke d̪eoɑ*, *ciṭpɔn*), rituals (*baṭaija*, *ancla d̪eoɑ*), and practices (*d̪ɔn kalam*, *roṭi caṭai*) exclusive to the community.

Ulti words are not just restricted to these domains; many words in Ulti have a Bangla counterpart, and are used interchangeably with each other. Some of those words include terms for:

- ▶ Food: *ʈakni, k^hobra, b^hisanṭi*
- ▶ Addictive substances: *k^helua, ḍ^humki, bila ḍ^humki*
- ▶ Frequented locations: *k^hol, corki, gaṇ mafi, sudḍ^hranir k^hol, ḍera*
- ▶ Common body parts: *ʈog, ḍ^horson, ak^hija mafi, k^humur*
- ▶ Cisgender people: *ṭonna, laharan, sudḍ^ha, sudḍ^hi, ḍiṇor, ṭæpka, ṭepki, piṭ ṭonna/laharan.*

What do Ulti sentences look like?

1a) **ami** **baɽi-te** **ɑ-c^h-i** (Bangla)

1PS home.Loc be.Pres.1P

“I am at home.”

b) **həmsi** **k^hol-e** **ɑ-c^h-i** (Ulti)

1PS home.Loc be.Pres.1P

“I am at home.”

2a) **hina toma-r** **ʃari-ʈa** **ni-e-c^h-e** (Bangla)

3PS 2PS.Gen saree.Cla take.Pft.Prog.3P

“Hina has taken your saree.”

b) **hina tumsi-r** **ʃatra-ʈa** **cem-e-c^h-e** (Ulti)

3PS 2PS.Gen saree.Cla take.Pft.Prog.3P

“Hina has taken your saree.”

- ▶ Lexical items in Ulti comprise mostly of content words like nouns, pronouns, demonstratives, verbs, adjectives, (1) adverb.
- ▶ They are inserted in the grammatical framework of a Bangla sentence to create Ulti sentences.
- ▶ There exists no “full Ulti” with its own function words and inflectional markers.
- ▶ Ulti only exists as a mixed language.
- ▶ This phenomenon is not unique to Ulti; varieties of **Farsi** in Rawalpindi and D. G. Khan in Pakistan are mixed with Urdu, Punjabi, and Siraiki, respectively. **Farasi** in Delhi and UP is mixed with Hindi. **Meti** in North Bengal is mixed with Nepali.
- ▶ The secret lexical items exclusive to all these hijra communities have many common roots, suggesting **all these languages exist in a linguistic continuum.**

Gender Agreement in Hindi and Bangla

▶ 3a) raju k^hana k^ha-t-a he (Hindi)

3PMS food eat.Hab.M be.Pres.3PS

“Raju eats food.”

▶ b) rani k^hana k^ha-t-i he (Hindi)

3PFS food eat.Hab.F be.Pres.3PS

“Raju eats food.”

▶ c) raju/rani k^habar k^ha-e (Bangla)

3PS food eat.Hab.3P

“Raju/Rani eats food.”

Gender Agreement in Farasi (Nagar, 2005)

2. R: To maine apni maa se kaha
3. ki ab jo hai main
4. chibdon ke saath nahi
5. tha^m lekin ab main chibdon
6. ke saath reh ke dikha^m doonga^m.
7. En Dusshera wale din hum
8. chibdon ke ghar main jake chela^m
9. ho gayen^f meri guru
10. ka naam Rajjo hai,
11. main unhi ke beti^f hoon
12. main unhi ke saath rehti^f
13. hoon unhi ke ghar ka sara
14. kaam karati^f hoon.

R: So I said to my mother
now it is such that
I not with *hijras*
was^m but now with *hijras*
I will^m live^m.
On the day of Dusshera, I
in a *hijra* house, chela^m
I became^f. My guru
her name is Rajjo
I am her daughter^f
I live^f with her
all the work in her house
I do^f.

Gender in Ulti

- ▶ Ulti has the same grammatical features as Bangla. Therefore it has no grammatical gender, no gender agreement. Then how does the community express gender?
- ▶ The Bangla kinship term, “mashi” (mother’s sister), is used to form compound nouns in Ulti.
- ▶ Mashi combines **obligatorily** with a handful of nouns in Bangla, Ulti, Hindi, or English to create new lexical items in Ulti.

4 a) kormo maji – work + maji – work
c) dhonnu maji – ___ + maji – earring
e) jinda maji – alive + maji – alive

b) ogni maji – fire + maji – fire
d) furfuri maji – ___ + maji – smile
f) helo maji – “hello“ + maji – phone

- With most other nouns, *mashi* combines **optionally** to produce compounds that do not play any role in the syntax of the language, nor do they have any effect on the meaning of the sentence. **Optional *mashi*** is very productive and combines with all kinds of nouns, whether animate, inanimate, count, mass, collective, or abstract.

- 5
- | | |
|--|--|
| a) TV <i>mafi</i> – TV | b) <i>pani mafi</i> – water |
| c) <i>k^hol mafi</i> – house | d) <i>k^holja mafi</i> – egg |
| e) <i>ḍṛpon mafi</i> – mirror | f) <i>laharan mafi</i> – woman |
| g) <i>ḷḷman mafi</i> – clients | h) <i>bæbja mafi</i> – business |
| i) <i>bakur mafi</i> – (the act of) stealing | j) <i>ṣaṭra mafi</i> – clothes/saree |
| k) <i>ḷog mafi</i> – hair | l) <i>ḍaktar mafi</i> – doctor |

- ▶ Mashi carries a strong semantic gender feature for feminine in Bangla. In Ulti, it gets semantically extended so that in many cases, it can combine with nouns that carry a masculine natural gender feature (**ṭonna mafi –cisgender man**), or nouns with no gender feature (**ṭakni mafi – food**). One could argue that mashi in Ulti has a weak semantic feature for feminine that does not block non-feminine nouns from combining with it.
- ▶ Speakers of the language (who are femme or transfeminine), claim that they use mashi so frequently because their deepest desire is to be accepted by society as a woman, so they use their language to feminize the world around them.
- ▶ Mashi is a **stylistic choice** made by the speakers to index their community membership, their increased fluency of the language and, therefore, their stronger footing in the community, besides being a means to gender themselves and the world around them – just because they can.

Thank you!

