

Unraveling Fluid Identities: Exploring the Migration of Gendered Semiotics in Magahi across Caste, Culture, and Pragmatics

Chandan Kumar¹

Abstract

The paper explores gendered semiotics in cross-category interactions within the context of Magahi, an Indo-Aryan language. It investigates the dynamic interplay of language, gender, and intersubjectivity in discourse, focusing on linguistic elements like terms of address, reference, honorifics, taboo/expletives, and cross-referencing/reversing genders. The study elucidates the semiotic processes of identity formation and attainment within the purview of 'social meaning'. The analysis uncovers a profound connection between linguistic structure, pragmatic goals, communicative goals, and power-gender dynamics. Significantly, this study explores cases of reversing gender through semiotic indexes from the viewpoint of the affective dimension of linguistic gendering. Strategies such as the use of kinship terms for non-kinship relations, employing taboo words as strategy, manipulating honorifics for (dis)/respect and the levels of familiarity are explored from the standpoint of 'communicative goal'. These linguistic strategies illuminate how language constructs social realities and identities in a fluid, non-fixed manner. Moreover, the study suggests a dynamic interpretation between semiotic indexes and socio-cultural concepts, examining language usage from a perlocutionary perspective. To comprehensively explore these phenomena, we employ the framework of Interactional Sociolinguistics (IS) as the guiding framework, complemented by Critical Discursive Psychology (CDP). The exploration of migration in linguistic expressions as per socio-cultural categories adds a nuanced layer to our understanding of how language reflects and shapes fluid socio-cultural identities.

Keywords: *Indo-Aryan, interactional sociolinguistics, semiotics, cross-reference, woman, Magahi.*

1. Introduction

The interaction between language and gender is a well-researched area in fields such as sociology, anthropology, philosophy, literary studies, linguistics and feminist studies (Lakoff, 1975; Schlegel, 1990; Kitzinger, 2000; Smalls, 2018, Speer & Stokoe, 2011; Angouri & Baxter, 2021; Hall et al., 2019; Parish & Hall, 2021; Hall & Devis, 2021; Nowak, 2022). Language serves as a tool to access cognitive categorization of socio-cultural categories. It can reveal a linguistic group's attitude towards its social and cultural position (Gumperz, 1958; Butler, 1990; Goodwin, 1990; Kumar, 2017; Ren, 2019). The study of language's role in understanding social identities has been studied from different perspectives, such as cognitivism, post-structuralism, and constructivism (Weatherall & Gallois, 2003; Parker, 2015; Wiggins, 2016; Parish & Hall, 2021). Linguistic genders and social genders are understood differently, however, not

¹ Department of English and Cultural Studies, Christ University, Bengaluru, India, chandan.kumar@christuniversity.in

independently. Linguistic genders such as masculine and feminine, however, are based on semantic properties such as humanness, sex, animacy, shape, form and size of the objects, and so on (Aikhenvald 2019). Since linguistic gender draws heavily from sociocultural ideas of masculinity and femininity, speakers are emotionally invested in the usage of the form associated with genders. Thus, there is a strong correlation between semiotic indexes and the assumed and ascribed identity.

Much of the research engages in understanding the direct correlation between form and meaning – how a text coincides with meaning. Advancement in the field brought context as an important factor; however, underscores the linguistic output. It intends to predict the final linguistic output by analyzing the available contextual resources. We feel that there is a gap in terms of methodological considerations like CDP and Interactional Sociolinguistics and the intended object of study.

We believe and propose that comprehending the exact meaning of a speech is achievable only by focusing on the ‘communicative goal’ of the interlocutors as the intended object of study. An uttered linguistic element further negotiates with context, intention, and socio-cultural and sociolinguistic weight. The linguistic clashes and cooperation, therefore, is a post-speech phenomenon. Consequently, the use of language does not guarantee social realities. A signifier has multiple levels – it negotiates with denotation, connotational, illocutionary and perlocutionary forces, and paradigms (in terms of either dichotomous or spectrum). An interesting linguistic phenomenon of gender reversing can be observed to demonstrate the hypothesis. Aikhenvald (2016) made an interesting observation about gender accomplishment and gender-reversed roles in Manambu society. She observed the speech in a cultural context where women dress like men and speak a masculine language. It is a good example of gender accomplishment, as the language is observed from the perspective of a ‘communicative goal’, i.e., to produce a man.

Keeping this in mind, in this paper, we have explored the various linguistic sites where gender and caste are achieved (communicative goal) in domains such as kinship, women at husbands’ locates, the honorific markers, terms of address and reference, gender-reversal roles; a case of Savtarin (a woman community working as laborers on brick kiln in Bihar, India), gender reversals in young speakers and discourse of affect. The paper also addresses the gap between the idea of gender as a continuum and the linguistic realization of it as a dichotomous category. It dwells in the realm of the production of meaning by incorporating the perlocutionary and illocutionary speech act, as it happens when the targeted person feels a sense of respect, endearment and disdain in the case of cross-gender referencing, for example (1).

- (1) Context- A shy boy hesitant to join the late evening party finally showed himself. His friends remarked jokingly to insult.

a	geləu	nəiki
come	go.PRF.2NH	new.DD.F

‘The newly-wed (girl) has come/ the shy.F has come.’

Feminine cross-referencing, a prevalent linguistic phenomenon across various languages is exemplified by the use of the lexical item nəiki (new.N.F). It is an adjective, marked with a feminine nominal marker. In (1), it refers to a newlywed bride. The communicative goal is to insult or mock Golu. The word draws upon general cultural knowledge, signifying a set of anticipated social behaviors for a newlywed bride, including qualities like shyness, propriety, nervousness, and a certain degree of social reticence. The humor or offense in such instances arises from the incongruity between two elements: the linguistic representation and the meaning associated with it and the referent (the boy). The former pertains to the notion of a newlywed bride, while the latter is a self-recognised socially accepted notion of a man. This phenomenon encompasses two dimensions: (i) individual engagement, encompassing one's emotions and discourse

objectives, and (ii) the method of attainment, which, in this case, involves the exaggeration of attributes; in Gumperz's (1982b) word, contextualization cues. For instance, being unsocial and shy does not equate to embodying the identity of a newlywed woman, but it contributes as one of its characteristics. Additionally, following the paradigmatic approach, the presence of feminine characteristics implies the absence of masculinity. Given that the 'communicative goal' is achieved, it underscores the importance of language in the construction and negotiation of meaning in a context. Or, in other words, the significance of all the other factors over the linguistic forms. Its illocutionary and perlocutionary effect in a context is subject to its interaction with factors such as interlocutors' state of mind, cultural context, non-linguistic semiotic indexes, and sociolinguistic profiles. It appears that it is the language that effectively contributes to our understanding of what constitutes gender (Burr, 2015), however, in essence, it is the semiotic practices such as uniform, the semantics of spaces, body language, voices, and so on. The achievement of the goal of communication, i.e., offending the boy in question indicates the fact that 'sociocultural knowledge is embedded within the talk and behavior in interaction' (Bailey, 2015). It is also important to notice the prosody in such interactions, as they constitute the contextualization cues.

In the context of modern Indo-Aryan languages, research on language and gender remains relatively limited. This is particularly significant for lesser-known languages like Magahi, which, to the best of our knowledge, have not yet been explored. The data presented herein is based on the author's experiences and long observation of the community, as he is a native speaker of the language, and has been residing there since his birth. Proper consent has been taken for presenting and publishing the data.

The next section justifies the methodology that has been opted to analyze the examples. Then I present linguistic sites and structures where genders are directly and indirectly embedded. I emphasize the importance of analyzing how words or phrases impact interactants to elucidate the achieved meaning. I then present the analysis of how honorifics and terms of address and references are not directly gender specific but are used tactically by both men and women. In section 8, I have exclusively presented examples for reversing genders and cross-referencing. The section highlights how masculine and feminine words/markers are used to manipulate individuals by underscoring the affective values associated with them.

2. Methodology

The paper offers a comprehensive examination of language usage in interactions where gender, caste, and culture play significant roles in the construction and negotiation of identities. Employing a qualitative analysis approach, interactional sociolinguistics (IS), the study conducts an in-depth analysis of naturally occurring linguistic and non-linguistic elements, including sentences, lexical items, sounds, gestures, clothing and more. Following Bailey (2015), the meaning in this framework is a 'situated interpretation.' A situated framework, as per Gumperz is the following.

"Situated interpretation of any utterance is always a matter of inferences made within the context of an interactive exchange, the nature of which is constrained both by what is said and by how it is interpreted." Inferencing involves "hypothesis-like tentative assessments of communicative intent, that is, the listener's interpretation of what the speaker seeks to convey, in roughly illocutionary terms" ((Gumperz, 1992, p. 230) cited in Bailey 2015, p. 1).

The most important reason for choosing IS as the primary framework is for its centrality in the meaning-making process and interpretation, along with its sustained interest in macro 'sociological phenomenon such as dialect, ethnic group, and the process of social differentiation' (Bailey 2015, p. 2). As it is the first work on language and gender in

Magahi, IS is an appropriate framework. As a methodology, it relies on close, culturally informed discourse analysis which is the primary site for this research. Along with IS, it is almost unavoidable to acknowledge that the analysis also takes help from critical discursive psychology (CDP) as a framework. It has been a widely applied framework in the social sciences to analyze conversations and interactions, aiming to understand the production of knowledge and socio-cultural realities as locally situated discourses (Wetherell, 1998, 2015; Wetherell & Edley, 2014). CDP integrates insights from conversation analysis and post-structuralism approaches (Budds, 2013; Budds et al., 2017; Edley & Wetherell, 2001; Wetherell 2014; Potter, 2012). While frequently used to explore the role of spoken and written language, CDP has yet to be widely employed in analyzing other vital aspects of discourse, such as visual elements, gestures, cultural symbols, spatial arrangements, clothing choices, and the broader context of natural language use. Building upon the work of McCullough and Lester (2021), who applied CDP to study the construction of masculine identities in visual imagery on Instagram, this paper recognizes the relevance of CDP for analyzing linguistic and non-linguistic elements within discourse. Consequently, this study presents and analyzes instances of lexical items, phrases, sentences, reverse-gendering, and grammatical markers, along with the description of pragmatics, which encompasses gestures, clothing choices, appearances, ornaments, and other contextual cues. This perspective views language as an active mode of engagement, underscoring its role in shaping and being shaped by the surrounding world (Butler, 1990; Crawford, 1995; Zimman, 2014; Corwin, 2017; and Clifford, 2019).

Despite the overlap between interactional sociolinguistics and discursive psychology in their focus on meaning-making and interpretation processes, there are key distinctions. Discursive psychology examines how psychological concepts like attitude, emotions, and identities are made relevant through language, while IS considers the social and cultural diversity in language use as well (Bailey 2015).

3. Language and Gender in Magahi: Linguistic Aspects

Magahi is a lesser-known modern Indo-Aryan language, spoken by a population exceeding 12 million, as per the 2011 census of India. It is found to be spoken in eight districts within the Indian state of Bihar. For this study, I focus on the native variety spoken in the Bihta region, situated to the east of central Patna, Bihar.

Drawing from Gumperz's framework (1958), it's essential to recognize three speech forms in Northern India, particularly within Hindi-speaking regions. Firstly, the regional dialect, the variety of Magahi that I have selected for this study. Secondly, a less formal variant, termed 'Hindi-ized Magahi,' is used in settings like marketplaces, suburban households, and public places, influenced by Hindi (Kumar 2017). Lastly, Hindi or Hindustani, a blend of Hindi and Urdu, is employed in formal contexts and public domains such as schools, colleges, offices, and administration, given Hindi's official status in the state. This linguistic diversity creates a dynamic sociolinguistic landscape, particularly noticeable in the middle class. The presence of Hindi in various spheres like education, media, and literature results in a hybrid sociocultural space, where the imagined socio-cultural status competes with the ascribed one (Bhabha, 1994). Hypercorrection, as observed by Kumar (2017), illustrates this phenomenon.

The role of language in shaping and reflecting sociocultural identities has been widely acknowledged (Baker, 1991; Weatherall & Gallois, 2003; Aikhenvald, 2016; Beach, 2017; Love, 2017). Most languages make distinctions at the lexical level. A phonosemantic analysis of lexical domains, including professional names, proper names, and kinship terms, sheds light on speakers' perspectives regarding gender-related social realities. Furthermore, the phonological cues in language provide sub-conscious insights into the manifestation of stereotypes within a specific community. Scholars such as

Oalkers (2003) and Ackermann & Zimmer (2021) have observed a phono-semantic regularity across languages concerning sound and gender correspondence. Clifford (2019) conducted a sociophonetic study of vowel formants among transwomen undergoing voice feminization. The association between sound and categories, though does not establish any psychological truth, it informs about the way we understand the psychological association. The way language creates and situates categories.

In addition to lexical distinctions, the Magahi language employs the diminutive marker as a means to convey gender distinctions. In such constructions, objects that are relatively small in size, soft, or aesthetically pleasing are marked by the last sound [i]. It is used as a derivational process whereby a feminine can be achieved by either adding [i] at the end of a word or changing the last sound with [i]. For instance, *kətorə* (big bowl) becomes *kətori* (small bowl), with the [i] sound arguably serving as a feminine marker (see Kempe, Brooks & Mironova (2003) for diminutive construction and gender in Russian). It's worth noting that grammatical gender is influenced by biological and anatomical differences between objects, which, in turn, are shaped by socio-cultural and political concepts of gender (Eckert & Podesva, 2021). Another linguistic phenomenon observed across languages is the use of default agreement markers, often masculine or neutral. Nissen's study (2002) highlights the correlation between the generic use of the masculine gender and the interpretation of referents as male. For example, loanwords like Facebook, Instagram, and Gmail tend to adopt a generic/masculine form in Magahi. De la Cruz Cabanillas et al. (2007) offers similar observations concerning Spanish loanwords (see also BuBmann & Hellinger, 2003).

In Magahi, when words are used in spoken discourse, they take an additional morpheme /-wa/ which has the semantics of definiteness, familiarity, nativization, etc. (Kumar, 2019). It has allomorphs which are subject to phonological conditioning. The allomorph /-wa/ and /-ia/ respectively mark masculine and feminine gender. For instance, the proper name Suman is found to be associated with both a man and a woman. However, when a girl is named Suman, she is addressed as *suməniya*, while a boy with the same name is addressed as *sumənwə*. Proper names, although not primarily characterizing, carry significance beyond individual identification (McConnell-Ginet, 2003). It is worth noting that personal names can reveal attributes like religion and gender in languages (Bhatia, 1993 for Punjabi). In Magahi, female names often avoid ending with consonants, a pattern observed in various studies (Ackermann & Zimmer, 2021). Additionally, surnames can bear sociocultural and political significance in the Indian context (Jayaraman, 2005; Kakati, 2022), for example, 'kumari' and 'devi' are specifically attributed to unmarried and married females, respectively.

Magahi also exhibits gender distinction in animate non-human nouns, such as animals, reptiles, and birds. These nouns are classified as either masculine or feminine based on whether they end with /-a/ (masculine) or /-i/-iya// (feminine) sounds. Alternatively, it depends upon the 'communicative goal', if the speaker wants to construct the gender of an animal, insect, and so on, s/he would use the available linguistic mechanism. These productive rules extend to language games and exercises among children in the Magahi community, demonstrating the rule's robustness, but also the gender and language association. For example, even though there is no masculine/feminine correspondence to the given words, children create counterparts in the process of language games (Also, see Björnsdóttir (2021) for a review on similar research and Taylor, 1996 and Yelland, 1998 for linguistic gender development in children).

Masculine	Feminine	Meaning
kəua	kəuvi	Crow
tʃiṭa	tʃiṭain	Leopard
mətʃhəla	mətʃhəli	fish

4. The Dynamics of Kinship Terms: Locating Gender in Discourse

Kinship terms are also used beyond their immediate kinship circles for achieving various communication goals in society. Some common kinship terms used for generic purposes include *b^həiya* (brother), *ḍ iḍ i* (elder sister), *bəhən* (sister), *maṭṭa ji* (mother H), *mai* (mother), *mama* (for older woman), *baba* (grandfather), *ʃaʃa* (uncle), and *məusi* (aunt). A non-kinship relationship between a stranger man and a woman before marriage is socially unacceptable. Moreover, requesting and employing manes is not commonly practiced within the culture. Using an individual's name is discouraged, leading to discomfort, nervousness, and tension during interactions between unfamiliar men and women. To avoid this uneasiness, people use kinship terms to address strangers. The choice of kinship terms depends upon communicative goal, sociolinguistic position, biological gender and age.

(2) Context: A lady is in conversation with a hawker. A is the lady and B is the seller.
b^həiya, kəise ḍeṭe həhū ʃura (A)
 brother, how give be.2H rice flake
 'What is the price of rice flakes, brother?'

əre bəhin bahuṭ səṣṭa hə (B)
 Hey, sister very cheap be.PRS
 'Hey, sister, it is very cheap.'

The use of kinship terms in (2) can only be understood from a 'situated interpretation'. The relationship between the buyer and seller is not of brother and sister. However, within the culture, people extend the use of kinship to achieve communicational goals such as buying and selling. To successfully achieve it, considering the cultural restriction, kinship terms are employed. In such locally situated discourse, kinship terms attain a functional meaning.

Malone (2004) defines kinship terms as the component of social grammar that makes the interaction between people predictable and meaningful. Holmes (2013: 349) believes that kinship terms reflect significant cultural relationships (see also Neelakshi and Amr (2021) for Hindi and Syrian Arabic). Kinship terms, when used with professional titles, further reflect the cultural nuances. The use of kinship terms with female references often signifies an establishment of immediate non-hierarchical relationships, easing sociolinguistic dynamics. For example, *tiʃər-ḍiḍi* (teacher sister), *kam wali-tʃaʃi* (maid aunt), *didi* (sister), *mai* (mother), and *ʃaʃi* (aunt), and so on. In contrast, male counterparts are often addressed as 'sir' or *sahəb, daktər-babu* (doctor sir), etc., maintaining the power dynamic between interlocutors. It indicates the use of language to reflect the power dynamics that exist in society. The choice of address terms, such as *malik* (maser), *mai-bap* (the one who feeds), *babu saheb* (sir) for male honor and *ʃaʃi* (aunt), *ḍaḍi* (grandmother), *ḍiḍi* (sister), *mai* (mother), and so on for female honor, reflects constructed feminine value but also the non-exploitative relationship that laborers seek to establish with female honor. Female honors figure prominently in wage negotiations, often acting as intermediaries between laborers and male honors (see 3). It exploits the existing image of women as caregivers being kind, emotional, and non-argumental (see 3).

(3) Context: A regular laborer comes to a middle-class house looking for honor. He asks about the whereabouts of the master to the wife and seeks her help to increase some wages.
malik ne ka hə^hin ʃaʃi, unka bolhū ki pəʃas rupia
 master NEG QN be.3H aunt he.3H ask.H that fifty rupee

or ḍe ḍe^hin
 more give PRF.3H

‘Is the master not at home, aunt? Ask him to give me fifty rupees more.’

The use of kinship functioning as an emotive language is strategic from the perspective of a perlocutionary act. In certain contexts, kinship address terms take on fictive meanings (Khalil et al. 2018). For example, the terms b^hai, (brother), ḍ oṣṭ (friend), and ya:r (friend) are used among males, while females typically address their friends by their first names. However, there is a negative connotation attached to the term ya:r, implying an unethical (unsocial) romantic relationship between a male and a female. Such usage is socially unacceptable and is intended to insult the person by questioning their character.

(4) Context: A fight broke out between the neighbors. Women are abusing each other, targeting each other’s character. A woman targeting the daughter of another woman said

puṭ^h na betiya se ke-go ya:r rək^hle həu
 Ask Add.NH daughter.F PP how-NCL friends kept be.NH
 subəhe sā^j^h lɔndənke sq^h g^humṭe rəhə həu
 morning evening boys.PP together roam PROG. be.NH

‘Ask your daughter how many boyfriends she has kept, she is found to be roaming with them all day.’

The purpose of the use of the term is to insult the mother by assassinating her daughter’s character. In urban spaces, terms like ‘bro’ and b^hai (brother) have become generic terms that extend beyond their original gender-specific meanings. They are moreover used as generic terms devoid of gender.² Though, diachronically, these terms refer to male individuals, it does not reflect the masculinity aspect. They function as endearment terms, which are devoid of denotational meaning. It presents a good example of how a contextually achieved communicative goal weighs over a sociolinguistics assumption. The achieved intended meaning is a kind of communication accommodation (Morgan, 1999; Zhang & Giles, 2018). It is also a good example of what Gumperz (1992) calls ‘situated interpretation’.

5. Women as Someone’s Wife: Identities in Negotiation

In many cultures, women residing in their husbands’ households often experience a unique set of sociolinguistic practices that reflect their cultural status within these familial structures (Upadhyaya, 1968).

(5) Context – A man addresses his daughter-in-law by taking the name of his son, Pappu.

pəpuə, tʃai bəna dihe ek kəp
 Pappu.NH tea make.2 give.2NH one cup

‘Pappu, make me a cup of tea.’

² The default agreement system establishes men as norm and women as exceptions. The practice is highly regulatory and describes the “ideology of man (male as norm)” (Hellinger (2001, p. 108), and, thus, subordinate women. As a result, a flow of linguistic movement happens from L (lower) to H (higher), as in the case of the use of the word ‘bro’ among girls.

In ‘situated interpretation,’ the reference in (5) is achieved by evaluating the context of an interactive exchange. In this context, the father-in-law is asking for tea from his son. However, within the culture, cooking is exclusively associated with women. Thus, the father-in-law is not addressing his son but his son’s wife. In the pursuit of attaining a communicational goal, the connection between the signifier and the signified is deliberated within a limited socio-cultural context.

All the addressing terms for the wife revolve around the husband’s and/or son’s/daughter’s names. The wife addresses the husband’s younger brother and sister by taking their first names with mid-level honorifics. The use of honorifics is tactical here, which reveals the socio-linguistic negotiation of the woman in the new house/community. The wife addresses elders at in-laws’ place in the same way as the husband addresses them. Employing honorifics in her address to both younger and older members at her in-law’s residence, she signals her socio-cultural status as a recent addition to the family, adapting to her new role. The use of honorifics serves as a strategic element in negotiating her position within the family.

Newly married women are expected to adopt the prestigious standard Hindi, signifying their education and social standing. Eckert & McConnell-Ginet (2003) observe that the language choice reflects women’s effort to position themselves as specific types of women within the new community. James (1996) observes that there is an overt prestige associated with the standard form of language (to know more about similar situations, see Trudgill & Trudgill 1974). Gal (1998) observes that the choice of women’s language is also the result of the desire for social upliftment in seeking jobs or marriage opportunities. McConnell-Ginet (1992, p. 90) states, “Women’s language has been said to reflect their [our] conservatism, prestige consciousness, upward mobility, insecurity, deference, nurture, emotional expressivity, connectedness, sensitivity to others, solidarity.”

Nevertheless, I believe their language reflects a negotiation between their existing social position and the various roles that they are supposed to perform. The use of standard language and the local language provides her with a good relationship with the people around her. Gradually, she also stops using honorifics while addressing the husband’s younger siblings. It destabilized the hypothesis, such as ‘women’s language’; as the use of language appears to be a tool for negotiation in the light of the strict patriarchal social realities.

The husband and wife have a unique way of addressing each other. They avoid using their names and, instead, use the names of their eldest son or daughter. Specifically, the husband refers to his spouse using the name of the eldest daughter, while the wife addresses her husband using the name of the eldest son. Context, communicative goal, prosodic features, and the use of honorific sounds become cues to fix the relationship between signifier and signified. In cases where they do not have children yet, they use alternative expressions like ‘verb of communication – verb + Auxiliary’ (as described in Bhatia 1993), demonstrative, and so on.

(6) Context- The husband is addressing his wife.

sunṭe	he	həmmər	kələka	moḍḡwa
listen.IMPRF.2	be.PRS.2NH	my	black.DD.S	sock.D
kene he				
where be.PRS				

‘Can you hear me? Where are my black socks?’

When the wife addresses her husband, there is a slight phonological change in the addressing morpheme, it represents honorific.

- (7) sunʔe hə kutʃʰ əɖəmi əiʔe həi
listen.IMPRF be.PRS.2H some people come.IMPRF be.IMP
'Can you hear me? Some people are coming.'

The aforementioned expressions may be categorized as vocatives. The alteration of the vowel sound from /e/ to /ə/ serves as a symbolic marker denoting the hierarchical dynamics inherent within the relationship. It is noteworthy that the husband consistently employs the non-honorific form when addressing his wife. This established linguistic practice results in the subordination of individuals associated with the wife's lineage, effectively relegating them to a lower position or status within the relational hierarchy.

- (8) unkər bʰai awela hətʰin bəhər-se a:dʒ
his.H. brother come.IMPRF be.IMPRF.H outside-from today
'Today, his (husband) brother is supposed to come from another city.'

- (9) okər bʰai awela həi a:dʒ
her.NH brother come.IMPRF be.IMPRF.3NH today
'Today, her (wife) brother is supposed to come.'

A native speaker can easily discern that (7) and (8) are uttered by the wife, attributable to the presence of honorific markers adorning demonstratives and verbs within these utterances. Analogously, (6) and (9) are attributed to the husband. Scholars such as Deuchar (1989) and Brown and Levinson (1998) posit that the heightened employment of politeness strategies by women stems from their societal disempowerment. This is elucidated by the notion that the identity and status of women are more contingent upon symbolic forms of expression rather than functional attributes, as expounded upon by scholars like Eckert (1989, 1998) and Woolard (1996). Pavlenko (2002: 283-84) postulates that language serves as a conduit to access symbolic capital, subsequently translating into material gains. Romaine (2003: 104) astutely observes that in a milieu where men hold sway over material resources, women's accumulation predominantly takes the form of symbolic capital. Notwithstanding, women don't employ honorifics in the same way when they are in their native place. It is the new locale which brings dynamics, and thus, to negotiate with those dynamics, they employ honorifics. It is the situation that is the emergent of the language, and not necessarily the individual. For example, in *Husbands' Locate*, women also use the interlocutors' relation with their husbands to refer to their husbands.

- (10) Context- The wife is complaining about her husband to one of the men in the neighborhood, as he asks her if she is eating well.

- ʔore bʰəiɣa kufʃʰ lake nə ɖə hətʰun
you.NH. brother something bring NEG.H. give.H be.IMPRF.H
'Your brother doesn't bring/buy me anything.'

The sentence presented in (10) illuminates the wife's deliberate intent to keep her husband's identity as the focal point, effectively anchoring her own identity within the orbit of her husband (also see Climate, 1997). It cannot simply be interpreted as the language of women. Following IS and CDP, it is an effective communicative strategy with twofold intention: (a) establishing a relationship between the addressee and the third person, adding layers to the context. Any possible utterance now will presuppose the dynamics of the speaker, hearer, and the third person (husband), and (b) it serves the

purpose of desexualizing her relationship with male interlocutors by bringing her husband's reference and making him the locus of the conversation.³

6. Gender in Addressing Morphemes and Honorifics

In the Magahi language, specific addressing morphemes, namely /re/ and /ge/, exhibit gender and caste-sensitive usage patterns. These morphemes are employed to address males and females, respectively. Phonetic variations, such as /ərə/ and /əge/, are contingent upon syntactic distribution and exhibit a nuanced usage pattern influenced by social hierarchy. It is important to note that their utilization can take on derogatory connotations in certain contextual settings.

Context: A landowner calls his male laborer named Kallu in (11) and a woman laborer in (12) in the farmland.

(11) əre kəluə kudəriya leṭe-jo
 hey.ADD.NH, kalu-DD spade.DD take-IMPRF-go.IMPRF.NH
 'Hey, Kallu! take the spade with you.'

(12) rəmənwa-bəhu ge əj kam kʰəṭm kər ɖihe
 Raman.DD-wife hey.ADD.NH today work finish do. give.IMPRF.NH
 'Hey, Raman's wife! finish the work today.'

For instance, in the context of addressing individuals in a farmland, a landowner uses the term /ərə/ when calling a male laborer named kəlu (as seen in (11)), while in another instance, the landowner addresses a female laborer using 'ge' (as depicted in (12)). This linguistic variation in Magahi is often associated with the speech of of gəwar (illiterate) and ɖesi (rural) population. Locally, this linguistic variant is referred to as ʃəmər/mushər ke boli (a lower-caste speech), a nomenclature which echoes in the work of Gumperz (1958) as well.

The employment of these morphemes illuminates the hierarchical positioning of genders within the kinship structure. Notably, a son, when addressing his father, uncle, or elder brother, cannot employ the morpheme /re/. Conversely, he can use /ge/ to address his grandmother, mother, aunts and sisters.

(13) (*babu re). məiya-ge kʰana ɖe
 father ADD.NH mother-ADD.NH food give.IMPF,NH
 'Hey Mother, give me food!'

(14) (*bʰaiya re) ɖiɖi-ge əj bəjar ɕəle ke
 (elder brother). Sister-ADD.NH today market go QN
 'Hey Sister, should we go to the market today?'

A straightforward interpretation suggests that these markers reflect the socio-cultural status of women in society. However, it is crucial to avoid the simplistic conclusion that these markers represent a power dynamic between men and women, exclusively. Following CDC and 'communicative goal' perspectives, these markers also signify proximity and are contingent on the nature of the relationship between the speaker and the addressee. When we see the illocutionary force behind the use of these markers with women, neither the addressor nor the addressee feels the power dynamic. Moreover, it

³ This practice finds resonance in Bernstein's (1994) examination of the 'Shona community,' where the addressing of married women predominantly occurs through their relational connection with others.

suggests that in the kinship context, it is the proximity that governs the usage. The contextual analysis suggests that a son or daughter may have a closer relationship with their mother compared to their father.

However, the use of these morphemes is seen with elder sisters but not with elder brothers; moreover, the same explanation will not work in this context. The use of these morphemes is thus way more complicated, especially when we bring factors such as caste and class into account. As the theory of familiarity and intimacy do not work there. Moreover, it is purely a power dynamic. It then puts women, younger people, lower caste and class in the same box.

I have taken this issue again in detail in the next section.

7. Honorifics and Gender in Kinship

Honorifics, traditionally studied within the framework of politeness strategies (Brown and Levinson, 1978), have evolved to encompass a dynamic aspect of meaning-making as the field progressed. Honorifics are now viewed as indexes whose meanings are derived from their contextual usage (Cook, 2011). In the context of Magahi, honorifics manifest morpho-phonologically, primarily in verb endings. For instance, when a verb ends with the sound /ə/, it carries an honorific connotation. Conversely, if it ends with /-e/, it is considered non-honorific. Non-honorific, however, carries a range of semantics such as neutrality, insulting, intimacy/familiarity, and so on. These meanings are situated within a specific pragmatic; the factors that facilitate one meaning over others are speakers' intentions, the relationship between interlocutors, kinship hierarchy, communication goals, sociocultural factors like caste, class, power dynamics, professions, and so on. Its distribution, however, also invites the question of gender in the kinship circle as we have seen with /re/ and /ge/. Sound /ə/ is employed when referring to elder male individuals, while /e/ is used for female individuals (both elder and younger).

(15) tu bəjɑr. gelə həl, pɑ
 you market go.PRF.2H. be.PRF father
 'Did you go to the market, father?'

(16) tu bəjɑr. gele həl, məmmi/soni
 you market go.PRF.2NH. be.PRF. mother/soni
 'Did you go to the marker, Mother/Soni?'

However, I proposed that the relationship between these phonological markers and gender is not straightforward. When addressing an unfamiliar or less acquainted woman, a boy or man will abstain from using either the /ge/ or /e/. For example, a boy addressing his maternal uncle's wife or father's brother's wife. Observe the following conversation between a boy and his maternal uncle's wife.

(17) (a) boy: məwani ailə hə-tʰin. kəbe. se
 uncle's wife. come.PRF. be.PRS.2H. when. Since
 'Aunt has been here for a long time.'

(b) Aunt: a əbʰi ɽək puʃʰbo nə kərlə he
 And now till ask.2 NEG. do.PRF.H be.PRS
 'And, you have not even asked yet for the food.'

(c) boy: kəuʃi kʰəibə boli

What eat.FUT.2H say.2H

‘What do you want to eat?’

It emphasizes the fact that the use of /e/ and /ə/ is subject to intimacy in the case of women reference in the close kinship web. A critical account of the usage of the two reveals that both power hierarchy and the level of familiarity between interlocutors (Brown & Gilman, 2012) govern the usage of these morphemes. This linguistic strategy reflects both the speaker’s proximity to their mother and the mother’s position relative to the father. Tannen (1999, p. 183) notes a similar phenomenon, stating, “I suspect it is both at once (children feel closer to the mother, but also the mother is given less respect), and that trying to pick them apart may be futile” (see also Tannen, 2008, p. 210-211). However, I believe that the usage of these particles is not reflective of the power dynamic, but the proximity, dearness, and affection.

Greetz (1989) observes that children typically employ familiar linguistic registers among family members until around the age of twelve, gradually developing distinct linguistic codes for addressing their fathers. However, they continue to use the same linguistic forms for addressing their mothers or sisters. The use of these morphemes, therefore, does not directly correspond to the gender distinction, rather it reflects the nuanced ways in which gender emerges within society. McElhinny (2007) observes that gender is also a form of social organization that extends to families, labor markets, education, and politics. Literature suggests that gender roles have to do with building on the notion of respect. This phenomenon aligns with gender and parenting studies (see Blankenhorn, 1995; Popenoe, 1996; Wilson, 2002). However, gender practices do not always align with social roles; women in positions of power do not necessarily receive honorific markers (Coates, 2013). Additionally, the assumption that symbolic and material capital always align is not universally valid (Heller, 2003 cited in Phillips, 2008). On an additional note, there are two more implications based on the speech pattern of the family above. Firstly, these particles have a strong familiarity feature compared with respect, which is weak. Secondly, respect is not solely invested in roles, it is a complex bidirectional relationship between power and gender.

The use of honorifics thus reflects both the speaker’s relationship with the addressee and the immediate communicative intent/goal. It cannot strictly be socio-linguistically encoded based solely on the social status of the interlocutors, but is contingent on the speaker’s communicative objective and identity construction within the discourse. Consequently, the semantics of honorifics remain fluid and subject to contextual influences. For instance, when a boy or girl wants to pursue his elder sister or mother, they use /ə/ and drop/-ge/ while addressing them.

(18) saikil kʰəriq̌ ɖebə nə məmmi
cycle buy give.2H neg.H mother
‘Will you buy a cycle for me, Mother?’

In practice, the usage of these linguistic markers imbues discourse with new meanings. For instance, a son using /əre/ to address his father might signal specific circumstances. It could indicate a situation of heated argument between the son and the father. In (18), /ə/ functions as an endearment marker. It does not have the usual semantics of respect (drawing from power). There is no direct, one-to-one correlation between linguistic variables and social variables. Rather, these linguistic markers serve as versatile resources for achieving specific communicative purposes within discourse.

Scantlebury, 2014). The insult arises from the juxtaposition of social constructs of masculinity and femininity. The illocutionary act in (20) is characterized by the illocutionary force such as the intention of the speaker to insult the person in question. This is a culturally defined speech act whereby the use of language creates a parallel reality, as opposed to the socio-culturally manifested reality of a man and a woman.

Raju's reluctance to attend the late-night party, stereotypically considered a masculine trait, shifts him towards the feminine end of the continuum and generates meaning, which is situated within specific temporal and spatial contexts. However, this meaning is inextricably linked to the broader socio-cultural framework of meaning construction. The humor or insult arises from the disjunction between the linguistically constructed reality and socio-culturally manifested reality. Additionally, the joking insult, as observed in (20), highlights that language plays a pivotal role in constructing pragmatic realities (Eckert and Podesva, 2021), which are intertwined with existing realities. Scantlebury (2014) aptly notes that 'identity is simultaneously fixed and changing,' encapsulating the paradox wherein established semiotic mechanisms of identity formation are used to either reinforce or disrupt existing categories. A key challenge in this process lies in the association of signs not with physical objects, but with the idea of an object. It is abstract and forms a continuum. Notice the following sentence uttered by a father addressing his son.

(21) Context: The father has been working in the field since morning. He has asked his wife to send his elder son to the field with water and food at noon. The son reaches the spot an hour late, as he walks slowly. The father says

ɑ: gelə ful-kumari
come be.PRF.H flower-kumari
'Ful-kumari has come, hasn't s/he?'

Utilizing the honorific marker /ə/ to address the son emphasizes that the relation between linguistic elements and established social relations is intricate. Within interaction sociolinguistics, the communicative objective is to express verbal anger, with mocking serving as a means to convey this emotion. Addressing the son as ful-kumari is an act of further insult, as kumari is a surname associated with unmarried girls in society. The inclusion of ful (flower) is intended to characterize the son's slow walking, late coming, delicate, and non-masculine traits. Cultural knowledge such as the correlation between flowers and femininity, works to produce the meaning here. It is derogatory to address a man with a feminine linguistic gender, as it indicates weakness as per the culture (Aikhenvald, 2019). The son feels offended by his father's remarks. The feelings of the targeted person are characterized by perlocutionary force and the intention of the father to insult his son is characterized by the illocutionary force, creating a disjunction between the realized gender by the son and father and an imposed gender through linguistic resources. The produced effect indicates the contextual dichotomy between the perceived and achieved meaning in the context.

9. Constructing Masculinity and Femininity: Savtarin and Teenager Girls

Amid heated exchanges, it becomes evident that violating the established socio-linguistic code serves as a deliberate strategy to inflict insult. The discussion so far indicates that the utilization of linguistic codes is not a breach; rather, the codes serve distinct purposes, leading to divergent meanings. For example, kinship terms, typically associated with familial relations, are sometimes repurposed as derogatory expressions. Notably, terms like sala (wife's brother) and sali (wife's sister) transform into abusive language when applied outside their designated contexts (also see Dube, 1997, p. 51). This again hints

towards the problematic approach towards a rigid association between linguistic and social variables.

It is observed that individuals from lower strata, encompassing considerations of caste, economic status, and educational attainment, tend to employ derogatory or profane language more frequently compared to those from higher strata (Edwards, 1979). Additionally, men tend to use these abusive terms with greater frequency than women. As noted by Jay (2000) and Culpeper (2008), swearing practices often mirror and reflect underlying power dynamics within social structures.

In delineating the contours of societal stratification, it becomes evident that women belonging to the upper and middle classes refrain from employing abusive language. Conversely, women from lower socioeconomic strata, including laborers, use similar derogatory terms to target both males and females (also see Hughes, 1992). Notable, the women laborers, often from marginalized castes, working at the brick kiln, colloquially referred to as Savtarin (/səvˈtɑːrɪn/), manifest a striking departure from established notions of ‘womanhood’ within society (also see Haslanger, 1995). The divergence in behavior and appearance between these women and the conventional societal ideal of femininity is palpable. Women laborers in brick kilns exhibit distinct body language, walking style, limited or non-existent use of cosmetics, and frequent recourse of expletives, including the utilization of linguistic elements such as ‘re’ and ‘ge’. These features collectively render them conspicuously different from the prescribed standards of feminine conduct and aesthetics in society. In the eyes of the broader social milieu, the orientation of Savtarin women is often perceived as an antithesis to the archetypal woman. The term Savtarin transcends the boundaries of class and caste, signifying an insulting or abusive appellation for girls who deviate from the expected norms. Should a middle-class girl employ abusive language, eschew modest attire, neglect customary postures, or exhibit behavior deemed unbecoming of traditional femininity, she risks being categorized as a ‘Savtarin’. This label carries pejorative implications and is employed to derogate those who deviate from societal expectations. The question of how these women, identified as Savtarin, perceive themselves in terms of their self-identification as ‘women’ and ‘workers’ yields both straightforward and intricate responses. Their self-conception is not shaped solely by their performance within the labor space or their physical attributes. Neither are they regarded as women by those who seek to exploit them sexually nor as men who want to treat them less or undervalue their contribution in terms of wages. Instead, they assert their identity while simultaneously positioning themselves as distinct from their middle-class counterparts.

Their departure from traditional femininity and thus from a typical idea of gender is an illocutionary act, as it is perceived by middle/upper-class men and women. The resemiotization creates a clear ambivalence in the perceived identity. It illustrates the existence of the spectrum or continuum and discourages the binary of male and female. Observe the context and the conversation given below.

(22) Context: Some women were working on a brick kiln. As they were talking among each other, a lot of expletive words were used. A man who knew these women jokingly asked what kind of women they were as they chewed tobacco and used excessive expletives in their language. Here A is the man and B is the woman.

(A) kəisən. əurət̪ hə tu ho ki gutəka kʰɑ hə
 what kind woman be.H you ADD. That. tobacco eat be.PRS.H
 ‘What kind of woman are you that chew tobacco?’

(B) t̪ə kʰɑ hi t̪ə kɑ
 then eat 1.NH then what
 ‘What if I eat, then?’

ʈu-hũ ʈə kʰəibə kərə hə,
you.H too eat.2H do be.PRS

‘You also eat it.’

əb ʈor məgi jəisən gʰəre me ne na rəhela həi
now your wife like home in neg QN.tag stay be.PRS

‘We don’t have to stay at home like your wife, do we?’

ɑ ne gəriəbuə ʈə ʈu sunəbə
and neg abuse.1.H then you listen.2H

‘And, will you listen to me if I will not abuse you?’

In the whole discourse, the debate is centered on semiotic practices, biological sex and socio-cultural gender. Their non-linguistic aspects include a dirty sari worn in an atypical manner that could facilitate movement, chewing tobacco, loud voice, undressed and messy hair, use of taboo words, no footwear, and rough and sunburnt skin. A reply to the question of what kind of woman she is, as she uses abusive language and chews tobacco, she brings two important points; one, to make herself different from the typical idea of a woman and second, her role or work at the brick kiln does not allow her to be a typical women-like.

A few things to notice in this conversation, man A (a lower-middle-class farmer and a milkman) shares a friendly relationship with these women. He also employs these women in his field, seasonally. The use of the particle /ə/ indicates that they are friendly in this conversation and mean no insult. In response to the question, the woman asserts that the man also chewed tobacco signifying equality of gender, but in response, she also positioned herself differently compared to the man’s wife. This is particularly a good example of understanding the semiotic construction, which is unbinding to category and further, its pragmatic (see Cameron & Kulick (2003).

In many languages, the gender reversal from feminine to masculine may imply a positive image (Aikhenvald, 2019), however, that is also the subject of class and education, as we have seen in the above discourse. In the urban landscape, young girls from middle-class backgrounds have increasingly adopted the use of expletives. Even though profane or taboo words are used as a part of discourse without necessarily producing any perlocutionary effect, they provide a sense of modernity or non-traditionality with individual identity. Johnson (2012) observes that when societal expectations remain unviolated, swear words are not typically perceived as offensive. Jay (2000) notes that taboos and expletives find resonance among two distinct categories of individuals: those in positions of power, who face fewer consequences for their language, and those who possess relative power or have little or nothing to lose. In the case of teenagers and working-class women, for instance, the latter category often applies, as they perceive limited repercussions for their linguistic choices and benefit from it. However, a pivotal aspect of this evolving semiotic landscape lies in the acquisition of associative meanings. The variations observed in these semiotic patterns underscore the intersectional nature of social categories, revealing nuances within broader categories (Levon, 2021). Nonetheless, the most notable observation pertains to the increased prevalence of abusive language in two distinct groups: monolingual, uneducated laborer-class women and multilingual, educated young girls. These instances illustrate linguistic shifts that intersect both across categories and across cultures, serving as markers of evolving sociolinguistic dynamics.

Abusive terms, often normalized as coarse or rough language, are inherently linked to prevailing notions of masculinity and, by extension, to the male gender, as highlighted by Kapoor (2016) (also Ochs, 1992). The linguistic choice of Savtarins and college-going

young girls serve as a strategic response to practical needs, primarily aimed at shielding individuals from physical, emotional, and economic exploitation by projecting a persona that is rugged and assertive (also see Gardiner (2012)). The resultant identity that emerges from this complex interplay is a composite of various factors, including gender, class, caste, language, occupation, societal expectations, and survival instincts. In the case of young multilingual educated girls, the use of such language takes a more significant dimension, signifying their progressiveness, demands for gender equality and a non-‘woman’ identity.

Within the community, women who adopt what is considered as men’s language – encompassing aspects such as speech patterns, lexical choices, and the use of abusive words are commonly referred to or addressed as *mərḍ ana* (man/masculine), signifying a masculine identity. Interestingly, an intriguing correlation exists between symbolic markers and ascribed identities, notably *Mardana* and *Savtarin*. Women who exhibit traits associated with masculinity, including their walking style, nonchalant dressing, rugged facial expression, unkempt hair, and the like, are more frequently labelled as *Savtarin*. This distinction is crucial, as the intensity of the insult escalates when women are characterized as ‘*Savtarin*’. In contrast, *mərḍ ana* denoting a man-like behavior, is a milder insult in comparison to *Savtarin*. Utilizing IS, we discern that the identity is contingent upon the immediate communicative goal. Men employ feminine traits as a means to abuse and insult other men, deploying terms like *mōga* (lacking masculine traits, see Gelman & Roberts (2017)), *ṛaṭ* (woman), *tʃhəkka/ hidzəra* (transgender), among others, to make remarks regarding their sexual prowess, implying culturally non-masculine characteristics. This complex interplay of language, socio-culturally manifested abstracted identities, intersubjectivity, and power dynamics underscores the intricate dynamics within the community’s sociocultural and linguistic landscape.

10. Closing Remarks

According to Croft and Cruse (2004), it’s essential to comprehend the meaning of a category as a process of construal, whereby the identity of a category is contingent upon the reinterpretation and restructuring of experiences in a specific manner. Gender, in this context, functions as a framework or structure that shapes both natural and cultural artifacts, as proposed by Braidotti (2002b). It exists as a meta-category, and its practical manifestation represents various points along the gender continuum. Building on Butler’s insight (1990) into socio-culturally constructed identities arising from individual semiotic practices, one might wonder if there is room for re-semiotization that transcends the confines of predetermined sociocultural traits. In simpler terms, can our actions break free of the predefined subtypes within the existing framework, allowing for a different category to emerge? Our observations reveal that individuals can be identified differently based on specific semiotic practices. I argued against any pre-established straightforward relationship between the signifier and the designated object. As IS and CDP suggested, the relationship between the signifier and the object in pragmatics is emergent and contingent on various cultural and psychological factors. Moreover, the identity itself is ephemeral and relevant to the immediate context. Thus, language emerged as a dynamic tool that negotiates the speakers’ position in any communicative context. Gender-cross referencing provided an interesting clue in this regard. The disjunction between the existing and achieved identity is clearer in cross-referencing. In the case of *Savtarin* and Young urban girls, we observed a linguistic practice that disregarded any correlation between social and linguistic categories and put gender on a continuum. In the case of *Hizaras* in Bihar, their gender identity fluctuates between masculine and feminine along the continuum, depending on the context, a phenomenon influenced by indexicality, as described by Hall (2021). The idea of ‘indexical competence’ is that based on situations, a *Hijra* can behave as masculine or feminine. Society tends to employ masculine linguistic markers when referring to *Hijra* individuals, who are transgender and typically male.

From a societal perspective, the category of Hijra is dichotomous, distinguishing between Hijra (M) and Hijrin (F), based on their semiotic expression (mostly body) such as beard, physique, breasts, and so on. It indicates the arbitrary correlation between linguistic items and social categories.

Declaration of Interests

The author reports there are no competing interests to declare.

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