
Theorizing Encryption: What leads to the formation of a secret register?

Enakshi Nandi¹, Ayesha Kidwai²

¹*Independent scholar*, ²*Jawaharlal Nehru University*
enakshi.nandi@gmail.com, ayeha.kidwai@gmail.com

The existence of secret registers spoken by the transfeminine/femme hijra-koti community has been documented in various regions of South Asia in the last few decades (Hall 1995; Reddy 2005; Nagar 2008; Awan and Muhammad 2011; Nandi 2021; Snigdha 2021; Rafiq 2022). A look at the linguistic data emerging from these studies indicates that while these registers might emerge from a common source or context, the registers as they are spoken now are quite varied (e.g., Farsi, Farasi, Ulti) and can be mutually unintelligible, as they are codemixed with the dominant languages spoken in the regions each of them are used in.

In this paper, we take a close look at Ulti, the secret register spoken in West Bengal, India. We analyse the socio-cultural, ideological, and linguistic conditions that led to the construction of a secret register like Ulti, and its immense significance for its speech community as the site and means of the construction of hijra-koti identity and subculture. In the conservative, cis-hetero-normative, multilingual ecosystem of West Bengal where there existed next to no vocabulary to articulate the subjectivities and desires of the people who fell outside the framework of binary gender, Ulti was developed by the hijra community to fill these linguistic gaps and thereby find their voice in a powerful act of linguistic and ideological subversion. However, in order to ensure the safety of its speakers from harassment and persecution by the upholders of the colonial laws that criminalized their existence (see Reddy 2005), as well as the mainstream society in general as they went about their occupations, it became necessary to keep this register a secret and use it as a code in public when required.

In this paper, we also explore how the element of secrecy has been seminal to the development of this register at a lexical and syntactic level, thus ensuring that Ulti retains its symbolic and strategic value for the community and continues to be transmitted through generations of hijras and kotis.

Through this exercise, we reflect upon the fundamental aspects that distinguish a secret register from other types of registers (see Lewandowski 2010), and argue that the formation of secret registers like Ulti cannot be adequately described as a process of enregisterment (Agha 2004). It calls for the development of the theory of encryption, which is defined 'as a socio-historical process of development of a variety or register that is governed by the need to preserve its secrecy, such that the element of secrecy becomes one of the main reasons the variety or register carries linguistic and/or social value for its speech community.' (Nandi 2021)

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