The Formation of the Hijra Subject: A Critical Inquiry into the Linguistic Method and Preliminary Postulates for a Political Linguistics

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Abstract: Language plays a key role in structuring the lives of Hijra population in India, both as a force of exclusion and as a tool for gaining access to the society. Language is thus a site of struggle for Hijra population, which is interminably political in nature. But the prevailing consensus in Linguistics, excludes politics and struggle from the domain of study of language; rather language is paradigmatically divided into essence and existence, and politics and struggle are isolated as a question only relevant to language's performance. In this paper, I argue that such an approach limits a genuine critical analysis of language, thus consequently protecting language in the work of maintaining status quo. Here, instead of employing the dominant linguistic methods which are uncritical towards the 'essence' of language, I propose postulates for a Political Linguistics which understands language-in-itself as a site of struggle and constant transformation. This approach, I argue is an adequate methodology, not just for the study of Hijra linguistic lives, but also in general, for the study of the relationship between language and society.
Keywords: Hijra subject, Linguistics, Marxism, Methodology, Political Linguistics

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I. LANGUAGE AS A SITE OF STRUGGLE

Most persons of marginalized genders lead a difficult childhood with experiences of alienation, violence and social exclusion from immediate family, neighborhood, school and the society at large. At a young age, many gender non-conforming children disassociate themselves with the biological assigning (at birth) of bodies in male/female binary and the gender roles assigned. Children who grow up to self-identify as a transgender man or a transgender woman, experience extreme levels of both body and gender dysphoria since early childhood days. When confronted with their families and peers at different stages of life, they are rejected for being "impotent", "abnormal" etc., and most times, are socially ostracized and forced to leave homes and drop out of schools. Many children and teens themselves run away in order to escape physical (or sexual) violence at home or school, and most importantly, to live a life with the gender identity they are comfortable with. However, no place in India is a relief when it comes to the treatment of transgender people in society. Transgender people have been pushed to the fringes of society for time immemorial, and for this reason, transgender women have formed their own family structures and networks outside the confines of the mainstream society. Hijra persons have built their community, by chalking out their modes of survival, a set of traditional occupations, their own cultural organization and the internal mechanisms of justice system and community living. Persons from different socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds join the Hijra community and lead a life together with their mechanisms of support, survival, defense and conflict management.

Language plays a significant role in the lives of persons of all marginalized genders, including that of the Hijra population of India. Language socialization of every child entails an ideological coercion by the male/female binary conceptualization of society. This binary gets mapped onto language structures as well. The dominant ideologies of gender, therefore reproduce themselves through language structures, both grammatically and discursively, whereby, the gender non-conforming children in general, and Hijra persons in particular, feel extreme difficulty in expressing their identity (-ies). Language (with its dominant ideologies) becomes a barrier even in schools and colleges because it has been institutionalized and is already part of the pedagogical practices in classrooms. Language is a vast medium for homophobic and transphobic harassments that takes place contributing significantly to the high number of school and college dropouts among transgender and other

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gender non-conforming children and teens. When transgender women join the Hijra community, language becomes a marker of their Hijra identity. They have to learn to speak a *feminine* language and talk *like a woman*. Here, in both the operation of marginalization and self-identification, language plays a central role. Language, therefore, for Hijra persons, has always been a site of struggle and resistance in daily lives, schools, colleges, institutions, legal rulings etc., and they have been challenging the binary and the cis-heteronormative language (and society) on a daily basis. Thus, in order to analyze the linguistic lives of Hijra subject, it is imperative to study language, not as an autonomous and isolatable entity, but as a site of social struggle and political resistance. In this paper, I argue that, the analysis of language as an autonomous unit, devoid of social determination, as pursued in the dominant linguistic frameworks, are inadequate to address the centrality of 'language as a site of struggle' in Hijra lives. Through the study of the formation of Hijra subject, I instead argue for the need to adopt a method that locates language as embedded in social relations and power structures which necessitates a political approach to linguistics.

II. THE LINGUISTIC METHOD

The field of linguistics, evolving from a Chomskyan perspective in the structuralist paradigm, advocates for a technical approach to the study of language, and investigates the processes of language structuring and development in the realm of mind (or consciousness). The structuralist approach to linguistics treats language as an abstract relational structure underlying the actual use of utterances. The conceptual framework laid out by Noam Chomsky, who is known as the father of modern linguistics, works on a hypothetical premise – stating the possibility of a child having an intrinsic mental capacity whereby, a child has the ability to acquire the grammatical structures of a language when exposed to an adequate language data. Chomsky introduces the concept of 'Language Acquisition Device (LAD)', as an independent human language faculty – having a schematic structure hardwired into the brain of a child that helps them to learn a language promptly. Language, as an object of study in linguistics, therefore, is seen as a distinguishing characteristic of a "fundamental human nature (a set of underlying rules of grammar or linguistic competence) [1]" whereby, a child has control over their linguistic performance by exploring the dimension of creativity, in forming new grammatical sentences and employing them to meet the conversational demands. In Chomsky's words,

> "We may think of the language faculty as a complex and intricate network of some sort associated with a switch box consisting of an array of switches that can be in one of two positions. Unless the switches are set one way or other, the system does not function. When they are set in one of the permissible ways, then the system functions in accordance with its nature, but differently, depending on how switches are set. The fixed network is the system of principles of universal grammar: the switches are the parameters to be fixed by experience. The data presented to the child learning the language must suffice to set the switches one way or another. When these switches are set, the child has the command of a particular language and knows the facts of that language: that a particular expression has a particular meaning and so on [2]".

The basis for the Chomskyan approach lies in the philosophical tradition of Cartesian rationalism wherein, essence is divided from material existence as an object of knowledge. Language is precisely divided here between technical essences in the mental faculty and the practical existence in utterances. These technical essences or the innate organizing principles of human language faculty and other mental faculties (independent of each other) determine the individual, social and intellectual behaviors of people in society.

In *Lectures Against Sociolinguistics*, Singh [3] poses a critique to Chomsky's conception of language as essence devoid of politics of material existence, by highlighting the inconsistencies emerging from his two lectures on Language and Problems of Knowledge (LPK) and On Power and Ideology (OPI). In LPK, Chomsky states a scientific understanding of the function of human mental faculty as that being an "organ of the mind/brain [4]", carrying out "precise computational operations, using mental representations of a specific form to arrive at precise conclusions about factual matters of no little complexity, without conscious thought or deliberation [5]". On one hand, Chomskyan approach to a scientific study of language relies on the "prespecification of the human language faculty [6]" and on the other, his views on politics in OPI is "a matter of trivial scientific understanding…of hopes, aspirations and intuitions [7]", as though they are 'not substantial enough'. Here, it is important to note two types of problems pointed out by Chomsky – Plato's problem and Orwell's problem. While arguing for human mental faculty to address Plato's problem, as the essence of material existence, which states "the problem of how knowledge that goes far beyond evidence is possible [8]," Chomsky ignores addressing Orwell's problem, which states "the problem of how and why evidence is systematically ignored [9]", 'evidence' here being the "laboratory called human history [10]". The negation of Orwell's problem and failing to recognize politics (material existence), Singh argues, is the reason why the

fields of linguistics and politics have not met, and therefore, denied so far, methodologically in sociolinguistics, the native speakers' "sovereign right to rationality and language [11]."

While Chomskyan linguistics is far from being a stand-by for the general nature of linguistic method, the methodological division between essence of language as technical and natural object, and the existence of language as practical and contingent phenomena, is hegemonically central to the linguistic discipline. Singh argues for a synthesis of the two:

> "One may legitimately ask what possible steps could plausibly lead to a theoretical synthesis of linguistics and politics. Perhaps the initial step would have to be the replacement of the view that learning a language is largely a passive unfolding of the hard-wired program of UG with the view that it is a creative confrontation between the child's natural-social predisposition and the socially encrusted system presented to him as his language. The standard view that a speaker is merely a derivative extension of the principles that generative grammarians have postulated, to describe what they call his language, would have to be given up in favour of the 'point de depart' that sees the speaker as both the larger and smaller than his "language": larger because he can change it and smaller because it may provide him the potential his place in society may have denied him [12]".

Singh's reformulation put forward the importance of complementing the technical essence of language ("natural-social predisposition") with the practical-material existence of language ("socially encrusted system"), which respectively tie to linguistics and politics. Although this is an important contribution towards the critique of exclusion of the politics from sociolinguistics and the discipline of linguistics at large, it still reproduces some of its methodological problematics. Namely, a presupposition of a "natural-social predisposition" that is at a basic level separate from politics, as an object of essence still outside the possibility of socio-structural determination and instability. In my research, a mere complementary approach is incomplete, as the very conception of a 'natural-social predisposition' is coming under the critique by the Hijra position – as such conceptions have been nothing but exclusionary for the lives of the marginalized genders. It is to be also noted that while Singh's reformulation reactivates a political approach in linguistics by placing language within its historical contingency and determination, it does not account for the conflicts and instabilities brought about by the struggles and resistance happening in the horizon of language, which is the actual condition for its transformation. Here, I put forward postulates for a Political Linguistics that can provide a basis for a critical analysis, not just of determination in the form of inequalities and hierarchies, but also instabilities created by alternatives and resistances.

III. TOWARDS A POLITICAL LINGUISTICS

The predominant approach to Language in Linguistics treats and advocates study of language as a 'natural or technical object' that must be approached in a scientific and objective manner. In linking linguistics with natural sciences and thinking of language as a technical object - linguistics precludes politics or the possibility of socio-structural determination of language [13]. Even while language is thought of as within the consideration of social relations, linguistics still insists on a separation between language as a technical object and society as its field of operations. Such an approach creates a distinction between the essence of language and the existence of language, which protects the technical object of language from the vulnerability of politics [14]. For my study, on the question of the Hijra subject and its relation to language, a separation between the essence of language and the existence of language is unsustainable, as the very essence of language precludes the possibility of the Hijra subject. The formation of Hijra subject constitutes an irreconcilable and antagonistic relation to the taxonomic functions of language in its facilitation of social relations. Under this context, to approach language as a natural or technical object of study would be to not recognize the constitutive antagonism of the Hijra subject, thus reproducing the same conditions of social exclusion of Hijra population within the ambit of knowledge production. A political study of linguistics, of politicizing the work of language within the social order, is thus necessary to study the Hijra subject formation, true to the conflicts and antagonism it represents.

The reality of antagonism, of contradictions within social relations, of oppression, exploitation, and resistance, is the reality of all social contexts and relations. As the primary manifestation of language is in its social manifestation, language is "social before it's technical [15]". If social relations are overridden by antagonism and contradictions, language which is embedded and operationalized by the same social relations, are consequently overridden with similar antagonisms and contradictions. This reality is the foundation of a political study of language; social relations are experienced in the collective – the collective and the antagonistic can be nothing but political in nature [16]. To divorce the study of language from the 'vulnerabilities of politics' is to not approach language in its social and practical form, but in an idealized way, as an object de facto. This

analysis points us in the direction of Roy Harris' Integrationist linguistics, which is a critique of the predominance of the "linguistic fact" in the discipline [17]. By 'linguistic fact', I mean the way in which language is treated as a static object or a thing - or more precisely, as a natural object. For example, in Chomskyan linguistics, language is thought of as an "organ, like the eye or the hand" [18], and wherein the functions of language are universalized and generalized by precluding any critique or instability within the "essence of language [19]". In contrast to the tradition of the 'linguistic fact', Integrational linguistics argues that language is a process, subject to change, resistance, and conflicts [20, 21]. A political study of language should go beyond merely indexing process over static facts, all the way to analyzing the linguistic processes on the basis of history and social relations, with all the contradictions and conflicts that animate them.

How can we articulate a political study of language? What kind of methodological divergences are there when the study of language is politicized as opposed to the approach to language as a merely natural object? Jean-Jacques Lecercle's *A Marxist Philosophy of Language* (1994) and Maurizio Lazzarato's *Signs and Machines* (2014) are two prominent works that attempt to study language from a political perspective. While Lecercle's work theorizes a Marxian approach to language, Lazzarato argues that the predicates of Marxist theory offer us a radical approach to the question of social conditions in relation to language. One of the main interlocutors of both authors, Gilles Deleuze, similarly argues that a Marxist approach gives us a generic analysis of social and material relation that is permanently transitory and historically contingent [22]. Following these theorists, I argue that a Marxist approach offers us a generic political methodology (beyond its theoretical particularities) that can be thoroughly effective in the study of language in the contexts of its interminable relation to social order and the contradictions/antagonism within social order. Moreover, a political methodology developed within the framework of a generic Marxism can allow linguistic study to move beyond and against the essence of language/existence of language divide, which is pervasive across the linguistic discipline. Within the context of my own study about the role of language as a social instrument within Hijra lives and politics - such a divide is indefensible, as mere empirical analysis reveals to us, language as it exists generates and complements oppressive and exclusionary conditions for the Hijra population. Under such a context, to study the essence of language separate from its problematic existence is, following the Marxist method and critique, a form of idealism; an idealism that is unbecoming for a scientific study of language.

The intellectual history of Marxism reveals to us that it is a school of thought that has managed to produce numerous radically opposing tendencies. If that is the case, what does a generic Marxism mean? My approach to Marxism is indebted to Jean-Jacques Lecercle's eccentric conception of generic Marxism, which is centered around the theory of materialism, and is further developed into sub-categories: of historical materialism and dialectical materialism [23]. A brief summary of these concepts will be useful for articulating a Marxist political method in the study of language. A historical materialist method argues for the primacy of the historical in the analysis of society, which is to say that social forms and relations are historically developed, and contingent, and not born out of nothing. Here, history is understood as a permanently transitory, that is constantly in the process of micro and macro transformations [24, 25]. This method has two consequences for any social analysis, i) social forms and relations cannot be foreclosed as static and universal but has to be defined by its tendency to transform, as it is part of the movement and contingency of history, ii) nothing exists outside the contingency of historical formations and transformations of the social, thus everything exists within the social totality, and is radically vulnerable to its determinations and effects [26]. If historical materialism is anchored by a view of society that is always in the process of transformation, dialectical materialism seeks to analyze what anchors the transformation.

The dialectical method postulates a permanent conflict and contradiction within any social relation, and it is for this reason that history is in the process of movement - as the conflict and the contradiction constantly destabilize any attempt at foreclosure of the process of history [27]. Dialectical materialism thus presupposes a politics at its core, as social conflicts and contradictions are given a central importance in the workings of the society. It is the reality of class struggle that inspired the dialectical materialist social analysis, which in older Marxist theorization mainly meant capitalist domination and working-class resistance, but within a generic Marxist framework, it refers to all forms of domination that structure the social totality, but also the resistance that destabilizes it [28, 29]. Therefore, in Marxism, a scientific study of social forms and relations can only be done by focalizing the struggle of the oppressed and excluded sections of the social form - as antagonisms and conflicts it shares with the social-structural totality, presupposes a materialist view of society (of contingency of social relations and its possible transformation), while a 'neutral' study risks becoming idealistic and unscientific by precluding the reality of domination and antagonism that pervades all social relations [30]. Here, Marxism provides us with a novel method – to side with domination (by necessitating it in analysis or by reducing analysis to description) is to conceal the contingency and instability of social relations, and on the other

hand, to side with the questions of the oppressed is to reveal them, thus advancing the materialist analysis [31]. Marxist materialism thus necessarily entails a politics at its core.

How language might fit into this analysis follows – as previously noted, 'language is social before it is a technical'. Language is radically entangled with social forms and relations, and is determined by the dynamics of social totality. i.e., it is contingent to the process of history. Thus, it cannot be a closed system, but something which is in a constant state of mutation and transformation by the reality of class struggle. In a generic Marxist method, therefore, an analysis of language cannot be made by presuming language as an object independent of the social totality. From this theoretical framework, my study attempts to remove the essence/existence divide, as language is to be studied in its praxis (in contrast to the conception of a static technical object) within social totality, and moved by the 'vulnerability of politics' through social antagonisms and contradictions. Any presumption of an essence independent of its existence vis-à-vis social-relations is thus an idealistic analysis of language. It is in Gilles Deleuze's and Felix Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus*, we see an elaboration of the generic Marxist method for the study of language/linguistics [32].

Deleuze and Guattari argue that the basic function of language is not communication, but what they term as 'order-words [33, 34]'. As language is part of the social form (Deleuze and Guattari refer to 'social form' as assemblage), and social form is conditioned by power-relations, the function of language cannot be merely communication at large, but the reproduction of the power relation itself [35, 36]. Order-word refers to the process in which language functions as a medium where both the speaking and listening subject (directly and indirectly), by its capture by signification of/within the power-relations of social totality, undergo a process of structuration, whereby it becomes compliant to the social-structural totality. Deleuze notes:

"There is no significance independent of dominant significations, nor is there subjectification independent of an established order of subjection. Both depend on the nature and transmission of order-words in a given social field [37]".

The structural view provided here displaces the individual subject as the primary origin of enunciation/utterance with social assemblage/social totality, which is a collective subject. It is similar to Heidegger's proposition that, "It is the language that speaks", but here it is the assemblage (which is an assemblage of power) that speaks [38, 39]. For Deleuze, language interpellates the subject to its modus operandi by its fundamental function, order-words. Deleuze thus summarizes order-word as a function in which "Language is not made to be believed but to be obeyed, to be compelled [40]."

In Deleuze and Guattari's analysis, the determination of power is pervasive across the social totality and it is inescapable – everything within its field is caught up in its arrangement of production and reproduction of social relations, including language [41]. But the analysis does not end there, Deleuze and Guattari introduce their own conception of class struggle in the analysis of language; the concept of minority [42]. As language in itself is determined by modes of power operating in society, all utterances are caught up within it. But, the modes of power and the major and dominant language it produces is explicitly repressive and exclusionary for the 'minorities' interpellated into it (for Deleuze and Guattari, the concept of the 'minority' does not have anything to do with numbers, but the position in relation to power. The major-ity represents the power-holders, while minor-ity refers to those who lack power and repressed by power). This is the condition of class struggle within language, as the position of minority creates instability by creating conflict within the working of language. As its full compliance with order-word amounts to its own self-condemnation, thus a minority of a language has to fashion its own survival in the fissures of the major language, which it has been forced into, thus creating the condition of transformation and critique of language (Deleuze and Guattari term it 'metamorphoses') [43]. Here, it is important to note that minor language is not a language akin to the major language i.e. the minor language is captured within the social relation, but the position of minority creates an antagonistic relation the major language, the structures that animate it.

Minorities relation to language has two important aspects, i) minor language; the progressive metamorphoses of language towards radical forms of inclusivity and creativity, and ii) antagonism of minor position; which presents a persistent critique and a permanent conflict with language-in-itself and its tethering to power and recognition, which can only be fully untethered by the advent of the abolition of all power relations itself (communism) [44]. The condition of the minority pushes for both the metamorphoses of language and singular metamorphoses which manifest as the critique of and exteriority to (major) language [45]. A Marxist political study of language is thus not a method made out of theoretical predicates and jargons, but an ethical-political approach which posits that, the knowledge produced through the social practice of the oppressed, fashioning their survival under oppressive conditions, contains a critical-materialist basis for a scientific study of all social formations, including language. This is attributed to the metamorphoses – the position of minority brings to question any and all attempts at naturalizing and idealizing social relations and

conditions. In this sense, there is a shared methodological approach to the dynamic of the minority/class struggle with the subject of 'unconscious' within psychoanalysis – both bring instability to naturalization and enforcement of the structural-symbolic order. If politics of minority advances the contingent metamorphoses of the social-symbolic order, the status of 'unconscious' within psyche provides a condition for universal metamorphoses of the social-symbolic order. The complementing of a psychoanalytic method within a Marxist political framework will make it possible to study the language and its origin within social totality/assemblage at a macro level, and at the micro levels of subjectivity [46].

It is in this context that we should examine the formation of the Hijra subject, which is under the condition of visceral repression and structural exclusion from society. While my primary concern as a linguistic researcher is the role of language, it's utterly entangled with gender, biopolitics, capital, and social formations in general [47]. A binary gendered organization (as male 'and' female, men 'and' women) of society is constitutive of social order and social reproduction, as such, the operation of this binary structuring is pervasive in our society - from birth to death, the assigning of a gendered role is inescapable within the social form [48, 49, 50] Trans-subject, by the embodiment of its non-compliance with gendering, threatens the machinic operation of the gendered organization of society, hence becomes worthy of condemnation, exclusion, and repression [51, 52]. By trans-subjects' embodied non-compliance with the working of society, it articulates a minor position. Because of the constitutive and pervasive nature of binarized organization, the trans-subjects' minor position creates a position of an extensive antagonism and critique, including within language. In the case of language, it is explicit how language operates as the policing of trans-subjects' non-compliance within the symbolic structure, especially through naming and grammatical norms and laws. The trans-position shows us the empirical reality of Order-word and Deleuze's formulation that, "a rule of grammar is a power marker before it's a syntactical marker [53]."

It is important to note that the Hijra subject is not merely another identification of the trans-subject, rather it is the explicit articulation of a political subject, declaring its position as being outside the mainstream and in the 'ghetto'. To take a Marxian analogy, it is the transformation from class-in-itself to class-for-itself. If class-in-itself refers to the structural classification within the social relation as a subordinate class, class-for-itself is the creation of the consciousness of this subordination, and subsequent politicization of its position within the social relation, by creating strategies of survival and resistance against the reality of domination [54]. In Hijra culture, we see the creation of structures of support, care, and belonging, and self-organization to resist natal and social alienation. Hijra subject is thus an explicitly political formation corresponding to a question of class struggle and minority (it is also important to note, the Hijra subjects' general socio-economic position is also that of the abject classes because of natal and social alienation) [55] In its articulation of class struggle specifically within language, the Hijra subject creates the metamorphoses of major language towards its own self-determination and autonomy. Many words and expressions devalued within the major language, achieve political revaluation, creating new forms of life (as survival and resistance) for the Hijra subject, vehemently excluded and repressed by the social-symbolic order.

The etymology of the word Hijra provides us with a fascinating example of this radical political subjectivation (as a class-for-itself). Much of the etymologies of the word 'Hijra' argue that it was merely another alternative word for the population classified as 'eunuchs' in the Mughal and British periods of India [56]. But this is an incomplete etymology that does not attempt to create a genealogy of why the specific word and how this word came into usage. We cannot see much etymological basis for the word Hijra in much of the Indian languages, but however, we can find it in Arabic. In Arabic, 'Hijra' refers to an event within founding histories of Islam, wherein the newly adherent population of Islam were uprooted and had to migrate to another location to escape persecution (Prophet Muhammad's migration from Mecca to Medina). They were fundamentally cut off from their family and social ties, and had to create a new mode of kinship relations in the reality of natal and social [57]. This has an uncanny resemblance to the ethos of Hijra subject and culture, which creatively and politically re-articulates its social exclusion as a condition for the creation of new forms of life. Here, marginality is affirmed only in-order to affirm the survival of the marginal subject, and thus antagonize the system that structurally produces marginality in the first place. It is possible that the Hijra cultural formation has origins and influence from early Sufi cultures of South Asia, which also affirms the condition of natal and social alienation as radical spiritual ethic, disavowing reconciliation with the mainstream forms of life [58]. I argue that this etymology reflects the radical political basis for the formation of the Hijra subject along with social practices that form the Hijra socio-cultural life.

In this paper, I attempted to sketch out the way language operates as a medium of power at the intersection of gender, biopolitics, and society for the Hijra subject, and how the Hijra political subject as ontology and social practice intervenes in the realm of language, to create a space of self-determination. Here,

following the Marxist framework, the Hijra subject more than being a subject of research is a position of critique; a critique of the dominant linguistic method. Thus, instead of examining how linguistic research can shed light on the Hijra subject, this paper proposes to reflect on how the minoritarian politics of the Hijra subject (and other minor subjects) can radically transform linguistic research into something that is critically scientific and dynamic.

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