

ORIGINAL ARTICLE



MJSSH
Muallim Journal of
Social Science and Humanities

SOCIAL DEIXIS AMONG INDIAN TRANSGENDERS IN MALAYSIA

Shuhasyini Balan *¹; Parvathi Wajindram ²;
Rajantharan Muniandy ³

¹ Department of Indian Studies, University Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

Email: 17033635@siswa.um.edu.my

² Department of Indian Studies, University Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

Email: 17010961@perdana.um.edu.my

³ Department of Indian Studies, University Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

Email: rajanmun@um.edu.my

*Corresponding author

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33306/mjssh/276>

Abstract

This study looks into the social deixis of six Indian transgenders who live in northern regions of Malaysia. The purpose of this study is to discover how social deixis (pronouns, names, and kinship relationships) are used by Indian transgenders and to determine the influence of social deixis on in-group and out-group formation among Indian transgenders. The social deixis used by Indian transgenders to indicate themselves is pointed out in this study, and they place themselves in relation to others who surround them. The research enables readers to make informed decisions in order to break the communication barriers and embrace transgenders for who they are without excluding them because of their languages. Findings in this study revealed that the transgenders used a social deixis approach in their daily communication, and it is also maintained that address forms are the best place to look at the close bond between language and society.

Keywords: Transgenders, Social Deixis, Social Identity Theory, Person Reference

This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Non-Commercial 4.0 International License



Received 18th December 2023, revised 20th January 2024, accepted 15th February 2024

Introduction

Human beings love to communicate with their surroundings, and it gives them happiness, excitement, and peace while communicating with others. Human beings who are involved in communication may use various language styles in speaking. Communication is important in order to help us fulfil our needs because we cannot get what we want if we do not communicate our wishes (Okamura,2005)¹. There are many ways to communicate, such as through interviews, emails, and so on, but in communication, the right usage of deixis becomes an important factor in building a successful communication.

In this research, the focus is on the social deixis of transgenders, particularly Indian transgenders in Northern regions of Malaysia. . Transgender is the key term used for people who do not follow the characteristics of the original sex to which they were born and may be identified as "bigender" (Roxie, M., 2011)². Many categories coincide in a transgender's identity, such as transvestites, androgynes, cross-dressers, genderqueers, drag kings, drag queens, and transsexuals. Even though transgenders have existed for a long time in Malaysian society, they are not recognized there, and transgender activities have been carried out secretly. As supported by Roughgarden (2004)³, transgenders are not recognized by most religions, societies, and cultures. They are generally unaccepted by heterosexuals because transgenders have their own beliefs about their religions and cultures.

There are three objectives being investigated, and they are to explain the existence of Indian transgenders in Malaysia, to identify the social deixis used by Indian transgenders in in-group and out-group formation of identities; and to analyze the referential deixis used in in-group and out-group formation of Indian transgenders.

Problem Statement

The transgender (TG) community forum on sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) was an initiative by a group of concerned citizens to highlight the lives of transgenders in Malaysia. Indian transgenders are happy in their own world. They have their own community. Despite the escalating number of transgenders globally, especially in Malaysia, which recorded approximately 30000 transgenders, the community had not received any attention or recognition it deserved (PT Foundation, 2022).

Furthermore, communication is a main challenge for transgenders in constructing a language that will allow them to self-identify within the community. The proper use of pronouns becomes crucial in developing successful communication when having a communicative discourse. While communicating with one another, heterosexuals and transgenders cannot agree on the appropriate reference usage. These might be similar or different from heterosexuals' beliefs, and social deixis comprises the idea of societal relations in language terms with the straight-

forward or unintended position of the participants in the conversation. Although the transgender community faced many obstacles in different aspects, the challenges they had to encounter in something as basic as the communication - the language they used daily - showed how their rights had been exacerbated over the years despite the progress of human civilization (Shamsudin, 2010)⁴.

The existing body of knowledge in the field has been precisely identified based on previous studies, allowing the researchers to see the available gap; the current research will undoubtedly contribute to the existing body of knowledge by filling a part of the gap as there has been a lack of study done on Malaysian Indian transgenders in the field of pragmatics, except for a few newspaper and magazine articles related to Indian transgenders. In this research, it solely refers to the communication barriers faced by Indian transgenders, particularly in the way in which language and social life depend on each other. This study focuses on male-to-female transgenders (abbreviated MTF: Transwoman in this study).

The phenomenon covered in this study inspired the researchers to conduct research on social deixis among Malaysian Indian transgenders, particularly on the use of person reference. This study is limited to the social deixis (pronouns, names, and kinship relationships) that people use to establish relationships with one another (heterosexuals). The research would like to highlight the communication barriers that enable them to communicate well with society, and it helped to distinguish the referential language use (social deixis) of six Indian transgenders in Northern regions of Malaysia. in their communication about their life stories and also their rapport with others.

Methodology

This study employed a descriptive qualitative method to conduct the research, commonly used to thoroughly investigate a phenomenon (Regionel, 2023)⁵. As this research focused on exploring the social deixis among Malaysian Indian transgenders, through the semi structured interviews to identify the social problems they faced as Malaysian Indian transgenders, the descriptive qualitative method allowed the researchers to comprehend the adversities experienced by analyzing the informants' personal accounts. Besides, this method was also prescribed by Patton (2002)⁶ to analyze lived experiences of people, under which the Malaysian Indian transgenders' personal accounts fell.

Besides, the six Indian transgenders who were born and raised in Malaysia were selected through snow-balling method. They were from northern regions of Malaysia. The researcher did not have any friends who were transgenders so she decided to use the snow-balling method to find participants for this study. This sampling method was prescribed to recruit the "hard-to-reach-populations" (Cooke & Jones, 2017)⁷ which well-suited the Malaysian Indian transgender

community as participants may be hesitant or afraid to reveal intimate details about their feelings and life styles to the researchers.

The researchers modified the social deixis approach and social identity theory. Social deixis is the most suitable approach for this research to define the language formation of self-identity among Indian transgenders. Social deixis is a reference to the social characteristics of, or dissimilarities between, the participants of the referents in a speech event, and it highlights the dissimilarities. Levinson (1983, p. 63)⁸ says that "social deixis concerns the encoding of social distinctions that are relative to participant roles, particularly aspects of the social relationship held between speaker and addressee or speaker and some referent." Moreover, Fillmore in Levinson (1983, p. 89)⁸ says that "a social deixis concerns aspect of sentences that reflect or establish certain realities of the social situation in which the speech act occurs." He also asserts that there are restrictive terms for those aspects of language structure that encode the social identities of participants or the social relationship between them or between one of them and the persons or entities referred to.

Discussion

In this research, the discussion is focused only on one part of deixis (social deixis), particularly on the referential language usage of pronouns, use of names, and kinship relationships. The emphasis is on how the speaker establishes different types of linkage between his or her utterances and elements in a situational context that only focuses on referential usage in group and out-group. Spencer Oatey (2011)⁹ suggested that when analyzing a specific communication, special attention should be focused on several aspects of participants’ roles and discussions in order to explore the participants’ language use of the terms "self" and "other."

In Tamil, the plurality with polite plurals to respected referents carries over into the third-person pronouns and into the first-person ones as well (Levinson, 1977)¹⁰. Schiffman (1999)¹¹ agreed, and he mentioned Tamil pronouns in his grammar textbook, "A Reference Grammar of Spoken Tamil." In his book, he mentioned that Tamil pronouns include personal pronouns (which refer to the person speaking, the person spoken to, or the person or thing spoken about), indefinite pronouns, relative pronouns (which connect parts of sentences), and reciprocal or reflexive pronouns (in which the object of a verb is being acted on by the verb's subject).

Table 1
Switches Person Reference in Tamil Pronouns Usage (Adopted from Levinson, 1977)

Actual (Singular) referent	Forms used	Literal Meaning
Speaker (First person singular)	Naan	I

	atu	It
	Naam	We-inclusive
	Naanka	We-exclusive
Addressee (Second person singular)	Nii	You (Singular)
	atu	It
	niinka	You (Plural)
	Naam	We-inclusive
	taankal	Themselves
Third Person (Male: Singular)	Avan	He (Singular)
	atu	it
	avaar	Archaic they; now he- singular plus respect
	Avaanka/aviika	they
Third Person (Female: Singular)	Aval	She (Singular) plus respect
	ava	She
	atu	It
	Avaanka/ avingga	They

The usage of pronouns in Tamil is clearly depicted in Table 1, and it is important to understand that respect can be conveyed by switching from singular to plural address forms, as well as from first and second person to third person (from naan to atu and nii to atu or taankal, respectively) (Levinson, 1977)¹⁰. Elias (2009)¹² saw personal pronoun positions as something separate and distinct from social positions or roles. Social roles always refer to the same person, while personal pronouns can and do change. Therefore, the personal pronoun model allows us to recognize our interdependencies and our relationships with those in our intercommunicating groups even though we may occupy different social positions or roles. These social figurations, however, are not fixed or static. They are dynamic and in "a state of constant flux and transformation, with interweaving processes of change occurring over different but interlocking time-frames" (Quilley & Loyal, 2004, p. 5)¹³. Members of groups may say "we" of themselves and "they" of other people; but they may say "we" and "they" of different people as time goes by (Elias, 2009)¹².

Furthermore, the researchers adopted Schiffman's (1999)¹¹ terminologies to relate to this current study, as this research focuses on Indian transgenders who are Tamil speakers. The terminologies are provided in Table 2.

Table 2

Kinship Relationship in Tamil Language (Adopted from Harold F. Schiffman, 1999)

Kinship Relationship	Terminology
Father	Appa / Thanthai
Mother	Amma / Thai
Elder brother	Annan
Elder sister	Akka
Younger brother	Thambi
Younger sister	Thanggachi
Grandfather	Tata
Grandmother	Patti
Son	Magan
Daughter	Magal
Husband	Purushan / Kanavan
Wife	Pondatti / Manaivi

Based on Table 2, it can be clearly seen that Tamil people have a very elaborate and systematic kinship system (Schiffman, 1999)¹⁰. The Tamil kinship system was established to ensure that there was a proper system in place to define family relationships and to prevent incest among the people. The choice of words in Tamil kinship may vary depending on the region or clan a person originated from, but the family relationship in general, is the same for all Tamils. Certain terminologies can be applied to multiple relationships. For instance, a person can refer to his or her sister's husband as Machan, Attan, or even Maaman, depending on the relationship between the families prior to the marriage (Kanthimathi, 2007)¹⁴.

Besides, the researchers also adapted Social Identity Theory on in-group and out-group by Tajfel and Turner (1979)¹⁵, which states that there are three mental processes involved in evaluating others as "us" or "them" that are "in-group" and "out-group," and these take place in a particular order such as categorization, social identification, and social comparison. The formation of in-groups and out-groups is referred to as referential. The distinction between in-group and out-group is based on a group's sense of belonging. In this current research, in-group refers to

transgenders and their communities, and out-group refers to heterosexuals. A person's ability to relate himself or herself to a group depends on the individual categorization of his or her identity, comparison, and psychological distinctiveness. It means that the same category that he or she belongs to refers to the in-group membership and identity within a group, which are either secure or insecure and subject to change.

In this research, the focus is not on identity, even though the researchers adapted the Social Identity Theory. The focus is only on the language usage of the transgenders, which explains in detail in-group and out-group formation through social deixis, such as how transgenders as a minority group identify themselves (pronouns used by transgenders) and with others who are heterosexuals who belong to the domain group (the use of name and kinship relationship).

Conclusion

The researchers identified person references in this current study as "self" refers to transgenders, "others" refers to the transgender community, and "others" refers to heterosexuals. The heterosexuals are the majority group, and the transgender community is the minority group; hence, heterosexuality becomes the more dominant ideology. Through the interview, the researchers were able to learn about transgenders who took various efforts to suit themselves by adapting the way "others" mingle in the majority community through their language usage. It will be fascinating to learn about their languages and whether they encountered communication barriers while interacting with the majority community through their interviews. According to Duszak (2002)¹⁶, the status of people is different based on the variety of their linguistic usage, and a person speaks in a way that signals their social status and forms their social identity in a community. In this study, the participants used various items of social deixis to form their identities, and this study agrees with Allen (2023)¹⁷ that people change their identities when they communicate with their surroundings, such as how they form their identities with similar "others" and different "others."

Moreover, Indian transgenders in Malaysia view themselves differently from heterosexuals, which can be discovered through their social deixis. Even though in their conversation they said that they are normal people, they still referred to heterosexuals as "real women" and "real men." Whenever they have any problems, they say that they will meet "our own community," by which they refer to their transgender community. When the transgenders mentioned the use of names and kinship relationships with themselves and others, it could be discerned whether they belonged to a particular in-group or out-group. Indirectly, the findings of this study support the social identity theory that the in-group will discriminate against the out-group to enhance their self-image (Tajfel & Turner, 2004)¹⁸. The researchers' intention in this study is not to indicate or commend what is right or wrong about the outcome, but to expect that the findings of this research will bring some insights that can better improve the communication gaps between these two groups in order to get rid of the language prejudices and suspicions between heterosexuals and transgenders.

Results of this study suggest that transgenders have developed a rather similar style of language and speech patterns through their adaptation of certain women's linguistic features in their communication, such as referring to themselves using their own female names, such as "Mayaku poo pidikum" (*Maya loves flowers*), "yen poluthu pookunu solla ponakka intha mari kathai pesurathu tangge..en vitula amma kooda irunthukittu kathai". *My hobby is talking to others. I love to talk to my mother when I am at home. I dislike going out.* Findings in this study revealed that the transgenders used a social deixis approach in their daily communication, and it is also maintained that address forms are the best place to look at the close bond between language and society. In relation to this, the researchers would strongly recommend future studies be conducted to discover the similarities in linguistic practices between transvestites and transsexuals. Therefore, more studies need to be done to find out the factors that determine the linguistic choice of spoken language among Indian transgenders. Therefore, a suggestion given by the researchers is to involve a large number of participants so that the findings can be generalized to the whole Indian transgender community in Malaysia, and it would be fascinating and informative.

References

1. Okamura, A. (2005). What do you call your colleagues? Address-forms in cross-cultural communication. *Business Discourse: Texts in Contexts*, 161-184.
2. Roxie, M. (2011). Genderqueer and non-binary identities & terminology. *Genderqueerid.com*.
3. Roughgarden, J. (2004). Evolution and the embodiment of gender. *GLQ: A journal of lesbian and gay studies*, 10(2), 287-291.
4. Shamsudin, Z. (2010). *Discursive construction of identities of young homosexual males* [Unpublished master thesis].
5. Regoniel, P. A. (2023, April 10). *Descriptive Qualitative Research: 6 Important Points*. Simplyeducate.me. <https://simplyeducate.me/2023/04/10/descriptive-qualitative-research/#:~:text=Descriptive%20qualitative%20research%20is%20a%20type%20of%20qualitative%20research%20that>
6. Patton, M. Q. (2002). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods*. Sage Publications.
7. Cooke, R., & Jones, A. (2017). Recruiting adult participants to physical activity intervention studies using sport: a systematic review. *BMJ Open Sport & Exercise Medicine*, 3(1), e000231. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjsem-2017-000231>
8. Levinson, S. C. (1983). *Pragmatics*. Cambridge University Press.
9. Spencer-Oatey, H. (2011). Achieving mutual understanding for effective intercultural management.
10. Levinson, D. J. (1977). The mid-life transition: A period in adult psychosocial development. *Psychiatry*, 40(2), 99-112.
11. Schiffman, H. F., & Harold, F. (1999). *A reference grammar of spoken Tamil*. Cambridge University Press.

12. Elias, N. (2009) 'The changing balance of power between the sexes – a process sociological study: the example of the ancient Roman state', in *Essays III: On Sociology and the Humanities*. Dublin: UCD Press (Collected Works, vol. 16), pp. 240–65. (First published in *Theory, Culture and Society* 4(2–3) 1987: 287–316.)
13. Quilley, S., & Loyal, S. (2004). Towards a 'central theory': the scope and relevance of the sociology of Norbert Elias. *The Sociology of Norbert Elias*, 1-22.
14. Kanthimathi, K. (2007). Mixing mother tongue and English: Exploring the reasons and functions of code mixing.
15. Turner, J. C., Brown, R. J., & Tajfel, H. (1979). Social comparison and group interest in ingroup favouritism. *European journal of social psychology*, 9(2), 187-204.
16. Duszak, A. (2002). Us and others: An introduction. *Pragmatics and Beyond New Series*, 1-28.
17. Allen, B. J. (2023). *Difference matters: Communicating social identity*. Waveland Press.
18. Tajfel, H., & Turner, J. C. (2004). The social identity theory of intergroup behavior. In *Political psychology* (pp. 276-293). Psychology Press.
19. Brinthaup T.M., Scheier L.M. (2022) Self, identity, and negative youth adaptation: Introduction to the special issue. *Self and Identity* 21(1), 1-14.