



IZKUNTZALARI GAZTEEN ELKARTEA ASOCIACIÓN DE XOVES LINGÜISTAS  
ASSOCIACIÓ DE JOVES LINGÜISTES ASOCIACIÓN DE JÓVENES LINGÜISTAS

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"Khotis: Gendered through language"

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The idea that gender is constructed through performance (Butler 1990; West & Zimmerman 1987) has been further developed by work showing that the construction of gender is to a large extent culture-dependent as far as performance of gendered identities is concerned (Ong 2001, 'Feminism and Race'). Using linguistic data from *khotis*, a sexual minority of India, I provide evidence in support of the claim that the verbal construction of gender and sexuality must be understood as specific to Indian culture. I focus on how naming practices, choices of linguistic features and interactional style are involved in the construction of membership in the gendered group referred to as khotis.

Indian society has indigenous sexualities, which cross gender boundaries and do not find parallels in Western construction of gays, lesbians, transsexual, etc. One such identity is embodied by khotis. The NAZ Foundation International (Non Government Organization working for the welfare of khotis in the HIV/AIDS sector) describes khotis as "a gender as well as sexual term and a self identifying label used by many males who present exaggerated effeminacy as a means to attract sexual attention of other males i.e., real men who will penetrate them." Khotis use the language variety Farasi (a more elaborate form of which is spoken by *hijras*, as Hall 1995 has shown) to index group identity. Using data from my 2003 fieldwork in Lucknow and New Delhi, I show that Farasi plays an important role in the construction of khotis' sexual identity as distinct from males, females, gays, and lesbians.

I also focus on the khotis' practice of referring to themselves and one another using the feminine markers. For example:

Hžm-si	log	suril-	na-	kyŒ
We-feminine marker	people	good-feminine marker	not	what

I argue that feminine self-reference are used to perform the discourses of powerlessness and submission. Feminine self-reference becomes a part of desire to be identified with females sexuality. I invoke a very broad definition of sexuality entailing sex, desire, and eroticism following Cameron & Kulick (2003). I argue that the choice of Farasi by khotis gives them a distinct identity and the choice of female self-reference adds to the construction of this distinct identity. This is heavily culture specific since the choice of this code and/or identity is open to people within the culture and not outside it. Farasi as a register is available to khotis and not to people outside this sect. Khotis choose to become part of the

community (*of practice*) (Eckert & McConnell Ginet 2003) which uses Farasi as a tool to identify with one another and to be identified as different from other sexualities or genders. I argue that gender is not only a social construct but it is also a culture dependent social construct because the sexual identities that embody khotis and hijras are found only in India and do not find parallels in Western cultures.