



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- <i>si</i>	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.