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## SECRECY AND THE ETHICAL QUESTION

### Some reflections on documenting Ulti, a secret transgender language

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Ulti is a secret language spoken by the marginalized and oppressed transfeminine/femme hijra-koti community in West Bengal, India. It comprises of a set of lexical items that have emerged historically from the socially segregated hijra households, to give voice to the range of queer identities and experiences that have been silenced in mainstream languages and discursive spaces, which are predominantly conservative, cisnormative, and hetero-patriarchal. Thus, these lexical items are secret and used in restricted domains specific to the lives of hijras and kotis.

The domains of use in Ulti include sexual activities (*dhurano* – to have sex, *khumur kora* – to have oral sex), private body parts (*likom* – penis, *cipti* – vagina), sexual and gender identities (*bhobhrashi* – intersex person, *chibri* – hijra), and other aspects exclusive to the hijra subculture (including kinship terms, professions, rituals and customs) and the hijra-koti lifestyle (including clothes, wigs, accessories, currency, biological kinship terms). The Ulti lexicon is limited (around 300 lexical items) but is rapidly expanding due to the presence of a symbolic gender marker *mashi* (lit. “aunt”), that combines with nouns in Bangla, Hindi, and English to create new compound nouns in Ulti.

In this paper, I reflect on the methodological, practical, and ethical questions that I was confronted with during my fieldwork as I embarked upon the project of documenting Ulti. The lexical data was collected using two data elicitation tools – the Rapid Word Collection method (Moe 2003) which uses the concept of semantic domains, and the word list and sentence list developed by Abbi (2001) for South Asian languages. Significant modifications were made to both to accommodate the secret nature of the language and the socio-political context of its speakers.

The central question I had to contend with was of the ethics of publishing the lexicon of a language that was not only secret, but which – as a secret lect – served to protect its speakers from scrutiny, censure, and harassment in public spaces. Ulti is also a professional lect, used in the course of traditional hijra professions such as *badhai*, *cholla/mangti*, and *khajra*. To publish that information would compromise the autonomy of hijras going about their daily lives. However, many speakers of Ulti are excited to share their language with the academic and mainstream community, claiming that their language has already been “revealed” in recent works of fiction and is no longer as secret as it was.

The motivation to document Ulti is an academic quest to learn more about a language that has existed for centuries but escaped detection and documentation until recently. The lack of information on what these languages may have looked like initially, how they may have evolved, and how they may have been used constitutes a major gap in the literature, which has consequently hampered our understanding of the community and contributed to their continued marginalization and segregation from mainstream spaces.

The ideal solution from the vantage point of the hijra-koti community would be to take a theoretical lexicographic approach and publish only as much of the language as is necessary to gain an understanding of its grammar and its role and significance within the community, steering clear of constructions that would put the community in any immediate danger. That precludes the development of a dictionary and/or a primer in the language under study.

This research work and paper does not present a conclusive and ethically infallible solution to the problem of documenting secret lects, It reflects on the working solution found by one researcher to one socio-cultural context, fully aware of its potential limitations in other research contexts. More significantly, this paper presents a problem that demands close attention and deep introspection by the academic community about the merits and ethics of working with a marginalized community and publishing findings of a sensitive nature in future research projects, especially in the form of an exhaustive dictionary.

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