

Kolkata's Kinetic Kinnars: A Pilot Study on the Various Communicative Aspects of the Endangered *Farsi Hijra* Language

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ABSTRACT: 'Kinnar' is the umbrella term ascribed to the third gender or the hijras, as they are known in Bengal. The Kinnars have been a part of the society since ages. In spite of using the local regional language, the Hijras have a secret language that they use to communicate among themselves. The paper deals with a secret language used by the Hijras for generations, known as Farsi Hijra. The Hijras believe that they, being a community, should have their own culture and language and they are never ashamed of using the language, rather they feel proud about it. The Hijras believe that this is one of the oldest languages. But this language lacks a script, it is learned verbally and is passed on from one generation to the other. The paper contains mainly first-hand primary data collected from ten (10) transgender respondents residing in Kolkata, a city in West Bengal in India. Since this secret language has no script, therefore it has no written grammar rules. The language is changing everyday from person to person and region to region and the pronunciation also varies from place to place. The Hijras of Kolkata being more in contact with Bengali language, they use the language in a Bengali accent. From the primary analysis of the obtained data, we find that this language is a Subject-Object-Verb (S-O-V) language, just like Bengali. The person marker and case markers have also been identified in the language. Just like any other language this language too has three tenses. We have also envisaged to study the cultural aspects of Farsi Hijra language including their number system, the way they address their family members and the rituals they follow when one dies. Another interesting factor has been reported here is the usage of the word *mashi* (aunt) as an ending in many words. From the audio recordings collected, a preliminary fundamental frequency (F0) analysis has been done to compare the pitch variations of transgender population from male and female populations. The results and implications have been discussed in detail

KEYWORDS: endangered language, case marker, s-o-v language, hijra, gender-based language, verbal language, no script, positive attitude, community.

1. Introduction

Transgender is an umbrella term. Under transgender there falls trans men, trans women, non-binary and genderqueer. The third gender or the *hijras* are called the Kinnars. The kinnars have been a part of the society since ages. Though the hijras are not accepted in the society, yet some of them have established themselves. In early queer linguistics research, a lot of studies have been done on transgenders and people non confirming their identities for their exceptionalism to existing theories of gender and language [1] – [6]. Studies on the relationship between language and gender have been a key element of sociolinguistic research since the 1970s,[7] but over the course of the last 50 years academic understanding of gender identity has been quickly evolving. Trans identities form a significant part of research in queer linguistics, even in various conflicting scenarios when a particularly gendered community is explicitly described as not transgender [8-10]. Various cultural contexts of their research drive the authors' to orient the trans-identity in such a way that translates local identities to a Western audience. Most of the studies referred to above construct an image of a trans person who self-identifies as a woman despite being assigned male at birth— and hence trans-masculinities are rarely acknowledged in these works. The issue of agency holds particular significance in discussions around the gender expression of transgender and non-binary speakers. Linguistic features associated with gender can be an integral part of authentic self-expression, confidence, and safety [11], but for many trans and non-binary individuals, affirming their identity linguistically requires learning new stylistic strategies [12]. Most of the linguistic research on trans people has focused on the management of binary grammatical gender systems by speakers who constantly negate the expectation that each individual is naturally placed within a binary gender structure. The disruption of binary gender structure opens up a number of research vistas, including how speakers refer to an individual who has undergone a shift in gendered referring forms— e.g., from masculine to feminine grammatical marking. Previous research has revealed that some speakers shift between gender markers to reflect whether they are referring to a person's current gender positionality or the gender role they occupied in the past. This aspect has categorically been documented in Hall's (1997) [9] study of hijras, Borba [13] (2007) analysis of Brazilian travestís, and Livia's [14] (2001) treatment of Georgine Noël's autobiography. Another interesting question dominating this fraternity of research is whether binary grammatical gender systems prevent the expression of nonbinary gender identities. Bershtling (2014) [15] conducted study on genderqueer Hebrew speakers and revealed that nonbinary identities can be expressed in the context of binary grammatical gender systems. Thus, the form and use of languages by the trans communities in the Eastern world provides an interesting domain of research, which has not been explored upon till date

Just like different communities speak a different language, similarly hijras' of the erstwhile capital of Indian state, Kolkata, too have a different language that they speak. This language is called 'Farsi-hijra.' The present pilot study intends to explore the language of the hijra community of Kolkata using different grammatical, linguistic, phonetic features and provide a comparative outlook on how this particular language stands out from the everyday language used by the commoners of Kolkata region. Farsi hijra is a language which has been used for decades. This language serves both as a secret code and a cultural identifier. The hijras believe that this is one of the oldest languages. This is spoken mainly among the hijras. This language does not have any written form, it is mainly a spoken language. This language has been passed on from the 'Gurus' to the 'Shishyas' just by speaking. When a new hijra enters the community, this language is taught to them. The main reason for the hijras to learn this language is to talk freely among themselves. They feel that they aren't a part of 'our' society, hence they feel that 'we' might not like the way they talk, hence they use this language to talk among themselves. Despite its name, the language does not significantly overlap with Persian. No one seems to know when and how hijra Farsi began, though some hijras say it started during Mughal rule over South Asia. It was then, according to folklore, that a royal eunuch named, Mai Nandi, founded the hijra community. (Urooj & Khan, 2022) All across the globe, hijras speak in this language. This is not a mother tongue to any, yet the hijras have a very positive attitude towards their language. They are never ashamed of using the language; rather they feel proud about it. They do not want this language to get extinct. The hijras love their language therefore it is mandatory to all the hijras whoever joins the community to learn this language. They feel that this language is their own.

The present paper focuses on the different grammatical and linguistic aspects of the Farsi hijra language as will be elaborated in the following sections. This language follows a particular grammar. It has some common grammatical rules like many other languages. It is a S-O-V language. The verb always comes at the end of the sentence. Just as in English, there are three case markers in this language as well. It has nominative, accusative and dative case markers. Nominative case is where there is only one subject, accusative case is where there is one subject and one object that has a direct relationship and dative case is where there is one subject and two objects- one direct and another one indirect object. It also has some grammatical genders, unlike English and Bangla. This language has a massive vocabulary system, and much of the vocabulary is centered around trade, money, hijra rituals, cursing, and sexuality. From this paper it can be noticed that the hijras have an extremely positive attitude towards their language. They are extremely possessive about their language. Because even though they don't have any script, they didn't forget the language. They make sure that whenever a new member

joins their community, they teach them the language with perfection. In fact, they remember all the rules of grammar, case markers, gender markers only by hearing it! The paper further investigates the differences between different speakers.

2. Data and Methods

2.1. Data and Discussion

This is a primary research paper and all the data are collected from the field and are real time data. It was a semi-structured interview and response was taken from 3 informants of the local *hijra* community of Kolkata. The entire data collection was based on face-to-face interview methods. Some questions were asked to them and they had to answer those. Like:

Q: Do you love your language?

Q: 'A language binds a community?'-do you agree?

Q: Is it not difficult to learn a language without any script?

Q: What rituals do you have when someone from your community dies?

Q: What is Rs.100 in your language?

It was more of a conversation than a formal interview. From this, we have tried to identify different case markers, tense markers and type of language orientation. Their body language, their ways of speaking, their attitude while talking about the language was also noted.

2.2. Methodology and Data Analysis

The data have been analyzed both in qualitative and quantitative manner. In the case of qualitative analysis, the body language of the hijras, the attitude towards their language, the way of speaking, and their expressions were noticed. The informants said that they love their language and don't want it to go extinct, and this positive attitude was noticed in them. They were delighted to speak about their language. Most importantly to remember a language, the words, its grammatical rules without a script is not possible unless one wants to.

2.3. F0 or Fundamental Frequency Analysis

The fundamental frequency of a speech signal, often denoted by F0, generally refers to the approximate frequency of the (quasi-)periodic structure of voiced speech signals. The oscillation originates from the vocal folds of speakers, which oscillate in the airflow when appropriately tensed. F0 is essentially defined as the approximate number of oscillations per second. F0 has been applied in a diverse number of studies in different

contexts ranging from emotion identification [16], speech synthesis and a number of other related applications [17, 18]. In this work, we performed a preliminary analysis to distinguish the fundamental frequency variations in the voice samples of male, female and transgender informants using the Praat [19] software.

Fig. 1 is a representative figure which illustrates the F0 or pitch variation corresponding to a voice sample of a transgender informant.

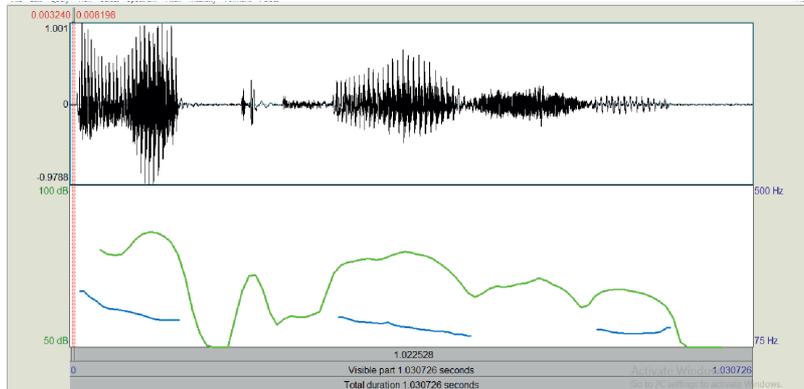


Fig. 1: Pitch variation of a transgender voice sample

3. Results and Discussion

Farsi hijra is a language which has been used for decades. The hijras believe that this is one of the oldest languages. But this language lacks a script. It is learned verbally and is passed on from one generation to the other. Just like every other language, it also has some grammatical rules.

3.1. Case Markers

Just as in English, there are three case markers in this language as well. It has nominative, accusative and dative case markers. Nominative case is where there is only one subject, accusative case is where there is one subject and one object which has a direct relationship and dative case is where there is one subject and two objects- one direct and another one indirect object.

Example 1:

English	Bangla	Farsi hijra	Case
I	আমি	Hamsi	Nominative
Me	আমাকে	Hamsi-ke	Accusative

Here, the 'ke' defines the case marker.

Nominative:

Example 1

Case	Farsi-hijra	Bangla	English
Nominative	<i>Hamsi tnakchi</i>	আমি খাচ্ছি	I am eating

Example 2

Case	Farsi-hijra	Bangla	English
Nominative	<i>Hamsi podchi</i>	আমি যাচ্ছি	I am going

3.1.1. Accusative

Example 1

Case	Farsi-hijra	Bangla	English
Accusative	<i>Hamsi kaal ishkule podbo.</i>	আমি কাল স্কুলে যাবো	I will go to school tomorrow.

Example 2 :

Case	Farsi-hijra	Bangla	English
Accusative	<i>Hamsi tumsike salobhabbashi.</i>	আমি তোমাকে ভালোবাসি	I love you.

3.1.2. Dative

Example 1

Case	Farsi-hijra	Bangla	English
Dative	<i>Unsi tumsike golapmashi chamiyeche.</i>	সে তোমাকে একটা গোলাপ দিয়েছে	She/he gave you a rose.

Example 2

Case	Farsi-hijra	Bangla	English
Dative	<i>Hamsi tumsike sontashpon chamabo.</i>	আমি তোমাকে পঞ্চাশ টাকা দেবো	I will give you Rs.50.

3.2. S-O-V Language

Farsi hijra is a subject-verb-object language. The verb always comes at the end of the sentence. Just like in Bangla.

Example 1

Language	Subject	Object	Verb
Farsi-hijra	<i>Hamsi</i>	<i>tumsi-ke ekgeri</i>	<i>jirontari.</i>
Bangla	আমি	তোমাকে ১০ টাকা	দেবো
English	I	you Rs.10	give

Which implies
'I will give you Rs.10.'

Example 2

Language	Subject	Object	Verb
Farsi -hijra	Hamsi	kalmashite cha	tnakbo.
Bangla	আমি	কাল চা	খাবো
English	I	tomorrow tea	drink.

Which implies
I will drink tea tomorrow.

Just like Bangla language, Farsi hijra too doesn't have any tense marker. Hence it has no particular word for 'will'.

Example 3

Language	Subject	Object	Verb
Farsi-hijra	Tumsi	tnakni/dorma	tnekecho?
Bangla	তুমি	ভাত	খাবে?
English	You	rice	eat?

Which implies:
Did you eat rice?

Just like Bangla language, Farsi hijra too doesn't have any tense marker. Hence it has no particular word for 'did'.

3.3. Person Marker

Just like in every other language that we know or speak, Farsi hijra too has some person markers. It also has 1st person, 2nd person and 3rd person.

Example 1

Person	Farsi hijra	English	Bangla
1st	Hamsi	I	আমি
2nd	Tumsi	You	তুমি
3rd	Unsi	He/She	সে

3.4. Tense

Like other languages, this language too has the three tenses- present, past and future tense. The tense can be understood by the verb used.

3.4.1. Present tense

Example 1

<i>Tense</i>	<i>Farsi hijra</i>	<i>English</i>	<i>Bangla</i>
Present	<i>Hamsi tnakni tnakchi.</i>	I am eating rice.	আমি ভাত খাচ্ছি

Example 2

<i>Tense</i>	<i>Farsi hijra</i>	<i>English</i>	<i>Bangla</i>
Present	<i>Unsi kholmashi-te snanmashi korche.</i>	She/he is taking a bath in the room.	সে ঘরে স্নান করছে

3.4.2. Past Tense

Example 1

<i>Tense</i>	<i>Farsi hijra</i>	<i>English</i>	<i>Bangla</i>
Past	<i>Hamsi kaalmashite tnakni tnekechilam.</i>	I ate rice yesterday.	আমি কাল ভাত খয়েছিলাম

Example 2

<i>Tense</i>	<i>Farsi hijra</i>	<i>English</i>	<i>Bangla</i>
Past	<i>Unsi kholmashi-te snanmashi korechilo.</i>	She/he took a bath in the room.	সে ঘরে স্নান করছিলি

3.4.3. Future tense

Example 1

<i>Tense</i>	<i>Farsi hijra</i>	<i>English</i>	<i>Bangla</i>
Future	<i>Hamsi kaalmashite tnakni tnekte jabo..</i>	I will eat rice tomorrow.	আমি কাল ভাত খাবো

Example 2

<i>Tense</i>	<i>Farsi hijra</i>	<i>English</i>	<i>Bangla</i>
Future	<i>Unsi snanmashi korbe.</i>	He/she will take a bath.	সে স্নান করবে

3.5. Cultural aspects of the *Farsi Hijra* language

3.5.1. Kinship

Kinship means the blood relationship or other relationship between one another. In Farsi-hijra also certain terms are used to identify their family members.

<i>Farsi hijra</i>	<i>English</i>	<i>Bangla</i>
<i>Sudda</i>	Father	বাবা
<i>Suddi</i>	Mother	মা
<i>Giriya</i>	Husband	বর
<i>Niharini</i>	Wife	বউ
<i>Tonna</i>	Boy	ছলে
<i>Tunni</i>	Girl	ময়ে
<i>Pith</i>	Brother	ভাই
<i>Pithni</i>	Sister	বোন

3.5.2. Death

When hijras die, the other hijras don't cry. They laugh, dance, sing songs and take the dead body to the graveyard or as per the religious belief of the hijra. All the hijras of that particular area are called before the dead body and some pujas are done. They then touch or beat the dead body with slippers or brooms. They consider this as giving a punishment of being born as a hijra. This is a ritual among them and they do this so that in their next lives the hijras are born as 'normal' human beings and not as a hijra once again. After burning or burying the body, when they come home, they distribute sweets. It is after this point of time they start to express their sorrow or grief at the loss of their near ones.

Previously, 40-50 years back, they had some different rituals. When someone died, all the hijras from that particular area were called and the dead body would have been dissected into several pieces and distributed among the hijras. Then the hijras used to either bury the pieces or burn the pieces as per their religion. But with time all these rituals have become obsolete. Now they don't believe in all these.

3.5.3. Numerical System

Like other things, it has been noted that the *Farsi hijra* language too has a different way in which they identify their numbers. Though it has some bangla included, yet some numbers are different.

<i>Farsi Hijra</i>	<i>English</i>
<i>Chillar</i>	Coins
<i>Poya</i>	Rs. 5
<i>Eri</i>	Rs. 10
<i>Double eri</i>	Rs.20
<i>Adagoj</i>	Rs. 50
<i>Ekgoj</i>	Rs. 100
<i>Ek patiya / Ek Katki</i>	Rs. 1000

3.5.4. *Special Feature of Language Use*

Among many other features, another noticeable feature is the use of the word ‘*mashi*’ (Aunt) as an ending. It has been noted that in most of the cases, the object in the sentence ends with the word ‘*mashi*’. Though they use this ending in many proper nouns as well. While questioning on this they said that since in Kolkata many people identify *hijra* as *mashi*, therefore they feel that this language being their own, they use the *mashi* ending.

3.5.5. *Goddess / Idol they worship*

They mainly worship ‘*Maa Bahuchar*’. Maa Bahuchara is another of Bhagabati. Maa Bahuchara sits on a hen. She has four hands. In one hand she holds a sword, in another hand she holds trishula, in the third hand she holds a book and the fourth hand is in *patakaor abhaya mudra* which shows that she is blessing. Goddess Bahuchara has been revered by members of the transgender and eunuch community ever since and she is considered as their patron saint. Thus, the Goddess serves as a source of solace for the Hijra community and gives them a feeling of belonging.

3.5.6. *Some special rituals*

The Hijras too, have some special rituals. As a community they celebrate those rituals with their community members.

3.5.6.1. *Khonjakaran*(খোঁজাকরণ): This ritual takes place when a new member comes to the community. Witnessing Maa Bahuchara, *Guru maa* offers the *dhol* to the new member and a new name is given. The name also has a specialty. Since they are hijras therefore the name ends with *hijrari*. This ritual is celebrated as re-birth of the person.

3.5.6.2. *Drum / Dhol:* The drum or the dhol is given to every hijra since the main occupation of a hijra is to dance. Hence whenever a new hijra comes to the society, a dhol is given.

3.5.6.3. *Celebrating Diwali:* On the occasion of Diwali they offer their prayers to the percussion instrument *dholak*. Since *dholak* is their source of earnings hence they dance, celebrate and offer prayers to the instrument.

3.5.6.4. *Occupation:* Though their main occupation is dancing yet there are some divisions among them as well. There is a hierarchy system. First there is *guru maa*, who is very prestigious, then there are some who dance and give blessings to the newborns and then there are some who stand in the traffic and ask for money.

3.5.6.5. *Chhinni kora:* Years ago there was this ritual where whenever a new member joined the community, after *khonjakaran* the *guru maa* used to cut the members male genital organ. That was extremely painful. There were many who couldn’t bear that pain. Hence with time this ritual was demolished.

3.6. Fundamental Frequency or F0 analysis

Fig. 2 represents the F0 variation corresponding to a sample voice recording of a male, female and transgender informant.

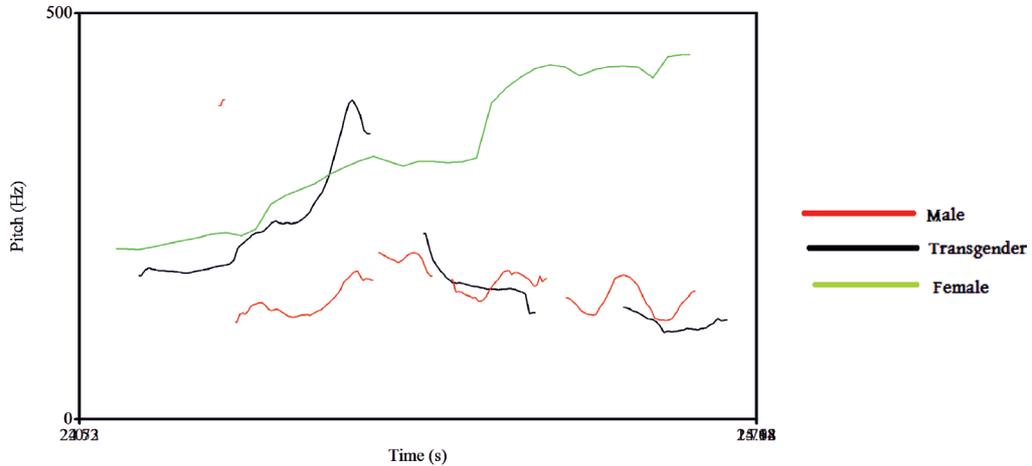


Fig. 2: F0 variation of male, female and transgender informant

As is evident from the figure, the F0 value for the transgender speech lies somewhere in between of the male and female speech sample. The following table and corresponding Fig. 2 gives the averaged maximum, minimum and mean pitch values corresponding to 10 speech samples collected from male, female and transgender participants.

TABLE 1: F0 variation for speech samples

	Maximum F0 (in Hz)	Minimum F0 (in Hz)	Average F0 (in Hz)
Male	378.56	121.51	159.36
Female	448.45	209.88	327.82
Transgender	396.86	106.19	193.09

As is evident from Fig. 2, averaged F0 values corresponding to transgender speech samples lies in between the F0 values of male and female speech samples. While the F0 values for female speech lies on the higher side and that of male speech lies on the lower side, the F0 value of transgender speech lies in between the two but is more closer to the male side. This provides an interesting case for future study, as in spite of the fact that most of the members of the *hijra* community identify themselves more with the female gender, our findings suggest that their voice sample has more closeness to the male

gender. Although these findings are very rudimentary based on a small data corpus, these provide an interesting new parameter with which the affinity of a transgender voice sample may be measured quantitatively with the help of F0 and formant analysis. Also the range of pitch values, from the minima to maxima, also has a higher range as compared to the male and female pitch range.

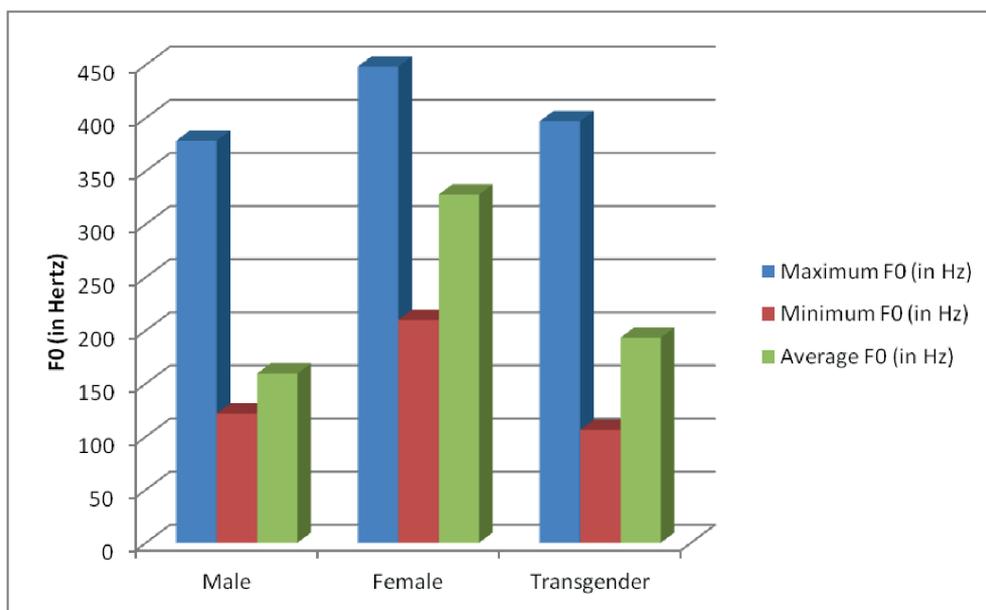


Fig. 2: Graphical representation of the F0 variations in three different speech samples

In the following figures, a comparison between two voice samples corresponding to the same sentence ‘amar priyo rong neel’ (My favourite color is Blue) have been taken and the vowels ‘aa’ and ‘ee’ have been extracted from them alongside plotting the pitch profile for the entire sentence.

From the pitch profile variation of the individual vowels and as well as from the entire utterance, it is clearly visible that the fundamental frequency of one transgender participant remains constantly high throughout the course of the utterance, while the other remains low. In fact, if we observe more minutely, we will see that the word boundary tones are also significantly different for the two participants. While one has a low tone in the last word, the other has a high tone. The same distinction is also observable for the word boundary corresponding to the first word also. This unique observation may shed some light on the socio-cultural status of the two transgender participants’ voice samples that were chosen for experimentation here – be it their sexual orientation or their mental paradigm.

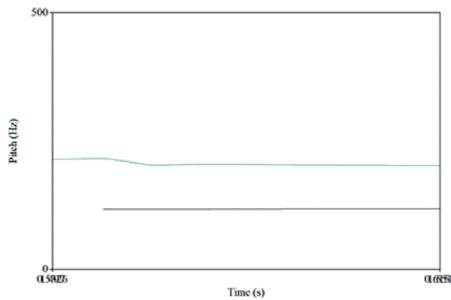


Fig. 4 (a)

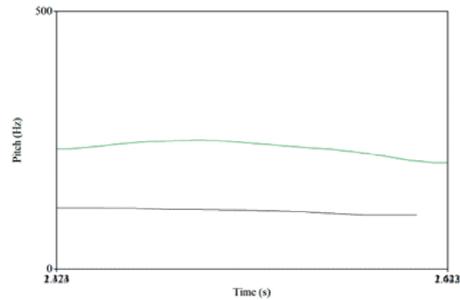


Fig. 4(b)

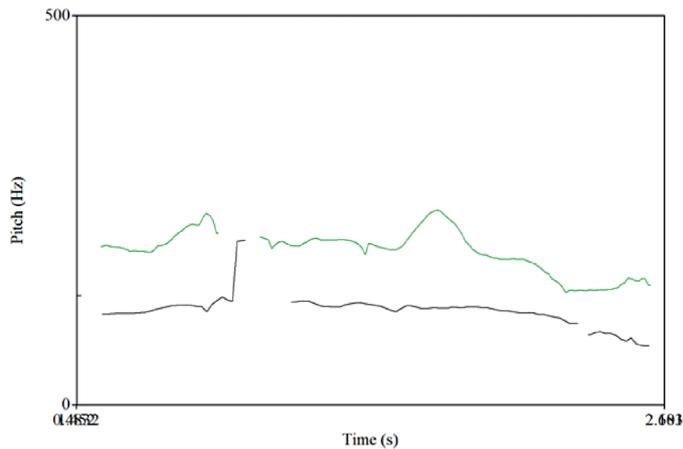


Fig. 4(c)

Fig. 4: Pitch profile for vowel (a) “aa”, (b) “ee” and (c) complete utterance

4. Conclusions

This pilot study on the linguistic aspects of the transgender community across Kolkata region presents first hand data on the use of *Farsi Hijra* language which is being used as a spoken language among the *Hijra* community across the country, and in a broader sense across the globe as well. The study presents the following interesting conclusions, which can be utilized by future researchers of language to document and explore more on this hitherto unknown language:

1. From the preliminary findings, the *Farsi Hijra* language has similar features like the Bangla language, i.e. it follows S-O-V order.
2. It also has person markers such as 1st, 2nd and 3rd person.
3. The *farsi hijra* language has three case markers as well, i.e. in the nominative, accusative and dative case.

4. The three tense markers have also been observed in this pilot study.
5. From the cultural aspect some interesting stories or myths have been observed about the death of a person from their community.
6. Their number system and the terms they use while addressing their family members have also been noticed.
7. From the F0 pitch profile analysis, we find that the F0 values of transgender speech lies somewhere in between male and female speech.
8. The study provides an interesting report on the basis of primary F0 analysis about a way to measure the closeness of transgender speech to male and female speech.
9. Another interesting fact about the language is the use of the word *mashi* (aunt) as an ending in many words. They use such an ending because they feel that the language is their own, as in Kolkata many address them as *Mashi*.

Future Work

Future works in this interesting topic of exploring *Farsi Hijra* language include primarily a more rigorous documentation of the language from other parts of the country. A comparative analysis on the variation of linguistic features across the *hijra* communities across different locations of the country also needs to be done. A more robust analysis at the phonetic level can be used to assess the origin of difference in the formant frequencies of this particular gender and the closeness of their voices to male and female speakers. This particular study provides a pathway to explore this hitherto unknown language.

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