

*Full Length Research Paper*

# The sociolinguistics study of caste-stereotypes in the language of Punjabi Society

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**Punjabi Society is full of various social groups which are further divided into several castes or clans living together for centuries. Although they speak Punjabi language, no matter how much different their dialects are, yet their prejudice, bias and social status have created stereotypes on basis of their social experience. This research is aimed at analysing the caste-stereotypes and their role in the language of Punjabi Society in Punjab (Pakistan). Caste-stereotypes in Punjabi Society are linguistic beliefs and have significant role in creating discrimination among the people belonging to different castes. These caste- stereotypes are affecting the social relations and intercommunication among the people of various castes in the society.**

**Key words:** Sociolinguistics, castes, stereotypes, Punjabi, society.

## INTRODUCTION

Earlier research traditions in sociolinguistics introduced the study of ethnicity and caste mechanism. The existence of caste-stereotypes among people is a very common social phenomenon. The phenomenon of linguistic ethnicity in the Punjabi Society is very crucial, as it is not only the mark of identification but also a vital indicator of social discrimination, which, certainly, is affecting the social relations and mutual interaction of the people. Lipman (1922) refers to stereotypes as "the pictures in our heads." According to him, stereotypes have both cognitive and affective components. Man, being inquisitive by nature and having the gift of the gab, remains desirous of describing whatever he sees, feels, and thinks, and language is the main source which he utilizes to express his thoughts, feelings, ideas and emotions. Linguists have put forward a number of themes and ideas to describe what a language is? Lyons (1981) tells us that, one of the ideas to describe language is that, it is a systematic way of combining smaller units into larger units, used for communication. Language can be defined as a system of conventional spoken or written symbols by

means of which human beings as members of a social group communicate. Language is the innate capacity, in its widest sense. It means the sum total of such signs of our thoughts and feelings, as of external perception and could be produced and repeated at will.

The scientific study of language is called linguistics (Trask, 1999). So, it is the scientific study of language not of a specific language, rather the languages in general. In sociolinguistics, the linguists are interested in identifying social functions of the language. For example, how people speak differently, why there are variations in languages etc. Sociolinguistics is the study of relationships between language and society (Homles and Meyerhoff, 2003). Socio linguistics has given us scientific understanding of language (Hudson, 1980). It is the geographical, social and cultural phenomenon and has deep rooted relation with society. All human beings use language and they acquire it from society by interacting with other people. People living in the same community, do not speak a uniform language. It is because language is not a static phenomenon and contains a lot of variations. These variations are on the basis of age, sex, power, status, ethnicity, gender and caste, as we see in our general life that, older people do not speak in the same way as younger people do. Men do not speak like women and so

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on. Language is a mark of identity. When we speak, we not only communicate with others but also exhibit in an indirect way which territory we belong to. In this way, we establish and maintain one social identity and one of the most prominent markers of ethnicity is speaking like people who live there. Ethnicity means belonging to a national or racial group of people or communities who have subjective belief in their common descent. It is very difficult to define ethnicity in a proper way. Rahman (1997) says that, a person might define himself or herself in terms of sex (male or female) family role (son, daughter, wife) occupation (weaver or Jolaha) tribe or clan (Mughal, Pathan, Arain, Sheikh) economic class. Such labeling is part of self perception and also perception by others.

Ethnicity is the socially constructed category, not based on any objectively measurable criteria (Fought, 2006). Moreover, it is not necessary for the people who have the same ethnicity to have blood relationship or kinship. Ethnic membership is different from the kinship or blood relationship group. In literature, dress, religion, color and music are repeatedly given pertaining to a particular group of some country and we can identify them by looking at them on the basis of our conception. Ethnic groups having different social thinking and picture in their minds for other ethnic groups give rise to behavior stereotypes.

Talbot (2003) researched on stereotypes representation of women and found out differences. Behavior of women was complaining, as they represented themselves as either bitching or nagging while males behaved wisely and gave natural explanation. Rahman (1997) conducted research on major ethnic groups with reference to Urdu as the official language in Pakistan. He described provincial prejudices of major ethnic groups and ethnic movements which raised their slogans in favor of their languages when Urdu was declared as official language. He elaborated ethnic prejudices to be found in four provinces of Pakistan. He also gave description about the people of Punjab and their caste-systems whose further bifurcation is on the basis of sense of being high and low in social and economic status. They had local names for their languages such as Majhi, Dogri, Jangali, Pahari and others. People belonging to same castes were called Birradaris (brotherhood) due to their kinship and blood relationship. This study intends to investigate the role of caste stereotypes in the language of Punjabi Society. Zhang (2009) researched on the aspects of stereotypes. He described accurate stereotypes and inaccurate stereotypes.

Accurate stereotypes help us to give cultural-level predictions about the strangers' behavior and inaccurate stereotypes lead us to misunderstanding. He also discussed the problem of the stereotypes and their solutions. Punjab is the most populous province of Pakistan having almost 100 million inhabitants. In such a large

number of people there exists great diversity of castes which is the hallmark of Pakistani Punjabi Society. This diversity of castes has given birth to such stereotypes which are being used in the language of Punjabi Society for over centuries. Much work has been done on major ethnic groups in Pakistan with reference to their languages and their prejudice and bias against one another, but the attention to the role of caste-stereotypes has not been paid and this aspect has escaped the researchers' view because many caste-stereotypes are present in Punjab. These caste-stereotypes are creating social boundaries among the people belonging to different clans in the society. This study was designed to achieve the following objectives:

1. To explore existence of the caste-stereotypes of the peoples of Punjabi Society.
2. To find out caste stereotypes belonging to major castes of Punjabi Society.
3. To investigate caste stereotypes about lower professional castes of Punjabi Society.

## METHODOLOGY

In order to conduct a pilot study first, the researcher conducted interviews to collect caste stereotypes associated with various castes in Punjabi Society (Pakistan). The sample was selected from District Vehari. People of this District are bifurcated into two basic categories: 1) Landlords and 2) Non-landlords. Landlords lead feudal a life. Most of the population belongs to working class. The researcher selected ten castes from Punjabi Society including seven major castes and three lower professional castes. The researcher selected four persons randomly from each of the major castes and lower professional castes, so as to collect data through questionnaire from each individual about other castes. The interviews were recorded and were transcribed. The interview data were later converted on a data sheet in the form of rows and columns for further analysis. Data were analyzed by using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) to calculate frequencies and percentages.

## RESULTS

Table 1 shows that respondents believe in the existence of caste-stereotypes in Punjabi Society. Peoples belonging to high castes look down upon the people of lower professional castes. They show favor and affinity on the basis of caste, as Punjabi Society is divided into high castes and low castes. Some of the castes are considered superiors and some are considered inferior according to their professions and social status. Table 2 shows that people in the Punjabi Society have stereotypes in mind and associate them with certain castes. Respondents have perception about the people of Kamboh caste, that they are well communicative, loving to

**Table 1.** Caste-stereotypes of peoples of Punjabi Society.

Variable	Response				
	Don't know	Wrong	Totally wrong	To some extent right	Quite right
	f (%)	f (%)	f (%)	f (%)	f (%)
General belief of the people about stereotypes	-	-	-	25 (62.5)	15 (37.5)
Feelings of dislikes by the people of high castes towards people of low castes	2 (5.0)	-	-	13 (32.5)	25 (62.5)
Favouritism on the basis of caste	-	1 (2.5)	-	21 (52.5)	18 (45.0)
People's bent of affinity	-	-	1 (2.5)	10 (25.0)	29 (72.5)
Blood is thicker than water	1 (2.5)	2 (5.0)	-	14 (35.0)	23 (57.5)

f\* = frequency of response.

**Table 2.** Stereotypes belonging to major castes of Punjabi Society.

Variable	Response				
	Don't know	Wrong	Totally wrong	To some extent right	Quite right
	f (%)	f (%)	f (%)	f (%)	f (%)
Kamboh Caste; well communicative and loving for their own family but worse nature	1 (2.5)	2 (5.0)	8 (20.0)	6 (15.0)	23 (57.5)
Rajput Caste; quarrelsome and use abusive language.	-	2 (5.0)	10 (25.0)	13 (32.5)	15 (37.5)
Arain Caste; are they thought to be fair weather in the society	1 (2.5)	1 (2.5)	-	8 (20.0)	30 (75.0)
Gujjar Caste; ugly looking and bad communicators	1 (2.5)	4 (10.0)	2 (5.0)	16 (40.0)	17 (42.5)
Sheikh Caste; thought to be close fisted in society	-	1 (2.5)	-	3 (7.5)	36 (90.0)
Jutt Caste; people use derogatory language and have no regard for others	2 (5.0)	3 (7.5)	-	9 (22.5)	26 (65.0)
Baloach Caste; people are disloyal, robbers or thieves	1 (2.5)	1 (2.5)	4 (10.0)	11 (27.5)	23 (57.5)

f\* = frequency of response.

well communicative, loving to their own family but their nature is worse. Rajput caste is quarrelsome and use abusive language. Arain caste is fair-weather. Gujjars are ugly looking bad communicators and Shiekh are close-fisted. Jutts use derogatory language and have no regard for others. The Baloach are disloyal, robbers and thieves.

Table 3 shows that, respondents have

stereotypes about the three professional (lower) castes.

The people belonging to the high class think that the Mochis (cobblers) are greedy, that is why they cannot be noble mentors or spiritual leaders.

The Julahas (weavers) are ill-mannered and do not have any sense of humanity and Nai caste (barber) is considered to be impatient and mean.

## DISCUSION

Stereotypes are strongly in operation in the Punjabi Society.

These stereotypes leave negative impacts on social behaviour of people. Although they are living in the same society but their prejudice, bias and social status do not let them have hand in

**Table 3.** Stereotypes about lower professional castes of Punjabi Society.

Variable	Response				
	Don't know	Wrong	Totally wrong	To some extent right	Quite right
	f (%)	f (%)	f (%)	f (%)	f (%)
Mochi (Shoe makers, a professional caste); greedy and cannot be noble mentors	2 (2.5)	1 (2.5)	4 (10.0)	12 (30.0)	21 (52.5)
Julaha (weaver); ill-mannered and no sense of good behaviour	3 (7.5)	1 (2.5)	13 (32.5)	4 (10.0)	19 (47.2)
Nai (Barber); considered to be impatient and mean	2 (5.0)	-	1 (2.5)	10 (25.0)	27 (67.5)

f\* = frequency of response

small quantity of the people have taken a step to remove these stereotypes, so that they can intercommunicate easily yet even then, a large majority of the people in the Punjabi Society still believes in these stereotypes and these stereotypes are in operation in the society. The role of castes is very crucial in creating huge discrimination between dominating influential castes and the lower professional mean castes. As a result, people belonging to lower professional castes are facing a lot of hurdles in almost all spheres of life. They are not given importance in the social gathering. The superior professional (feudal) class does not let the inferior class intercommunicate. Even they are deprived of their fundamental right of getting education. In short, the role of the stereotypes is so crucial that, at the time of interview for the selection of officers in different departments people of the rich dominating castes are given first importance and lower professional castes are given secondary importance.

In order to steer clear of the negative impacts of the caste-stereotypes being operated in the language of Punjabi Society, some lower professional castes have changed their identity and disguised themselves into other social groups by

giving up their humiliating professions. For example, example, people who were called Jollaha have almost left their hand weaving work which is now no more visible in the Punjabi Society. Now they are called Ansari and enjoying respectable social status in society. Nais (Barbers) and Mochis (shoe makers) who have not only changed their identity but also brought a number of modifications in their profession. They have moved to cities and built big shops and use scientific instruments. In the past, they were looked down upon and still their social relation and communication are not up to the mark. Stereotypes are the content of the categories which we use to categorise the people belonging to different social groups in the society. These stereotypes which are generally used in the language of the Punjabi Society have direct influence on their social communication. As these caste-stereotypes expose the negative attributions of the people, hence the influence of these stereotypes is also creating the negative impacts in their social behaviours with other people of the society. People in the Punjabi Society, unconsciously try to make effort to the confirmation of their expectations when they speak with one another. In other words, these stereotypes create self-fulfilling predictions; because these stereotypes

are the natural product of the communication process, they influence the way people process information. When people communicate with others, they interpret incoming messages on the basis of symbolic systems which they have learnt since childhood. That is why their processing of information is biased and prejudiced in the exposition of using the pre-existing belief of systems.

### Conclusions

Caste-stereotypes in Punjabi Society are linguistic beliefs and have significant role in creating discrimination among the people belonging to different castes. These caste-stereotypes are affecting the social relations and intercommunication among the people of various castes in the society.

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