

A Sociolinguistic Analysis of the Registers of the Street Hawkers in Dhaka

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Abstract

This study examines the distinctness of registers shared as a part of communication by the street hawkers in Dhaka. The reasons for studying these registers are to investigate their different jargons, why they use them while selling their products, and what they mean through them. It also explores the effectiveness of their registers in their communication. By adopting the qualitative method, the researchers have interviewed 40 street hawkers, recorded their conversations and some distinctive vocabularies for over a month, and found some striking meaningful registers they share in this profession. The results show that they use these specific registers before the customers to make communication comfortable and smooth. They also share these jargons to hide the real meaning from customers, to make fun of them, to discourage their fellow hawkers from promptly selling a product, to get rid of some particular customers, and sometimes even to cheat and provoke them. The findings of the study are discussed carefully to draw the attention of language users, planners, and policymakers. One of the important reasons for choosing the street hawkers was to concentrate on the professional language variation of an underprivileged community in Dhaka.

Keywords: register, sociolinguistics, jargon, street hawkers

Introduction

To live in a society, human beings must share ideas, collect information, communicate, and interact with others using a language for different personal and social purposes. However, the language they use for communication varies from individual to individual, country to country, community to community, and even profession to profession. This variation of



language always depends on the speaker. One speaker may use different types of language items, codes, and sets of vocabularies based on the context for a definite purpose. They also may not use these exact codes in another context. In sociolinguistics, the register refers to a set of vocabulary used by a particular social group.

According to Rahman and Mohiuddin (2014), “A set of vocabulary that is available in a particular profession is known as register” (p. 46). In the field of sociolinguistic study, the register is a crucial area that has received significant attention from linguists worldwide. Holmes (2001) held that registers are specific sets of vocabulary items associated with different occupational groups or the language of groups of people with common interests or jobs. Because of being applied in the job sectors, the register must have a significant meaning to the people of a community, society, or even in a country. However, Rahman and Mohiudddin (2014) stated that, regrettably, textbooks of sociolinguistics have tended to overlook the rich tradition of register studies.

Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh, is a city where many people are found living temporarily for occupational purposes. All these people have their own dialect, and after living in Dhaka for a long time with people using different kinds of dialects, their own dialect gets mixed with others and forms a new type of language. They also use definite registers, jargons, or codes to communicate with others in the same profession. In Dhaka, more than 5 lakh street hawkers sell various types of products like dresses, shoes, bags, cosmetics, and fruits, and use different types of verbal repertoire amongst themselves while selling their products. Each hawker generally communicates with the other in their native language, Bangla. Still, in some situations, they use several codes carrying different meanings, which are only comprehensible to them but not to the customers. These hawkers are not very educated and come from lower economic conditions. Their living standards are not very high, and sometimes, if they cannot sell their products daily, they have to starve along with their family members. However, they have a strong unity among themselves and support each other in case of any problems outside their community. They maintain good communication amongst themselves using their registers in terms of selling any product to the customers, tricking them to make a good profit, and sometimes they mix these registers with their native language, Bangla, even though they do not have much formal education. Most of them think that the jargons they use are derived from Hindi and Urdu though it is challenging to find any Hindi or Urdu words in the registers they use. Some of the street hawkers are conscious of sharing their jargon with an outsider because they think that might lead to problems as they use those to tease and provoke some customers who are not willing to buy any product from them. The uniqueness of the registers of the street hawkers in Dhaka is that their professional language is different from others in terms of applying them in some particular situations. It is fascinating that a hawker selling a particular product shares different codes from those selling other products. Sometimes they share some similar registers as well.

Hawkers in common, for example, use ‘Jot’ to refer to the customer who would only bother them by asking for prices of different products but would not buy any. The jargons

they use are not derived from their native language or not even from English. They created completely different codes to communicate quickly and comfortably. The researchers became interested in investigating the occupational language of a marginal community because they realized that this type of working-class people in a busy city like Dhaka hardly get any attention in any sector of linguistic research, unlike some noble occupational groups like doctors, engineers, the army, and the police. Many other researchers have worked on the registers of various professional groups and explored plenty of significant results. Still, the indispensable professional group of street hawkers, who have created a potential language item for their smooth communication, is neglected as they do not have much economic solvency and proper educational background. Street hawkers in Dhaka share some different and meaningful jargons that are different from other occupational groups, and this should be discussed widely in sociolinguistics.

With this background, this study aims to answer the following research questions:

- a) What are the striking features of Dhaka street hawkers' registers?
- b) Why do they use these registers in their professional communication?

The results of the research are expected to enrich the study of the registers of underprivileged communities like street hawkers living miserably in developing countries across the world and also to place emphasis on an established language item created by a barely educated professional group.

Literature Review

Function of register

The functionalities of registers resemble the functionalities of an established language. Both have the functions of displaying the identity of the language users. According to Edward (2009), the importance of language as an identity marker at a group level is much more readily evident than accent, dialect, and language variations that reveal speakers' membership in particular speech communities, social classes, and ethnic and national groups. These kinds of variations are also a must when the groups are based on gender or age or extending the linguistic focus to include jargons, registers, and styles of occupation, club or gang membership, political affiliation, religious confession, and so on.

Regarding occupation, it can also show what the language user is doing. A transport worker's register might differ entirely from that of a doctor, for example. Apart from these, registers can differentiate a community or social group from one another. Registers can also help a language user apply a definite vocabulary set depending on the social situation. A single user can apply different registers in different situations. A register has to be purposive. There must be a purpose for using it. The purpose might be occupational or situational, or it can provide a specific meaning to another user without keeping others informed about the meaning.

Registering any language is one of the most exciting topics to be analyzed. A number of researchers have conducted studies on registers of various occupational groups. Hence, it needs to refer to some of them to make the current study more extensive.

Rahman and Mohiuddin (2014) mentioned that in sociolinguistics, a set of vocabulary that is available in a particular profession is known as register. The purpose of their study was to investigate the meaning of different jargon the transport workers use in Bangladesh and the reasons for choosing some particular words among them. It also scrutinized what the transport workers signify with the codes they use while communicating among themselves.

Holmes (2013) opined that the register is the language used in situations associated with such a group of people with common interests or jobs, and it refers to the use of a particular style of language by a specific group of people in conditions they are involved in. She also indicated that using a register depends on the context, and it is uttered by a particular occupational group in their activities. Therefore, the register is needed to be analyzed along with the situation or context. Holmes (2013) developed context or social factors that influence the application of registers. The social factors include participants, setting, topic, and function. The users of the language are called participants. Holmes (2013) divided the participants into addresser and addressee. The setting includes what time and where the conversation takes place. The topic is what is being talked about. It controls the idea of the conversation. Finally, the function describes the purpose of the conversations. It explains the function of the utterance, whether the utterance contains information or is used to show affection.

According to Wardaugh (2010), registers are the sets of language items associated with discrete occupational or social groups. Surgeons, airline pilots, bank managers, sales clerks, jazz fans, and pimps employ different registers. Jannah (2015), in her research on language registers on instant messages, aimed to analyze the form of registers and describe the use of instant messages in terms of the gender and age of the participants by using David Crystal's (1991) theory. The thesis uses a sociolinguistic approach and a descriptive qualitative method. She finds 24 forms of register on IM and the differences in the use of IM in terms of gender and age of participants, in which the female's language is politer than that of the young male. Ambarsari and Rusnaningtiyas (2016) explored the registers doctors use while they are in conversation with nurses in a hospital in Jawa Timur, Indonesia. They identify the features of the doctors' registers in association with their morphological features. The results reveal that the features of the registers or vocabulary they use in their professional communication are different from the vocabulary they use in other contexts. Regarding morphological features, they adopt clipping and abbreviation as the processes of word formation for developing their registers.

Haque and Mohiuddin's (2013) work found the causes, applications, and inspiration for using the high-frequency English lexical resources of the military registers in Bangladesh. They worked in a sensitive, prestigious, and nationally crucial occupational group with many activities at home and abroad. Ulfa (2010) tried to discover a register's features in English movie advertisements. This research aimed to characterize linguistic features, such as diction, variety of language, and figure of speech, and to describe how language variety and figure of speech characterize the register of English movie advertisements. Descriptive research and a purposive sampling technique were employed in the research. The data of

this research were the use of diction, the language variety, and the figures of speech in the register of written English movie advertisements by www.21cinplex.com, published in Jakarta Post from 2008 until April 2009. Ulfa (2010) found some special characteristics in the register based on the data analysis. Each characteristic of the language of movie advertisements covers a specific purpose and form.

Daristin (2015) identified the linguistic features of register in an auctioneer's talk, and she used some theories by Holmes, Radford, and Wells in her analysis. In that study, she found some features that marked the register of the auctioneers' talk. They were syntactic reduction, syntactic inversion, distinct vocabulary, and intonation patterns. Balzer-Siber (2015) examined the registers used by the announcers in television sports in broadcasting soccer in the United States. The study showed that the announcers use their own linguistic features to attract more viewers with an intention to promote production companies.

The similarity between all the papers reviewed above and this paper lies in the fact that they deal with sociolinguistic research, especially about registers. However, all those research works were primarily conducted with participants belonging to a higher class social group and are already included in many language-related discussions. Moreover, the registers they found mainly originated from English or the native language they use. The street hawkers' registers are unpredictable and not even derived from English or the native language, Bangla. The researchers have been interested in working with a marginal group's professional registers regarding their socio-educational and socio-economic conditions. This occupational group is the street hawkers in Dhaka who sell various necessary products to people and hardly get any attention from them in any sector. According to a report by *The Financial Express* (2022), around 300,000 street hawkers sell various commodities by hawking, and almost all have a low-income profile. They do not lead a polished life at all. Their educational background is not good, but they have formed an excellent social bonding. They express their identity by using a set of jargons while talking. Though they are native speakers of Bangla, they can use their jargons in a distinct form or by mixing them with Bangla. The researchers found that their professional jargons completely differ from the registers of other occupational groups. Doctors, engineers, and police use some professional language too. Still, most of them are taken from either Bangla or English, but the street hawkers have created a set of unique codes which are mostly not taken from English or Bangla or not a distorted form of them. Strangely, the registers created by the hawkers are not predictable for ordinary people to understand or have any clue about them.

Methodology

The researchers conducted this research in a natural setting by applying the qualitative research method. They used structured and semi-structured questions to collect data, interviewed the participants, and went through observation. All the data have been collected through direct observations and interviews. The data have also been collected from the situations when the hawkers were selling products to their customers in their working places and mostly when conversing with their fellow hawkers and assistants regarding selling their products. The researchers also made face-to-face verbal interactions with several hawkers selling different products and sought the information they need. At some places, three to

six inquisitive hawkers gathered and started to answer the researchers' questions, which also helped them to have a focused group discussion. Here, the researchers were able to investigate the similarities and dissimilarities of the jargons they share in their occupational sector. They also tried to compare and contrast the registers they provided based on their products. All interviews were conducted in Bangla and later translated and transcribed. The researchers used this method to describe the meaning of the registers the street hawkers in Dhaka apply in their profession, the reasons behind using them, and the effects they get from them.

Participants

To complete the research, the researchers interviewed 40 professional street hawkers. There were 15 hawkers selling shoes, 10 selling garment products, 5 selling fruits, 5 selling items like ribbons, bangles, and cosmetics, and the rest 5 selling kitchenware. Among the 40 hawkers, 30 were male and 10 were female. Interestingly, the researchers found that some female hawkers share standard registers when doing business. Most of them were 20 to 40 years old. All the hawkers did not have the chance to receive formal educational, and many of them could not get themselves admitted into any educational institutions. The comparatively young hawkers had some opportunity to study until class 5, but later, they could not continue due to the financial crisis of their families. Finally, the researchers interviewed 15 people working in different professions to investigate whether they could infer the semantic use of the registers used by the street hawkers.

Procedure for collecting data

Flick (2022) held that the observation and interview data are taken by identifying and selecting the individuals, getting permission, asking them, and gathering information. Ary et al. (2010) stated that data analysis is processing data which involves several stages: organizing, coding, interpreting, and representing. To collect data, the researchers selected Mirpur (1 to 10) and Gulistan, two essential and busy marketplaces. Firstly, being customers, the researchers observed various types of street hawkers selling different products on the street, like garment products, shoes, fruits, cosmetics, utensils, various electronic gadgets, books, etc., for almost one month and recorded the jargon they use while selling products to their customers. They generally use this set of code words with other hawkers selling the same products and with their assistants. Sometimes they create two or three interesting harmonic verses respecting the quality of their products and utter and recite them repeatedly in a very loud voice together with their fellow hawkers to get the customers' attention. The researchers wrote those jargons and verses on a piece of paper. They spent two weeks interviewing the target group and recording the interviews at Mirpur. Here, they managed to interview 3 groups for focus group discussion. It was very interesting that most of the group members came forward to make a group and give information on their own when they saw the researchers interviewing one of their fellow hawkers. Then the researchers went to Gulistan to collect data from the street hawkers selling different kinds of products. They found that most hawkers use similar jargons based on their products as the hawkers of Mirpur did. The researchers noted the jargons on a piece of paper.

Findings

This section describes the findings, discussions, and analysis of the study. The data have been analyzed based on interviews, observations, utterances, and structured and semi-structured questions. Through observation and analysis of the collected data, the researchers have tried to find answers to their research questions. They described the striking features of the street hawkers' registers in Dhaka city and why they use some particular set of jargons in their occupational communication. The researchers explained the meaning of the set vocabularies the street hawkers use and tried to understand the effectiveness of their registers in communication.

The street hawkers feel very proud of the jargon they acquired from their profession. These registers make their communication easy and comfortable in front of customers. Each hawker generally communicates with the other in their native language, Bangla. Still, in some situations, they use several codes carrying different meanings that are understood by them but not by the customers. All these hawkers are not very educated and come from lower economic conditions, such that their families may starve if they are unable to make sufficient sales.

Nevertheless, their bonds are strong, given the commonalities amongst them as explained earlier. They also use the registers to pretend to be a highly experienced business person for a particular product to do a profitable business with their wholesalers, to hide the real meaning from customers, to make fun of them, to disallow their assistants from selling a product, to get rid of some specific customers, to seek the attention of the customers, and sometimes even to cheat them.

Most of the street hawkers in Dhaka think that the jargons they use are derived from Hindi and Urdu though it is really difficult to find any Hindi or Urdu words in the registers they use. Some street hawkers are conscious of sharing their jargons with an outsider because they think that might bring problems as they use them to tease some customers unwilling to buy any product from them. The specialty of the registers of the street hawkers in Dhaka is that their professional language is different from others in terms of applying them in some particular situations. Interestingly, the hawker selling a product shares some different codes from those selling other products. Sometimes, they share some similar registers as well.

It is found from Tables 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6 that most of the registers are quite difficult and unpredictable for people in general. The researchers interviewed 15 general people from various professions except street hawking and found that most of the people failed to understand the registers used by the street hawkers.

The researchers found that the hawkers who sell shoes noticeably use a good set of jargons for their communication. They use it for easy communication. Sometimes they use them to hide information from the customer and even use them to make a good profit. For example, 2 pairs of the same-looking shoes might have different quality and buying prices. They can replace that pair of shoes with another pair of the same-looking shoes being

poorer in quality than the first pair by using their jargons with their assistant or the other fellow hawkers.

Table 1: Registers used by the street hawkers who sell shoes

| What they use | What they want to mean |
|-----------------------------------|---|
| Chao Maal [চাও মাল] | The quality of the product is not good. |
| Chol Maal [ছোল মাল] | The quality of the product is bad. |
| Goni [গনি] | Shoes |
| Tike [টিকে] | Available |
| Usai [উসাই] | Not available |
| Chitta [চিট্টা] | White |
| Ratta [রাত্তা] | Red |
| Cchia [ছিয়া] | Black |
| Lori [লোরি] | Profit |
| Ratta [রাত্তা] | Something liquid |
| Cchudda [ছুড্ডা] | Old man |
| Cchuddi [ছুড্ডি] | Old woman |
| Tasha [ট্যাশা] | Middle-aged male |
| Tashi [ট্যাশি] | Middle-aged female |
| Chung Mara Nera [চাং মারা ন্যারা] | Get rid of the customer |
| Fugari [ফুগারি] | Cigarette |

They also maintain many rare registers when they need to use any numerals. They use these registers to make their communication easier and time efficient, and to hide the real price of a product. The hawkers who sell shoes, cosmetics, and garment products, especially shoe sellers, mostly use these numeric registers for comfortable communication.

Table 2: Numeral registers of the street hawkers

| What they use | What they mean | What they use | What they mean |
|--------------------------|----------------|----------------------------------|----------------|
| Sung [সাং] | 01 | Tegla [তেগলা] | 13 |
| Sung Chitta [সাং চিট্টা] | 02 | Fugla [ফুগলা] | 14 |
| Ek Pai [এক পাই] | 03 | Budla [বুদলা] | 15 |
| Fook [ফুক] | 04 | Daagla [ড্যাগলা] | 16 |
| Bood [বুদ] | 05 | Paitla [পাইতলা] | 17 |
| Daag [ড্যাগ] | 06 | Mungla [মাংলা] | 18 |
| Pait [পাইত] | 07 | Koonla [কুনলা] | 19 |
| Tali [তালি] | 08 | Sudi [ছুদি] | 20 |
| Koon [কুন] | 09 | Lainga [লাইংগা] | 100 |
| Chola [ছলা] | 10 | Sung Lainga [সাং লাইংগা] | 200 |
| Egla [এগলা] | 11 | Ek Pai Lainga [এক পাই লাইংগা] | 300 |
| Jola [জলা] | 12 | Ek Pai Lainga [এক পাই লাইংগা] | 300 |

The hawkers who sell fruits on the street use some registers regarding the size of their products.

Table 3: Registers used by the street hawkers who sell fruit

| What they use | What they want to mean |
|--------------------|-------------------------------|
| Mati [মতি] | Best Quality |
| Kaat [কাট] | Small Size |
| Mazla [মজলা] | Medium Size |
| Thika [ঠিকা] | The unsold remaining products |
| Kek Maal [কেক মাল] | Low-quality product |

The researchers found that hawkers selling garment products and cosmetics use almost similar registers for their communication. They use them mostly when discussing the price of their products with other sellers. Hence, most often, their registers are about counting money.

Table 4: Registers used by the street hawkers who sell garment products and cosmetics

| What they use | What they want to mean |
|-------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| Ek Chala [এক চালা] | 10 Taka |
| Suti [ছুতি] | 20 Taka |
| Ek poka [এক পোকা] | 1000 taka |
| Lot Er MaaL [লট এর মাল] | Rejected products |
| Medical [মেডিকেল] | Products the customers want to change |

The researchers also found some common jargons used among all the street hawkers who sell different products. All these jargons have similar meanings for their comfortable understanding.

Table 5: Some common registers used by most of the hawkers

| What they use | What they want to mean |
|------------------------------|--|
| Jot Customer [জট কাস্টমার] | The customer who will not buy any product but bargain. |
| Maal Lara Koto [মাল লারা কত] | Asking about the buying price of a product |
| Usai [উছাই] | Telling a customer to leave |
| Lori sai [লরি উছাই] | Could not make any profit |
| Jot Maal [জট মাল] | Worst quality product |

Discussion and Recommendations

Language has been there since the beginning of society, but it has continued its function by changing its shape and form in case of necessities and situations. Different communities and occupational groups create, adopt, and use language for internal communication. A professional group with the identity of street hawkers, living mostly on the roads and suffering daily to gain a solvent livelihood, have created a distinct set of registers purposively for their easy communication, which is mostly unpredictable for the general public. Truly speaking, we do not bother about their lifestyles, sorrows, and sufferings; we do not even care about the language they use as they live a lower-class lifestyle. Nevertheless, they have been practicing their registers smoothly for a very long time. As native speakers of Bangla, they are not deriving any words from it but creating their own jargons with a set of different vocabularies. Most of them do not realize that they have acquired these jargons from Bangla, but some of them believe that these registers are a mixed version of Urdu and Hindi. However, the researchers could not identify whether their registers originated from Hindi or Urdu as their registers do not sound like either of these languages.

Wardaugh (2010) stated that a “register is a set of language items associated with a discrete occupational and social group” (p. 48). Here all the registers of street hawkers are indecipherable to other professional groups, and they have been able to establish their registers as independent and exclusive as they can use them as native speakers of their specific language items.

Rahman and Mohiuddin (2014) stated, “Having a sound socio-educational and socio-cultural background, the Army personnel of Bangladesh create, generate and use registers and jargons, some of which are unknown and unpredictable to us” (p. 62). On the other hand, a community with no socio-educational and socio-cultural background is really advanced in maintaining particular and well-established language items for their needs. They are underprivileged in terms of education, social status, and culture and lag behind other professional groups, but they use their registers effectively to create smooth communication among them. Most of the time, they use the registers to attract customers, make a profit, express the quality of a product, fix the price, cheat, and tease customers, and sometimes pretend to be experienced business people to the retailers. The study’s findings are discussed judiciously so that language users, planners, and policymakers can be aware of the language competence and repertoire of a marginal community. One of the important reasons for choosing the street hawkers was to signify the language variation of a lower class group who would get some attention in sociolinguistics research.

Table 6: Relationship among field, tenor, and mode

| Registers | Field | Tenor Speaker-Hearer | Mode |
|--|---|--------------------------|---|
| <i>Damer maal kome loy</i> It means that the normal price of the product is high, but they are selling at a cheaper rate. | Uttered to draw the attention of the customers | Hawkers to the customers | Spoken registers are uttered to serve the purposes. |
| <i>Vabi nile vai khushi</i> It means that if the wife buys the product at a cheaper rate, the husband will be happy. | Uttered to gain the attention of the female customers | Hawkers to the customers | |
| <i>Jot niye kot khaiyen na</i> It means that customers should not buy any bad products from other hawkers. | Uttered to make the customers aware of the bad quality of other hawkers' products | Hawkers to the customers | |

| | | | |
|--|---|-------------------------------|--|
| <i>Chung mara nera</i> It means that the salesperson/shopkeeper should not pay attention to a customer. | Uttered to make their partners or assistants drive away the customers | Hawkers to the fellow hawkers | Spoken registers are uttered to serve the purpose. |
| <i>Taguri takte jabo</i> It means that someone wants to take leave for some time. | Uttered to inform their partner about his leaving and having a meal | Hawkers to the fellow hawker | |
| <i>Lori Usai</i> It means that the salesperson/shopkeeper should sell a product without any profit. | Uttered to inform another hawker about not making a profit | Hawkers to the fellow hawkers | |

Conclusion

The method of coining registers and the recurrence of using them by the street hawkers have become a fundamental and natural part of their verbal repertoire. The street hawkers have a poor socio-educational, socio-economic, and socio-cultural perspective, but they have created a strong bond and set of language items according to their needs and demands. Societal needs and demands of a community affect and dominate the language of that particular community. The use of language and every element of language bear an identity for every social and occupational group. The street hawkers in Dhaka have to lead terrible lives. They must work hard to earn their livelihood. They do not have good living facilities and must work in rough and tough conditions on the street. But their major attraction is their registers. With their registers, they maintain a good sociolinguistic feature that nobody has revealed yet. Their registers are distinct and established for smooth communication in their professional field. They use them very comfortably and boldly in front of the general public and share some jargons with their colleagues to fulfill their purposes.

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