

# Language attitudes and child-directed speech in Bangladeshi Bangla

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## Abstract

This study examines morphological variation in child-directed speech (CDS) of native Bangla-speaking families from Bangladesh by analysing the style-shift between standard and non-standard Bangla with a focus on present-tense verb forms: e.g., *korchi* do.1sg.pres (standard) vs *kortesi* do.1sg.pres (non-standard). Style shifting has been found to occur variably in CDS depending on the age and gender of the addressee as well as language attitudes of the addresser. Proceeding from an initial analysis of the variable use of standard and non-standard verbforms, we focus on quantitatively analysing language attitudes of potential relevance for patterns of style shift. The aim of this is to gain an understanding of the motivation behind interlocuters' style shifting choices in CDS.

Keywords: Bangla, Bangladesh, child directed speech, language attitudes

## Introduction

This paper investigates child-directed speech (henceforth, CDS) of native Bangla speakers in Bangladesh and the style shifting between standard and non-standard Bangla through morphological variation. Subsequently, it also focuses on the language attitudes of relevance for each variety amongst the speakers.

Child-directed speech (CDS) refers to speech directed towards infants by their parents or caregivers; it is also called baby talk or caregiver speech (Van De Mierop et al. 2016; Reese et al. 1996). Smith et al. (2007) mention that when addressing very young children, mothers are prone to use standard variants more frequently. This is notable as children are typically exposed to high levels of input from female caregivers in the early acquisition phases (Labov 1990).

Although there have been studies regarding CDS in other languages focusing on children's exposure to one variety over the other (Foulkes et al. 2005; Van De Mierop et al. 2016), these studies have not touched upon the more general language attitudinal factors that underlie patterns of style-shift. Therefore, this study aims to explore how language attitudes affect patterns of variation in CDS with a specific focus on Bangla as an understudied language in this area.

Indeed, Bangladeshi Bangla is particularly complex in this respect due to an established situation of diglossia. Two main speech codes or registers can be identified: Shadhu Bhasha (SBh) refers to the standard prestigious literary variety, whereas Cholito Bhasha (CBh, 'current language') is a non-standard colloquial variety that is used in informal day-to-day conversation.

## Research aims

Based on first-hand observation of parental speech habits in everyday conversation, we suspect that SBh occurs with particularly high frequency in Bangla CDS. We therefore sought to measure use of the two registers in parent-to-child speech and to observe whether the variation is affected by parental gender, child gender and/or child age. We also aimed to investigate how SBh and CBh are evaluated by adult speakers. Our expectation in this regard is that gaining an understanding of the language attitudes that Bangla speakers associate with the two registers could help to explain why parents may prefer to interact with their children using the prestige register.

## Methods

Responding to these goals, we first analysed patterns of morphological variation in a series of YouTube vlogs created by five Bangladeshi families. Vlog data was chosen due to the lack of Bangla CDS corpora. We focused our analysis of verbforms in parent-to-child and parent-to-parent interactions. This decision is motivated by the fact that SBh and CBh are mainly differentiated by their verbal morphology: e.g., SBh *korchi* vs CBh *kortesi* (do.1SG.PRES in both cases). Secondly, using a combination of focus groups and online questionnaires, we surveyed 102 Bangla speakers (54 females, 48 males) about their attitudes towards SBh and CBh. In the online questionnaire, we asked respondents to evaluate both registers and to provide ratings for a set of social attributes. This included formality, educatedness, friendliness, masculinity vs femininity as well as childishness, slanginess and trendiness.

## Results

Our findings regarding modulation between SBh and CBh in the corpus of YouTube vlogs are summarised in Figure 1 (see Authors ANON for a full analysis). We observe approximately a 50:50 split between use of SBh and CBh verbforms in interparental speech. SBh, however, occurs with greater frequency in all parent-child interactions. Although use of the prestige code is high when both mothers and fathers address their sons, a striking finding is that CBh is rarest in speech directed at daughters, particularly in mother-daughter speech.

Turning now to our findings from the attitudinal survey, Figure 2 summarises the responses to the social-attribute ratings task. In general, in comparison to CBh, the prestige register, SBh, is rated as being less trendy, less slangy, less friendly and less rural-sounding. CBh as the non-prestige register achieves lower ratings for formality and educatedness, and is evaluated as sounding somewhat more rural, lower class and childish. Interestingly, neither register is strongly associated either with feminine or masculine-sounding speech. And contrary to our expectations, SBh receives a slightly lower rating than CBh with regard to middle class status.

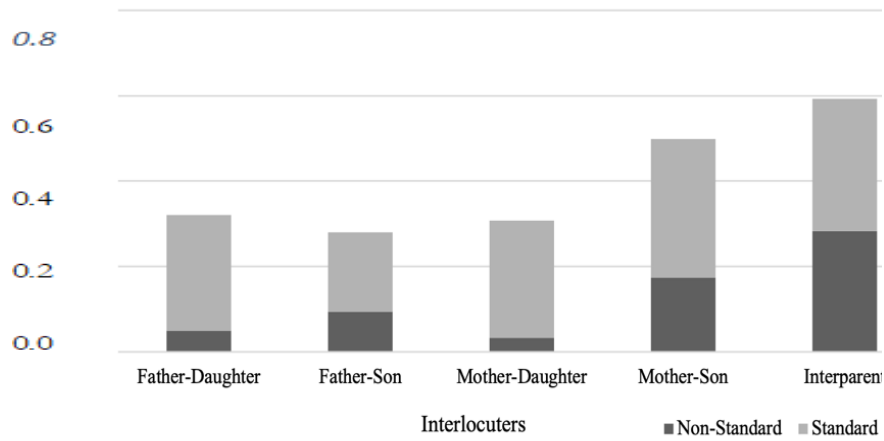


Figure 1. Style shifting in CDS.

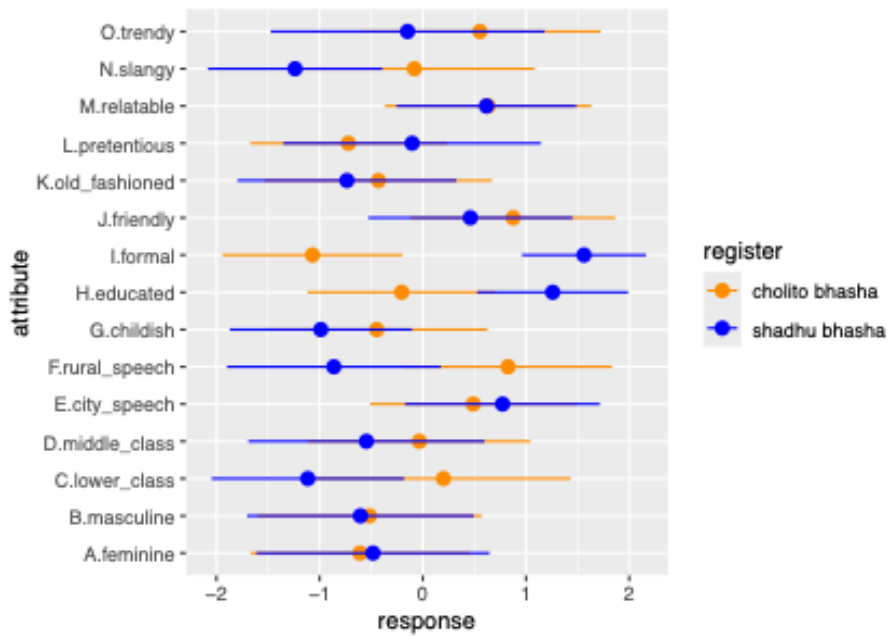


Figure 2. Attitude ratings for CBh and SBh: y-values indicate degree of agreement (-2 = “strongly disagree, 2 = “strongly agree”).

## Discussion and conclusion

The results gained from the study show, in accordance with previous research on CDS, that Bangladeshi parents favour the standard prestige register of Bangla when addressing children. Whilst this tendency is observed in all CDS, gender produces strong effects. Both mothers and fathers appear to suppress use of the non-standard register when addressing their sons. However, this effect is much more pronounced when parents address their daughters. Indeed, it is in mother–daughter interactions that we observe greatest use of SBh overall.

Although we were not fully able to investigate child age as a predictor of variation, De Houwer (2003) reports that older children are gradually shifted towards inter-adult speech patterns. Foulkes et al. (2005) also make the observation that parents gradually revert to speaking as they would to an adult as children grow up and CDS diminishes. We did note in the YouTube videos that older children tended to be exposed to fewer standard forms and a greater number of non-standard forms. Nevertheless, further work will be necessary in order to assess whether this is a robust finding for Bangla.

Regarding language attitudes, our study has uncovered some interesting patterns in terms of the social meanings attached to CBh and SBh. Given the clear effects in language use where interactions between parental and child gender appear to condition different usage of the two registers, it is striking to observe that neither register appears to carry strong gender associations. We suggest that it is the dimensions of social meaning where SBh and CBh are evaluated most differently that probably play a role in parental style shifting. That is, the perceived formality and educatedness of SBh versus the rural-sounding character of CBh which may also overlap with its association with lower class speech.

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