

A Sociolinguistic Survey on Personal Pronouns in Assamese

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I. Introduction

As Coulmas (2005:52) observes ‘Language is a tradition, which flows from one generation to another. It is handed down from one generation to the next in a way that allows members of coexisting generations to communicate.’ But it is not handed down unaltered. For, each generation gradually recreates the language of its predecessors along with their changing lifestyle with the passage of time.

The term ‘personal’ is used to label the class as it is the type of pronouns to which the grammatical category of person applies. The personal pronoun in the language is a five-term system having a tripartite distinction for person- 1 (first person), 2 (second person) and 3 (third person), with the second and third persons additionally exhibiting a three-term distinction for social status. First person indicates the reference to the speaker, second person to the hearer or addressee and third person is the default term in the system which includes all those excluding the speaker and the addressee. All the categories have singular-plural forms, with the singular third person category additionally exhibiting gender as well as spatial deictic distinctions of proximal and distal. The following Table 1 displays personal pronouns.

Table 1 : Personal pronouns

Person	Singular						plural	
	proximal			distal			proximal	distal
	M	F	NEU	M	F	NEU	NEU	NEU
1	mœ ‘I’						ami ‘we’	
2 ₁	apuni ‘you’						apona-lok /-hōkol ‘you’	
2 ₂	tumi ‘you’						toma-lok ‘you’	
2 ₃	tœ ‘you’						tō-hōt ‘you’	
	proximal			distal			proximal	distal
	M	F	NEU	M	F	NEU	NEU	NEU
3 ₁			ek ^h et ‘s/he’			tek ^h et ‘s/he’	ek ^h et-hōkol ‘they’	tek ^h et-hōkol ‘they’
3 ₂			əv ‘s/he’			təv ‘s/he’	təv-lok ‘they’	təv-lok ‘they’
3 ₃	i ‘he’	ei ‘she’		hi ‘he’	tæ ‘she’		i-hōt ‘they’	hi-hōt / təhat ‘they’

Table 1 exhibits the personal pronouns in Asamiya as a class of twenty two (22) members (the optional forms are not counted). The empty boxes in the Table 1 represent absence of forms. The first column shows the person categories, with the subtypes of the second and third persons divisible into honorific, familiar and ordinary according to the nature of the social status of referents. The honorific person 2 and 3 are shown with subscripts as 2₁ and 3₁, the familiar ones as 2₂ and 3₂ and the ordinary ones as 2₃ and 3₃. Although the pronouns of 3₃ exhibit spatial contrasts of proximal and distal, the distal pronouns are used as default forms, unless two referents in the same context need to be distinguished. The singular forms of 3₃ inherently encode gender differentiations as masculine and feminine, while 3₁ and 3₂ are gender-neutral forms. The plural variants of 3₃ are also used as gender-neutral forms for both male and female referents of human and non-human as well as inanimate objects with appropriate plural markers. The 3rd person pronoun has a special high honorific form (3H) *tera*, used specifically to refer to God or a saint or a very revered person.

All the singular personal pronouns and the plural first person are basic stems, but the plural second and third person pronouns are derived by suffixation of plural classifiers (Chowdhary 2012:282-283) to oblique stems of the corresponding singular pronouns. The plural classifiers consist of three members - *hōkol*, *-lok* and *-hōt /-hat* encoding social register as well as plurality. In orthography, a plural personal pronoun composed of an oblique stem plus a plural classifier are written as one word, but for ease of identification they are hyphenated in the tabular representation above.

It is important to note that in the glosses of examples of pronoun, only the associated grammatical information are shown, leaving aside the inherent semantic information, unless both are warranted by certain contexts.

II. The hypothesis

To avoid any ambiguity or misunderstanding a clearly formulated list of following hypothesis are intuitively formulated against the language data.

Hypothesis 1

There are differences in frequencies of choosing the particular forms of 2nd and 3rd person pronouns to refer to the people, males and females in the public sphere.

Hypothesis 2

Females use ordinary forms of 2nd and 3rd person pronouns more than males.

Hypothesis 3

There are differences between the young and adults / seniors (both males and females) in choosing the particular forms of 2nd and 3rd persons to refer to the social superiors in different contexts of discourse.

Hypothesis 4

The young people use the 2nd and 3rd person ordinary forms of personal pronouns more than the adult / senior ones.

Hypothesis 5

Ordinary forms are not more frequently used in the responses in public by people in their regular speech habits.

Hypothesis 6

The extensive use of ordinary forms are considered as improper.

Hypothesis 7

There are no differences in the use of pronominal forms in spontaneous conversation.

Hypothesis 8

There are differences between the males and females (both young and adult/senior) in selecting a pronoun in formal and informal situations.

Hypothesis 9

Male speakers use the 1st person plural pronoun in exclusive sense, whereas female speakers tend to use them in inclusive sense.

Hypothesis 10

Male speakers use more pronouns than females.

Hypothesis 11

Ordinary forms are used equally in written and spoken forms by males and females also in translations from English into Asamiya.

III. Methodology of the survey

Descriptive survey method was used for the present study. A questionnaire is designed with both open and closed questions to elicit information relating to personal pronouns from the participants in the survey. As the study is descriptive in approach, all the successive stages are oriented accordingly. The results of the field survey on the use of personal pronouns is displayed in statistical graphs and tables.

Sampling of the survey

Four hundred (400) participants, both male and female, were interviewed in the study. These four hundred (400) participants were randomly selected by personally visiting colleges, canteens, public places like markets, bus / railway stations etc. Later the contacted participants were classified into five (5) groups according to age, viz. 15-25, 26-36, 37-47, 48-58, 59-69. Thus, the sampling design is adopted through a random sampling¹ procedure with post stratification². Age groups constitute the strata³. The following Table 2 shows the number of participants of different age groups (strata).

Table 2: The number of participants in different age groups (strata)

Age group	Participants		
	Male	Female	Total
15-25	100	105	205
26-36	55	45	100
37-47	25	20	45
48-58	12	16	28
59-69	12	10	22

From each of the selected individuals necessary information have been collected.

Tools for data collection

As the study is confined to literate people only, the illiterate respondents were ruled out. This includes the elderly respondents or participants who might not themselves fill in the questionnaire as well as those who cannot spare unduly long time for providing required information. Non-participants were not considered in this study.

In order to have uniformity, comparability and generalization, the present study has opted for paying due attention to study objectives / hypothesis and the key issues arising from them. Towards this end, a structured questionnaire, covering such dimensions as identifying information has been developed. It consists of seven (7) parts I, II, III, IV, V, VI and VII. Initial draft was thoroughly edited and reviewed by several experienced researchers. It was then pre-tested on fifty (50) young adults and fifty (50) seniors belonging to various parts of Guwahati. In the light of pre-testing, the interview schedule was modified in terms of contents, thrust and communication. It was planned that interview would be conducted in Assamese (except the part-V) to create a normal or general, relaxed and friendly atmosphere for the survey, but the questionnaire would be in English, the medium of the study.

IV. The questionnaire

A specially designed and pre-tested questionnaire was distributed to the selected native speakers to answer instantly on the spot at a single sitting. The filled up questionnaires were evaluated by allotting numeral scores or grades, depending on the pattern of the answers required immediately.

The questionnaire composed of seven (7) parts with both open and closed questions is aimed to provide opportunity to the participants to express their views in their own words, as their choices are not fixed. The questionnaire was designed to check the correlation in choice of pronouns, argumentation, interactional and conversational behaviour etc. between the responses and attitudes of the participants. Some follow-up interviews were conducted to confirm the results immediately after the questionnaire was completed and after a considerable time span had taken place.

Collection of data

The present study relied upon both primary and secondary data. During primary data collection, the researcher paid several visits to schools, colleges, academic institutions like university, research centres, offices, hostels, residential colonies / flats, parks etc. Many a times a lot of participants helped the researcher to approach other people of their locality or area. During interviews, a number of participants shared their life-experiences and feelings, apart from the issues covered in the questionnaire. Except in a few cases the participants offered full help and co-operation to the researcher. Collection of primary data took six months.

The secondary data were gathered from recorded and taped interviews and written materials such as newspapers, magazines, books on short stories, dramas, novels, children literature etc. on various subjects of science, arts and commerce collected from libraries, personal and official letters were also included. Some information were collected by visiting schools, colleges, offices, banks, canteens, restaurants, public places like bazars, shopping malls, railway stations, bus stations and watching plays, films and programmes telecast by T.V. channels, and listening to programmes broadcast by radio.

Analysis of data

Both the types of data thus collected were processed by classifying, tabulating and presenting them diagrammatically where suitable. However, processing of primary data involved some more steps. Since the researcher herself collected data, any inconsistency was cross-checked at the time of interview itself. The completed data were re-checked for errors in recording. In certain cases the data were subjected to further scrutiny. Responses of some open questions were listed out and analysed separately. Further more, in few cases the information thus gathered were analysed and recorded on the basis of the interviewer's observations. At the planning stage itself, a detailed scheme was prepared, which was modified at the successive stages of the implementation of the work. In the present form, the report is divided into seven (7) parts divisible into some sub-parts.

The scheme

The following is a bird's eye view of the scheme of analysis, divided into seven (7) parts.

- Part-I Visual focus was given to the participants for making the choice and use of ordinary forms of 2nd and 3rd in unmonitored situations.
- Part-II Opinion polls were conducted to elicit responses from participants about social relationships.
- Part-III Participants' likes and dislikes for using and choosing a particular form were elicited.
- Part-IV Through the slot fillings it was tried to determine the actual as opposed to desired usages.
- Part-V Through the process of translation from English into Asamiya the individual choices were identified.

Part-VI It is related with the roles of socio-psychological conditions of the participants in the process of choosing and using pronouns.

Part-VII It focuses on the participants' own judgement regarding the choice and use of personal pronouns in context of discourse.

Finally, a summary and conclusions are presented.

Participants of the survey

The participants were not only the native speakers of Assamese, but also those who originally hailed from other peech communities with Assamese as their first language.

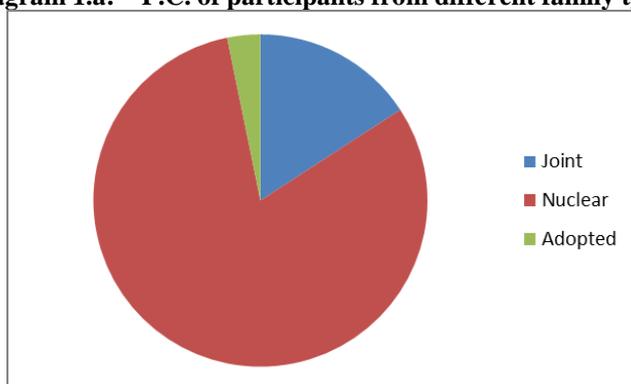
Information about the participants

Following is a brief description of the social, economic, educational backgrounds of the participants.

Family background

Family-type determines, to some extent, the kind of language they use. In the present study the participants living in a joint or extended family was only 15.8 %. On the other hand, as per the trend of the present day the neuclear family groups were the largest one, i.e., 81.0%. The participants belonging to adopted families (those participants not living in their natural family or living with distance relatives or with family friends) was 3.2 %.

Diagram 1.a: P.C. of participants from different family types



Gender

Due to the diversity and complexity of gender roles, a special and clear focus is made in this survey on interdisciplinary, qualitative and context-sensitive approach to access the domain of 'gender and language' with special reference to use of personal pronouns.

Age

Chronological age is a significant indicator of allocation of roles and responsibilities in any society. The participants were from the age group of young adults to elderly people. The age grading⁴ of participants are indicated in the following Table 3.

Table 3: The age grading of participants

Age group / grade (years)	No. of participants labeled
15-25	X ₁
26-36	X ₂
37-47	X ₃
48-58	X ₄
59-69	X ₅

Total participants, $\Sigma X_i = X_1 + X_2 + X_3 + X_4 + X_5 = N$

The term *age groups* or *age grade* is used to refer to the average performance of a particular 'age group.' Most of them had a fairly high familiarity with English. This is not to say that they were fluent or even semi-fluent speakers of English, rather it means they had been exposed to English language for quite some time.

Educational level

As the survey is confined to literate participants only, the range of education of the participants were from intermediate to post graduate level mainly, but some of the participants had degrees above the post graduate level. Table 4 represents the educational status of the participants of the survey.

Table 4: Educational status of the participants

Age group	Intermediate	Bachelor degree	Master degree	Higher degree
15-25	58.2%	41.8%		
26-36		38.1%	51.7%	
37-47			34.0%	13.8%
48-58			13.1%	11.0%
59-69			1.2%	5.2%

Occupational patterns

Occupational patterns very often give an indication of the economic position and life-style of individuals. Participants working in government and private sectors were considered and a special focus or attention was made on the language pattern of working woman and non-working women with reference to the use of pronouns. The following Table 5 gives a comparative view of past and present occupational patterns of the participants.

Table 5: Occupational patterns of the participants

Occupation	Age group < 40	Age group > 65
Non-worker	12.0%	54.2%
Government service / pension	14.0%	30.6%
Private service / undertaking	65.1%	8.5%
Self-employment	8.9%	6.7%

Mother tongue

Mother tongue is not only a means of communication but also an indicator of cultural background, and even psycho-social make-up of persons. In the study sample 85% of the participants used Assamese as their mother tongue and 10% originally hailing from different speech communities later accepted Assamese as their mother tongue and remaining 5% belonged to different tribes having their own languages but used Assamese as the lingua-franca.

Location / Area

Participants of the survey belonged to both rural and urban areas. The influence of locality on the language users is a matter of the study. Altogether 400 individuals including young adults, adults and seniors, both male and female, were interviewed. The following Table 6 exhibits area-wise percentage distribution of the participants involved in the survey.

Table 6: Area-wise distribution of participants

Participants	Area	
	Rural	Urban
Male	48.3%	51.7%
Female	40.9%	59.1%

Marital status

Marital status plays an important role in the life of human beings. The effects of choosing the particular form(s) of pronoun(s) between spouses also reflect the individual's personality, views and impressions.

Neighbouring speech communities

The influence of neighbouring speech communities on the target language cannot be ignored in the case of language studies. Apart from Assamese, Assam has many other inhabitants with distinct customs, traditions and languages. Thus, the languages of the neighbouring speech communities play a significant role in influencing Assamese language.

The research design

The various question patterns, procedures of execution and the findings are presented in the following under seven (6) parts research design.

Part-I was designed to elicit answers to questions concerning actual uses. Some pictures / comic strips were placed together on a table and the participants were asked to pick at least two (one at a time) and asked to

explain what were the circumstances or who the people were being pictured and what might be the dialogues of each in the given pictures / comic strips. (These pictures / comic strips contained both male and female characters with variables in age, gender, occupation and social status in both formal and informal situations). For scoring purpose only responses were focused, ignoring the process of selection of the pictures. After filling up a speech bubble on a picture / cartoon strip, the participant was handed over another strip to fill up by using ordinary forms of pronouns at least once or more than once in this task.

V. Findings

(a). Part I reveals that a significantly higher number of young people (especially the age group of 15-25 and 26-36) use ordinary forms of personal pronouns like *tœ*, *i/hi*, *ei/tae* than the elder ones (i.e., age group of 37-47, 48-58, 59-69) who prefer familiar forms like *tumi*, *œv*, *tœv* in the same context of discourse.

(b) Females use ordinary forms more than males, completely ignoring their age, occupation, education, social status etc. While interacting with opposite gender, the males make use of the ordinary forms less than females who can easily switch to ordinary forms in their spontaneous speech habits.

(c) Again, it has been found that in a formal situation the females switch to the familiar forms as opposed to an informal situation in which most of them use the ordinary forms for the same referent. But the rate of use of pronouns (ordinary and familiar forms) remains more in case of males. Data show that among the participants, 62% of female participants switched to familiar forms to address the servant shown in the picture, while among the male participants, only 10% switched to the ordinary forms in the same situation. It seems females are more self-conscious about their image in front of others.

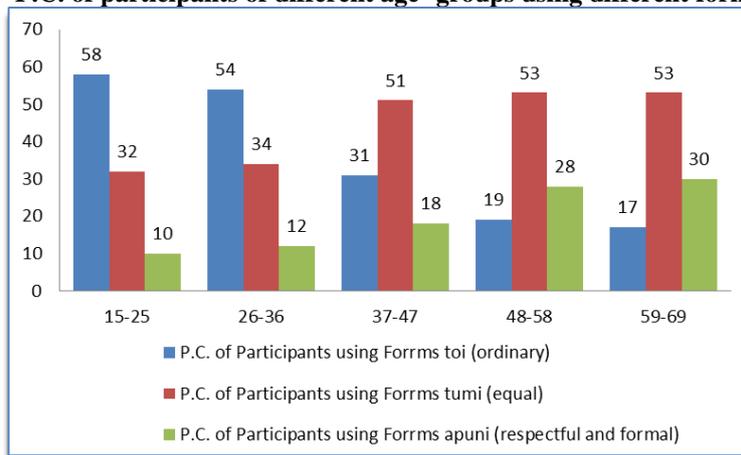
Table 7 depicts the use of ordinary forms by participants while filling up the dialogues in the pictures / comic strips.

Table 7: The use of ordinary forms by the participants

Ordinary forms of personal pronouns	Male (%)	Female (%)
<i>tœ</i> 2 ₃	66.7	87.6
<i>i/ei</i> 3 ₃		
<i>hi/tae</i> 3 ₃		

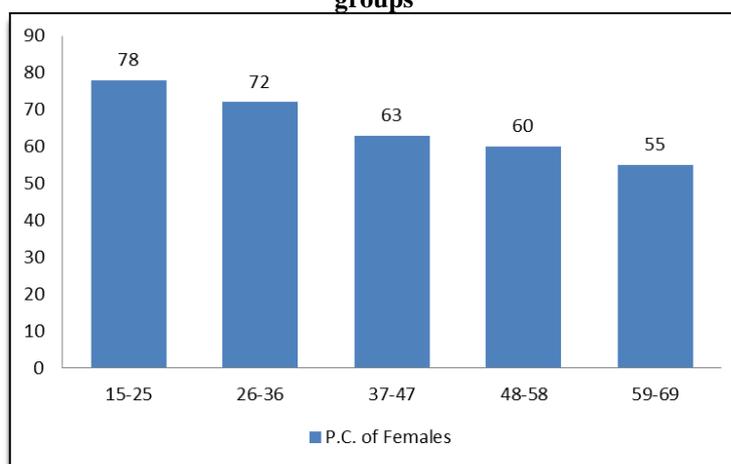
The table reveals that the female participants use the 2nd and 3rd person ordinary pronouns much more than their male counterparts. The following Diagram 1.b displays the participants' overall use of ordinary forms of 2nd and 3rd person pronouns.

Diagram 1.b: P.C. of participants of different age- groups using different forms of pronouns



As seen from the Diagram 1.b, though the young generation uses ordinary forms more frequently than the elder ones / seniors, among the young adults, particularly the females tend to choose ordinary forms more. At the same time they always have the tendency to switch to other forms according to the demands of the context of discourse, while males do not switch to other forms in the same context. The differences between the age group of 48-58 and 59-69 is quite less, while the difference is more or vast between the age group of 15-25 and 59-69. The following Diagram 1.c depicts the percentage of the use of ordinary pronouns by females in overall situations.

Diagram 1.c: The percentage of use of ordinary forms of pronouns by female participants of different age groups



In Part-II each individual was given a questionnaire with questions relating to socio-cultural background of the participants and was asked to fill it in with appropriate forms of pronouns as well as to express their personal feelings, opinions, experiences, ideas in the process of selection and use of the particular form of pronouns in day -to -day situations.

Findings

Most parts of the questionnaire were self-explanatory and participants became conscious or were in a state of over-consciousness while completing the particulars. The major difficulty with this part of the questionnaire was that often the participant’s response was based not on what s/he believed s/he should do, but on what s/he wanted to believe s/he did.

One reason behind this conflicting psycho-socio mental state is that the participants were asked to report his / her own personal reactions. So in order to draw the actual form from the participants, an informal atmosphere was created by discussing some incidents relating to the life of some celebrities or the personal or private life of the participants themselves. Following are some of the major issues as per the questionnaire that have been unraveled in the process of the survey.

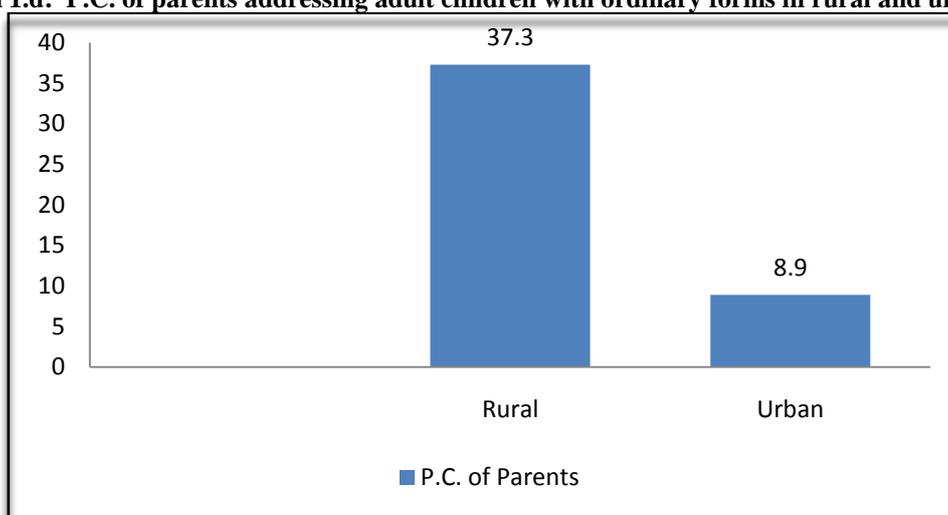
(A) Most of the young spouses use familiar and ordinary forms reciprocally to refer to each other. Only 20% of females of the total participants use honorific forms to address their husbands, while 5% of them are referred to by their husbands by ordinary forms in return. Interestingly, the 40% (belongs to age group 48-58, 59-69) females use honorific forms while referring to their husbands, as according to them the husband is the head of the family. In comparison to this feeling, 95% of males are neutral and only 3% agree with them. It shows that a female has a feeling of dependency or inferiority complex. However, most of the female participants who are not addressed with the ordinary forms by their husbands also strongly feel that a husband should not refer to his wife with ordinary forms.

(B) A vast difference of opinion is found among the participants regarding the matter of selection of pronouns to refer to parents- in-laws. 45% of the young participants prefer to address their parents- in-laws with the same form of pronoun as they use to refer to their parents. All of them use familiar forms to refer to their parents. While most of the participants of age group of 37-47, 48-58, 59-69 are of the opinion that they should address their parents-in-laws with honorific forms only. Some of them are of the opinion that this relationship is made not by birth and it is in a very rare case that parents-in-laws can be replaced by one’s own parents. So, it would be better both sociologically and psychologically to address parents-in-laws with honorific forms to maintain a social distance. Very interestingly, the vast differences in opinions is found in case of males of age group 15-25, who think that it is better to address the parents-in-laws not as ‘father or mother’ but with the English kinship terms like ‘uncle’ and ‘aunty’ (which however, have no literal equivalents in Assamese). They believe, this will help the participant to place his / her in-laws as their parents’ friends and thus establish a relationship of intimacy. 15% of male participants express such opinions and also feel that there is no hard and fast rule that the parents-in-laws should be referred with the same form as their parents. Though the participants of the young group (15-25) prefer to address their parents-in-laws with the same form as their parents. Only 5% are able to use it in practice, while others use either the honorific or the familiar forms of personal pronouns to refer to their parents. 35% of them use ordinary forms to refer to their mother, but switch to the familiar form to refer to their mother-in-laws. This proves that extensive use of ordinary forms are not considered as proper.

Most of the participants of age groups 15-25 and 26-36 are of the opinion that the elder sister / brother in-law should be referred with familiar forms, while most of the participants of the age groups 37-47, 48-58 and 59-69 prefer to address them with the honorific forms only. Many participants of these two groups opined that in case of a spouse's elder brother / sister-in-law the age or gender differentiations between the addresser and addressee were ignored, as social norms of honorificity is given priority according to the tradition. So even if one's wife's elder sister is younger to him, he has to address the elder sister of his wife with the honorific form as a social norm of politeness and honorificity. But it is up to the elder sister whether she would address her younger sister's husband with either familiar or honorific form. Both are acceptable by the social norm.

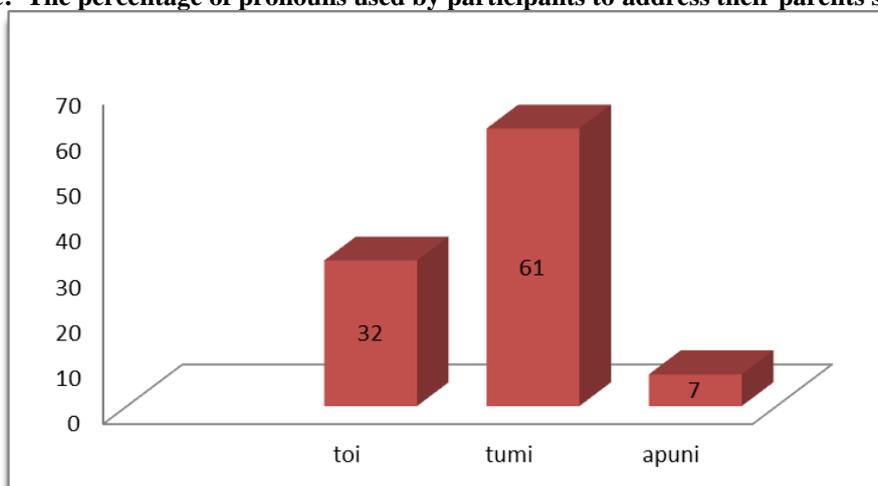
(C) It is also found that baby and kids are very rarely addressed with ordinary forms by their parents. 70% of parents use ordinary forms to refer to their older children (teenager and adult). The working and married adult children are mostly addressed with familiar forms. However, in a rural area 37.3% of adult children are addressed with ordinary forms, while the percentage is 8.9 in urban areas as represented by Diagram 1.d.

Diagram 1.d: P.C. of parents addressing adult children with ordinary forms in rural and urban areas.



(D) 60% of the participants prefer to address their parents with the familiar forms. 40% of the participants of the age group of 26-36 and 50% of the age group of 35-45 prefer to address their parents asymmetrically. While 70% are for the use of ordinary forms to address their mother, 30% of participants never address their father with ordinary forms. This reflects an intimate relationship between the mother and the child as against the patriarchal domination of society. 12% of the participants prefer honorific form to address their fathers only, while 7% of the participants use honorific form to address their parents. 32% of participants use ordinary forms to address their parents, as represented by Diagram 1.e.

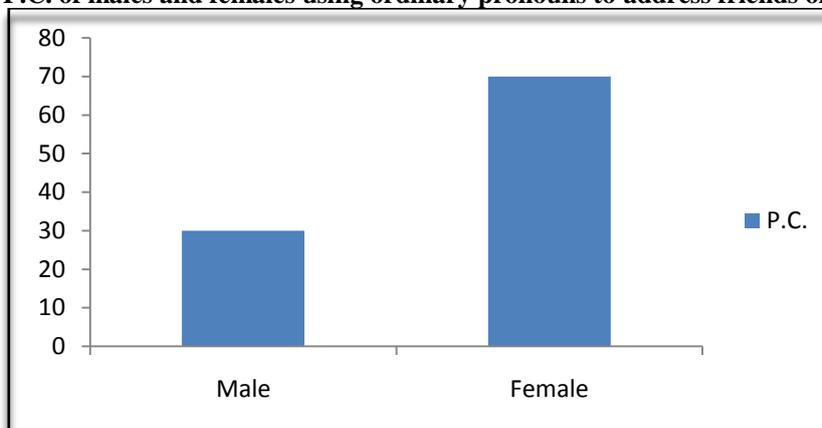
Diagram 1.e: The percentage of pronouns used by participants to address their parents symmetrically



- (E) Among the participants 21% of the grand-children use the honorific forms to refer to their grand-parents, while, 70% use familiar forms and 8.9% use ordinary forms.
- (F) In urban areas most of the grand-parents use familiar forms to address their grand children. In rural areas 70% of them use ordinary forms, while 30% use familiar forms. But in an urban area the percentages of using the familiar forms is 63.7 and ordinary forms is 33% respectively. The differences in age groups of grand children do not make any distinct changes in case of use of pronouns by their grand parents.
- (G) Most of the children use honorific forms to address their parents' friends, 12% of the participants prefer to use the same forms they use to address their parents depending on their degree of intimacy with them. 5% of the participants prefer to use the same forms to refer to parents' friends of different gender (i.e., father's female friend or mother's male friend) depending on this condition. Three cases are found where the participants (9 male and 9 female) prefer ordinary forms and fifteen cases are found where the participants use familiar forms to refer to their father's female and mother's male friends.
- (H) The children of the age group of 15-25 keep no differences in the selectional process of a pronoun to address their elder or younger siblings. 90% use the ordinary forms reciprocally. The difference is found in case of participants of age group of 55-65. 20% of these participants use honorific forms to address their elder siblings. Interestingly, most of them are addressed by ordinary forms by their elders in return. Again 13% of the age group of 26-36, 10% of the age group of 37-47 and 20% of the age group of 48-58 use familiar forms to address their younger siblings. Most of them prefer to switch forms or keep differences between the elder/younger siblings, specially when s/he is the only girl / boy child of the family or the age differences is vast.
- (I) 60% of the participants prefer familiar forms to refer to their domestic help. 12.0% of the participants use ordinary forms to refer to the old / aged domestic help. 3 (three) cases are found where the old / aged domestic helps are treated like one of their family members and are addressed with honorific forms. However, it is seen that in rural areas most of the domestic helps (of all the three categories) are addressed with ordinary forms.
- (J) 98% of the participants prefer to use honorific forms to refer to their guests who are old/ aged and switch to familiar forms when they establish an intimate relationship with the guests. In general, 70% of the participants prefer familiar forms, while the rest prefer ordinary forms to address the category (j.c)).
- (K) No differences are found at all in case of addressing a friend of both genders by the participants of any age group. In all cases they prefer symmetrical pronominal forms. 70% of the participants of the age group 15-25 prefer to use the ordinary forms to address their friends irrespective of gender differentiations. 30% of the participants of the age group 26-36 prefer to use ordinary forms to address their close friends either of the same gender or the opposite gender. 75% of the participants of the age group 37-47 prefer to use the familiar forms, while 20% use ordinary forms to address their close friends of both genders. 83.1% of the participants of the age group 45-55 are for the use of the familiar forms with their friends, 65% of them are against using the ordinary forms with the friends of opposite gender. The same holds for the age group 55-65. 15 cases are found where male participants of this age group (55-65) use reciprocally the formal / honorific forms with their friends. The intimacy or gender differentiation does not matter for them.

The investigation reveals that 70% of female participants use ordinary forms more frequently and without any hesitation with reference to the opposite gender. While 30% of the male participants of age group of 15-25 hesitate to do the same in similar situation as represented by the following Diagram 1.f.

Diagram 1.f: P.C. of males and females using ordinary pronouns to address friends of opposite gender

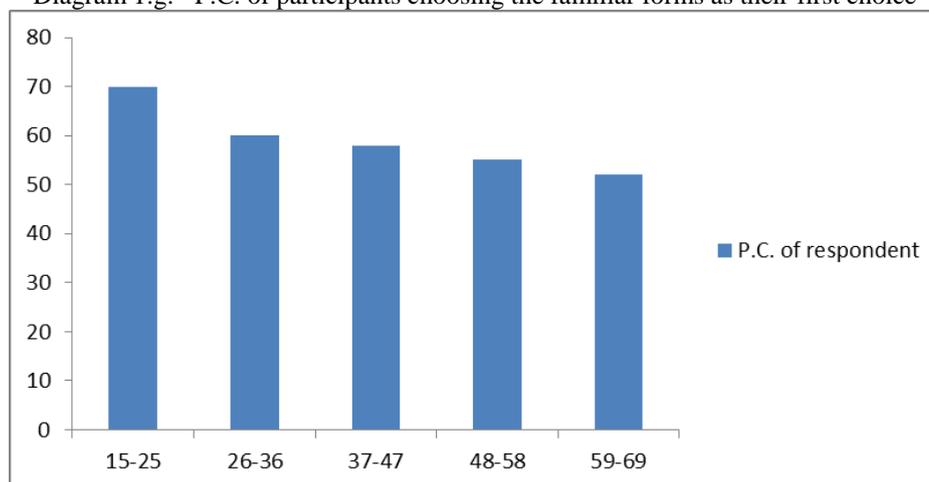


The above Diagram 1.f shows that the gender differentiation plays a crucial but not vital role in the selectional process of a pronoun.

- (L) It is on the basis of the outward appearance, i.e., looks, dress, bearing of a stranger / acquaintances that all the participants of all the age groups select the form of pronouns to refer to him/her by completely ignoring the referent's biological difference. However, the parameter of age is considered when some prefer the honorific forms to refer to adult referents and choose the familiar forms to refer to teenagers and kids.
- (M) While addressing the people in public eye most of the participants of all the age groups prefer the honorific forms as their first choice. The participants never use ordinary forms to address 'white collar' referents. 98.1% of the participants use honorific forms, while 1.7% of the participant prefer familiar forms to address them. Only 5% of the total participants of all the age groups prefer the honorific forms, 88% of the total participants of all the age groups prefer the familiar forms, while 12% of the total participants of all the age groups prefer the ordinary forms to address the blue collars. However, most of the participants strongly agree that in such cases age and educational qualifications play an important role. There were four cases of male referents like rickshaw pullers, labourers working in a factory and autorickshaw drivers with master degree holders, who were usually addressed by familiar forms.

89% of the total participants are of the opinion that emotional factors (like intimacy, social relations), economic and biological factors (like age, gender) play an important role in the selectional process of pronoun in such cases. Only 23% of overall participants ticked confidently in the relevant boxes. 87% of the participants of all age groups prefer the honorific forms as their first choice and the familiar forms is chosen by 13% as their first choice to address the people with who they come into contact in their daily lives. This again proves that extensive use of ordinary forms are regarded as improper, as shown by Diagram 1.g.

Diagram 1.g: P.C. of participants choosing the familiar forms as their first choice



All the participants of all age groups prefer the ordinary forms to refer to the anti-social people of society (like thieves, dacoits, terrorists etc.). None of the participants like to use honorific / formal pronominal forms to refer to them. 91.8% of the participants prefer ordinary forms to refer to them, while 8.0% of the participants prefer to use familiar forms.

- (N) None of the participants of all age groups like to use ordinary forms to refer to social-superiors. 98.9% of the participants chose to refer to them by honorific forms while 1.0% preferred familiar forms for them.

Part-III is designed to determine normal as opposed to desired usage. A paragraph was taken from an actual conversation of short dialogues in which the personal pronouns were left blank. As the verb in Assamese carries the person category, special care was taken in choosing the sentences. No antecedents were given as clues to the participants. The written style is a colloquial one as used in texting messages.

Findings:

(1) It is found that except few cases there is no difference between the written and spoken form in the use of pronouns. The frequency of use and selection of a particular form is same as in spontaneous conversation. Most of the participants of all age groups chose the 3rd person forms to fill up the slots, while only 20% of the total participants chose 2nd person forms.

(2) However, some exceptions are also found. Although extensive use of ordinary forms of pronouns is normally looked upon as improper, these are particularly used by the young adults and seniors due to demands of certain social contexts (e.g., to express anger, dissatisfaction, etc.). The participants of all age-groups are in agreement about their use and preference for ordinary forms is noticed in the most of the such conversations of their daily life. They do not consider these forms improper. 80% of the participants of all age groups are of the opinion that ordinary forms are associated with emotional feelings of negative attitudes towards someone which

can only be expressed by the use of ordinary forms more clearly as in the tasks given in the questionnaire. They, however, regarded the familiar forms as neutral and the honorific forms for senior referents or representatives of high social position.

Part IV is designed to determine normal as opposed to desired usage. The paragraph was taken from an actual conversation of short dialogues in which the personal pronouns were left blank. As the verb in Asamiya carries the person category, special care was taken in choosing the sentences. No antecedents were given as clues to the participants. The written style is a colloquial one as used in texting messages.

Findings:

(1) It is found that except few cases there is no difference between the written and spoken form in the use of pronouns. The frequency of use and selection of a particular form is same as in spontaneous conversation. Most of the participants of all age groups chose the 3rd person forms to fill up the slots, while only 20% of the total participants chose 2nd person forms.

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Part-V is designed to check the differences in the use of personal pronouns in different contexts of everyday life in place of English pronouns. Participants were asked to translate a passage from English into Assamese, which contained a large number of pronouns. Here the question arises, why is English chosen as the source language? The reason is that English does not exhibit differences in honorificity as the personal pronouns in Assamese, the target language. It thus aims to find out whether the participants face any difficulty in translating from the source language into Assamese by using appropriate pronouns of the target language depicting the status of the referents.

Findings:

Most of the participants completed the task of translation comfortably. As in previous parts, in this part also the young adults of age group 15-25 used the ordinary forms more frequently than the other age groups. The survey reveals that almost three-fourth (¾) i.e., 78% of the participants of the age group 15-25 including 70% female used the ordinary forms. While the 30.1% of the total participants of age group 59-69 including 20.6% female used the ordinary forms. The data further show that participants of age-group 59-69 who had a strong degree of reluctance for using the ordinary forms than those of other age-groups.

Part-VI is designed to gauge the range of personal pronouns used by participants during moments of emotional context of discourse. Each participant was asked to talk about his/her experiences of life, narrate any memorable incident or talk about any person who influenced him/her in his/her life using suitable pronouns. This part especially helps to distinguish the use of inclusive and exclusive forms of 1st person plural pronouns with special reference to the participant's gender.

Findings:

The setting of each speech was manipulated so that it provided the same period for each talk. While narrating an exciting incident or talking about the influence of some particular person in the life of the participants, most of the participants used all the three pronouns with their alternative forms quite frequently.

(1) Males irrespective of any differences of age, occupation and social status are found to have used more pronouns in their speech than females.

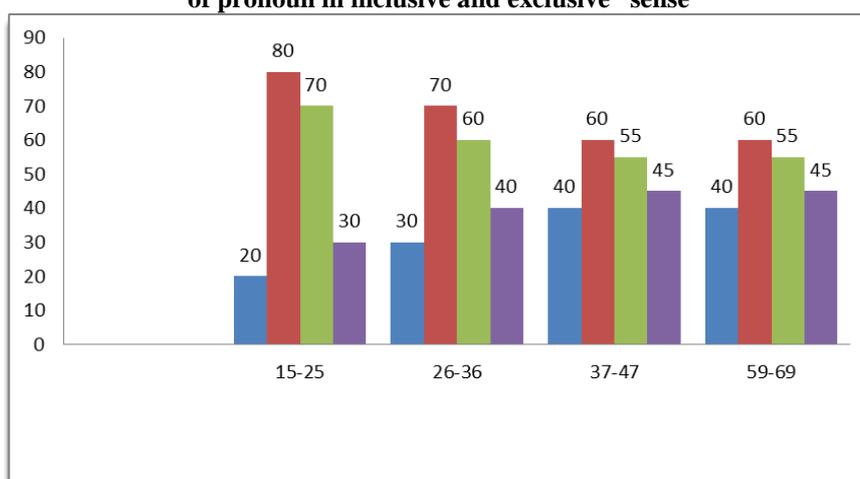
(2) The male participants used the 1st person plural form of pronoun in an exclusive sense whereas female speakers tend to use the same form of pronouns in an inclusive sense. No difference was found in case of use of pronouns between working and non-working women. Table 8 shows the association between the overall uses of personal pronouns suggesting that males use more pronouns than females.

Table 8 : Association between overall uses of personal pronouns in the speech act among the participants

Age group of the participants	Number of use personal pronouns in percentage	
	male	female
15-25	84.8	82.6
26-36	99.2	98.3
37-47	96.8	95.0
48-58	81.7	80.6
59-69	79.8	72.4

The following Diagram 1.h represents the total number of inclusive and exclusive forms of pronouns used by male and female speakers.

Diagram 1.h: P.C. of male and female participants in different age groups using 1st person plural forms of pronoun in inclusive and exclusive sense

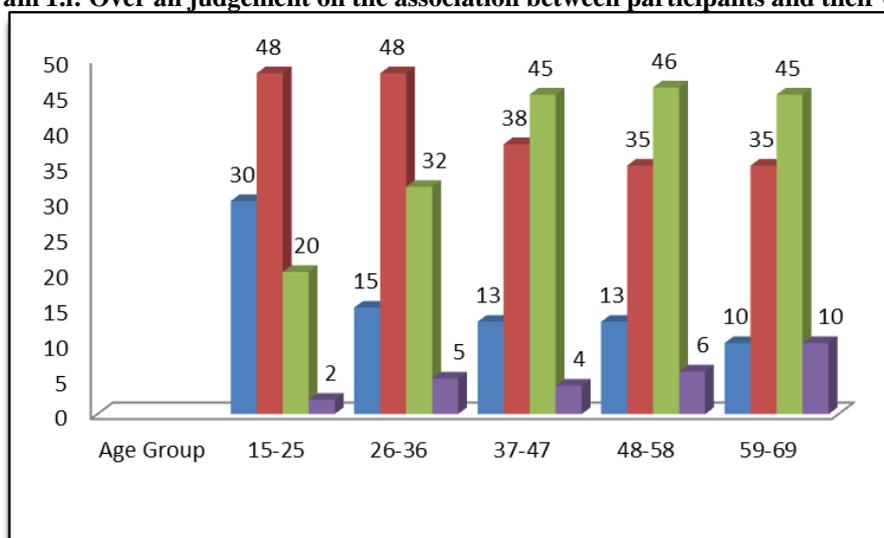


The above Diagram 1.h represents the association between the two variables. The proportion of male participants is high in all age groups having high number of use of personal pronoun in exclusive sense.

The study reveals that the rate of frequency of pronouns is too high in both males and females at the age group of 26-36 and 37-47. At the age group of 59-69, the differences between male and female participants become wide (almost by 8%).

Part-VII helps to find out the judgements of the participants in an overall situation. Each participant agrees that too much use of ordinary form sounds indecent / improper. This part proves that the lots of use of ordinary forms of pronouns are not accepted by people even in overhearing situation like in telephonic conversations. The following Diagram 1.i represents the association between participants and their choices.

Diagram 1.i: Over all judgement on the association between participants and their choices



The above Diagram 1.i represents that extensive use of ordinary forms is regarded as indecent/improper by the participants of all age groups.

Final results

The results of the survey show that the hypotheses 1-6, 8-11 intuitively formed at the beginning of the survey appear to be correct, while hypothesis 7 is found to be partially correct.

- Hypothesis 1 is proved by Part-II
- Hypothesis 2 is proved by Part-I and II.
- Hypothesis 3 is proved by Part-I and III.
- Hypothesis 4 is proved by Part-I and II.
- Hypothesis 5 is proved by Part-II and IV, VII.
- Hypothesis 6 is proved by Part-II.
- Hypothesis 7 is proved partially correct by Part-V.
- Hypothesis 8 is proved by Part-I and II.
- Hypothesis 9 is proved by Part-VI.
- Hypothesis 10 is proved by Part-VI.
- Hypothesis 11 is proved by Part-IV.

VI. Changing trends in use of personal pronouns

It is evidenced from the study that power is no longer as important as it once. There has been a gradual shift in recent years from emphasis on power to solidarity. The reciprocal use of 2_2 (tumi), 2_3 (tœ), 3_2 (ευ / tœυ) and 3_3 (i / hi, ei / tae) pronominal forms now-a-days gradually have come to replace the honorific forms of pronominals of power and politeness. The most common pattern is noticed in case of reciprocal use of pronouns (2_2 form tumi 'you' and the 3_2 forms ευ's/he' (PROX.) and tœυ 's/he' (DIST.)) between the young couples are being replaced by 3_3 (i / hi, ei / tae) forms of pronouns. Such usage of the familiar and ordinary pronouns are no longer considered as impolite and improper in the conventional sense.

Expansion of nuclear family and influence of western culture, globalization, are the basic reasons behind the changing trends in the selection of pronouns in Assamese, especially among the educated ones. The influence of other neighbouring communities also partially play an important role in the process of this changing trend. For example, the indigenous population of Assam including the speakers of Tibeto-Burman languages, the people of Adibasi community, the Muslim residents of Char area do not make a rigid distinction in pronouns with respect to social status and gender while speaking Assamese, as they lack such distinctions in their native languages / dialects. Thus it can be assumed that the areal influence also helps in shaping the selectional process of personal pronouns by speakers of Assamese.

The elderly groups of 48-58 and 59-69 have the feeling that the language of youngsters lack warmth, politeness and formality which they were once used to. To quote a remark from one of the participants, 'The new generation never likes to use 'apuni (2_1)' even to elder ones.' Another complains, 'Now-a-days we don't get that respect which we used to give our elders. The form 'apuni' is so rarely used by the new generation that I feel myself like an alien. We used 'apuni' even to address our class-mates in my college days and also my own elder siblings.'

In a nuclear family, familiar forms of personal pronouns are used more frequently than other forms to refer to the members of the family. While in a joint and extended family, these are used according to the demand of the context. Similar situation is also noticed in case of an adopted family. The ambience of the residential area also partially influences on it, while the context or situation of discourse plays also an important role. Depending on the demands of context of discourse, participants switch to other forms of pronouns very swiftly as a part of their speech habits. For example, a newly married lady confided that the ordinary forms were used reciprocally between the spouses as they were class-mates from their childhood and their's was a love marriage. So, it did not create any problem for them. But her mother-in-law and even her parents did not approve of it. So, in front of them as well as sometimes in the most formal situations, they switched to familiar forms. The wife never switched to the honorific form to address her husband, which she felt as very outdated. They also felt that their children should address their grand-parents with the familiar forms to express the feeling of closeness or intimacy. However, they did not oppose the idea of using honorific forms to grand- parents, but completely rejected the idea of using ordinary forms by children which they felt would be very odd.

It is found that the tradition of addressing the elders with the honorific form has been kept intact in the age-group of 59-69 as the norm.

The variability in the degree of acceptance of a particular form of pronoun highlights the social variability in case of participants of different age-groups and of both genders. It is generally assumed that gender differences are no longer profound in this age. But the survey points out that the language behaviour of

males and females differ in day- to-day life. Females give priority to solidarity and concentrate on building and maintaining the social bond that holds communities together, for males, priority goes to power.

The study further reveals that a particular form of personal pronouns has a wide range of uses. The ordinary form is used to express intimacy as in the case of parents, siblings or friends. It is also used to mark inequality or lack of any social standing of the referent. Further, it is also used to express one's disliking or disgust. The familiar form is used basically to express informality or cordial relations with the referent. It marks equality. And it is this form which is used as the addressing term for God, although a high honorific form is exclusively used as the referring term for this specific referent. The honorific form of pronoun, in general, is reserved for expressing respect. It may also be used for encoding politeness. Another function of these forms is to signal formal relations with referents irrespective of age.

Since the pronominal system in a language is an area involved with many interacting issues, it requires some rethinking and in-depth studies. It is hoped that this humble effort of the investigator will contribute a little bit on the way of further studies on the related issues and stimulate others to work towards the understanding of the nature of the language in general and the pronominal system in particular.

Notes:

1. A random sample is a sample where each individual of the population has equal chance to be selected for the sample.
2. The procedure of grouping the data into homogeneous groups for analysis purpose is called post stratification.
3. Strata are the groups of homogeneous units of a population.
4. Age grading is a phenomenon in which speakers in a community gradually alter their speech habits as they get older and where this change is repeated in every generation. Age grading has to be checked for in apparent time, in the studies of linguistic change to ensure that false conclusion are not being drawn from linguistic differences between generation.

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