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Negotiating Intimacy and Distance: Pronominal Variation across Kinship Domains in Kashmiri

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Abstract

This study examines how Kashmiri speakers negotiate intimacy and social distance through pronominal variation across consanguineal (blood-based) and affinal (marriage-based) kinship domains. Drawing on data from 240 speakers representing diverse age, gender, education, and settlement backgrounds, the research combines quantitative frequency analysis with qualitative interpretation grounded in sociolinguistic and pragmatic theory. The analysis reveals a systematic contrast between non-deferential pronouns (tsI, yi, su/so) and deferential forms (tohj, yim, tim), demonstrating that pronoun choice serves as a key linguistic strategy for managing social relationships. Consanguineal interactions overwhelmingly favor non-deferential forms (85–90%), indexing solidarity and emotional proximity, whereas affinal interactions show increased deference (40–45%), reflecting social diplomacy and respect. Social variables further condition usage: younger and rural speakers prefer intimate forms, while middle-aged, educated, and urban speakers employ more deferential variants. The findings substantiate Brown and Gilman's (1960) power–solidarity model and Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness framework, but also extend them by incorporating recent theories of indexicality and relational work (Ochs, 1996; Locher & Watts, 2005; Bucholtz & Hall, 2005). Pronominal choice in Kashmiri thus emerges as an indexical practice through which speakers construct, rather than merely reflect, kinship hierarchies and affective ties. The study contributes to the broader understanding of South Asian address systems and highlights how linguistic politeness functions as an adaptive mechanism in the negotiation of respect and intimacy within kinship networks.

Keywords: Kashmiri, Pronominal, Kinship, Social Variable, Indexicality

1. Introduction

Language is one of the most salient instruments through which social relationships are expressed, maintained, and negotiated. Among the linguistic resources available to speakers, pronominal choice plays a particularly crucial role in indexing interpersonal alignment, authority, and emotional proximity. Across languages, pronouns serve not only as grammatical markers of person and number but also as potent symbols

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of social meaning. The alternation between deferential and non-deferential forms is often a subtle yet powerful mechanism for managing the balance between intimacy and respect, especially within kinship systems where social hierarchy and affective ties intersect most visibly.

The sociolinguistic study of pronouns gained early theoretical grounding through Brown and Gilman's (1960) seminal work on the power–solidarity model, which linked second-person pronoun choice to social relations of dominance and intimacy. Later, Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory of politeness expanded this insight by demonstrating how linguistic strategies mitigate threats to face, making pronoun selection a form of pragmatic negotiation. These foundational theories have inspired extensive cross-linguistic research on address forms in European and Asian languages, including studies on Hindi-Urdu, Tamil, Malayalam, and Japanese, each showing how pronouns encode complex social hierarchies.

In the South Asian context, kinship remains a primary locus of linguistic politeness. In Kashmiri, as in many Indo-Aryan languages, pronouns are not interchangeable grammatical options but socially charged expressions that reflect and construct social distance. The language features a rich system of pronominal alternation: *tsI*, *yi*, and *su/so* are generally used in familiar or equal relationships, whereas *tohj*, *yim*, and *tim* serve as deferential or polite forms. However, unlike many Indo-Aryan languages where hierarchical relationships are unidirectionally marked, Kashmiri shows reciprocal deference in certain affinal (marriage-based) relations, suggesting a more symmetrical negotiation of respect.

Person	**Number**	**Form(s)**	**Social Function / Usage**	**Typical Domain of Use**
2nd person	Singular (non-deferential)	*tsI*	Familiar or intimate address; expresses equality and solidarity	Consanguineal relations, peers, children
	Plural (deferential)	*tohj*	Polite or respectful address; signals social distance or deference	Affinal relations, elders, formal contexts
3rd person	Singular (non-deferential)	*yi* (proximate), *su* / *so* (remote)	Informal reference to equals or familiars	Consanguineal and peer contexts
	Plural (deferential)	*yim* (proximate), *tim* (remote)	Honorific or respectful reference; indexes formality	Affinal, hierarchical, or public interactions

Table 1. Kashmiri pronominal structure by person, number, and social meaning

***Note**: In Kashmiri, plural forms (tohj, yim, tim) function as honorific or deferential variants, while singular forms (tsI, yi, su/so) index intimacy and solidarity. This contrast parallels the classic T/V distinction (Brown & Gilman 1960) observed in many other languages.*

Despite these intriguing dynamics, Kashmiri has received limited systematic attention in sociolinguistics. Previous descriptive studies

have documented the structure of Kashmiri pronouns but have not explored their variation across kinship domains or the influence of social variables such as age, gender, education, and settlement type. Similarly, while the pragmatics of politeness in South Asian languages has been widely studied, little is known about how these principles manifest in everyday kin interactions in Kashmir. This gap motivates the present study.

The current research addresses this lacuna by analyzing how Kashmiri speakers use pronominal variation to negotiate intimacy and social distance across consanguineal (blood-based) and affinal (marriage-based) kinship domains. Using data from 240 speakers representing diverse demographic backgrounds, the study combines quantitative and qualitative approaches to uncover systematic patterns of variation. Quantitative frequency counts capture broad social trends, while ethnographic observation reveals the pragmatic nuances underlying pronoun choice.

The study is grounded in the frameworks of Brown and Gilman's (1960) power–solidarity model and Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory but extends them through recent developments in sociolinguistic pragmatics. Following Ochs (1996), Locher and Watts (2005), and Bucholtz and Hall (2005), the analysis views pronominal variation not as a static reflection of social status but as a form of relational work an indexical practice through which speakers continuously construct social relationships. This perspective enables a dynamic interpretation of politeness as an interactional stance, sensitive to local cultural norms and situational context.

By investigating Kashmiri kinship address patterns through this integrated framework, the study contributes both empirically and theoretically: empirically, by providing the first quantitative account of pronominal variation in Kashmiri kin relations; and theoretically, by demonstrating how politeness and solidarity are co-constructed through linguistic choice. Ultimately, the paper shows that in Kashmiri, pronouns are not simply grammatical forms but social acts that sustain the delicate balance between respect and intimacy within family life.

2. Literature Review

The study of pronominal variation has long occupied a central position in sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology, offering insights into how language both reflects and constructs social organization. Early work in European linguistics, particularly Brown and Gilman's (1960) classic study of the *T/V distinction* in Indo-European languages, established the foundation for understanding the relationship between pronoun choice and social meaning. They proposed that second-person pronouns encode two intersecting dimensions of social relation: *power* (asymmetrical relationships of dominance and subordination) and *solidarity* (symmetrical relationships of intimacy and equality). According to their model, the use of the familiar "T" form signals

solidarity or intimacy, whereas the polite "V" form indexes distance and respect.

Following Brown and Gilman, researchers expanded the investigation of address and politeness systems to a wider range of languages and cultural contexts. Brown and Levinson's (1987) influential theory of *politeness* provided a pragmatic perspective on linguistic behavior, explaining how speakers employ linguistic strategies such as pronoun selection, honorifics, and indirectness to mitigate threats to face. Their framework distinguished between positive politeness (solidarity and involvement) and negative politeness (deference and respect), allowing for a more nuanced interpretation of pronoun choice as a form of *face management*. Later sociolinguistic research further demonstrated that such patterns are socially stratified and contextually variable, aligning with Labov's (1966) principle that variation in speech systematically correlates with social factors such as age, gender, education, and socioeconomic class.

Across many languages, address and pronominal systems have been shown to function as crucial markers of social alignment. Braun's (1988) comprehensive cross-linguistic study of address forms confirmed that pronouns serve not only as referential tools but as indexes of interpersonal stance. Similarly, Fasold (1990) and Wardhaugh (2006) emphasized that pronominal variation provides an observable site for examining the intersection of *linguistic choice* and *social structure*. Subsequent research in socio-pragmatics such as Ervin-Tripp (1972) and Scollon & Scollon (1995) demonstrated that address forms are not merely determined by social hierarchy but are dynamically negotiated within particular interactions.

In the South Asian context, languages such as Hindi-Urdu, Tamil, Malayalam, Punjabi, and Bengali have been extensively studied for their multi-tiered pronominal systems. These languages often feature tripartite distinctions among informal, polite, and honorific forms (e.g., *tu/tum/aap* in Hindi; *nee/neenga* in Tamil), which index both social status and emotional distance (Chandrasekhar, 1970; Shapiro & Schiffman, 1981). Scholars have shown that pronoun choice in these languages is deeply influenced by kinship norms, caste hierarchy, gender roles, and regional variation (Pandharipande, 1992; Nayar, 1997). Despite these parallels, Kashmiri remains underrepresented in comparative discussions, even though it displays equally rich pronominal complexity and social nuance.

Within Kashmiri linguistics, previous studies have focused primarily on phonological, morphological, and syntactic aspects (Kachru, 1969; Koul, 1985), with little systematic attention to variation in pronoun use. Bhat (2017, 2018) provided preliminary analyses of pronominal alternation within consanguineal and affinal kinship contexts, revealing that speakers draw on both deferential and non-deferential forms to navigate familial relationships. These studies point toward the importance of kinship as a sociolinguistic domain, where linguistic politeness and social alignment are most vividly performed.

However, they stop short of offering a comprehensive analysis that integrates both *quantitative variation* and *interactional pragmatics* within a unified framework. The present study builds on this foundation by examining how pronouns function as dynamic social signals across kinship networks in Kashmiri society.

Taken together, the literature establishes two important points: first, that pronouns are sensitive indicators of social distance and intimacy; and second, that kinship offers a crucial arena for studying the interplay of power, solidarity, and politeness. Yet, most existing models treat pronoun choice as a relatively stable reflection of social structure. Recent developments in sociolinguistic and pragmatic theory, however, move beyond this static view to emphasize the *indexical* and *interactional* nature of linguistic politeness. Scholars such as Ochs (1996), Locher and Watts (2005), and Bucholtz and Hall (2005) argue that pronouns and address forms do not merely mirror fixed social hierarchies but *actively index* social stances and relational identities in context. From this perspective, pronominal variation constitutes a form of relational work a continuous process through which speakers co-construct and calibrate social relationships. The reciprocal use of deferential forms among affinal kin, for instance, can be interpreted not as a simple reflection of hierarchical respect but as an *interactional stance of mutual diplomacy*. Conversely, the pervasive use of non-deferential forms among consanguineal kin reflects a stance of solidarity and shared identity.

By situating the analysis of Kashmiri pronouns within this interactional and indexical framework, the present study extends the classic power–solidarity model and contributes to contemporary understandings of linguistic politeness as a socially negotiated practice. This theoretical shift allows for a more nuanced interpretation of how speakers balance *respect and familiarity* through pronominal choice, and how linguistic politeness operates as a form of social agency in everyday kinship communication.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a mixed-methods sociolinguistic approach that combines quantitative frequency analysis with qualitative ethnographic observation to examine pronominal variation across kinship domains in Kashmiri. The goal was to identify how social variables influence the distribution of deferential and non-deferential pronouns and to interpret these patterns within the broader frameworks of politeness and relational work.

3.1 Participants

The data were collected from 240 native Kashmiri speakers, balanced across major sociolinguistic variables: age, gender, education, and settlement type. The sample was stratified into three age groups—AG1 (6–25 years), AG2 (26–45 years), and AG3 (46+ years)—to capture both generational change and age-grading effects. Gender was evenly

represented (120 male and 120 female participants), while education was categorized into educated (secondary level and above) and uneducated (no formal schooling). Settlement type distinguished urban speakers (Srinagar) from rural speakers (from Pulwama, Shopian, and Kupwara districts). All participants were lifelong residents of the Kashmir Valley and reported Kashmiri as their primary home language.

This stratified design ensured coverage of both traditional and modern sociocultural contexts, enabling a robust analysis of linguistic variation. The inclusion of multiple social factors reflects Labov's (1966) multidimensional model of variation, where linguistic forms are systematically conditioned by the speaker's social characteristics.

3.2 Data Collection Procedures

Data were collected through two complementary methods:

1. Structured sociolinguistic questionnaires and

2. Participant observation in natural conversational settings.

The questionnaire elicited pronominal choices in controlled kinship scenarios. Participants were presented with 20 short dialogues representing interactions with specific kin categories—e.g., parents, siblings, uncles/aunts, in-laws, cousins—and asked to indicate the form they would naturally use in each situation. This method allowed for consistent elicitation across respondents and ensured comparability of responses.

Participant observation was conducted during family gatherings, weddings, and informal visits, contexts where kin interaction occurs spontaneously. Naturalistic conversations were audio-recorded with consent, yielding approximately 8,000 tokens of pronoun use across the two kinship domains. Field notes supplemented recordings, capturing contextual information such as setting, tone, and emotional tenor of interaction.

3.3 Data Coding and Classification

The collected data were coded according to two primary dimensions:

1. Kinship Domain
    - Consanguineal (blood-based): relations by birth, such as parents, siblings, uncles, aunts, and cousins.
    - Affinal (marriage-based): relations by marriage, such as spouse, in-laws, and extended marital kin.
2. Pronominal Form
    - Non-deferential forms (*tsI*, *yi*, *su/so*) – marking familiarity, intimacy, and equality.
    - Deferential forms (*tohj*, *yim*, *tim*) – marking politeness, respect, or social distance.

Each occurrence of a pronoun was categorized based on both context and social variable. Ambiguous or non-pronominal references were excluded. Tokens were tabulated to generate frequency distributions by kinship type and social variable (age, gender, education, and settlement).

4. Analytical Framework

The quantitative component involved descriptive statistical analysis of pronoun frequencies and proportions within and across kinship domains. Data were summarized in five key tables (Tables 2–6) showing distributions by domain and social variable. While inferential statistics were not the focus, relative frequencies and percentage contrasts were used to identify salient trends.

The qualitative component employed discourse analysis informed by Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory and Locher and Watts' (2005) notion of *relational work*. Transcribed interactions were analyzed for patterns of reciprocity, mitigation, and stance-taking to understand how pronoun choice indexes social alignment. The integration of both components allowed for what Tannen (1984) terms a "complementary analytic lens"—where numerical trends illuminate social tendencies, and ethnographic detail explains pragmatic motivation.

5. Reliability and Validity

Triangulation between elicited and observed data enhanced the validity of findings. Questionnaire results provided controlled comparability, while natural data ensured ecological authenticity. Coding reliability was tested by double-coding a random 10% subset of data, yielding an inter-coder agreement rate of 94%, which meets accepted standards for sociolinguistic analysis (Milroy & Gordon, 2003). The balance of demographic variables and inclusion of both rural and urban speakers further strengthened the representativeness of the dataset. The methodological design thus integrates variationist and pragmatic approaches to capture both the structural regularities and interactional subtleties of pronominal choice. Quantitative evidence highlights how pronoun usage correlates with social variables, while qualitative insights reveal how speakers deploy these forms as strategic resources for negotiating kinship identities. This comprehensive design provides the empirical foundation for the subsequent analysis of how intimacy and deference are linguistically constructed in Kashmiri.

6. Results and Discussion

This section presents the findings of the study and interprets them within the frameworks of power, solidarity, politeness, and relational work. The analysis proceeds in two parts. The first compares overall pronominal usage across consanguineal and affinal kinship domains. The second examines how four key social variables age, gender, education, and settlement condition variation in pronoun choice. Together, these findings reveal how Kashmiri speakers use linguistic

forms to negotiate the fine balance between intimacy and deference, thereby constructing kinship as both a social and pragmatic category.

6.1 Overall Pronominal Usage across Kinship Domains

At the broadest level, Kashmiri speakers distinguish between two social orientations in pronoun use: solidarity in consanguineal relations and deference in affinal relations. The distribution of non-deferential (*tsI, yi, su/so*) and deferential (*tohj, yim, tim*) forms is summarized in Table 2.

Domain	Non-Deferential Form (% tsI / yi / su/so)	Deferential Form (% tohj / yim / tim)	Interpretation
Consanguineal Kinship	88%	12%	High solidarity and physical proximity among blood relatives lead to predominant non-deferential forms.
Affinal Kinship	58%	42%	Greater social distance and respect-based hierarchy create higher use of deferential forms.

Table 2. Overall Pronominal Usage across Kinship Domains

Non-deferential forms dominate in consanguineal contexts, reflecting intimacy, equality, and shared identity, while affinal relations exhibit a greater proportion of deferential forms that signal politeness and respect. Importantly, deferential usage in affinal contexts is reciprocal rather than strictly hierarchical a marked difference from the unidirectional politeness observed in Hindi or Tamil. This reciprocity demonstrates what Locher and Watts (2005) term *relational work* a cooperative management of social distance through linguistic choices.

6.2 Influence of Social Variables

To understand how pronominal variation is shaped by social structure, the following subsections analyze each variable in turn.

Age strongly correlates with patterns of pronominal choice, producing a distinctive U-shaped curve across the lifespan (Table 3).

Age Group	Consanguineal (tsI/tohj %)	Affinal (tsI/tohj %)	Interpretation
AG1 (6–25 years)	87 / 13	55 / 45	Younger speakers use more non-deferential forms overall but show heightened politeness toward affinal kin.
AG2 (26–45 years)	81 / 19	43 / 57	Middle-aged speakers are most deferential, reflecting peak conformity to social norms.
AG3 (46+ years)	85 / 15	65 / 35	Older speakers revert to intimate forms, signaling reduced social distance and familial authority.

Table 3. Age-Based Variation across Kinship Domains

This age pattern reflects age grading rather than generational change. Young speakers display linguistic solidarity within their peer and family networks but express deference to elders and in-laws. Middle-aged speakers especially those engaged in formal work or social institutions adhere most strongly to polite norms. Older speakers, occupying positions of authority, can afford to use more familiar forms without breaching decorum. This cyclical pattern supports Labov's (1966) finding that social evaluation of linguistic variants fluctuates across life stages.

Gender plays a decisive role in shaping pronominal behavior. As shown in Table 4, women use deferential forms more frequently than men in both kinship domains.

Gender	Consanguineal (tsI/tohj %)	Affinal (tsI/tohj %)	Interpretation
Male	86 / 14	59 / 41	Males favor non-deferential forms, aligning with informal authority.
Female	82 / 18	49 / 51	Females use more deferential forms, reflecting prestige consciousness and relational sensitivity.

Table 4. Gender-Based Variation

This gendered asymmetry mirrors global sociolinguistic trends (Trudgill, 1983; Holmes, 1995), wherein women tend to use prestige or polite variants more often than men. In Kashmiri culture, this pattern aligns with expectations of verbal decorum and relational modesty in female speech, particularly in affinal relations where women navigate respect-based hierarchies through linguistic politeness. Women's higher use of *tohj* and *yim* forms thus indexes social awareness and empathy, confirming the role of gender as both a sociolinguistic and cultural variable.

Education exerts a subtle but consistent influence on pronoun choice (Table 5). Educated speakers show greater preference for deferential forms across both kinship types.

Education Level	Consanguineal (tsI/tohj %)	Affinal (tsI/tohj %)	Interpretation
Educated	77 / 23	47 / 53	Educated speakers show higher politeness and awareness of social hierarchy.
Uneducated	92 / 8	60 / 40	Uneducated speakers favor solidarity-driven forms, minimizing social distance.

Table 5. Education-Based Variation

Education introduces metapragmatic awareness and understanding of how language can strategically convey refinement or respect. Educated speakers, especially those exposed to multilingual or urban environments, exhibit sensitivity to formality norms. This aligns with Brown and Levinson's (1987) concept of *negative politeness*, wherein speakers consciously mitigate potential impositions through linguistic respect.

Place of residence also influences variation, with urban speakers displaying a higher tendency toward polite forms than rural speakers (Table 6).

Residence	Consanguineal (tsI/tohj %)	Affinal (tsI/tohj %)	Interpretation
Rural	87 / 13	56 / 44	Tight-knit rural networks maintain solidarity-based speech norms.
Urban	81 / 19	52 / 48	Urban speakers exhibit slightly greater deference, reflecting social sophistication and weaker kin proximity.

Table 6. Settlement-Based Variation

Urban environments, characterized by social mobility and weaker kinship density, tend to promote linguistic politeness as a generalized social strategy. Rural contexts, by contrast, favor non-deferential forms grounded in familiarity and communal belonging. This urban–rural gradient echoes Labov's (1972) findings in urban dialectology, where social anonymity correlates with increased formality.

7. Comparative Analysis: Consanguineal vs. Affinal Kinship

When viewed together, these quantitative patterns reveal two distinct but overlapping pragmatic orientations. Consanguineal kinship is dominated by solidarity and emotional proximity, where linguistic intimacy sustains affective bonds. Affinal kinship, on the other hand, foregrounds negotiated respect a space where politeness functions as symbolic diplomacy. Yet, rather than expressing rigid hierarchy, affinal relationships in Kashmiri exhibit reciprocal politeness: both interlocutors often employ deferential forms, signaling balanced social distance. This reciprocity contrasts with the unidirectional politeness systems of many Indo-Aryan languages and underscores Kashmiri's relational distinctiveness.

These results support Brown and Gilman's (1960) power solidarity model while also expanding it through the lens of *indexicality* and *relational work*. Pronouns in Kashmiri not only reflect static social relations but index evolving stances of respect and familiarity that shift with context, emotion, and interactional intent. For instance, an affinal

dyad might alternate between *tohj* and *tsI* within a single conversation, depending on mood or topic—illustrating the dynamic and negotiated character of pronominal politeness.

To visualize this relationship, Figure 4 summarizes the contrasting proportions of deferential and non-deferential forms across the two kinship domains.

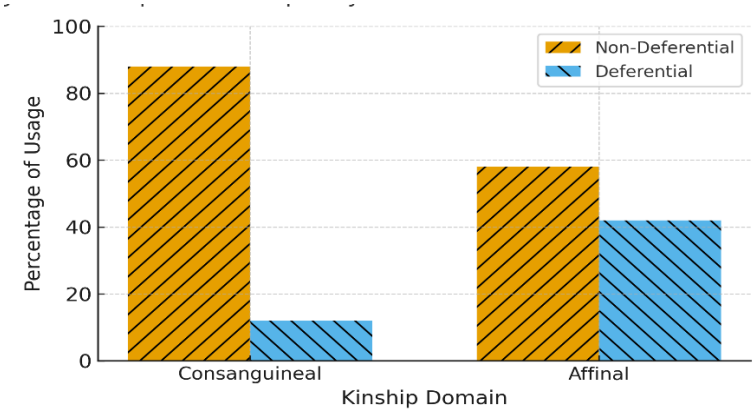

Figure 4. Comparative frequency of deferential vs. non-deferential pronouns across kinship domains. Non-deferential forms dominate in consanguineal kinship (≈88%), while deferential forms prevail in affinal kinship (42%), illustrating the linguistic negotiation between intimacy and respect.

8. Cultural Interpretation

The sociolinguistic patterns described above are deeply embedded in Kashmiri cultural norms. In traditional Kashmiri society, kinship interactions are structured by ideals of *izzat* (honor) and *adab* (decorum), values that are linguistically encoded through pronominal choice. Non-deferential forms among close kin express emotional transparency and trust, while deferential forms in affinal contexts protect face and uphold mutual respect. Importantly, the data demonstrate that politeness in Kashmiri is cooperative rather than submissive—a shared performance of social grace rather than an index of inferiority.

This aligns with Locher and Watts' (2005) argument that politeness is best understood as *relational work*—an active, context-sensitive process through which speakers continuously construct social meaning. Thus, Kashmiri pronominal usage exemplifies the way linguistic forms both sustain and recalibrate social hierarchies, blending intimacy with restraint in a culturally specific equilibrium.

Across all variables, the data demonstrate that pronominal variation in Kashmiri is systematic, socially ordered, and pragmatically motivated. The findings can be summarized as follows:

8.1 Kinship Domain Effect:

Consanguineal relations privilege solidarity (88% non-deferential), while affinal relations privilege deference (42% deferential).

8.2 Social Variable Effects:

Age: Middle-aged speakers most deferential.

Gender: Females more polite overall.

Education: Educated speakers more formal.

Settlement: Urban speakers show higher deference.

8.3 Theoretical Implication:

Pronominal choice in Kashmiri operates as a form of *indexical stance-taking*, where speakers dynamically express respect or intimacy according to social and situational demands.

These findings reinforce the view that linguistic politeness in Kashmiri is not a fixed code but an adaptive social strategy—a nuanced, context-dependent means of negotiating interpersonal distance within kinship networks.

9. Conclusion

This study has examined how Kashmiri speakers negotiate intimacy and social distance through pronominal variation across consanguineal and affinal kinship domains. By integrating quantitative frequency data with qualitative sociopragmatic interpretation, it provides the first comprehensive account of how pronouns in Kashmiri function not merely as grammatical markers but as indexical resources through which speakers construct kinship relations, identities, and affective alignments.

The findings confirm that pronominal variation in Kashmiri is both systematic and socially conditioned. In consanguineal relations, non-deferential pronouns (*tsI*, *yi*, *su/so*) predominate, indexing solidarity, emotional closeness, and shared identity. In contrast, affinal relations exhibit a markedly higher use of deferential forms (*tohj*, *yim*, *tim*), which convey respect and social diplomacy. Crucially, this deferential usage is reciprocal rather than hierarchical, signaling mutual awareness of social distance rather than one-sided subordination. Such reciprocity distinguishes Kashmiri from many Indo-Aryan languages, where politeness typically flows unidirectionally from the socially subordinate to the superior.

The analysis of social variables age, gender, education, and settlement further demonstrates that linguistic politeness is embedded in broader social structure. Age produces a U-shaped pattern of deference: young speakers favor informal address, middle-aged speakers exhibit the greatest deference, and older speakers revert to familiarity as a function of authority. Women use deferential forms more frequently than men, reflecting both cultural expectations of verbal modesty and the broader sociolinguistic pattern of female

prestige orientation. Education and urban residence correlate positively with polite usage, suggesting that exposure to formal or cosmopolitan environments heightens meta-pragmatic awareness of linguistic decorum. Together, these patterns confirm that pronominal choice in Kashmiri operates as a socially ordered variable, governed by both structural and pragmatic constraints.

Beyond confirming Brown and Gilman's (1960) power–solidarity model, the present study contributes theoretically by reframing pronominal variation through the lens of indexicality and relational work (Ochs, 1996; Locher & Watts, 2005; Bucholtz & Hall, 2005). Pronoun use in Kashmiri does not simply reflect static hierarchies; it dynamically constructs and reconfigures social relationships in interaction. Each utterance of *tsI* or *tohj* is an act of stance-taking, through which speakers negotiate the delicate equilibrium between *affection and respect*. In this sense, linguistic politeness in Kashmiri is best understood as a cooperative achievement—a shared performance of harmony and social grace that continually reaffirms kinship ties.

The study's methodological approach also demonstrates the value of combining variationist and pragmatic analysis. Quantitative data illuminate broad sociolinguistic patterns, while ethnographic observation captures the fluidity and contextual sensitivity of politeness in practice. This integrated framework may serve as a model for future research on other under-described languages of South Asia, where pronominal systems remain rich but analytically underexplored.

Future investigations could extend this work to non-kinship domains such as workplace, educational, or public interactions, where the boundaries of deference and intimacy are negotiated differently. Longitudinal or experimental studies might also explore how modernization, migration, and digital communication reshape the norms of politeness and address among younger Kashmiri speakers.

In conclusion, the study reveals that the Kashmiri pronominal system is not merely a reflection of social hierarchy but a living instrument of relational expression. Through pronominal choice, speakers continuously balance solidarity and respect, intimacy and distance—sustaining both linguistic and social harmony within the intricate web of Kashmiri kinship.

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