REQUEST AND COMMAND IN KINNAURI: THE PRAGMATICS OF TRANSLATING POLITENESS

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ABSTRACT

Translators face an enormous task in translating texts from languages which are both culturally and typologically distinct from the target language. Highly complex socio-cultural values are, in many cases, encoded rather subtly in the linguistic structures used for narration. The manifestation of cultural values is to some extent also dependent on the linguistic structures available in the language. The translation of expressions denoting request and command in Kinnauri (a Tibeto-Kinnauri language spoken in NW India) is one such case. Kinnauri predominantly uses the imperative construction to encode requests and commands. The distribution of the verb inflectional morphology reflects a complex interplay of a range of semantic and pragmatic factors. In this paper we will examine the request and command strategies in Kinnauri and contrast them briefly with such strategies in English, in order to discuss their implications for translation.

1. AIM AND PURPOSE

The aim of a narrative is to communicate a specific event to its audience. An effective narration involves the interweaving of small and big episodes, which are brought into focus and then pushed into the background, only to perhaps be brought onto the scene again. This communicative function is achieved by means of a combination of factors, including the choice of linguistic structures and grammatical markers. All this is couched within a culture-specific context. In order to effectively translate a narrative, both its linguistic and cultural aspects must be taken into consideration.

In modern times, as many of the lesser-known languages are disappearing fast (an estimated 90% of all languages spoken today will disappear in the coming century, according to Krauss 1992), the need for preserving languages and their culture is more urgent than ever. Translated material from lesser-known languages is one way of documenting them. Such translated materials also bring awareness of these languages and communities to other parts of the world. The importance of translated texts is highlighted in Ojo (1986:291), as

provided in Mbangwana (1990) as follows: "Through him [the translator], the text which would have been unable to cross its native linguistic habitat is accorded a right of place in another linguistic community."

Translating texts from languages which diverge both culturally and typologically from the target language poses a challenge. The manifestation of cultural values is to some extent also dependent on the linguistic structure of that language. In this paper we will examine the request and command strategies in Kinnauri[1] and contrast that briefly with strategies in English in order to discuss its implications for translation purposes. In Kinnauri both request and command expressions are expressed mainly by means of the imperative construction, whereas in standard English it is only in certain restricted contexts that the imperative construction is used. This has important implications for the enterprise of translation.

2. REQUEST AND COMMAND IN KINNAURI

Languages have sometimes been classified as "direct languages" depending largely on their prevalent use of the imperative construction. In this paper I will present data which suggest that such labels are invalid, keeping in mind that a language like Kinnauri may display degrees of politeness, even within the imperative construction.

We follow Blum-Kulka *et al*'s description of the speech act *request*:

> Requests are pre-event acts: they express the speaker's expectation of the hearer with regard to prospective action, verbal or nonverbal. Requests are face-threatening by definition (Brown and Levinson 1987): hearers can interpret requests as intrusive impingements on freedom of action, or even as a show in the excercise of power; speakers may hesitate to make the request for fear of exposing a need or risking the hearer's loss of face. (Blum-Kulka *et al*, 1989:11-12)

My description of *request* in the Kinnauri data subsumes the usual notion of requests, as well as directives and commands. In all these cases, the use of the imperative construction is the most frequent mechanism in Kinnauri. I suggest that *command/directive* and *request* are not two separate discrete speech acts,[2] rather they form a continuum, with their extreme forms occurring on opposite ends of the continuum. A major difference between a command, a piece of advice and an urging may in some ways be indicative of the control factor: *How much does the speaker think (s)he can/cannot make the hearer do the act?*

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2 House and Kasper (1987) also suggest that request and directives are to be subsumed under the same speech act.

Languages may differ with regard to the linguistic structure used to encode request/command. Languages like Kinnauri use primarily the imperative construction for the entire continuum, whereas other languages, such as English, frequently use several different linguistic strategies to encode different points on this scale, using the imperative construction only in a very restricted context. As will be shown below, the choice of the linguistic mechanism to describe request/command in a language depends on the complex interrelationship between the socio-cultural values of the society that speaks the language and the linguistic structures available to that language.

Sentences such as (1-2) illustrate the use of the imperative construction to make requests and commands in Kinnauri. The difference between a request and a non-honorific direct command is made here by the choice of the imperative markers on the verb,[3] indicated in the examples in bold.[4]

1. *hales*   *ni-ma-le*   *tata*   **ta-rI-ñ**
    how   exist-NOM-EMPH   keep/NF   keep-IMP-2H

    (The king wrote): "Whatever he is like, please keep our son."

2. *ku-yu*   *hara*   **ran**
    dog-POSS   bone/PL   give/IMP

    Give the bones to the dog!

A finite verb in an imperative construction carries one of three sets of inflectional morphology. In the imperative construction, the verb *come* is the only verb in the narrative corpus that exhibits two separate forms for imperative and non-imperative, namely, *bə* (non-IMP) and *ji* (IMP).

$$(PROH)\text{-}V\text{-}(OBJ.AGR) \quad \text{-}(I)\text{-}ñ\ /\text{-}č$$
$$\text{-}(I)\text{-}rI\text{-}ñ\ /\text{-}č$$
$$\text{-}(I)\text{-}ra/\text{-}n/\text{-}u/\text{-}d/\varnothing^5$$

The distribution of this verb inflectional morphology reflects an interplay of a range of semantic and pragmatic factors. Variables such as honorificity, social

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3 The abbreviations used in this paper are as follows:

2	second person	H/HON	honorific	PROH	prohibitive
ACC	accusative	IMP	imperative	OBJ.AGR	object agreement
AUX	auxiliary	NF	nonfinal verb	SG	singular
ASP	aspect	NOM	nominalizer	SUB.AGR	subject agreement
DIMINU	diminutive	N.PST	narrative past	TNS	tense
EMPH	emphasis	PL	plural	V	verb

4 Kinnauri, like many Indian languages, has a compound verb construction (Hook 1974). The second element (which is otherwise a lexical verb) functions in the compound verb as an auxiliary.

5 *-d/-n* occurs in the corpus with a restricted set of verbs, which may also take the remaining three markers of this set.

hierarchy, cultural norms about displaying respect, the age factor, and, whether
the utterance should be viewed as a concise instruction, a suggestion, a piece of
advice, or an urging are some factors determining the choice of the imperative
markers. The occurrence of the suffix *-I* is, however, phonologically
conditioned, occurring when the verb stem ends with a consonant. Table 1
summarizes the distribution of the imperative verb morphology. The distribution
of the three sets encodes different points on the continuum. Set 1 is the most
polite form of requesting (weak command) and set 3 is the most 'direct' form of
command. There are cases which could be viewed either as an advisory or
urging utterance, or as an instruction. The choice of the imperative marker
seems to reflect the perspective which the speaker takes in such cases.

Marker		Conditions, Functions
Set 1: *-(I) -rI* / *-ñ* / *-č*	*-ñ* 'SG' *-č* 'dual, PL'	1. Suggestion or mild request. 2. Result of the action beneficial to the main participant (at least in the speaker's opinion).
Set 2: *-(I)* / *-ñ* / *-č*	*-ñ* 'SG' *-č* 'dual, PL'	1. Concise instruction. 2. Speaker is portrayed as someone who (for his great intelligence/kinship status) is authorized to give such instructions. 3. Result of the action may or may not be beneficial to the main participant.

Set 3:
-(I) / *-ra*
 	
    / *-u ~ -o*
 	
    / *-d ~ -n*
 	
    / ∅
		1. Direct command, non-honorific (lowest on the respect hierarchy).
		2. Degrading expressions, such as *monkey.like* occur in such constructions.
		3. *-ra*, *-u/-o* and ∅ can occur with the same verb (ex. *byo, byu* [byɔ-u], *bo-ra* [byɔ-ra]).
		The distribution of *-ra* and ∅ is as follows: *-ra* 'non-immediate result awaits', ∅ 'immediate result awaits'. Sometimes this is also correlated with a 'visible' vs. 'non-visible' variable/factor.

Table 1. Distribution of the inflectional morphology of the imperative verb.

In constructions involving the neutral (i.e., non-negative) image of the
characters, some of the social factors which seem to determine the occurrence of
the more polite markers (sets 1 and 2 in Table 1) are: