

## **REQUEST AND COMMAND IN KINNAURI: THE PRAGMATICS OF TRANSLATING POLITENESS**

**Anju Saxena**  
Uppsala University

### **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<sup>1</sup> 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 exercise 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,<sup>2</sup> 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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<sup>2</sup> 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,<sup>3</sup> indicated in the examples in bold.<sup>4</sup>

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)-V-(OBJ.AGR)    *-(l)-ñ /-č*  
                                   *-(l)-ri-ñ /-č*  
                                   *-(l)-ra/-n/-u/-d/Ø*<sup>5</sup>

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

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.

<sup>5</sup> *-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:<br>-(I) -rI / -ñ<br>/ -č                                   | -ñ 'SG'<br>-č 'dual, PL' | 1. Suggestion or mild request.<br>2. Result of the action beneficial to the main participant (at least in the speaker's opinion).                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
| Set 2:<br>-(I) / -ñ<br>/ -č                                       | -ñ 'SG'<br>-č 'dual, PL' | 1. Concise instruction.<br>2. Speaker is portrayed as someone who (for his great intelligence/kinship status) is authorized to give such instructions.<br>3. Result of the action may or may not be beneficial to the main participant.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
| Set 3:<br>-(I) / -ra<br><br>/ -u ~ -o<br><br>/ -d ~ -n<br><br>/ Ø |                          | 1. Direct command, non-honorific (lowest on the respect hierarchy).<br>2. Degrading expressions, such as <i>monkey.like</i> occur in such constructions.<br>3. -ra, -u/-o and Ø can occur with the same verb (ex. <i>byo</i> , <i>byu</i> [byɔ-u], <i>bo-ra</i> [byɔ-ra]).<br>The distribution of -ra and Ø is as follows: -ra 'non-immediate result awaits', Ø '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:

- a. Kinship hierarchy (e.g., daughter → father)
- b. Social hierarchy (e.g., servant → king)
- c. Age hierarchy (e.g., girl → old man, king → old woman)

The Set 3 imperative markers occur in special cases, where the addressee, following the socio-cultural norms, does not qualify to receive the normal treatment.

- d. Kinship hierarchy (e.g., son → stepmother)
- e. Social hierarchy (e.g., smart servant → stupid brahmin, smart mouse → girl)
- f. Age hierarchy (e.g., younger brother → stupid older brother)

Characters which are portrayed as saintly characters tend to use Set 1 markers, even in cases which do not follow these norms (for instance, *saintly man* → *young girl*). Further, situations where the participants have the same status (e.g., *two sisters* or *two friends*), Set 1 or 2 is normally chosen, depending on the situation.

An example of the use of the imperative markers in Kinnauri narratives is presented below. It illustrates the determinant role socio-cultural factors play in the choice of the imperative markers. In (3) we have two instances of the imperative markers (*biñ* and *lorlñ*, marked in bold). *biñ* has the Set 2 imperative marker whereas *lorlñ* has the Set 1 imperative. The choice between the two available types of imperatives within the same context by the same speaker (narrator of the story as well as the speaker in the story) illustrates how socio-cultural and pragmatic values are discretely encoded in the choice of the grammatical markers. In the Kinnauri speech community it seems that one may give instructions to one's sisters (even in respectful situations), whereas giving concise instructions or commands to or about one's father normally seems to be avoided.

3. *yalyal*    *lo-kyc*    *tseik-u*    *gafo-tse-pəŋ*  
tired/NF    say-N.PST    all-POSS    small-DIMINU/FEM-ACC

***bi-ñ***            *bapu-pəŋ*    ***lo-rl-ñ***  
go-IMP/2H    father-ACC    say-IMP-2H

Having gotten tired, they said to the youngest (sister): "Please go, and call our father!"

As the above description shows, Kinnauri predominantly uses the imperative construction to encode requests and commands. English, on the other hand, uses the imperative construction or the 'direct' command strategy

only in extremely restricted contexts, preferring to use indirect means for this purpose,<sup>6</sup> e.g. the WH-question construction. To quote Wierzbicka, "In English, the imperative is mostly used in commands and in orders. Other kinds of directives (i.e., of speech acts through which the speaker attempts to cause the addressee to do something), tend to avoid the imperative or to combine it with an interrogative and/or conditional form..." (Wierzbicka 1985:150).

Another observation to be made in this connection is that Kinnauri, unlike English, has a morphosyntactic mechanism to encode phenomena such as politeness and respect even in declaratives. This is morphologically encoded on the verb by the subject agreement suffix as well as by the choice of pronominals. The availability of linguistic means to encode politeness in the grammar of a language such as Kinnauri makes it redundant to choose yet another, indirect means of encoding this distinction in request/command constructions. On the other hand, in languages such as English where neither the verb agreement system nor the pronominals marks such distinctions, there seems to be a need to use different linguistic structures to distinguish explicitly different points on the request-command continuum, using the imperative construction only in restricted contexts. (Languages may, however, differ concerning which points of the scale they choose to distinguish.)

The differences in the way English and Kinnauri encode request/command should not lead one to draw sweeping conclusions about the degree of politeness in these two languages. As Wierzbicka (1985) points out, the interrogative form in English may also be used in situations lacking respect (e.g. when swearing). Further, the wide range of options available within the imperative construction in Kinnauri, suggests that the linguistic encoding of request/command in these languages is as sensitive to the factor of politeness as in any other language.

### 3. DISCUSSION

Successful translation involves not only individual words and expressions, but also requires us to capture small but important pieces of information reflected in the discourse organization as well as in the choice of lexical items and grammatical markers.

Problems in translation may arise, at least in part, because of cultural differences between the two speech communities. When members of a community with one set of cultural values and expectations come in contact with another community with a different set of cultural values and expectation patterns, misunderstandings may arise. Retaining the linguistic structure (i.e.,

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<sup>6</sup> See Ervin-Tripp (1976) for a detailed description of directives in American English.

the imperative form) of the speech act *request* in Kinnauri in its translated version in English may raise culturally-bound expectations and elicit conventionally established responses among its English readers, leading to a breakdown in the transfer of message, and also losing important semantic and pragmatic information encoded in the selection of the various imperative markers in Kinnauri.<sup>7</sup>

Nida describes translation "as an act of communication" (1977: 217) and emphasizes the importance of taking discourse into consideration for translation purposes: "Translating is essentially an act of communication, and if the resulting translation is not understandable, or is generally misunderstood, it is obviously not a satisfactory translation, regardless of the manner in which certain formal devices may have been imitated or the lexical units carefully matched" (1977: 228).

In recent translation studies, terms such as 'similarity' or 'family resemblances' (Toury, 1980) have been used to describe the relation between source and target language material. This allows the possibility that there is more than one way to translate the source language text, so that the translator's task is to select the best possible alternative in a given context, for a given purpose. Toury (1980, 1995), among others, suggests that it is the target culture which should be taken as the starting point, and not the source culture, since the product of the translation (i.e., the translated text) will be a part of the target language and culture, and therefore needs to adhere to its (TL) norms.

The comparison of the linguistic coding of the speech acts *request/command* in Kinnauri and English shows that these source and target languages differ both culturally and typologically. In such circumstances, the aim of a translator should be to make the translated material 'acceptable' to its English readers rather than to make an 'adequate' translation of the source language texts, i.e. that it is oriented towards its target language readers rather than to its source language speakers (for a similar observation, see Tymoczko, 1990). To accomplish this goal, the translator should focus on the corresponding expressions in the target language in similar social contexts. The translated text is a creation, a new text in another language, where the choices of the translator take into consideration both the message in the source language and the means available in the target language to convey the subtleties of the source language.

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7 See Gumperz (1977, 1978, 1980) for an examination of the interaction between British and Indian English speakers in England. These studies suggest that differences in expectations and interpretation of linguistic behavior can lead to breakdowns in interethnic communication.

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