

ACQUISITION OF HONORIFICS IN HINDI: A SOCIOLINGUISTIC COMPETENCE

Sunil Kumar Bhatt

(clsskb@nus.edu.sg)

National University of Singapore, Singapore

Abstract

The honorifics system in Hindi is a complex set of flexible rules. Its morphological representation is present in nouns, pronouns adjective and verbs. It reflects intertwined relationships among individuals based on formality, familiarity, age, familial relationships, social status, caste and other social factors. Whereas the T-V distinction in most of the language is expressed in second person only, in Hindi it is extended to third person and to certain extent first person. This adds to the complexity in its acquisition by a foreign language learner. The ability to make the T-V distinction, while talking with a native Hindi speaker, is imperative for HFL students to acquire this culturally sensitive communicative competence. If used incorrectly a HFL learner might give a misleading idea of his own personality or culture that could cease the opportunity for him to penetrate deeper into the society through language. This paper deals with the Hindi honorific system in details, its significance and culturally appropriate use and the paper will also offer some suggestions for the its acquisition by foreign language learners.

1 Introduction

Honorifics in a language have a very important role in the interplay of respect, familiarity and formality based on age, familial relationships, level of personal acquaintance, social hierarchy, status etc. among the members of the society. For a native speaker it comes very naturally as it is learnt along with other specificities of the language with no special effort. A foreign language learner has to make conscious decision in the choice of words or honorific markers in his speech. To make a correct choice of a honorific marker a foreign language learner needs to keep in mind lots of factors that justify his choice. The choice calls for a deep knowledge of the target language culture with regard to human relationships.

In Hindi also the usage of honorifics reflects culture of mutual relationship among individuals on the basis of age, familial ties and social hierarchy. A correct use by a foreign language learner can open doors for him to experience colourful Indian culture and penetrate deeper inside the Indian society. An incorrect use, on the other hand, can give a wrong impression of foreign language learner's own culture and society, and it can take away a unique chance to penetrate deeper into society though the language.

Hindi language has an elaborate system of honorific usages. The honorifics are expressed in the grammatical number, to be more specific, it is expressed by plurality of noun, pronouns and other modifiers in subject as well as predicate of a sentence. Unlike in other languages,

such as Slavic and Romance languages, where usually the honorific system of T-V distinction is expressed only in the second person in Hindi the T-V distinction has its expansion into the third person and to a certain extent first person too. The other uniqueness of Hindi honorifics is the fact that the T-V distinction in second person in Hindi has three levels of honorifics¹. On the other hand the first and third person has a usual two way T-V distinction. The choice of different level of honorifics not always depends on the formality / informality, politeness, respect or even age, but there are some predefined situations that go beyond the traditionally accepted norms that describe usage of honorifics, for instance to address one's mother the most informal pronoun is used, on the other hand for father the most formal pronoun is used. These predefined situations express culturally bound interrelationships between individuals in the Indian society.

Although some languages² also have an honorific system, but there are very few parallel references to Hindi honorific system. Regardless of the fact that the mother tongue of a foreign language learner of Hindi has honorific system or not, the Hindi honorific system is unique and equally alien to all of them. It is of utmost importance for a foreign language learner to acquire the knowledge of this unique Hindi honorific system to show a culturally sensitive communicative competence and avoid unintentional and unnecessary faux pas. The sensitivity of using different levels of honorifics is nicely expressed by Friedlander (2009, p.25), "The choice of how you use the words for you will greatly influence people's reactions to you."

Another very important part of study of honorifics in Hindi lies in pragmatics. The language use and the standard grammar are very often quite apart. According to the standard there are only three levels or forms of T-V distinction in second person, but there is also very widely used fourth form. This fourth form is a combination of the pronoun *āp* with the highest level in subject and the middle level grammar forms *tum* in predicate in a sentence. According to the standard grammar such usage is outright ungrammatical regardless of a very high frequency of this usage in people's formal and informal speeches. This usage might probably even be more frequent than the other two standard forms.³ This form will be taken in detail in later part of the paper. The standard grammar also does not discuss the T-V distinction in first person. The usage of *ham* first person plural instead of *maĩ* first person singular is very popular in some Hindi speaking regions and also in poetic descriptions. Quite often Bollywood film titles and songs are full of such usages.

Although the role of pragmatics of such cases is avoided, rather not discussed in grammar books, in the classroom teaching the students should be made aware of off-track usages of

¹ There is a possibility of a fourth form too. This fourth form is not a part of standard grammar, but is widely used.

² Here I do not mean other South Asian languages which have very similar honorific system, rather European languages; Romance, Slavic etc.

³ There has not been any study done on the frequency of occurrence of this ungrammatical usage. My presumption here is based on personal observation of people's speech and its use in media; entertainment as well as news media. For instance, if an interview is conducted in electronic media of TV or Radio; the anchor would be using a correct grammar form, but the interviewee would unconsciously be using the fourth form most of the time.

such forms, certainly not by making them use in the classroom, but by bringing authentic material such as movie clips, interviews, talk shows where such forms very casually appear.

Another pragmatical feature of the Hindi honorific system which grammar books do not even touch is the tendency of moving back and forth between different levels. This feature is very hard to explain specially when the moment is both ways. One can understand if two people get acquainted in a formal situation and start conversation in a formal manner, but with the course of some time they become close and friends and level of formality drops down and they start using lower level of honorific. The poets of used this grammatical feature of Hindi in a verbal form to write poetry of meeting the lover in a formal way in the beginning and later with time becoming informal and closer.

āp se tum, tum se tū honā
to become *tum* from *āp* become *tū* from *tum*. (Lit.)

This means to start using *āp* in the beginning and then move to *tum* and with more time passed start using *tū*.

The reverse of this is also not very uncommon. The lack of rigidity in such rules give the HFL students a very tough time in grasping the whole notion of honorifics in Hindi.

To make a correct choice of honorific in a foreign language one has to have a very clear understanding of the fine details of interwoven relationships among individuals in the target language society. The explanation given in the grammar books or rules taught in the foreign language class can serve as a rule of thumb, but the casual use driven by instincts and intuitions of the native speakers can pose a challenge for the foreign language learner to comprehend the honorifics in its entirety. In this paper I will make an attempt to analyse the whole system of honorifics in Hindi morphologically, semantically and pragmatically. I will also try to give some guidelines for its correct usage to the HFL students so that they can avoid any misunderstanding and gaffes in communicating with the native speakers.

2 Second person honorifics

The T-V distinction in second person in modern standard Hindi has three levels; *tū* very informal or even rude, *tum* – familiar, somewhat informal and relatively polite, *āp* – very formal and certainly polite. Here I would like to give the conjugation of the verb *honā* - to be - in simple present tense with all these second person pronouns i.e. you are.

tū hai
tum ho
āp hai

The reason to give conjugation here is the interesting fourth form, which is treated as a ungrammatical, rather not mentioned or totally ignored by the grammar books. This form is highly prevalent in everyday speech of an ordinary Hindi speaker and equally frequently reflected in the media entertainment as well as news media. This fourth form is *āp ho*. The morphology of this form is combination of *tum* - familiar, somewhat informal and relatively polite with *āp* - very formal and certainly polite. It takes the highest form of the honorific

pronoun i.e. *āp* and the conjugation of the verb in *tum* form, hence *āp ho*. The detailed discussion on these 4 forms are in the following sections.

2.1. *tū hai*

This is a very informal, even rude or impolite form of addressing people. It is used among very close friends or siblings of the same age, to address small children. It is often not used even between a husband and a wife. Pets are addressed with this pronoun only.

All the grammar books and Hindi teaching manuals (Agnihotri 2007, Bhatt, 2007, Pořízka 1972, Snell – Snell – Weightman, 2003, Shapiro 1989 etc). caution the learners to be extremely careful in using this form. In fact, they mostly advise HFL learners to completely avoid this form. In case of some textbooks (Bender, 1968 and Fairbanks & Misra, 1966) this form is not even mentioned. In Van Olphen (1974, 81) after giving all the usual situations where learner might face its use, indirectly also advises them not to use it; “It is however safe to say that students will not be faced with situations which require the use of *tuu* and therefore it should be taught as an item for passive knowledge only”.

Bhatt (2007, 5) as in most of the HFL textbooks explains that “The pronoun *tū* is the most informal of the three and used only by very close friends or family members (brothers and sister, not parents⁴)”. Bhatia (1996, 74) describes it “either too intimate or too rude”, and very wisely advises the learner not to use it until the other person has started using it in conversation with him. Shapiro (1989, 40–41) gives a little more elaborate account of this level of honorific, along with the usual usage of *tū* he mentions another interesting use, “It is often used in the home by husbands to address their wives, but less often by wives addressing their husbands”.

There are some predefined uses of *tū*. One uses it to address one’s mother. The emotional closeness to the mother is reflected in informal, rather intimate way of addressing her. The word *mā* (mother) itself is very informal and intimate, whether there is a reference to second person or third person. *mā*, ***tujhe salām*** (*Mother, I salute you*) is a name of a patriotic film. The second person pronoun (bolded) is the lowest of the honorifics which is referring to the mother, rather motherland in this context.

Gods are also addressed with the *tū* form of pronoun to portray the intimate spiritual relationship with the lord. Another example taken from the a Hindi film *rām, terī gaṅgā mailī* (Oh God Ram, **your** Ganges is sinful). Although most of the books explain this use as an expression of spiritual closeness with the god, but Van Olphen (1974, 80) finds the reason in the archaic use of the language; “In addressing the deity, *tuu* often does not represent an intimate level, but an archaic use of *tuu*, which is more representative of the use of this pronoun at an earlier state of the language.”

The use of this form can also express negative emotions such as contempt, anger, disgust, disrespect etc. in other words, uncivilised behaviour. This so called civilised behaviour and its reflection in the choice of second person pronoun is expressed by some people in a very unique way “Many ‘civilised’ speakers of ‘standard Hindi’ take pride in saying that in their family, they don’t use

⁴ A little later we will discuss how mother is also addressed with this level of honorific.

tū at all” (Agnihotri, 2007, p. 131). The uncivilised behaviour in using *tū* is also embedded in the semantics of a conjunct verb “*tū tarāk karnā*”. This verb means talking in a very uncivilised, rude manner, in fact, it literary means using *tū* form of second person pronoun.

In HFL classroom *tū* form is just taught or rather informed about its existence, but never practiced and rightly so. There could be an extremely rare occasion where a foreign language learner of Hindi will be able to use it, and that occasion will come only once he has mastered the language and spend enough time in the target language country and observed mutual relationships among different types of people very closely. Until then the form and grammar related to the pronoun *tū* should remain in his passive knowledge.

2.2. *tum ho*

This is somewhat formal and somewhat polite form of addressing the people who the speaker is familiar with and is of same age, that includes close friends, relatives with not much of age difference. People of lower social status rickshaw-wallas, shoemakers, washermen, tailors etc. are also included in this list by most of the authors of HFL textbooks. Although most of the modern textbooks discourage students to use it, certainly not on the first acquaintance, but some old manuals and textbooks such as Van Olphen’s (1974) does not shy away from the use of this form, he says “If the student is to function appropriately he should therefore have a good active knowledge of this familiar level.”(p. 77). McGregor (1972) also mentions that a part of a Hindi speaking population does not find *āp* natural to use in a everyday conversation and they use *tum* instead. At the same time he advises not to imitate such people.

The use of *tum* in urban settings have now become very uncommon, but it is still prevalent in everyday speech. A HFL student can safely use it with children or somebody he became close with and there is not a significant age difference. The best advice for him is to observe the conversation with the native speaker and start using it only when the native speaker initiates it with him.

2.3. *āp haī*

This is a formal and polite form which students are encouraged to use during the classroom practice with drills and exercises. As recommended by the books, this form should always be used during the first introduction with everybody except the small children. Although one can encounter adults using this form with their small children, but that is done with the intention to train the children to use *āp* with others. There is always inconsistency from the sides of parents in using *āp* with the children.

Since the borderline between the usages of *āp* and *tum* is not very hard and fast different textbooks suggests different ways to deal with this issue. Kachru (2006) with the help of examples of some the possible usages of *āp* tries to give some guidelines to the students of HFL: kinship terms for elders, referring expressions for teachers, high officials and professionals. In case of doubt one should use *āp* to avoid any kind of misunderstanding (Snell & Weightman 2003). Bhatia (1996) refers to the caste based society in the usage of *āp* and *tum* by native speakers, but at the same time advises the HFL students to use *āp* and avoid any kind of stereotyping.

All the recently published (last 2-3 decades) HFL textbooks encourage HFL students to use *āp* most of the time and only when they are very sure and have become close with the other speakers, they could use *tum*. On the other hand some old manuals were not so rigid about the

use of *tum* and *āp*. Van Olphen's (1974) McGregor (1972) do not entirely discourage to use *tum*. They both list a socially low level jobs such as rickshaw-wallas, shoemakers, washermen, tailors etc. where people freely use *tum* and the HFL students will be fine using *tum* instead of *āp* there. McGregor (1972) also mentions that for some people using *āp* is unnatural.

Comparing old and recent textbooks one can see a paradigm shift in Modern Hindi language, the usage of *āp* have become more prevalent in recent times. Here I will try to give some reasons and rationale behind such a paradigm shift. Historically *āp* has been part of an urban idiom that reflected civility and etiquettes of high cultured and aristocratic layer of the society. The urban Urdu culture and its etiquettes have always had *āp* in its everyday speech, but the rural Hindi was lacking such use of *āp*. In fact, the dialects that are spoken in the rural India often did not have *āp* at all. Some cognate languages such as Gujarati, Punjabi etc. also do not have *āp* or anything similar that could reflect the meaning of *āp* in such a sense. These dialects and cognate languages have only the other two forms *tū* and *tum*.

In the recent decades the electronic entertainment media; television thorough its serials, sitcoms, talk shows, reality TV shows, music programs and even news programs, and cinema through popular Bollywood films and songs, has made Hindi popular among the masses in urban as well as rural India. The standard Hindi, in other words, the urban Hindi has penetrated into the speech of millions of people. The usage of *tum* has declined and is replaced largely by *āp*. *āp* has even penetrated into the dialects that traditionally did not have it.

Another feature that can confuse a HFL learner who tries to learn the usage of honorific pronouns through observation of native speakers is the fact that many speakers move back and forth between *tum* and *āp*, and less frequently between *tū* and *tum*. This behaviour is very hard to explain, but a foreign language learner is advised to use lower level of honorific only when he is addressed by the speaker in lower level honorific. In almost all other cases he should use *āp*, and specially when the paradigms have changed in the modern India.

2.4 *āp ho*

This ungrammatical form is a combination of *tum* and *āp*. It is derived from the pronoun *āp* and conjugation and other verb forms the pronoun *tum*. Since both of them are grammatically plural, the elements of the predicate such as nouns, adjectives, possessive pronouns do not need to be adjusted, they remained the same except the verb forms. This form is widely used mainly in the speech text by rural and urban folks equally. In fact according to my personal experience of observing its usage, I find this from more widely used than *tum* and *āp* in their grammatically correct forms. The standard grammar has not accepted it yet, so it is not found in the books, specially in the grammar books. This pragmatic use is not taught in the HFL classes, in fact, not even mentioned.

This form is often explained as an attempt to find something in between *tum* and *āp*. In my opinion there is no such intention by a speaker to find a half way, this is simply a use of wrong grammar which is dictated by the paradigm shift that is mentioned above. As described above the idioms of the rural speaking area do not have *āp*, and the people use mainly *tum* even for the highest honorific meaning. The use of *āp* is mainly in the urban settings, but this

urban variety of Hindi through entertainment media has become popular and penetrated into the rural areas as well. This leads to the replacement of *tum* by *āp*, but it is limited to subject only, the predicate still stays the same as *tum*. The pragmatics in this case has such a strong influence that this use have become massive and the TV, Radio, cinema and other media regularly use this form as a normal grammar.

A HFL learner is highly unlikely to make this error as he has not been taught or trained to use it, but he should aware of this form, many people use it and he should not be surprised if he hears it.

The role of *āp haĩ* form is more of a honorific use for a singular subject rather than of a plural number. For the plural number in general cases (command or request not addressed some specific group of people) the *tum ho* form is usually used. Specially in an imperative form when a command or request is addressed to a plural audience, the form used is *tum ho*, eg. *calo* (go or move!) or *bacāo* (help!). The phrases and proverbs which have imperative forms are usually made with the *tum* form

jiyo aur jīne do!
Live and let live

In these phrasal and proverbial usages, it is hard to establish whether these forms belong to *tum ho* (1.2) or *āp ho* (1.4), since being part of a phrase or proverb it does not have morphologically expressed grammatical subject, just the verb form that belongs to both *tum ho* or *āp ho*.

The *āp haĩ* form is mainly used if the request or command is addressed to a specific person with the intention of an honorific meaning.

My personal belief is that regardless of the fact that all the grammar books ignore *āp ho* form because it is not part of the standard grammar, the HFL students should be introduced with this form. This form is ubiquitously prevalent in people's communication from the street level to high standard journalism. The student should not be trained or drilled to use it, but a passive knowledge of the form and its widespread presence will make their communication with native speakers more authentic.

3 Third person honorifics

Another unique feature of Hindi honorific system is the presence of the T-V distinction in the third person. The third person honorific is expressed with the grammatical plurality. Unlike the second person there are only two levels here; singular for informal addressing and plural for politeness and formal addressing. The HFL students find this distinction very hard to grasp. This concept is not so much present in European languages, but analysed by European linguists. Comrie (1975) calls it "polite plural". The distinct feature with the third person honorifics is the plurality of the predicate.

This distinction to express an honorific meaning is morphologically represented throughout the pronominal system; in subject pronouns, possessive pronouns, their oblique and ergative subject forms.

vah – singular informal
ve – plural formal and polite.

	Subject pronoun	Possessive pronouns	Oblique form	Ergative subject
Singular/ informal	<i>vah</i> ⁵ - he	<i>uskā</i> - his	<i>us</i> - him	<i>usne</i> - he
Plural / polite or formal	<i>ve</i> – they / he	<i>unkā</i> - their / his	<i>un</i> – them / him	<i>unhōne</i> they / he

The pronouns behave consistently throughout the spectrum of plurality to express an honorific meaning, but that is not the case with nouns. The honorific meaning expressed by the plurality of nouns⁶ is limited only to masculine nouns in nominative case whether it is part of subject or predicate. The honorific meaning with feminine nouns is not expressed by the noun itself, rather it is expressed by other components of the predicate, mainly the verb. The masculine nouns that are not in nominative case i.e. in oblique and ergative subject, do not have any morphological way to express an honorific meaning. The honorific meaning can only be expressed by the titles or honorific markers such as *ji*, or *sahib*, but not by the grammatical category of plurality.

I am going to deconstruct the whole phenomenon of honorifics through plurality with examples now. First I take only pronouns:

ve acche lekhak haĩ (Nominative)

He is a good writer.

They are good writers (Literally)

ve acchĩ lekhikā haĩ (Nominative)

She is a good writer.

They are a good writer⁷ (Literally)

unkā bhāĩ (Possessive)

His/her brother.

Their brother (Literally)

maĩne unko dekhā (Oblique)

I saw **him/her**.

I saw **them**. (Literally)

unhōne mujhse kahā (Ergative subject)

He/she told me.

They told me. (Literally)

⁵ For convenience I am taking masculine gender in English translation. Hindi pronouns are not gender sensitive, same pronoun is used for masculine and feminine.

⁶ Nouns here mainly are human nouns.

⁷ It is grammatically incorrect sentence in English. The translation is word to word. The plurality in the predicate will be dealt a little later.

As mentioned above the pronouns follow a set pattern of expressing the honorific meaning through plurality.

In an archaic and stylistic enhanced way sometimes *āp* is sometimes used to express the honorific meaning in third person.

Varmā jī ek acche lekhak haī, āpne kaī acche upanyās likhe haī.
Varma ji is a good writer, **he (Lit. you pl.)** has written good novels.

This type of use is excluded out of grammar books and HFL students are not even told about it. Chances of them encountering this use is very rare and they themselves will not be using it at all.

When there is a masculine noun in nominative, whether as a subject or part of a predicate, plurality is used express the honorific meaning.

mere profesar acche lekhak haī.
My professor is a good writer
My professors are good writers. (Literary)

In expressing the honorific meaning the entire sentence needs to be in plural, not just the subject towards which the honorific meaning is intended. Every word in the sentence is in its plural form.

mere(pl.) profesar(pl.) acche(pl.) lekhak(pl.) haī(pl.).

In fact, this sentence is ambiguous in term of grammatical number. In a context free environment this could mean both.

When a feminine noun is a subject, both the predicated noun and the subject noun are in singular only the verb is in plural. Only the verb express the honorific meaning through plurality.

āpkī bahan acchī lekhikā haī.
Your sister is (Lit. are) a good writer (feminine form).
āpkī(sg.) bahan(sg.) acchī(sg.) lekhikā(sg.) haī(pl.).

When a masculine or a feminine noun is in any grammatical case or form except nominative, the honorific meaning is not expressed by plurality, in fact, it is not at all expressed morphologically. Additional particles or honorific markers can be used, but plurality of the nouns does not express honorific meaning, rather it express only the plural number.

Here I am going to take some of the same sentences which I took for showing the honorific meaning in pronouns. I will just replace the pronouns with the noun my “*profesar*”.

maīne apne profesar ko dekhā (Oblique)
I saw **my professor**.

Here in this sentence the word *profesar* is in singular. With regard to the honorific meaning it is neutral. It does not express presence or absence of the honorific meaning. The plurality of the noun *profesar* (the sentence below) will give only plural meaning, but not honorific meaning.

maïne apne profesarō ko dekhā (Oblique)
I saw **my professors**.

Same is the case with the ergative subject:
mere profesar ne mujhse kahā (Ergative subject)
My professor told me.

The plural (sentence below) does not express the honorific meaning, it expresses the plural meaning only:

mere profesarō ne mujhse kahā (Ergative subject)
My professors told me.

So far I talked about the morphological description of honorific, but now comes the question when and for whom to use honorific meaning. For those you would use *āp* in second person, should be mentioned with honorifics. The elders should also be mentioned with the honorifics. Certain professions such as professor, manager, high officials etc. are to be mentioned with respect. Speakers subjective relation towards the person mentioned can also dictate the use of honorifics. Some honorific particles such as *jī, sāhib, śrimān* etc. (Mr. Miss, Mrs. etc.) which can be used after personal names and profession always demand plurality for the honorific meaning.

On the other hand some low status professions such as cobbler, tailor, washerman etc and also domestic servants are always used without honorific meaning eg.

is gāv kā mocī kahā baiṭtā hai? –
Where does the village cobbler sit (has his shop)?

The nouns *ādmī, insān* (man, person, individual) etc. usually take singular, but if these words are mentioned with some respectful person, honorifics must be used.

vahā ek ādmī (singular) rahtā thā.
There lived a man.
śarmā jī acche ādmī (plural) hai.
Mr. Sharma is a good man.

To foreign language students it might seem a little difficult to grasp, but in reality they only have to worry about the pronouns, which always take plural form to express honorific meaning. And about noun the HFL students have to remember to use plural form only for Masculine nouns in nominative. Regarding the choice of the honorific form for the third person the rule of thumb is if one uses *āp* for a certain person, then the higher honorific should be used, otherwise singular or formal form is fine to use.

4 First person honorific

Another interesting detail about honorifics in Hindi is that they exist in even in first person, to be precise, the use of “we” *ham* in place of “I” *maĩ*. In Hindi it is very common. The usage is also kept out of standard grammar, although some grammar books (Pořízka, 1972) do mention it, usually with an advice not to use it. In the HFL classrooms too this usage is not mentioned and of course not practices at all. For higher level second language learner of Hindi, the knowledge of first person honorifics can give a broder idea of the language use, as it is present ubiquitously.

In fact the idea of using “we” instead of “I” to elevate oneself above rest is not uncommon in other languages. The concept of royal “we” or majestic plural has quite often been discussed in the scientific literature. A prominent personality such as a king, a politician or a high level official often uses royal “we” in fictional literature or even real life situations. One of the very common examples from literature is when a king is pleased by a one of his subjects, he would say:

ham khuś hue.
I am happy.
We are happy. (Lit)

The practice of using “We” instead of “I” (Nosism in Latin terminology) in Hindi has more functions than simply reflection of honorifics.

In some parts of India, mainly eastern dialects, it is very common to use plural *ham* instead of singular *maĩ* in first person. The numerical plural in these places is expressed either in the context or if extra emphasis is needed to express numerical plural, it is achieved by the addition of the word “log” i.e. *ham log*. Often in the fictional literature to express the belongingness of a character to one of the eastern regions such speech is used. In Bollywood films too this use is employed as a tool to portray a character who comes from the eastern Hindi speaking area.

The use of plural for first person singular is also used for poetic and rhetorical expressions. The Bollywood exploits it quite so often. As a big number of students come to learn Hindi driven by the colourful world of Bollywood (Bhatt, 2012), it makes perfect sense to have a better understanding of this poetic use. The Bollywood titles, songs and dialogue sequences uses first person plural in place of singular quite often e.g.

ham āpke haĩ kaun?
Who am I to you?
Who are we to you? (Lit.)

On one hand the royal “we” is used as honorific i.e. to elevate oneself, to the contrary of it, on the other hand the use of first person plural for a singular subject is also to express humility and humbleness. It is also called plural of modesty (*pluralis modestiae* in Latin). In scientific literature and journalistic writings the use of “we” is very common by which the author express his own opinion. In Hindi this use of “we” goes beyond such articles and scientific papers. In colloquial Hindi the use of first person plural is to show respect to the person addressed. It is a very common practice not to use *maĩ* – I, which might mean a snobbish

behaviour, as if one is separating him from rest of the group or the person addressed on the grounds of superiority. The use of *ham* – we neutralises such effect and shows one’s humility. While making a conversation with prominent people a person can skilfully avoid being the other or rather become a part of the group just by simply using “we”. In the fictional literature it is very common to see the use:

hamē māf kar dījie

Excuse *me*.

Excuse *us*. (Lit.)

5 Conclusion

The honorific system or rather the T-V distinction in Hindi is a complex set of rules. Some of these rules are rigidly applied and other are flexible and sensitive to the context. Another feature that makes Hindi honorific system unique is that the T-V distinction is not restricted to second person only as is the case with many languages, but it is present throughout the spectrum of first and third person too. Since it is a culturally sensitive part of sociolinguistic communication, a foreign language learner should acquire and have a very good understanding of its usage. There are some predefined rules that describe relationships among individuals and how these relationships are reflected in the honorific system. These rules can help HFL students to understand this complex system and use them in their communication with the native speakers. However, beyond these predefined rules lie the pragmatics of honorific system which could be learnt only through observation of people’s behaviour in communication with each other, reading of authentic texts, examination of the language use by different media.

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