



Acquisition of Honorifics in Hindi: A Sociolinguistic Competence

Sunil Kumar Bhatt

(sunil.kumarbhatt@utoronto.ca)

University of Toronto, Canada

Abstract

The Hindi honorifics system works according to a complex set of pragmatic rules. Its morphological representation is present in nouns, pronouns, adjectives and verbs. It reflects intertwined relationships among individuals based on formality, familiarity, age, familial relationships, social status, caste and other social factors. Whilst the T-V distinction¹ in most of the languages manifest itself in the use of the second person pronoun only, these distinctions are extended to the use of the third person pronoun and, to a certain extent, the first person pronoun in Hindi. This adds to the complexity in its acquisition by a foreign language learner of Hindi. The ability to make the T-V distinction, while speaking with a native Hindi speaker, is imperative for Hindi as foreign language (HFL) students to enact in culture-sensitive communicative competence. If used incorrectly, a HFL learner might give a misleading signal of his own personality or culture that could cease the opportunity for him to assimilate himself into the target society through language. This article offers detailed analyses of the Hindi honorifics system, its significance and culturally appropriate use. The article will also offer some suggestions for 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 and so forth among the members of a society. For a native speaker, the use of honorifics 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 decisions in the choice of words or honorific markers in his speech. To make the correct choice of an honorific marker, a foreign language learner needs to keep in mind many factors that justify his choice. The choice calls for a deep knowledge of the target language culture with regard to human relationships.

Hindi honorifics use also reflects a culture of mutual relationship among individuals on the basis of age, familial ties and social hierarchy. The correct use by a foreign language learner can open doors for him to experience the colourful Indian culture and interact closely with native Indian speakers. The 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 the unique chance for him to assimilate into the target speech society through the language.

Hindi language has an elaborate system of honorifics use. The honorifics are expressed in the grammatical number. Specifically, it is expressed by the plurality of noun, pronouns and other modifiers in the subject as well as predicate position of a sentence. Unlike in other languages, such as Slavic and Romance languages, where the honorifics system of T-V distinction is expressed only in the second person pronouns, T-V distinction in Hindi expands into the third person pro-

nouns and, to a certain extent, the first person pronouns. The other uniqueness of Hindi honorifics is the fact that the T-V distinction in second person pronouns in Hindi has three levels of honorifics². The first and third person pronouns have the usual two-way T-V distinction. The choice of different levels of honorifics does not always depend on the formality/informality, politeness, respect or even age, but there are some predefined situations that go beyond the traditionally accepted norms that describe the use of honorifics. For instance, to address one's mother, the most informal pronoun is used, whereas in addressing one's father, in contrast, the most formal pronoun is used. These predefined situations express culturally bound interrelationships between individuals in the Indian society.

Although some languages³ also have an honorific system, there are very few parallel references to the Hindi honorifics system. Regardless whether a language learner is aware of the honorifics system or not, the Hindi honorifics system is unique and equally alien to all speakers of Hindi as a foreign language. It is of utmost importance for a foreign language learner to acquire the knowledge of this unique Hindi honorifics system to achieve a culture-sensitive communicative competence and avoid unintentional and unnecessary faux pas. Friedlander (2009) offers an interesting view on the sensitivity of using different levels of honorifics: "The choice of how you use the words for you will greatly influence people's reactions to you." (p. 25)

Another very important part of studying honorifics in Hindi lies in pragmatics. The language use and the standard grammar very often stand quite apart. According to the stipulations of standard grammar, there are only three levels or forms of T-V distinction in the second person pronoun, but there is also a 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 use is outright ungrammatical regardless of a very high frequency of this use in people's formal and informal speeches. This use might probably even be more frequent than the other two standard forms (see below for more details). The standard grammar also does not discuss the T-V distinction in the first person. The use of *ham* first person plural instead of *maī* first person singular is very popular in some Hindi speaking regions as well as in poetic descriptions. It is noteworthy that Bollywood film titles and songs are often full of such uses.

Although the pragmatics of such sociolinguistic practice is not discussed in grammar books, in the classroom, however, students should be made aware of the off-track uses of such honorific forms. The awareness of the honorific use could be created by bringing authentic material such as movie clips, interviews, talk shows to the classroom where such forms appear very casually in interpersonal communication.

Another pragmatic feature of the Hindi honorifics system which grammar books do not even touch on is the tendency of moving back and forth between different levels. This feature is very hard to explain especially when the moment is in both directions. One can understand if two people get acquainted in a formal situation and start the conversation in a formal manner, but in the course of time, they become close friends and their level of formality decreases with the use of lower levels of honorifics. Some poets have used this grammatical feature of Hindi in a verbal form to write poetry about meeting the lover in a formal way in the beginning and later with time, their relationship gradually becomes informal and closer.

For example, *āp se tum, tum se tū honā* – to become *tum* from *āp*, and then further become *tū* from *tum* (Literal). This means that one starts using *āp* in the beginning and then moves to *tum*, and over more time, one starts using *tū*. The reverse of this is also not uncommon. The lack of rigidity in such rules gives HFL students a very tough time in grasping the whole notion of honorifics in Hindi. To be able to make the correct choice of honorifics in a foreign language, one has to have a very clear understanding of the fine details interwoven in the relationships among individuals in the target language society. The explanations given in the grammar books or rules taught in the foreign language classes can serve as rules of thumb, but the casual use driven by the instincts and intuitions of native speakers can pose a challenge for the foreign language learner to comprehend the honorifics in its entirety.

This article attempts to analyse the whole system of honorifics in Hindi morphologically, semantically and pragmatically. Some guidelines for the correct use of honorifics are provided to HFL students so that they can avoid any misunderstanding and gaffes in communicating with the native speakers. The discussion also includes the colloquial use of honorifics which deviates from the standard form of the language.

2 Second person honorifics

The T-V distinction in the 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. The conjugation of the verb *honā* – to be – is in the simple present tense with all these second person pronouns (i.e. you are), namely, *tū hai*, *tum ho*, and *āp hai*.

The reason for giving the conjugations here is the interesting fourth form, which is treated as ungrammatical or normally ignored by the grammar books. This form is highly prevalent in the everyday speech of an ordinary Hindi speaker and equally frequent in use in the entertainment media as well as news bulletins. This fourth form is *āp ho*. The morphology of this form is a 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, which is *āp* and the conjugation of the verb in *tum* form, hence *āp ho*. These four forms are discussed in detail 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 and to address small children. It is often not even used between husband and wife. Pets are addressed with this pronoun only. Many grammar books and Hindi teaching manuals (Agnihotri, 2007; Bhatt, 2007; Pořízka 1972; Shapiro 1989; Snell & Weightman, 2003) caution learners to be extremely careful in using this form. In fact, they mostly advise HFL learners to avoid this form completely. In many textbooks (Bender, 1968; Fairbanks & Misra, 1966), this form is not even mentioned. van Olphen (1974), after giving all the usual situations where learner might encounter it, also indirectly advises learners 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.” (p. 81)

Bhatt (2007), as in most HFL textbooks, explains that “*tū* is the most informal of the three and used only by very close friends or family members (brothers and sister, not parents)”⁵ (p. 5). Bhatia (1996) describes it as “either too intimate or too rude” (p. 74), and very wisely advises the learner not to use it until the other person has started using it in conversation with him. Shapiro (1989) gives a more elaborate account of this level of honorifics, along with the usual use of *tū*, whereby 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.” (p. 40–41)

There are some predefined uses of *tū*. One use is to address one’s mother. The emotional closeness to the mother is reflected in an 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 pronoun. *mā, **tujhe** salām* (*Mother, I salute you*) is the title of a patriotic film. The second person pronoun (in bold) is the lowest of the honorifics which is referring to the mother, or rather motherland, in this context.

Gods are also addressed with the *tū* form of pronoun to portray the intimate spiritual relationship with the lord. An example taken from a Hindi film is *rām, **terī** gaṅgā mailī* (*Oh God Ram, your Ganges is sinful*). Although most books explain this use as an expression of spiritual closeness with the god, but van Olphen (1974) 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.” (p. 80)

The use of this form can also express negative emotions such as contempt, anger, disgust, disrespect, and so forth. In short, the form is related to 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 *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 literally means using *tū* form of second person pronoun.

In HFL classroom, the *tū* form is merely taught in passing or students are only informed about its existence, but they do not ever practiced it, 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 spent 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. Even though this form would rarely be used by a HFL learner and the teacher would not drill the student in this form, it is recommended for teachers to bring authentic material such as songs of films and film titles with the use of *tū*. This will not only show the students its use in everyday life, but prepare them linguistically when they come in contact with the Hindi-speaking world. Ignoring it completely, as some text books have done, will not give the student the full experience of a living language.

2.2 *tum ho*

This is a somewhat formal and somewhat polite form of addressing people whom the speaker is familiar with and who is of same age including close friends and relatives with not much of age difference. People of lower social status, such as rickshaw-wallas, shoemakers, washermen and tailors are also included in this list by most HFL textbook authors. Although most modern textbooks discourage students from using it, certainly not on the first acquaintance, some old manuals and textbooks do not shy away from the use of this form. For example, van Olphen’s (1974) writes, “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 the Hindi speaking population does not find *āp* natural to use in everyday conversations and they use *tum* instead. At the same time, he advises that one should not imitate such people.

The use of *tum* in urban settings has now become very uncommon, but it is still prevalent in everyday speech. A HFL student can safely use it with children or somebody he has become close with and where there is no 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. The student should also be prepared to discern it when being addressed through some communicative activities such as role plays or through listening to dialogues where this form is used. A student can find himself in a small place in India, or talking to the commoners who use this form. He should be taught that in such situations this form has nothing to do with disrespect; it is rather common speech in such surroundings and he can himself use it.

2.3 *āp haī*

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

Since the line between the use of *āp* and *tum* is not hard and fast, different textbooks suggest different ways to deal with this issue. Kachru (2006), with the help of examples of some possible uses 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 use of *āp* and *tum* by native speakers, but at the same time advises HFL students to use *āp* and avoid any kind of stereotyping.

HFL textbooks published in the last 2 to 3 decades 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, should they use *tum*. On the other hand, some old manuals were not so rigid about the use of *tum* and *āp*. McGregor (1972) and van Olphen (1974) do not entirely discourage the use of *tum*. They both mention that socially low-level-job holders such as rickshaw-wallas, shoemakers, washermen and tailors tend to use *tum* freely, and HFL students could use *tum* instead of *āp* when interacting with them. McGregor (1972) also mentions that for some people, using *āp* is unnatural.

Comparing older and more recent textbooks, one can see a sociolinguistic shift in modern Hindi language: the use of *āp* have become more prevalent in recent times. Some reasons behind such a pragmatic shift are proposed in the discussion. Historically, *āp* has been part of an urban idiom that reflected civility and the etiquettes of the high-cultured and aristocratic layer of the society. The urban Urdu culture and its etiquettes have always had *āp* in its everyday speech. However, the dialects spoken in rural India often did not have *āp* at all. Some cognate languages, such as Gujarati, Punjabi, and so forth, 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 recent decades, the electronic entertainment media, including TV serials, sitcoms, talk shows, reality TV shows, music programmes, news programmes, popular Bollywood films and the theme songs, have made Hindi popular among the masses in urban as well as rural India. The standard urban Hindi has penetrated the speech of millions of people. The use of *tum* has declined and is replaced largely by *āp*, which has even made its way into the dialects that traditionally did not have it.

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

2.4 *āp ho*

This ungrammatical form is a combination of *tum* and *āp*. It is derived from the pronoun *āp* and the conjugation and other verb forms of the pronoun *tum*. Since both of them are grammatically plural, the elements of the predicate such as nouns, adjectives, possessive pronouns do not change, except for the verb forms. This form is widely used mainly in the speech of rural and urban folks. In fact, according to my personal observation of its use, *āp ho* is more widely used than *tum* and *āp* in their grammatically correct forms. The standard grammar has not accepted the form as yet, thus it is excluded, especially from grammar books. This pragmatic use is not taught or mentioned in HFL classes.

This form is often explained as an attempt to find something between *tum* and *āp*. In my opinion, this was never the result of the intention to find an in-between morpheme; rather, it is simply the use of wrong grammar which is dictated by the paradigm shift mentioned above. As described above, the idioms of the rural speaking areas do not have *āp*, and people use mainly *tum* even for the highest honorific meaning. The use of *āp* is prevalent mainly in the urban settings, but this urban variety of Hindi through entertainment media has become popular and spread into the rural areas as well. This leads to the replacement of *tum* by *āp*, but it is limited to the subject of the sentence, and the predicate still stays the same as *tum*. The pragmatic impact of *āp* has had such a strong influence that its use has become so massive that media such as television, radio, and cinema regularly use this form as a normal grammatical form.

A HFL learner is highly unlikely to make this error as he has not been taught or trained to use it, but he should be made aware that this form is current and common so as not to be surprised if he hears it. The role of the *āp haī* form is more of an honorific use for a singular subject rather than of a plural number. For the plural number in general cases (command or request not addressed to a specific group of people), the *tum ho* form is usually used. A common example is the imperative form when a command or request is addressed to a plural audience. The form in use is *tum ho*, with *calo* (go, or move!), or *bacāo* (help!). Phrases and proverbs which have imperative forms are usually made with the *tum* form, for example, *jiyo aur jīne do!* (Live and let live!).

In these phrasal and proverbial uses, it is hard to establish whether these forms belong to *tum ho*, or *āp ho*, since being part of a phrase or proverb it does not have a morphologically expressed grammatical subject, but a verb form that belongs to both *tum ho* and *āp ho*. The *āp haī* form is mainly used if the request or command is addressed to a specific person with the intention of an honorific meaning. Despite the fact that all the grammar books ignore *āp ho* form because it is not part of the standard grammar, HFL students should be introduced to this form. This form is ubiquitously prevalent in people's communication from the street level to high standard journalism. While the student should not be taught, or drilled, to use it, however, a passive knowledge of the form and its widespread presence will make his/her communication with native speakers more authentic.

Furthermore, looking for authentic material with the use of this form is not at all a difficult task. Such material can be easily found in the dialogue exchanges in films, TV interviews between people and so forth, though more in spoken than print forms. If a student uses this form in oral exercises after learning it from films, he should not be discouraged, but should rather be informed that it is mostly used in spoken exchanges rather than written instances.

3 Third person honorifics

Another unique feature of the Hindi honorific system is the presence of the T-V distinction in the third person. The third person honorific is expressed with grammatical plurality. Unlike the case of the second person pronoun, there are only two levels here, namely singular form for informal addressing, and plural form for politeness and formal addressing. HFL students may find this distinction very hard to grasp. This concept is not common in European languages, but has been analysed by European linguists. Comrie (1975) calls it *polite plural*. The distinct feature with the third person honorifics is the plurality of the predicate. The morphological distinction to express an honorific meaning is represented throughout the pronominal system. The honorific variants in subject pronouns, possessive pronouns, their oblique and ergative subject forms, are *vah* – singular informal, and *ve* – plural formal and polite.

Table 1. T-V honorific distinctions in third person pronouns

	Subject pronoun	Possessive pronouns	Oblique form	Ergative subject
Singular/informal	vah ⁶ – he	us'kā – his	us – him	us'ne – he
Plural/polite or formal	ve – they/he	un'kā – their/his	un – them/him	unhōne 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 nouns⁷ 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 such as in oblique and ergative, the 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. The vari-

ous uses of honorific markers through plurality is elaborated through examples containing pronouns:

ve acche lekhak haī (Nominative)

he is a good writer

they are good writers (Literal)

ve acchī lekhikā haī (Nominative)

she is a good writer

they are a good writer⁸ (Literal)

un'kā bhāī (Possessive)

his/her brother

their brother (Literal)

maīne un'ko dekhā (Oblique)

I saw **him/her**

I saw **them** (Literal)

unhōne mujhse kahā (Ergative Subject)

he/she told me

they told me (Literal)

As mentioned above, the pronouns follow a set pattern of expressing the honorific meaning through plurality. In an archaic and stylistic enhanced way, *āp* is sometimes used to express the honorific meaning in third person.

Varmā jī ek acche lekhak haī, āp'ne kāī acche upanyās likhe haī.

Varma ji is a good writer, **he** (Literal: you pl.) has written good novels.

This type of use is excluded from grammar books and HFL students are not even made aware of it. The chances of them encountering this use are very rare and they themselves will not be using it at all. When there is a masculine noun in the nominative, whether as a subject or part of a predicate, plurality is used for expressing the honorific meaning.

mere profesar acche lekhak haī.

my professor is a good writer

my professors are good writers (Literal)

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 the plural form.

Mere (pl.) *profesar* (pl.) *acche* (pl.) *lekhak* (pl.) *haī* (pl.).

In fact, this sentence is ambiguous in terms of grammatical number. In a context-free environment, this could mean both. When a feminine noun is the subject, both the predicated noun and the subject noun are in singular, but the verb is in plural. Only the verb expresses the honorific meaning through plurality.

āpkī bahan acchī lekhikā haī.

your sister is (Literal: are) a good writer (feminine form)

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. The same sentences for showing the honorific meaning in pronouns have the pronouns replaced by the noun phrase *my professor*.

maīne ap'ne 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* (in the sentence below) will give only plural meaning, but not honorific meaning.

maïne ap'ne profesarō ko dekhā (Oblique)
I saw **my professors**

The same is the case with the ergative subject:

mere profesar ne mujhse kahā (Ergative subject)
my professor told me

The plural in the sentence below does not express honorific meaning, but a plural meaning:

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

The question when and for whom to use honorific meaning is the focus in this section. For the use of *āp* in the second person, it should be mentioned with honorifics. The elders should also be mentioned with honorifics. Certain professions such as professor, manager, high officials and so forth are to be mentioned with respect. Speakers' subjective relation towards the person mentioned may dictate the use of honorifics. Some honorific particles such as *jī*, *sāhib* and *śrimān* (Mr., Miss, and Mrs.), 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 and domestic servants are always used without honorific meaning, for example:

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

The nouns *ādmī*, *insān* (man, person, individual) and so forth usually take the 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, Hindi honorifics might seem difficult to grasp, but in reality they only have to worry about the pronouns, which always take the plural form to express honorific meaning. As for nouns, HFL students only have to remember to use the plural form only for masculine nouns in the 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, it is fine to use the singular or formal form.

4 First person honorific

Another interesting detail about honorifics in Hindi is that they exist even in the first person, to be precise, the use of *we*, *ham* in place of *I*, *maī*. This is very common in Hindi. Such use is not commonly mentioned in standard grammar, although some grammar books such as Pořízka (1972) does include it, usually with an advice not to use it. In the HFL classrooms, this usage is normally not mentioned and of course not practiced at all. For higher level second language learners of Hindi, the knowledge of first person honorifics can give a broader idea of language use, as it is present ubiquitously.

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

ham khuś hue.
I am happy.
we are happy (Literal)

The practice of using *we* instead of *I* (i.e. *nosism* in Latin) in Hindi has more functions than simply a 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*, such as *ham log*. Often used in fictional literature to express the belongingness of a character to one of the eastern regions, such grammar form is used in the speech. In Bollywood films, this use is employed as a tool to portray a character who comes from the eastern Hindi speaking area.

The plural form for the first person singular may be used in poetic and rhetorical expressions. Bollywood exploits it quite regularly. As the number of students driven by the colourful world of Bollywood to learn Hindi increases (Bhatt, 2012), it makes perfect sense to have a better understanding of this poetic use. The Bollywood titles, songs and dialogue sequences use the first person plural in place of the singular quite often, for example:

ham āpke haĩ kaun?
who am I to you?
who are we to you? (Literal)

On the one hand, the royal *we* may be an honorific, for instance to elevate oneself. Contrary to that, on the other hand, the use of the first person plural for a singular subject is also to express humility and humbleness. It is also called the plural of modesty (i.e. *pluralis modestiae* in Latin). In scientific literature and journalistic writings, the use of *we* may be common for expressing one's own opinion. In Hindi, this use of *we* is beyond such articles and scientific papers. In colloquial Hindi, the use of the first person plural is to show respect to the person addressed. It is a very common practice not to use *maĩ – I*, which might signal a snobbish behaviour, as if one is separating himself from the rest of the group, or the person addressed on the grounds of superiority. The use of *ham* will neutralise this effect and show one's humility. While making a conversation with prominent people, a person can skillfully avoid being the other, or rather become a part of the group just by simply using *we*. In fictional literature, it is very common to see this use as follows:

hamẽ mãf kar dījīe
excuse me
excuse us (Literal)

Advanced level learners could be acquainted with honorifics use. Literary texts with such forms can be used to show this language use to higher level students. Although the practice of this form is not necessary, but the students should definitely be made aware of this form and the reasons behind it. If the students have already acquired a high level of communicative competence, then, on rare occasions and for practice purposes, role play situations can be created where these forms can be employed.

5 Conclusion

The honorifics system, or rather the T-V distinction in Hindi, is governed by a complex set of pragmatic rules. Some of these rules are rigidly applied and others are flexible and sensitive to the context. Another feature that makes the Hindi honorifics system unique is that the T-V distinction is not restricted to the second person only, as is the case with many languages, but it is present throughout the spectrum of the first and third persons too. Since it is a culture-sensitive part of sociolinguistic communication, a foreign language learner should acquire and have a very good understanding of its use. 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 native

speakers. However, beyond these predefined rules lie the pragmatic understanding of the honorifics system, which could be learnt only through the observation of people's behaviour in communication with one other, the reading of authentic texts, and the examination of the language use by different media.

Notes

¹ The T-V distinction is a sociolinguistic feature in many languages where a speaker uses different pronouns to address different people in order to express different levels of politeness, formality, age, social status, and so forth. The acronym T-V comes from second person subject pronouns in Latin "T(u)" and "V(os)" that are used for the second person singular and plural, respectively.

² There is a possibility of a fourth form too. This fourth form is not a part of standard grammar, but is widely used.

³ Here I do not mean other South Asian languages, which have very similar honorific systems, but rather European languages, such as Romance, Slavic languages, and so forth.

⁴ There has not been any study done on the frequency of occurrence of this ungrammatical usage. My assumption here is based on personal observation of people's speech and its use in the media – entertainment as well as news media. For instance, if an interview is conducted live on television or radio, the anchor would be using the correct honorific form, but the interviewee would unconsciously be using the fourth form most of the time.

⁵ A little later, we will discuss how a mother is addressed at this level of honorifics.

⁶ For convenience, I am taking the masculine gender in the English translation. Hindi pronouns are not gender sensitive, the same pronoun is used for masculine and feminine.

⁷ Nouns here mainly are human nouns.

⁸ It is grammatically an incorrect sentence in English. The translation is word-for-word. The plurality in the predicate will be dealt with subsequently in the discussion.

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