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How Pronominal System and Reference Terms in Hindi Construct Ad Hoc

Subordinate/Dominant Identities in Various Contexts

In her talk given at TedxUBCOkanagan, researcher Robyn Giffen talks about ‘the role language can have in identifying us and others’ (Giffen 1:29). It is the terms that we use, the way we use them and things we speak about that carry hints to various aspects of our identities that we have consciously chosen or imbibed by default. Language not only is a tool for self identification and expression but also poses a lens through which we understand and respond to others and the world ¹. Pronominal system and addressal terms of any language are a direct implication of this identification process which not only creates permanent/long term identities but also ad hoc identities determined by the language in use and the cultural context it is being used in. This paper explores the pronominal system and addressal terms in Hindi to exemplify this ad hoc identity creation that happens by the use of specific pronouns in specific contexts. It

¹ Sapir -Whorf Hypothesis - The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis holds that the semantic categories of one’s native language influence thought, and that as a result speakers of different languages think differently. It is exemplified in one way through gendered perception of certain objects because of the gendered nature of language used to address and define them.

further briefly elaborates how the use of these terms determine kinship structures and reflect the social values of the Hindi speaking society. The subject matter will be analysed through the use of the traditional T/V model of pronoun analysis given by Brown and Gillman in 1960, completed by neutrality posture N, proposed by Cook in 1997² to understand the pragmatics of Hindi pronominal system along with the use of centering theory³ to understand ad hoc dominant/subordinate identity creation when interaction happens through Hindi. A larger query this paper aims to nudge in the direction of, is how language becomes a practicing tool of our social realities.

You, me, who? What's in a pronoun anyway?

From a grammatical point of view, as Merriam Webster defines a pronominal system; it is 'of, relating to, or constituting a pronoun'. This brings us to the definition of a 'pronoun'.

Pronouns are commonly known as words used as 'substitutes for noun or noun phrases'

(Merriam Webster) such as *I, you, he, she, they* and so on used as illustrated below:

1. A and B are friends.
2. They study in the same class.

² T/V Model - The T-V distinction exists in some languages, and serves to convey formality or familiarity. Its name comes from the Latin **pronouns** tu and vos. The distinction takes a number of forms, and indicates varying levels of politeness, familiarity, courtesy, age or even insult toward the addressee.

³ Centering theory - 'Centering theory deals with one kind of cohesive device, namely, focus/center of attention. Thus, one kind of coherence is viewed as resulting from the ability to perceive what a discourse is about. The theory also deals with the way the focus of attention is realized and perceived linguistically, namely with referring expressions' (Prasad 11).

The pronoun ‘they’ in (2), substitutes ‘A and B’ in (1). Seemingly all ‘they’ is doing is acting as an anaphoric term⁴ to ‘A and B’ but if pronouns would have been simply agents of substitution then this paper and vast literature produced on pronominal systems would be rendered pointless. In his introductory chapter to *The Social Dynamics Of Pronominal Systems*, Bouissac states that ‘their actual use is far more complex and diverse’ than what the definition lets us believe. He goes on to mention that various researchers have defined them as ‘indexical tools’ that respond to ‘context of communication acts in which they take part or report to’ in order to draw meaning (1). To summate, pronouns are terms used in place of nouns/phrases of nouns drawing their meaning from the context of use. These contexts together with the use of pronominal systems and addressal terms act as the petri dish for identification process ourselves and others. When a baby learns to call its mother: ‘mom’, not only is it identifying the woman who gave it birth as a ‘mother’ but also self identifying itself as a ‘child’. Understanding of pronominal system then acts like a linguistic counterpart of Lacan’s mirror stage, recognition and thus formation of an identity, one’s own identity in relation to oneself and others. Referential terms place onto us and others identities that in turn out the rules of social behaviour and kinship; better described as cultures of relatedness’⁵ (Cranston).

The common categories of pronouns found in most languages is its occurrence in the singular-plural first, second and third person. Varying from language to language, pronouns also give insight into the age, gender, number, honorifics of the addresser-addressee. The Hindi

⁴ Anaphoric terms - being a word or phrase that takes its reference from another word or phrase and especially from a preceding word or phrase. In this sense pronouns are anaphoric terms because they refer to a previously mentioned noun or are indicative of something that is known priorly.

⁵ Cultures of relatedness - As defined in Britannica encyclopedia in the article contributed by Cranston, etymologically kinship, as a term is definitive of blood-relations, in the anthropological discourse it has transgressed to be understood in a much broader sense, encompassing relations beyond blood. She further writes, kinship is a universal human phenomenon that takes highly variable cultural forms, giving it the term ‘Cultures of Relatedness’.

pronominal system, ‘exhibit a great deal of ambiguity’ which however is reduced somewhat by ‘the verbal agreement paradigm in the language...third person pronouns are not fully marked for number, honorificity, and not at all marked for gender’ (Prasad 74) but gender in the two identified forms in Hindi; male and female, is the gendered versions of nouns and verbs in a given sentence. For example;

3. **Vah** school jata hai. (He goes to school)

4. **Vah** school jatii hai. (She goes to school)

This alteration of verbs is done through addition of suffix ‘-aa’(sg.) and ‘-e’(pl., sg.) to indicate masculinity and ‘ii’ (sg.) and ‘iin’ (pl.,sg.) to indicate femininity as done in the given example. In both (3) and (4), neutral pronoun ‘**vah**’ is used to refer to the subject but their gender is marked as male and female by adding the suffix ‘-a’ and ‘-ii’ to the verb ‘jana’ which means ‘to go’. Another feature of the Hindi pronominal system is that ‘possessive pronouns in Hindi show gender agreement with the head nouns’ which arises from the inherent gender in Hindi nouns’ (Prasad 77) eg. Uski Ma (His/Her mother), Uska bhai (His/Her brother), Uske joote (His/Her shoes) etc.

I would argue the usage of pronouns reflects a certain degree of honorificity though when cultural context is taken into consideration. T/V forms of 1st, 2nd and 3rd person pronouns in Hindi (Table 1.1) are consciously chosen depending on the age and/or social status of the person in any given context, creating ad hoc subordinate/dominant identities of the addresser/addressee. Brown and Gillman suggest that the use of T(familiar/ informal) and V (polite/ formal) pronominal terms is determined by the factors, power and solidarity. Later in this paper I

elaborate on how in certain contexts (such as interaction between father - son or interaction between people of different social standing), the use of pronominal system in Hindi language, allows the power position addresser/addressee to be reflected through the use of pronouns that symbolise honorificity. Moreover, I extend the observation Lotte Dam makes in her paper *The Functionality of Personal Pronouns in Constructions of Communities*, that the use of third person plural pronouns sometimes constructs communities the addressee identifies with.

	Direct	Oblique	General			T/V
			Male		Female	
			Sg.	Pl.		
First Person (Sg.)	Mai (I)	Mujh (I)	Mera (Mine)	Mere (mine)	Meri (mine)	T, V
First Person (Pl.)	Hum (We/us)	Hum (We/us)	Humara (Our)	Humare (Ours)	Humari (Our)	T, V
Second Person (Sg.)	Tu (You)	Tujh (You)	Tera (Your)	Tere (your)	Teri (your)	T
Second Person (Pl.)	Tum (You)	Tum (You)	Tumhara (Your)	Tumhare (Your)	Tumhari (Your)	T
Second Person (hon)	Aap (You))	Aap (Your=)	Aapka (Your)	Aapke (Your)	Aapki (Your)	V
Third Person (Sg.)	Yah/ vah (he/she/it)	Is/us (His/her/its)	Iska/uska (his)	Iske/uske (his)	Iski/uskii (her)	T
Third Person (Pl.), (hon)	Yeh/veh (They)	In/un (them)	Inka/unka (Their)	Inke/unke (Their)	Inki/unki (Their)	T,V

Table 1.1

Who's Who? - Identity and Kinship through Hindi Pronominal System

The Hindi language Hindi, member of the Indo-Aryan group has a conflicted history. On one hand it is believed to be descendent of language born out of the Sauraseni apabhramsa;

Hindavi, which further spawned Hindustani; a blend of Hindi and Urdu (Lakhan 45), on the other, it is considered by some to be is nothing but a sanskritised version of Hindustani, curated for political reasons by the British and propagated by a part of the natives for communal reasons (Shrivastava 3898). This controversial official language of India is written in Devanagari script and is spoken over a belt that approximates the region of northern India, south through the state of Madhya Pradesh.

The hindi lexicon spelled out variations of 11 vowel and 36 letters, provides definitive terms to address different kin relations along with grammatical codes of formal and informal pronominal usage that helps one navigate through the myriad of cultures of relatedness. In the context of Hindi speaking society, though not always, age is a great determinant of who should be respectful towards whom. The social value and in turn reality reflects is the usage of honorific pronouns (vah, aap, un) and verbs with suffix ‘-e’ (For male addressee) and ‘-iin’ (for female addressee) when a person is addressing someone elder to them. When an addresser addresses an addressee with honorific terms or reference/ pronouns, a power relation is created between the two putting one in a dominant position and this other in a subordinate position. These ad hoc identities would not have been evident if not for the pronoun in use.

In an observational stand-up comic’s (Abhishek Upmanyu) viral bit on ‘respecting elders’, this power relation created by pronominal usage dictated by kinship structure is very evident. He retells the interaction between him and his father regarding respecting elders to the audience and the absurdity of how this social value is imposed. The comedy bit composed in Hinglish; mixture of Hindi and English, common vernacular for urban Indian youth, consists of Upamanyu reacting to his father’s constant warning against eating sweets and how they result in

rotten teeth. The retelling goes as follows:

‘On being told to not eat sweets out of the fear of rotten teeth yet again,

Me(Upmanyu): Aur koi baat karni aati hai **aapko**? (Do you ever talk about anything else?)

Papa (Father): **Tum** tameez se baat kar, respect your elders (Mind your words, respect your elders)

And that is one thing our parents have always told us ‘respect your elders’ but they never explained why, aur **mujhe** lagta hai inke pass aur koi reason hai nahi. Vo bole ja rahe hain aur **hum** sune ja rahe hain, faltu me, aise hi. (And I feel they don’t have any real reason for it. They have been telling it to us and we have gone on listening to them, for no reason, just like that). To **maine** bola.

_____ Me: ek baat batao, kyu karni hoti hai?(Tell me one thing, why do we have to?)

Papa: vo....bas karni hoti hai. (That...you just have to)

Me: Kyu magar? (But why?)

Papa: **Hum** pehle paida hue the. (We were born before you)

Me: Aur? (And?)

Papa: Aur to koi reason nahi hai. (There is no other reason)

Me: Aur nahi karein to? (And what if we don’t respect elders?)

Papa: To dant me kide... (Then your teeth might rot...)

Me: **Aap** pagal to nahi ho **yaar**? (Are you crazy or what, buddy?)’

(Upmanyu 0:58)

This brings to light the arguments I have proposed about the pronominal use in Hindi language. The story is being recounted in an informal setting of a comedy club, is about an informal interaction between father and son and yet we see usage of honorific 2nd person pronouns (aap, aapko) when Upmanyu addresses his father and addition of ‘-e’ suffix to the verbs (‘-e’) when he describes his father's activities. The choice of pronoun by both Upmanyu and father for each other reveals the kinship dynamics between father and son in this context. This, of course, doesn’t speak for all contexts in the Hindi speaking society but is a mere example of how pronouns in certain contexts create power dynamics. It also must be noted that the use of 3rd person plural pronoun ‘hum’ is used by Upmanyu and his father both on different occasions to evoke a sense of community with all who identify with the contexts; that of elders who demand respect by Upmanyu’s father and that of younger people who have to comply by Upmanyu.

Another way in which pronouns play a dual function is in the ‘Politically sensitive area of pragmatics of the pronominal system is pronounced as a marker of social status’(Buissan 6). The Hindi pronominal system then becomes a way to linguistically navigate the social arena where, in certain contexts the choice of addressal pronoun is determined by the social standing of the addressee. Joong Ho’s *Parasite*, a film internationally acclaimed for its commentary of the class divide finds yet another way to deliver the message when dubbed in Hindi. The dubbed version of the film available on Amazon Prime Video exemplifies the usage of the pronominal system as a marker of social status. When Dong Ik, a rich businessman is introduced to his son’s art teacher; Jessica, who is of a lesser age and social standing, the translation of his addressal to her contains the Hindi 2nd person honorific pronoun ‘aap’.

‘Hi, aap ki madad k liye shukriya’ (Hi, thank you for your help’)

(Parasite 0:29:22)

On the other hand when he is interacting with the new driver; Kim, unaware of the fact that Kim is Jessica’s father, the addressal contains the 2nd person formal pronoun ‘tum’.

‘Lagta hai **tumhe** raste badi achchi tarah se pata hain’ (Looks like you know these routes well’

(Parasite 0:38:31)

Though Jessica is younger and below Donk-ik on the social ladder, she earns the honorific pronoun ‘aap’ owing to the respectful position being a teacher puts her in. Whereas Kim is older than Dong-ik but much lower on the social ladder and thus the power position is reversed.

Conclusion

The pronominal system in Hindi language in synergy with the context and the addresser/addressee relationship creates ad hoc identities of dominance or subordination. These identities can be better explained through Zimmerman's classification of identities into discourse, situational and transportation. While discourse identities are not related to a specific situation or person and can shift turn by turn in an interaction (e.g. the current speaker, listener), situated

identities come into play within the precincts of particular types of situations (e.g. identities as teacher and student in an educational context). Transportable identities travel with individuals across situations and are potentially relevant in a situation, such as gender or ethnic identities. (Qtd Dam 7). The ad hoc identities created are the cases presented in this paper are situated in the contexts dominated not just by the Hindi pronominal system but the cultural and social realities the identities are being created in. However, the pronominal system singlehandedly provides a hierarchical structure to place these identities in.

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