

Re: Vocatives

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DKleinecke wrote:

English does not have a vocative case. Apparently Common Indo-European did and most people know it survived into Classical Latin. (Et tu, Brute). The unnatural English "O" deserves nothing but the ridicule it gets.

My question is: What does it feel like to speak a language with a vocative?

The problem comes up in translating. The specific example I was confronted with is from the Qur'an (that Arabic, at least, has a vocative – a prefix "ya:-"). In the course of a narrative Pharaoh speaks to Moses and starts out (in an unsatisfactory translation) "O Moses .. ". The natural way to translate that would be "Pharaoh said to Moses "... " but this is less literal (and we already have enough trouble with Muslims who think the Qur'an cannot be translated).

Is there any better way to imitate the feeling of a vocative in a language without one?

It doesn't have a feeling. You address someone, it comes out in the vocative form, pure and simple. There is no alternative, just as Latin speakers used datives where datives were called for and ablatives where ablatives were called for, all without thinking about it. The speaker isn't making a choice for the purpose of conveying some feeling.

If the original has Pharaoh speaking to Moses and entreating him to have God lift a plague, a translation into Modern English would be, "Moses, I beg you to have your god lift this plague with which he has afflicted us," just as if you were having coffee with your friend Peter and you said, "Peter, could you please pass the sugar?"

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