

Re: Vocatives

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On Aug 25, 9:05 pm, DKleinecke <dkleine...@xxxxxxxx> 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?

But English does have a vocative case that functions exactly like the vocative case in other indo-european languages like Latin and Polish. The only difference is that the English vocative cannot be formally distinguished from the nominative, having long ago merged with it in form, but not function.

There are various ways of accentuating the fact that a particular word or name is vocative, such as "O", "Hey", and "Dear". However, these are not essential, and often sound artificial, though, as you have noticed.

There is no difference in "feeling" between the English vocative and the vocative in Latin and Slavic languages. The difference is solely in form. Also, in Latin and Polish, the form of the vocative case is distinguishable from the form of the nominative only for certain noun declensions, and not for others.

Re: Vocatives

What you are asking is really a question of style. In the example you give about Pharaoh speaking to Moses, using an unadorned vocative seems overly familiar and informal, which clashes with the register expected for this type of writing. However, this is a matter of English style only, and has its roots in the history of Biblical translation in English. The unadorned vocative does not have this effect in Latin or Polish, for example. This has nothing to do with the fact that the vocative in Latin and Polish is sometimes formally distinguishable from the nominative, though.

The reason that "Hear, O Israel, the Lord, thy God, is one" and "Listen, Israel, the Lord, your God, is one" "feel" different is purely a matter of English style and the conventions of English biblical translation. A skillful translator can convey some of the feeling of the style of the original by carefully using different English stylistic techniques and conventions, but these do not necessarily correspond to the stylistic techniques and conventions of the original language, and with languages as different from English as Hebrew and Arabic, probably differ quite radically.

Dominic Bojarski