

Homeric Directives: Language Sensitivity and the Pragmatics of Interaction in Homer

Directives, commands and command-like utterances, and the various ways of presenting them, are important features of social discourse and important tools for (re)constructing one's social position (Brown and Levinson). Homer employs a number of grammatically distinct methods for presenting directive speech--these include imperatives, infinitives, hortatory subjunctives, wish optatives, $\chi\rho\eta$ constructions etc., and often in conjunction. Near the beginning of Book I of the *Iliad*, when the priest Chryses addresses Agamemnon to ask for the return of his daughter, he makes two requests of him $\pi\alpha\acute{\iota}\delta\alpha \delta' \acute{\epsilon}\mu\omicron\iota \lambda\acute{\upsilon}\sigma\alpha\iota\tau\epsilon \phi\acute{\iota}\lambda\eta\nu, \tau\acute{\alpha} \delta' \acute{\alpha}\pi\omicron\iota\nu\alpha \delta\acute{\epsilon}\chi\epsilon\sigma\theta\alpha\iota$ (*Il.* 1.20). Why does Homer employ an optative $\lambda\acute{\upsilon}\sigma\alpha\iota\tau\epsilon$ for the first request and an infinitive $\delta\acute{\epsilon}\chi\epsilon\sigma\theta\alpha\iota$ for the latter? The question is all the more important when we note that alternatives for the latter form are both metrically identical and occasionally attested (*viz.* $\delta\acute{\epsilon}\chi\omicron\iota\sigma\theta\epsilon$ and $\delta\acute{\epsilon}\chi\epsilon\sigma\theta\epsilon$). Thus, the switch from optative to infinitive is purposeful and specifically not *metri gratia*.

This paper opens up a dialogue on the various ways Homer employs directives to construct a believable and dynamic social space with his characters and for them. Unlike the use of analogous constructions in the Sanskrit tradition, which have been well studied (see Van De Walle), Homer's social world does not represent a fixed caste system with fixed rules of interaction, but a dynamic, and often violently dynamic world. Thus the use of socially stigmatized and stigmatizing language such as address forms and directives are subject to considerably more complex sets of selectional criteria. As his characters maneuver through Homer's dynamic social world, they use language in a way that reflects their specific rhetorical needs. However, their usage also seems to reflect the pragmatics of the specific situation they find themselves in and the social relationships of the characters themselves (such as *anax* to *basileus*). Thus when Chryses addresses Agamemnon at *Iliad* I.20 and makes his two requests, the latter, *take this ransom*, involves very little threat to Agamemnon's perceived social station. However, the former, *release my dear child*, clearly threatens Agamemnon's perceived status directly. The fact that he is compelled to relinquish his 'prize' in the face of other lesser Greeks who are not themselves forced to give up anything, is clearly perceived by Agamemnon as a threat to his position as *anax*, as his subsequent actions show. Homer has Chryses' speech reflect those threats (or perceived threats) to Agamemnon's social position, and further, I suggest, he is presenting Chryses as anticipating Agamemnon's possible reactions to those threats in the use of the optative of wish. In this paper, then, I will show how Homer uses language in a way that shows sensitivity to the pragmatics of the social interactions of his characters.

Sources

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