

# A critical grammar of the Hebrew language Volume 1

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## Politeness Strategies in Biblical Hebrew and West African Languages

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### Abstract

Most languages have a wide variety of strategies for communicating politeness, however these are always highly culture-specific and relate closely to broader cultural norms that affect the application of Grice's maxims, for example.

Focus strategies include the use of greetings, modal particles, and various forms of participant reference. Typical initial greetings may take the form of wishes or blessings in biblical Hebrew but questions in West African languages (which reserve wishes and blessings for leave-taking and thanking); therefore, more literal translations may invite misunderstanding. Pragmatic particles in biblical Hebrew are often misunderstood. West African languages may lack these altogether, and so they have to resort to longer idiomatic expressions. Participant reference in biblical Hebrew may involve metaphors from service or kinship terminology; these may combine with special uses of grammatical person in honorific addressee-reference and deprecating self-reference. Some of these observations may shed light on features of the Psalms which have traditionally been read more as poetics than as pragmatics.

Indirection strategies may be employed in the form of euphemisms or Indirect Speech Acts, the most common form of which in biblical Hebrew is the rhetorical question, which may have a range of pragmatically-defined functions, though the forms may differ from those of West African languages.

The two primary biblical Hebrew verbal conjugations also have special pragmatically-defined functions, including the restriction of deontic use of *atbal* (the 'precativ perfect') to human address of God, restriction of deontic use of *yiqtol* (the 'preceptive imperfect') to divine address of humans, and the use of *yiqtol* in questions. West African languages may need to resort to a wide variety of strategies to express such modal nuances.

These notes raise questions as to the extent to which translators may "Africanize" the speech of actants in biblical narratives.

### 1. Introduction

Politeness strategies may sometimes receive a sophisticated morphological encoding, as in Japanese, but they usually depend more heavily on pragmatic functions such as conversational implicatures and Indirect Speech Acts. The use of those strategies is prescribed by features of social status, all interpreted in highly culture-specific ways.

Just as some universals have been proposed for communication in general, most famously Grice's maxims of quality, quantity, relevance and manner, so some basic universals have been claimed to hold for

<sup>1</sup> This paper was first presented in the section Politeness Strategies and Translation at the UBS Triennial Translation Workshop 2003, Iguazu, Brazil; it has since benefited from input from Ernst Wendland and unnamed reviewers of *The Bible Translator* and *Journal of Translation*.

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