

FOCUS ON TRANSLATORS

Names, titles, and forms of address in Falam

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It is often said that there are about 120 “dialects and languages” spoken by the people of Burma, but at this point in time there is only one national language, Burmese. The presence of so many languages is perhaps best explained in terms of geographical difficulties presented by mountainous regions in most of the country except in the central and lower part of Burma where there are fewer language varieties. Chin State is one of the seven States in Burma and is situated in the hilly north-western part of the country, and shares part of its boundary with India. **Falam** is one of the language groups in the northern section of the State and the language variety the Falam speakers use is also known as **Falam**. (Formerly it was called **Laizo**.) The estimated number of speakers of Falam varies from a hundred thousand to a hundred and fifty thousand. Eighty to ninety per cent of Falam speakers are now Christians. The following notes discuss the use of names and titles in Falam.

Names

It sounds trivial but it is significant to realize that everyone has an individual or personal name. It is by the personal name that we identify each other and recognize each other's status. There is no family name in Falam speaking communities, and that is true everywhere in Chin State, and no less true throughout Burma. The lack of family names among Falam speakers in no way weakens the attachment a person has for his family, nor does it indicate any lack of solidarity among the relatives. It is sometimes difficult, but people keep track of who is related to who for many generations. The lack of a family name also fits with the traditional rights that women have, such as keeping their own individual names when they marry.

Falam and the Chins in general can be described as patrilocal and patrilingual in marriage: the husband and wife live where the husband was brought up and the wife should use her husband's language variety both in the home and in the community. This is the case in Falam as well as in other parts of the State, even when marriage takes place between various language groups. However, even though the woman joins her husband, she still keeps her own individual personal name. If there is any introduction of family names in Falam culture it is due to Western influence, and we do not find much evidence for it at this point in time.

A great deal of meaning is attached to the way individual and personal names are used. The Chins give and understand different messages according to whether individual names are used or not used when addressing each other. And this is true whether or not titles of respect and other terms of address are used.

What's in a name?

In the thought of Falam speakers, a name does not only distinguish one person from other persons, it is closely related to the nature of its bearer, or to the nature of the person who named him or her. The name therefore is thought of as possessing a greater degree of reality and substance than as a mere sign of identification. Names are created by elders—parents or grandparents—signifying their own achievements. And the elders expect the youngsters they have named to live out the names given them. It is taken as unfortunate by the name-givers if those they have named do not live up to the names they have given. The name-givers whose named youngsters do live up to their names are likely to be invited to create more names!

A name usually consists of two syllables not connected to each other, such as Van Lian which means literally "Heaven is great". There is no first name or last name. Van Lian, in this case, is the full and complete name. Names carry meanings, and the meaning of a particular name as given by the name-giver is related to the experience of the giver—expressing fame, achievement, victory, strength, riches, social status, or blessings, if he is a man. If the name-giver is a woman the name given is usually connected with fame, beauty, jewellery, or social status. If the name-giver has none of the above attributes, he or she will still give names which express a wish that the named person will achieve the above ideals.

This being an established custom, names which have meanings in the Bible are received with much more relish and appreciation by Falam speakers than names which carry no meanings. For Falam speakers, names are like mirrors, for by reading the names it is possible to read the experiences and a little bit of the history of the name-giver or name-givers.

Names and meanings

The question "What's in a name?" may be correctly answered by saying: a person is in his or her name. And by the way you say a person's name, you show to that person your attitude towards him or her. In other words, by the way you address a person, you always give a para-message. And these para-messages are as important as the direct messages of a speech or written text. In fact para-messages can either greatly enhance or destroy the real message. By the way you address a person, you show to that person either respect or disrespect, endearment or distance, courtesy or contempt. If a reporter, for example, were to call the President of Burma by his "bare" name, the public would regard

that utterance as a clear indication of contempt on the part of the person involved, and the community would regard him or her as uncultured. Custom in our society does not allow that kind of unacceptable utterance. Everyone is expected to maintain verbal behaviour in accordance with the accepted norms of society. A person and his or her name cannot be separated. (There is no written code for these kinds of social norms, but the unwritten codes of behaviour are just as strong as the written ones, if not stronger. And a person violates these norms only at his own peril.)

There are many ways to address a man in Falam speaking communities depending on the context, the speaker, and the subject matter. For example, if an event takes place in a formal setting, and the man addressed is a Government official, and the subject matter relates to official actions or decisions, the person addressing him must use the man's full name preceded by "U" which stands for either "Mister" or "Uncle". The use of "U" in fact is part of the Burmanization of every form of culture in the State, and it carries a connotation of respect and distance as well. To address someone without the "U" would denote a degree of contempt and disrespect. However, if it is an event which is related to a family meeting where family affairs are discussed, the most common form of address is not the person's name but "father of so-and-so". If his eldest son is Za Hu, then a man is addressed as "Za Hu's father"—*Za Hu Pa*. This form of address denotes both endearment or closeness and a degree of respect as well. To use "U" in this situation would mean creating a distance between the speaker and the person addressed. "U" can be used by younger as well as by older speakers.

Problems for translation

There are problems in connection with the honorifics we use in the Falam language in relation to Bible translation. One of them has to do with the translation of "king" and "queen". We have a word for king namely *siangpahrang*—a three syllable word. *Siang + pa + hrang* literally means "a king who is a male"—the central syllable *pa* means male. Therefore King David is translated as *Siangpahrang* David. The problem arises when we come to translate "queen". Strictly it should be *siang + nu + hrang* where the central syllable should be *nu* meaning female. However, that is not what people say. The normal way of translating queen is *siangpahrang bawinu* literally meaning "a king who is a female". This is contradictory, but it is what is used and therefore translated. Moreover, *siangpahrang bawinu* can also mean the wife of a king, very much like in English, where "queen" can also refer either to the wife of a king or to a reigning queen. Queen of Sheba is translated as *Siangpahrang bawinu Sheba*. Does this mean "a king who is a female" or "the wife of a king"? One way of solving the problem would be to say in full, "the reigning Queen of Sheba". Otherwise it remains ambiguous for Falam readers.

The suggestion that was made to translate queen by *siangnuhrang* with *nu* as the central syllable meaning "female" was considered unacceptable by the Falam translation committee, for two reasons: it is new, never used before; and it is too radical. This rejection by the committee along with other actions similar to this one revealed that the Falam committee, and perhaps committees in other Chin translation projects as well, is conservative to a great degree: it has been reluctant to change or adopt new vocabulary.

Father and mother

Young children and toddlers call their mother *Nu Nu* and their father *Pa Pa*. These words express closeness and intimacy between the parties involved. The children may not understand the whole content of intimacy inherent in these words, but the parents certainly fully feel the warmth and endearment in the words. However when children are about ten and in their teens, the endearment titles *Nu Nu* and *Pa Pa* develop into *Ka Nu* and *Ka Pa* which literally mean "My Mother" and "My Father". It is significant to see the introduction of the possessive sense indicated by "my" developing in the process. Even adults will still use these honorific titles *Ka Nu* and *Ka Pa* when addressing their parents.

In this environment, it is perfectly understandable to Falam speakers when they read the cry of Jesus on the cross in Mark 15.34, "My God, my God, why did you abandon me?" (GNB). It fits very well with the way the Falam speakers would address the God they worship. It would be *Ka Pathian*, *ka Pathian*, *ziangah i tlansan*? But it would be less than a good translation to render literally the cry of Jesus on the cross which we find in Luke 23.46 "Father! In your hands I place my spirit" (GNB). In fact it would be childish to translate it literally as *Pa Pa*. To be an acceptable translation we have to bring the possessive indication "my" into the text, although there is no "my" in the words of the Greek text.

A possible question can be raised as to why Jesus uttered "My God, my God" (Mt 27.46; Mk 15.34) and "Father!" (Lk 23.46), and not "My God" and "My Father" in both places? Can the difference in these two utterances be explained in terms of the literary styles of the different gospel writers? We cannot reject that possibility. However, perhaps a better explanation for Falam readers is that in the first instance Jesus felt a distance between himself and God and therefore said "My God, my God", whereas in the second his sense of closeness to the Father played a greater part and therefore he said "Father!" When these two utterances are translated into Falam, both will have to have "my" to give the best functional equivalence. The possessive sense of "my" could create a sense of distance in the second utterance, but it is overruled by the word "Father!" to make it an acceptable translation. To translate "Father!" as *Pa Pa* would be childish. The choice here is between the possible creation of "distance", and a certain feeling of "childishness". We avoided the second because the risk is greater.

The problem of "woman"

No child would call his parents by their names, either half name or full name, in private or in public. To do so would show disrespect of a high degree. It would be an open insult. The only possible situation where the children might address their parents by name would be where a combination of an endearment title and the name was used as a form of introduction, and the listeners were people not familiar with the parents. For example, the son *Za Hu* can introduce his father to an unfamiliar audience by saying, "This is my father *U Kaw Kaw*. . ." If he does it without saying "my father", *Za Hu* is creating a distance between himself and his father, but not disrespect. If he addresses his father as "Man!" and his mother as "Woman!", he is in real trouble. He would be creating an image of being uncultured, disrespectful and downright contemptuous.

That is precisely the situation we find in John 2.4, and 19.26, where Jesus addressed his mother as "woman" (Greek *gunai*). To translate this utterance literally would be *Nunau* in Falam, and this would be offensive to Falam readers. Although we find the same utterance in John 20.13, by two angels who say to Mary, "Woman, why are you crying?", this is not as offensive as the other uses. The difference lies in the person who said it. For the angels to say to the woman "Woman", is acceptable. But for the son to say "Woman" to his mother demonstrates utter disrespect and contempt or even extreme anger. That is precisely what we found the text of John put in the mouth of Jesus. But is that actually what Jesus meant when he said "Woman"? Fortunately, we are told that "Jesus' use of 'woman' (RSV) in direct address was normal and polite. . . It showed neither disrespect or lack of love. . ." (*Translator's Handbook on John*). In Falam, the word "woman" *Nunau*, will have to be avoided and replaced by *Ka Nu*, meaning "My Mother". This is the only choice possible in the situation. "Woman" (*Nunau*) would be insulting, and "mother" *Nu Nu* would be childish.

Honorific title for Jesus

During the ministry of Jesus, there were innumerable instances of verbal communications between Jesus and others—his disciples, his enemies, curious listeners, desperate people. His disciples call him Lord and Rabbi (Mt 26.22; Jn 1.38,49; 13.13), while some of his enemies use no form of address (Mt 19.3), some call him an associate of "Beelzebul" (Mt 12.22-30; Mk 11.14-15), and some sarcastically called him "Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews" (Jn 19.19). But others who met Jesus for the first time addressed him in various ways—two blind men called him "Son of David" (Mt 20.30-31), Bartimaeus addressed him as "Jesus, son of David" (Mk 10.46-48). To the ears of Falam speakers, Jesus' disciples and those who met him for the first time addressed him properly by calling him Lord, Rabbi, Son of David, and so on. The enemies of Jesus understandably called him either nothing, or "associate

of Beelzebul", or something similar.

However, there are instances where people meeting him called him simply "Jesus"—his personal name. We find this incident in Luke 23.42 where one of the criminals said, "Jesus, remember me when you come as King!" From the evidence of the text, there is nothing to indicate that Jesus was known by this criminal before they met at the cross. And therefore for this criminal to address Jesus by his personal name demonstrates a degree of disrespect or at least ignorance. If the criminal believed that Jesus would be coming some time later as a King, why didn't he address him as such?—this is a problem for translation in Falam. Can we insert "Lord" preceding Jesus? That would be a proper way of addressing him—an honorific title. If we do, are we inserting an affirmation of faith into the text which the criminal may not have meant for Jesus? Or can we insert "U" preceding Jesus? It should be acceptable to Falam readers if we believe that the criminal has respect for Jesus with a certain degree of distance. But the translation committee would not accept this option. Uncertainty about the precise meaning kept the committee from having anything other than just "Jesus". In short, to introduce an honorific title such as "U" before "Jesus", or any other biblical figure for that matter, would be unacceptable at this stage. The negative emotional reaction against it by the Christian community would be substantial. At this time the literal biblical usage in the area of honorifics overrules normal national or local usage.

Conclusion

In Falam society, para-messages are sent when honorific titles and other forms of address or reference are used in verbal communication. Addressing a government official or anyone older than the speaker with a "U" or its equivalent preceding his name sends a message of respect. If the speaker does not use "U" or its equivalent, then he is sending a para-message of disrespect. At the same time, people who are close associates do not address one another with "U" in front of their names; instead they use "father of so and so". Only when the person addressed does not have children will his friends use other alternative forms of address such as using a half name with "Friend" in front (*Kawi Hu* for *Za Hu*). This sends a message of closeness and endearment, and it operates among relatives as well.

However in the Bible, honorifics are not used in the majority of cases. The use of bare names dominates forms of address. For Falam readers this presents a problem in the para-messages. For the criminal on the cross, addressing Jesus just by the name "Jesus" presents a message of disrespect. In the mind of the criminal this sense may not be present, but for Falam readers this sense is a clear message. However, the reluctance of the translation team to accept change at this stage would not allow other forms of address such as "Lord" or "U" in this instance to be considered. Thus a literal rendering of the biblical text dominates the present translation in this respect.