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A Short Note on the Hindi Honorificum *-jī*

Abstract

This paper's objective is to point out problems inherent in widely accepted etymologies of the Hindi honorific particle *-jī*. Bloch and Turner connect the particle with imperatives formed from Sanskrit roots $\sqrt{jī}$ and $\sqrt{jiv}$. However, lexical-syntactic equivalents for Hindi phrases such as *sunīye jī*, which would have to be formed by adding imperative forms *jaya/jīvatu* to other imperative forms, do not seem to exist in either Sanskrit or Prakrits. In Bhasa's *Svapna-vāsavadatta*, the equivalent phrases contain *arya-*. This paper's conclusions indicate that, when dealing with well documented phases of linguistic development (as is the case with the Indian textual tradition), it is imperative to check whether the hypothetical protoform and its consecutive phonetic continuations build similar and fully meaningful collocations in similar contexts. Further studies must be done in order to ascertain how *arya-* was treated as an onomastic suffix in inscriptional Prakrits.

The honorific particle *-jī* belongs to the basic vocabulary of Hindi. It can form part of a word or appear independently, both in Hindi and many NIA languages. It is normally added to surnames (e.g. *Byrski-jī*) to express respect, sometimes becoming their integral part; it is also added to given names (*Aśok-jī*), to categories of kinship (*mātā-jī*), and to all titles – official, academic, religious, and professional. Equally often, it is used independently, in the sense of “please [sir/madam/ladies and gentlemen]” – it is then coupled with simple imperatives and polite imperatives (in phrases such as *dekho jī/dekhiye jī* – “please look [sir/madam]”). It occurs jointly with the exclamation particles *o*, *are* (*o jī!*, *are jī!*), with the particles of assent and negation (*jī hā̃*, *hā̃ jī*; *jī nahī̃*, *nahī̃ jī* – “yes/no, please [sir/madam/ladies and gentlemen]”), and also as an independent particle of assent (*jī* – “yes [sir/madam]”).

The etymology of the honorificum is unclear. Considering the popularity of its usage, the lack of wider interest in its origins is surprising. The oldest suggestion seems to come from Platts (1884: 411), who claims that the Hindi *-jī* derives from the Sanskrit noun *jīvaḥ* – ‘life’ (by way of the Prakrit *jīvo*). Bloch (1970: 336) derives the Marathi, Gujarati, Panjabi and Hindi “particle of respect and consent” *jī* from the same OIA root

√*jīv*. He suggests, however, that it is a continuation not of the noun, but the verb form – i.e. the 2nd person singular of the imperative: *jīva* – “[you] live!”. The same etymology was proposed by Turner for the Nepali *jyu-* (1931: 216). In his *Comparative Dictionary of Indo-Aryan Languages* (1966, entry 5240), he again links the Hindi *-jī* with *jīva*, adding that in its position *after* surnames *-jī* possibly continues 3rd person singular: *jīvatu* – “may he/she live!”. Turner gives no arguments to support his claim, nor does he include references to any earlier discussions of the problem. It can only be inferred that he considered the labial *-u* appearing in the forms preserved in Sindhi, Lahnda, Panjabi, Nepali and Kumauni (*jiu*, *jyu*) to be traces of the *-v* appearing in the root √*jīv*. In Gujarati and Marathi, the honorificum has the form of *-je*. According to Turner (1966, entry 5142) these forms can be traced to the 2nd person singular of the imperative from the OIA root √*ji*: *jaya* – “[you] conquer!”.

If, as Turner assumes, the particle *-jī/-je* is indeed a remnant of the 2nd/3rd person singular imperative formed from the OIA roots √*jīv* and √*ji*, it would be difficult to imagine that it could be connected with imperative forms in Sanskrit phrases analogous to Hindi *suno/suniye jī*, such as the not only clumsy, but also clearly absurd *śṛṇu/śṛṇotu jīva/jaya* – “listen, live!/conquer!”.

Quite predictably, Sanskrit texts do not confirm such usage. In Bhāsa’s *Svapna-vāsavadatta* (hereafter *BhSv*), where phraseology mirrors lively dialogic communication, the words *jīva* – “[you] live!” and *jīvatu* – “may he/she live” appear only in wishes of long life (1.7:10 *ciraṁ jīva*; 1.10:4, 1.10:5 *ciraṁ jīvatu*). There is not a single instance of *jaya* – “[you] conquer!” in the text. *Jayatu* – “may he/she conquer!” – does appear, but only *preceding* a small set of words describing persons worthy of special respect (2:45 *bhartṛ-dārikā*; 4.7:24, 5.11:6, 6.3:12, 6.5:3, 6.15:16, 6.16:4 *ārya-putraḥ*; 6.3:4; 6.5:4, 6.14:2 *bhartā*; 6.15:4 *bhavān*; 6.16:3 *svāmī*).

Imperatives in the *BhSv* do not appear jointly with *jīva/jaya*, but they regularly do with the nominative of the word *ārya-*, both in masculine and feminine forms. The *BhSv* yields many phrases with *ārya-* *preceding* singular imperative forms, thus serving as a strong mark of respect accorded to the interlocutor (“Sir!/Madam!”). This, however, is not the exclusive word order. In quite a number of instances *ārya-* appears *after* the 3rd person singular imperatives. In this less accented position *ārya-* seems to play, already at the time of the text’s composition, the role of a particle of respect. In such cases the phrases *imperative + ārya-* are the equivalent of the syntactic order of Hindi:

BhSv	Sanskrit	Śauraseni	Hindi*
1.1:4	<i>utsarata āryāḥ</i>	<i>ussaraha ayyā</i>	<i>haṭiye jī</i>
1.10:2	<i>anutiṣṭhatv āryāḥ</i>	<i>aṇuciṭṭhadu ayyo</i>	<i>kṛjiye jī</i>
3:39	<i>grhṇātv āryā</i>	<i>gahṇadu ayyā</i>	<i>lījiye jī</i>
3:48	<i>tvaratām āryā</i>	<i>tuvaradu ayyā</i>	<i>jaldī kījiye jī</i>
4.0:37	<i>paśyātv āryā</i>	<i>pekkhadu ayyā</i>	<i>dekiye jī</i>

4.7:19	<i>bhaṇatv āryo</i>	<i>bhaṇādu ayyo</i>	<i>kahiye jī</i>
5.6:18	<i>etv āryā</i>	<i>edu ayyā</i>	<i>āiye jī</i>
5.6:25	<i>praviśatv āryā</i>	<i>pavisadu ayyā</i>	<i>bhītar āiye jī</i>
6.0:9	<i>śṛṇotv āryaḥ</i>	<i>suṇādu ayyo</i>	<i>sunīye jī</i>
6.15:2	<i>upasarpatv āryaḥ</i>	<i>uvasappadu ayyo</i>	<i>āiye jī</i>

* Srivastava (1964).

The existence of parallel lexical-syntactic structures in Sanskrit, Prakrit and Hindi involving *ārya-*, *ayya-* (*ajja-*, etc.) and *-jī* can be documented by other texts. Considering this, Turner's opinion on the origins of *-jī* requires caution. The contexts in which the suffix is used in Hindi point to its basic original meaning as 'respected person'. It can thus be assumed that the source of the discussed word must have been in the OIA *ārya-* – 'noble, respected person'¹.

An interesting methodological problem arises here. While establishing the etymology of a given word, is it enough to consider solely the rules of sound change? The material presented in this short paper shows that adherence to a strictly phonological level of analysis may lead to doubtful conclusions. Emeneau (1978: 126, f.n.) is not convincing when, in his classic paper on Indian onomastics, he glosses over an obvious difficulty: "The common North Indian respect suffix added to names, viz. *-jī*, *-ji*, *-jiu*, **is structurally parallel to the use of kinship terms, but is historically derived from another source** [emphasis mine, A.K.]; Turner 1966, entry 5240, says probably < Sanskrit *jīvatu* 'long may he/you live!'." When dealing with well documented phases of linguistic development, as is the case with the Indian textual tradition, it is feasible, and thus imperative, to check whether the hypothetical protoform and its consecutive phonetic continuations form similar and fully meaningful collocations in similar contexts. There is no reason why they should not. In my opinion, when there are several possibilities, the one that can be found in contexts similar to its continuations should be chosen as the most likely etymon.

OIA *ārya-* is one of the most important Indian cultural terms. It is to be expected that an examination of the paths of its development will shed more light on the nature and dynamics of the social processes taking place on the subcontinent since antiquity. In a way, the transformation of *ārya-* as a term of respect used exclusively when addressing people of high status into the popular honorificum *-jī*², is reminiscent of the development of the geographical concept of *Āryāvarta* – as "the land inhabited by the noble ones", at first denoting a relatively small territory of Panjab and Haryana, and then, two millennia after, encompassing nearly all the subcontinent.

¹ It is rumoured that Jawaharlal Nehru (Pandit-ji) was convinced that the *-jī* in his nickname had its origin in Sanskrit *ārya-* and that he put this information in a footnote somewhere in his *Discovery of India*. There is no such footnote in my copy of the book (Asia Publishing House, Delhi 1973).

² Bloch stresses that the particle is "used with the names of non-Brahmins" (1970: 336). It should be added, however, that *usually* it is not used with the names of Muslims (private communication with A. Sieklucka, Department of South Asian Studies, University of Warsaw).

There are, evidently, problems with documenting the development of OIA *ārya*-. One of the main difficulties is that already in MIA languages the word functioned simultaneously in regional forms, literary and colloquial, and was treated as belonging to either *o/u*-stem, or (possibly) *e*-stem. It cannot be excluded that in less formal contexts they could have been influenced in their development by the term of endearment *jī* – ‘soul, life’ < OIA *jīva*-. Of special value for future research would be information on how *ārya*- was treated as an onomastic suffix in inscriptional Prakrits. As the final, and thus unaccented, part of family names and professional titles, the word could have undergone drastic changes, including elision of its first element. *-jje* out of *ajja* < *ārya*- would not be unexpected.³

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³ A short and on the whole inconclusive exchange of arguments on the topic (participants: V.J. Roebuck, S. Varakhedi, J.E.M. Houben, T.C. Cahill, M. Kapstein, R.P. Hayes, H.H. Hock, W. Cox, A. Karp) took place in June 2005 at the Indology (Liverpool) Discussion Forum, in the thread entitled: *Etymology of honorific particle jī*. See <http://listserv.liv.ac.uk/cgi-bin/wa?A1=ind0506&L=indology>.