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Veiled Commands: Anthropological Perspectives on Directives[1]

By Rosita Henry

1 A question of command

As commands are the 'real-world' counterparts of 'imperatives', they are as interesting a topic for social or cultural anthropologists as for linguists. In this chapter I consider some anthropological approaches to commands by focusing on the politics of command performances, or the way that commands are actually given and received. I explore how culturally specific strategies for authority, politeness and diplomacy might be encoded in the ways people deliver directives to others. I focus on public speeches in the Western Highlands of Papua New Guinea (PNG) and especially strategies related to egalitarian values and concepts of autonomy and power.

What particularly interests me about commands is the many ways that they can be veiled in different cultural contexts. Many years ago, following a robbery at our family home, I adopted as a guard dog a Rottweiler that had been abandoned by his previous owners. Nervous to have such a large, untrained dog around my young children, I invited a retired police-dog handler to come to the house to advise me on how to train him. While the dog handler was present, my son, who was about five years old at the time, started kicking his football around the kitchen, so I called out to him something like:

'Rurik! Would you mind not kicking the ball in the house?'

Or perhaps it was:

'Could you please stop kicking the ball in the house?'

Rurik, however, ignored me and kept kicking. At this point the dog handler told me that a child was much like a dog and that I should have given Rurik a short, direct order like, 'Stop

kicking!' The way I had expressed it, according to the dog-handler, I had given my son a choice; and he had chosen not to obey.

Although I continued to be polite to the dog handler until he left, I was not at all impressed with him for presuming to lecture me about how I should talk to my child. After all, my son was not a dog, I thought, and children needed to learn the language of human diplomacy to get on in life!

From infancy, among the first things that children learn from their parents or other carers, are directives, including imperatives such as 'No! Stop! Ta (give it to me)!'. They also learn to reflect on and evaluate such directives. As Duranti (2015: 202) notes,

> …over time, in being directed, children are not only oriented to attend to objects or to perform certain actions on them, they are also exposed to various ways of reflecting on their own experience of such objects and more generally on their life experiences. This in turn entails an ability to move from the "natural attitude" of the here-and-now to the "theoretical attitude" of evaluating the type of ongoing activity or the type of person that such an activity entails or invokes. In some cases, the "theoretical attitude" appears in situations in which children challenge or resist a particular request that is being made from them.

Children also learn the linguistic strategies that are used in their particular cultural contexts to soften or disguise direct orders.

In English and many other languages, directives are often veiled as questions. Unlike the dog handler's claim, being given a directive in the form of a question does not necessarily mean that the addressee is actually made to feel they have a *choice* in the matter. It may be that veiling the command as a question strategically *obliges* the addressee to accept the command and to comply.

As Enfield (2013: 92) argues, the 'fundamentally dialogic nature of speech acts' means that it is not merely the intention of a speaker that defines a command. Thus, in the study of any type of speech act one must consider the listener(s) as much as the speaker and, importantly, the nature of the relationship(s) between them. In addition, one must also

consider the wider social situation and especially who else (apart from the speaker and the addressee) might be present at the time of the interaction. In the case of the interaction in my kitchen, had the dog handler not been present, I might have chosen to phrase my command to my son quite differently and might even have included an expletive: ‘Stop kicking that bloody ball!’

2 Directives in an intersubjective world

Directives, which include commands, are one of five types of speech act identified by the philosopher John Searle (1994: 21[1969]) on the basis of the intentional state or individual cognition of the speaker, rather than on social relations (Enfield 2013: 90). The other types are assertives, commissives, expressives and declarations. As Enfield (2013: 89) points out, these speech acts are not mutually exclusive. Thus, for example, as several other contributors to this volume have shown, assertives can also serve as directives.

Searle (1976) also introduced the concept of ‘direction of fit’ to distinguish between these types of speech act. Directives, he argues, have a *world-to-word* direction of fit. In other words, a person giving a directive is trying to make the world change according to the words that are uttered. My command ‘Silence!’ upon entering a classroom, for example, causes something to happen in the world by directing the students to be quiet. In contrast, if the students were already quietly working and I said, ‘there is silence in the room’, I would be describing an already existing state of affairs, a *word-to-world* direction of fit.

Searle draws on Austin’s (1975 [1962]) division of speech acts into locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts, where an illocutionary act is an action that speakers perform in saying something (such as a directive), and a perlocutionary act is speech that generates an effect of some kind. By saying ‘Silence!’, I am prohibiting the students talking (an illocutionary act) and, by means of uttering this command, I may cause them to respond

in one way or another (a perlocutionary act); they might stop talking, but they might also become resentful, ignore me, or be annoyed that I should presume to silence them, and so on. As James Slotta (2015: 517) puts it in his paper focusing on the 'agentive role of listeners' and perlocutionary effects among Yopno people in Papua New Guinea: 'The perlocutionary facet of speech acts concerns speech as an activity that gives rise to consequences', whether they be intentional or not. This raises what I think is the most interesting question for an anthropologist, that is, the *relationship* between illocutionary force and perlocutionary effect. Between an illocutionary act and a perlocutionary act it is necessary for there to be yet another kind of act – an act of interpretation, where listeners adopt a theoretical attitude and reflect upon the action of a speaker, and where in turn a speaker might try to predict how a listener might receive words and respond (even ignoring or refusing to do what a speaker commands constitutes a response). Thus, to fully understand a directive and its perlocutionary effects requires close attention to cultural context and to the social relationships of the people involved in the communicative exchange. It requires 'a relationship-thinking framework that highlights the distribution of social agency…and the interpersonal relationships that form the fabric of human social life' (Enfield 2013: 218).

Searle's speech act theory became increasingly influential during the latter part of the twentieth century and has been the focus of much critical attention in more recent years, not only within philosophy but also other scholarly disciplines, including literary and legal studies, psychology, and anthropology (Green 2015). A key issue of debate has been the importance of context (Fetzer & Oishi 2011), as for example expressed in the concept of 'the speech situation', or 'the situated speech act' (Mey 2001, 2011; Oishi 2006, 2011). Another matter that has been strongly debated is the notion of 'uptake', particularly in relation to gendered 'illocutionary silencing' when, for example, the refusal of a sexual advance is not taken up by the addressee. At issue is the role of the hearer in the constitution of a speech act.

Some scholars have argued that an illocutionary act, such as the command “Don’t touch me!”, is a relational phenomenon that requires both the speaker’s words and uptake of them by the hearer (Hornsby & Langton 1998), whereas others argue that ‘uptake is not in general required for illocution’ (Bird 2002: 1). The question is the role of extra-linguistic factors, such as gender and power relations, in how natural language works (Grünberg 2011: 173).

Alessandro Duranti (2015) provides a detailed account of Searle’s speech act theory and some of the issues that anthropologists have had with it. These include, ‘the notion of the autonomous self that seemed to be implied by the model’ and ‘the treatment of linguistic communication as caused by mental states’. According to Duranti (2015: 19), ‘Searle’s perspective was criticized for not acknowledging the ambiguous, dialogical, intertextual quality of human discourse and, more generally, the ubiquitous indexical value of language as a situated and situating human activity that might not be controlled or controllable by the individual.’

The anthropologist who perhaps most famously critiqued Searle’s speech act theory in relation to commands was Michelle Rosaldo (1982). Focusing on the extensive use of overt directives in daily life among the Ilongot in the Phillipines, Rosaldo (1982: 216) argued that speech act theory concentrates too much on the speaker’s intentions or on ‘actor-based prerogatives and wants’, and not enough on the social relationships that are ‘affirmed and challenged’ as an ongoing part of everyday life. According to Rosaldo (1982: 209), for the Ilongot undisguised direct commands are not rude or harsh, but ‘the exemplary act of speech’, ‘the very stuff of language’, and this is because they use commands to articulate and display kinship bonds (see also Telban, this volume chapter 13). Rosaldo notes that while Ilongot distinguish between various kinds of directives and have different names for them, which she translates as commands, prohibitions, orders/warnings, requests, appeals and so on, these are not distinguishable in terms of grammar nor are there any ways to differentiate

'soft' or 'polite' from hard command forms (as in the use of interrogatives in English). Instead, according to Rosaldo (1982:223), the Ilongot classification system relates to the cooperative activities evoked by these different directive utterances. Thus, the most significant thing about directives, which Rosaldo argues was missed by Searle, is that they are in essence *social acts*. They are not just grounded in an individual's intentions but demand *uptake*.

Searle partly moderated his views in his later writings by introducing the notion of 'collective intentionality' (Searle 1990). However, as Duranti (2015: 209) argues, drawing on the phenomenological notion of intersubjectivity, the distinction that Searle proposed between individual and collective intentions is 'both theoretically and empirically problematic' as 'the world of the individual is always a social world'. Thus, a phenomenologically informed anthropological approach to commands, or any other kind of speech act for that matter, would start with the assumption that we 'are always in a world of others' and are *aware* of others (Duranti 2015: 232).

Speech acts have been conventionally examined by linguists in terms of one-to-one speech. Discussion and examples of speech acts tend to refer to 'THE speaker and THE hearer, and questions of intention and inference are always formulated in terms of only these two presences' (Pratt 1986: 61). Yet, speech situations often involve 'multiple participants, with multiple intentions to one another' (Pratt 1986: 61). Even when the exchange is seemingly just between two people, there are frequently others around, whose presence might influence a speech act (as in the example above where I tempered my command to my son due to the presence of a stranger in my home, the dog-handler). Thus, to fully understand the nature of commands requires attention also to social situations in which a speechmaker is addressing a wider audience, or perhaps the intended specific addressee/s is within the

presence or earshot of others, such as in the Western Highlands of PNG examples, discussed below.

3 Speech acts in the Western Highlands, Papua New Guinea

The group of people among whom I have conducted most of my research in the Western Highlands of PNG, identify as members of the Penambi tribe. They have no particular name for their language, but simply refer to it as *bo ung* (lit. seedling talk) or *tok ples* in Tok Pisin. The language is classified as Papuan, of East New Guinea Highlands Stock and of the Chimbu-Wahgi family. Penambi *tok ples* belongs to a sociocultural and linguistic continuum that includes Melpa in the Hagen area, which has been extensively documented by Marilyn Strathern and Andrew Strathern, and Ku Waru in the Nebilyer Valley, which has been the focus of research by Alan Rumsey and Francesca Merlan. I draw on and acknowledge here the foundational work of these scholars.

As anyone who has ever been to the PNG Highlands will have observed, and as many researchers have noted, one of the most noticeable features of social life among Highlanders is not only the apparent fondness people have for talk, but also for talking about talk. Merlan and Rumsey (1991: 222-223), for example, note the 'striking volume of talk which characterises proceedings at public events in the Hagen/Nebilyer area' and observe that talk 'is not indigenously considered mere verbiage, but a form of social action which, in some contexts at least, is perceived as the most salient and socially-valued form of *doing*, efficacious action'.

Speeches characterise proceedings at all public events, especially events such as funerals, compensation payments, brideprice exchanges, and at times of dispute or conflict, when leaders may stand up to urge men to fight or to dampen their passion and anger, depending on the situation . High value is given to oratorical skills, not only the confidence to

speak in front of a crowd, but also the ability to talk with a certain rhythmic fluency so as to be able to *make oneself heard*, to capture the close attention of those present. I have observed on many occasions a crowd fall into almost compete silence during the speech of a particularly good orator, while other speakers were not able to gain much of a hearing and could be barely heard.

There is a performative style that lends efficacy to a speech. This style is called *el ung* (*el ik* in Melpa). *Ung* is the word for speech, or language and *el* is the word for fight. Merlan and Rumsey (1991: 98-99) describe this kind of oratorical style as being different from everyday language in terms of pitch contour. Also characteristic is that each line of a prosodic unit 'terminates with an abrupt fall to an overlong [a::] or [o::]', which does not make any lexico-grammatical contribution to the line. Merlan and Rumsey refer to this as the 'line terminating *el ung* marker'.

In addition to these distinctive prosodic features, there are also typical para-linguistic features that mark this style of oratory. The speaker strides back and forth in a straight line, pacing his steps in rhythm with his words. It is always a man. Although I have witnessed women speaking in public, I have never seen a woman use this style of speech and performance. Public speaking is a gendered social activity that is generally the preserve of men. This is the case, in spite of, or perhaps all the more reinforced, by the few women who are exceptions to the rule. Below is a case in point:

> I am a woman but I am standing up in front of a lot of people here at the sing sing ground. I do it because my husband's dead. I am a widow and I have never seen widows doing the things I am doing now, but I have the strength to stand up and talk because my brothers … are here and I have the strength to talk because I have contributed much and I have even brought in a pig… I am making this speech because I have sympathy for the family and I have brought cash and a pig and I want to give it to my sister Rita. I am sorry that I will not give it to any of you brothers in the village but I will give it to my sister Rita. That's why I am making this small speech…

It is important to note that during her speech, this woman repeated several times that she was a widow. Given the politics of gender among Highland peoples, it is unlikely that she would have stood up and given a speech if her husband was still alive. Women generally sit on the sidelines at formal ceremonial gift exchanges. It is men who are the orators on the ceremonial ground and it is they who control the proceedings and decide who gets to speak and who does not. When a man speaks he usually speaks as a member of a segmentary group, and sometimes even as if he embodies his whole group by using what Merlan and Rumsey (1991) and Rumsey (2000) refer to as the 'segmentary person'. That is, a man will use the first person singular in reference to his whole lineage, clan or tribe and when referring to a different group he will use the second person and third person singular (Henry 2013). For example, a man might say 'I killed him' meaning not that he killed anyone himself but that his segmentary group as a whole was culpable. Speech situations, in which a speaker talks for or through other people, or as a part of a collective whole, present a fascinating challenge for linguistic philosophers, as indicated by Pratt (1986: 62) in her critique of the tendency among speech act theorists to analyse speech acts in terms of 'strikingly monolithic…lone pairs of speakers and hearers'. Pratt (1986: 68) takes Searlean speech act theorists to task for not taking into account, 'affective relations, power relations and the question of shared goals', noting that 'some people get to do more talking than others, some are supposed to do more listening, and not everybody's words are worth the same'. Certainly, in the Western Highlands men get to do more talking than women in public contexts, women are expected to do more listening, and the words of some men appear to be worth more than others.

Significantly, the woman quoted above, while she acknowledged her clan identity, did not speak as if she embodied her whole clan and when she gave the cash and the pig, she gave it not for general redistribution among her patriline (her brothers), but to a specific individual, another woman with whom she had an existing long term exchange relationship.

Rena Lederman (1984: 102) makes a distinction between group transactions and network transactions and argues that in Mendi in the Southern Highlands of PNG 'the male/female distinction can come at times to stand for this group/network distinction'. It could be argued that a similar formula holds for the Hagen area, but in this case the woman took the opportunity to appropriate the space of male group transactions in order to pursue network transactions in which she was normally engaged outside of the formal context of the ceremonial ground. Thus, to understand the total social situation of any speech act, one must not only understand how power relations operate in the particular context, but also the different strategies that are available for circumventing or challenging these relations.

4 Veiled words materialised

The high value that people of the Western Highlands place on the interpretation and understanding of talk is evidenced by the rich system of metalinguistic expressions that are used to characterise the art of speech and ways of talking (see Merlan and Rumsey 1991: 347-349). For example, throughout the Hagen area there is a special style of figurative speech called *ung eke* (Ku Waru) or *ik ek* (Melpa), literally meaning 'bent talk', which Andrew Strathern (1975) refers to as 'veiled speech'. In Tok Pisin this style of speech is translated as either *parable tok* or *tok bokis.* Highlanders say that one has to have a special talent to be able to speak in this way. While people recognise *ung eke* as a style when they hear it spoken, especially in the context of *el ung* speeches, they may not understand the full import of the actual tropes used by a speaker. Ambiguity leaves room for alternative interpretations.

While it is a style of speech that only men are thought to have a talent for, my friend Maggie Wilson, whose father Patrick Leahy was among the first white men in the Highlands, was exceptional in this regard. Maggie was the first women to ever stand for election in the Hagen area. During her election campaign in 1982, an orator at the rally said, 'You can give

your vote to your own kind or else to the cross breed between the white pig and the wild cassowary'. At first Maggie did not understand what he meant but then it clicked that he was referring to her. She insisted on speaking and 'used his *parable tok* back at him', saying, 'Even those crossed animals are feeding from you and speaking your language. Are they not therefore one of you?' According to Maggie, people loved her speech and one old man even came up to her and put his *omak*, around her neck.[2] This was a significant gesture of respect as the neckpiece is usually only worn by male leaders or 'big-men' who have conducted *moka* ceremonies involving the largescale public exchange of pigs and other valuables.

After public events, people usually go home and talk about the talk, dissecting it in terms of its illocutionary force and perlocutionary effects and trying to come to some interpretation or understanding about what might have been meant by the various speakers and their actions. They do this in spite of the fact that they claim that it is impossible to really know what is in another person's mind. Although they espouse what Robins and Rumsey (2008: 417) have dubbed 'the opacity of other minds' doctrine, Penambi people actually spend a great deal of time trying to work out other people's intentions. One way that they believe it is possible to do so is through observing the condition of people's skin and the health of their bodies (O'Hanlon 1989, Strathern 1979, Rumsey 2008, Henry 2012). Unlike talk, which is thought to hide people's 'true' feelings and intentions, 'exterior signs, such as bodily states, physical comportment, adornment (or lack of it), are thought to reveal the inner states of both individuals and groups' (O'Hanlon 1989: 21).

Another way that Penambi and other Western Highlanders try to figure out what might be hidden behind, or in, words is through a consideration of the gifts that sometimes accompany them. A key way that talk is remembered and understood is through being tied to something material. After a public event, people will often recount what was said at the event

by enumerating the gifts that were given. Thus, the intangible is thought to be discoverable in the tangible.

An example of how words are interpreted in terms of their materialisation as things can be found in an interview I recorded in English the day after a brideprice exchange I attended. A kinsman of the bride told me that the intermarrying groups had been 'enemies in the old days' but that at the brideprice ceremony a kinsman of the groom had given a significant speech in *tok ples* (Melpa) about 'a curse that he wanted to break':

> You know, my age group are young but the older guys knew what he was talking about. He gave out 300 kina and one pig to break that curse… [The bride] has only two girls and they believe that if they break that curse the next child will be a boy…so they have broken that curse and given out the 300 kina and the pig which was smart and a good idea.

The speech by the groom's kinsman at the brideprice exchange had included recitation of the history of a particular tribal war that had occurred in the 1920s, during which the bride's great-grandmother was killed. The pig and money given at the brideprice ceremony materialised the acknowledgement of a past wrong committed against the bride's side. The story of this tribal war and the death of the old woman is an important narrative in the Penambi oral history of dispersal and resettlement of their tribal territory. Public recognition by the groom's kin on their ceremonial ground of the *truth value* of the Penambi narrative was appreciated and will be remembered as 'a smart and good idea' because the acknowledgement was given material form through the presentation of a pig and some kina. The gift enabled the indirect admission of segmentary group responsibility for the death of the old woman, through its displacement into things. As Annette Weiner (1984: 174) puts it:

> With objects, unlike "hard words", the danger in exposure for both parties is displaced. Objects represent the societal constraints in the regeneration of social relations. The constraints are the tensions between autonomy and domination. These tensions give to objects the power of displacement.

Thus, the perlocutionary effect of the speech about the breaking of the 'curse' was not realised as a consequence of the words alone, but also the gifts that were given. To

understand any speech act, including a command, requires attention not only to what is said but also to what remains unsaid but acknowledged via other means, including gestures, gifts, pregnant silences, and so on. We live in an intersubjective world where human intentionality is not just a matter of the mental states of individuals, but is also expressed in 'embodied actions and dispositions' as well as 'cultural artefacts, cultural categories and, culturally organised activities' (Duranti 2008: 491).

5 Your wish is (not) my command

Most speeches that are given in public contexts in the Western Highlands consist of long recitations of histories of relations of alliance and enmity between segmentary groups. However, such speeches are also used to variously command, direct, or persuade people to action (usually only certain groups and/or individuals among those present). Yet, saying something does not easily make it so in this cultural context and even strong leaders, well recognised for their oratorical skills, are not always able to convince people to attend to their words. Merlan and Rumsey's (1991) transcript of Ku Waru speeches at a compensation payment event in 1983 provides some good examples:

(1) Ya pilyikimil-i –o
Here listen-PRES PROG-2/3pl –el ung marker
'Listen here!'

(2) Ung pilyik takan molung-ko
Talk listen-2/3pl quiet be-PERV-ko
'Listen and be quiet!!!' (strong command form literally 'You have been quiet')

Directives can also be conveyed in Ku Waru in a round-about way via a question. As discussed above, English speakers sometimes couch commands in the form of questions (as I did when commanding my son not to kick the ball). It has been argued that this strategy tends to be favoured by women and signals their relative powerlessness (Lakoff 1994), but this is

not necessarily the case. Use of this strategy suggests subtle skills of diplomacy, where the speaker attempts to soften a command to achieve a desired outcome through solidarity and the creation of rapport.

However, among Ku Waru speakers, rather representing a gentle or polite form, commands couched as questions may instead be used to express what we might call sarcasm, as in, for example, the question *Kung mabola kalung-i*? 'Have you put on pig grease?', recorded by Merlan and Rumsey (1991: 247). Traditionally Ku Waru speakers would rub themselves with pig grease before public events as a form of self-decoration. According the Merlan and Rumsey (1991: 112), in the context of trying to get the crowd's attention and where the answer to this rhetorical question is obviously no, the question was a way of directing those being addressed that they 'are not qualified to speak' and so should just sit down and be quiet. Putting a directive in the form of a sarcastic question is also possible in English, as in 'Are you deaf?' to mean 'Listen!'

The many exhortations to be quiet and listen during speeches in the Highlands, reveal that people have to be convinced to take notice and challenge any assumption that those who issue commands must occupy secure roles of authority and power. A speech requires oratorical and performative skill to capture attentive listeners and the collaboration of at least some of the participants is crucial to its success.

Fundamentally, speech acts are activities that are jointly, or communally, accomplished. Therefore, understanding the relationship between a command and its consequence/s requires an understanding of the total social situation and, in particular, cultural concepts regarding perlocutions. As Slotta (2015: 544) writes of the Yopno:

> A would-be leader's word is nobody's command; the success of efforts to direct community members is understood to be contingent on the way directions are 'handled' by their recipients. Speakers frame their contributions with an eye toward their addressees' uptake, submitting their speech to the receptive activity of others. While some may have the verbal skill to reliably stir their addressees to act, their

> influence remains precarious - they exercise verbal power at the pleasure of the communicative recipient.

The 'agentive role' of listeners is similarly considered significant in communication among peoples of the Western Highlands and great attention is paid to the perlocutionary effects, both negative and positive, that talk might have.

6 Conclusion – Veiled Commands, Egalitarian Values and Language Materiality

The way directives are given and received in the Hagen area is related to political values of autonomy and equivalence but also to *tensions* between these values and other values, such as relatedness (group identity) and dependence, as well as new forms of inequality of race, class and gender. As I have discussed above, one means by which people avoid or rectify the use of words that cause conflict, and mediate the tensions between obligations that arise from being in relationship with others and individual autonomy, is through the exchange of things (pigs, cash, and so on). Thus it is important to take into account the linguistic and the material within the same analytic framework. Shankar and Cavanaugh (2012) offer the term 'language materiality' to characterise what they identify as an emerging field of enquiry within anthropology that brings together the linguistic, which is usually seen as immaterial, and the material which is usually considered 'concrete and non-discursive' (p. 346), to understand 'how words and objects work together' (p. 358).

Andrew Strathern (1975) argues that Hagen people use indirect, allusive speech in a range of situations to express matters that if spoken about directly or openly might provoke violence. According to Strathern, using veiled (indirect) speech enables a person to air contentious issues while at the same time preserving social relations and maintaining social control. Veiled speech is politically significant in terms of values of autonomy and equality because it enables 'a certain flexibility of response' from the people addressed (Lederman

1984: 88). However, the use of indirect speech is not universally associated with egalitarian values. Indirect speech also facilitates authoritarian relationships in some cultural contexts (Bloch 1975) and can do so even in the Western Highlands. The fact that a directive is veiled as a question for example, or that figurative speech is used, may be a stronger way of demanding a response from a communicative recipient than a direct command, depending on the social situation.

A great diversity of command strategies can be found cross-linguistically, as evidenced in Aikhenvald (chapter 1) and by the other contributors to this volume. The authors provide rich comparative material for consideration by linguistic philosophers. No doubt speech act theory will continue to generate productive debates on the metaphysics of speech acts; how illocutionary acts such as commands are situated in context, indeed the very definition of context (Mey 2011: 178; Pratt 1986: 63); the relationship between illocutionary and perlocutionary acts; intersubjectivity and the nature of 'uptake' of commands; 'language as action' (Marcondes de Souza Filho 1985); the distinction between a speech act as an ideal type and speech action as a concrete 'natural' event (Grünberg 2011: 176); and the relationship between speech action, power relations, politics and diplomacy (Mey 2011: 176-77; Green 2015). Examination of the material in this volume indicates that while there may be correlations between certain command strategies and the political contours of social life, these are not necessarily universal. Does this mean we should give up comparative projects in favour of particularism, or are there some generalisations to be made about the apparently widely recurring tendency for people to veil their commands, whatever linguistic strategies they might use?

Pointing out the presence of ethnographic exceptions is a favourite form of anti-universalist argument in anthropology. Yet, as Bloch (2008: S27) writes 'we cannot ignore the fact that so many people, in different cultures all around the world, are saying similar

things again and again. Such recurrences are a challenge that anthropology should not dodge by finding occasional counter examples'. As Bloch (2008) argues, it is possible to study recurrences across different contexts and to generalise without necessarily universalising. While it may be impossible to say that veiled commands are universally linked to an egalitarian ethos, perhaps one could generalise that in any context veiling is related to concepts of personhood, relatedness, autonomy and responsibility, and to the human awareness that the world we inhabit is always a social world, a world of intentional others full of hopes, desires, and fears, and the capacity not only for honesty and sincerity but also for deception and trickery.

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2. An *omak* consists of a panel made of thin sticks of bamboo made to hang down a man’s chest. It was added to during a man’s lifetime, each additional bamboo stick marking another successful *moka* or large ceremonial exchange event, signifying his growing status as a leader.