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## Gained in translation: the case of Castithan

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### Introduction

Politeness systems differ considerably cross-linguistically, leading to complications when translating from or into a language with a more or less elaborate one: subtle characteristic speech patterns may be lost in translation, and attempts to emulate them may lead to excessive formality or informality.

However, translating into a language with a more elaborate politeness system is an opportunity for translators to add new depths to a work by carefully adjusting the level of politeness in interactions depending on their context and participants. While this mainly happens when translating into natural languages, instances of such added layers of politeness are now also found in translations into developed fictional languages due to their increasing use for various productions.

I will demonstrate this through case studies involving a fictional language featuring a realistic complex politeness system made for a production originally written in English. Many lines in this language employ intradiegetic specific yet natural speech patterns that explicitly denote levels of formality or informality that the original English only implies without having a way to make them overt in natural-sounding ways.

### The *Defiance* universe

*Defiance* was an American science fiction television series that aired from 2013 to 2015, lasting 3 seasons. It takes place on Earth after a war between mankind and refugees from multiple extraterrestrial species who fled their solar system to survive a natural disaster, and deals with the difficult coexistence of aliens (collectively referred to as "Votans") and humans in a still-recovering world. The show formed a shared universe with an online video game of the same name launched the same month, although I will only consider material from the former here.

For all 3 seasons, the show notably employed the professional language creator David J. Peterson to create 4 Votan languages that were spoken by many of its characters, including humans, although he had little involvement in the game. I will focus on the Votan language that enjoyed the most use on the show, Castithan (*Kastithanu*), which is frequently spoken in all 3 seasons by several of the show's main characters as well as dozens of supporting ones.

## The Castithan language

Castithan is not a language from Earth and is therefore not related to any human language but is pronounceable and usable by humans in addition to their original speakers, the humanoid (enough to be able to have children with humans) Castithan (*Kastitho*) species, whose social structure is a highly conservative patriarchy divided into castes called *liro* (from an old word for "cloud"). To obtain a highly realistic language, Peterson went as far as to invent a Proto-Castithan from which he derived the modern language, resulting in a variety of irregularities and instances of semantic drift.

A lightly agglutinative topic-prominent language, Castithan is typologically not unusual for human standards in that it is verb-final and strongly head-final, a combination commonly encountered in human languages. For instance, relative clauses precede nouns whereas auxiliaries follow verbs.

Similarly to the typologically alike Japanese and Korean, it features an extensive set of honorific speech rules called *fakarélu* (from an old word for "to talk to" and the common honorific prefix *fa-*) and allows the omission of pronouns when they can be deduced from context even though it paradoxically has a very large set of pronouns owing to its politeness system. However, it also differs from both in several important ways, for instance its verbs inflect differently depending on the definiteness of their arguments.

Because the show features large numbers of Castithans from a variety of backgrounds interacting, it gave Peterson considerable opportunity to add nuances the original English screenplays lacked and therefore uses many different registers of the Castithan language.

## Formal Castithan

Castithan politeness is conveyed through the avoidance of some verb forms such as the imperative and the use of different sets of pronouns (including one, *favizwo*, which is only used to address or refer to Rayetso, the Castithans' god) as well as dedicated honorifics, for instance *fakarélu* requires assertions and requests to end with the formal particle *zhulawa*, which is often translated as "please" in English but actually covers a much wider range of uses. *Fakarélu* even employs some intentional ungrammaticality, for example even though intransitive verbs normally cannot be passivized by their very nature, they may take a passive voice suffix in questions to achieve the highest level of formality:

- *henuli she?* (be.ready INT?): are you ready? (neutral)
- *henudhali she?* (be.ready-PASS INT?): are you ready? (formal)

This line from the first season of the show (whose gloss I have simplified to focus on the parts relevant to the politeness system) is an example of *fakarélu*, its context is self-explanatory:

*Shavi nda jume thoribuna ksa famile do nevitsa re shinevi je zhulawa.*

any over deep condolences TOP 2.POL ACC 1.HML NOM offer-NDEF EMP HON

"I offer you my deepest condolences."

*Famile* is Castithan's most formal second-person pronoun and *nevitsa*, which also means "servant", is its humblest first-person one. The verb is in the indefinite form even though it is normally ungrammatical to use it in assertions if all the arguments are known and definite, it is because it is considered more polite not to claim to have definite knowledge. The sentence ends with the honorific *zhulawa* as expected, it could be approximated in English as "humbly". None of these markers of politeness have any equivalent in the original English line Peterson had to translate, he was able to add his own flavor to it.

## Taboo Castithan

Conversely, Castithan also has an extremely informal register called *skalanu* (from an old word for "flood") which is only used by Castithans when they are deeply offended, shaken or aroused. For the most part, it is actually a preserved older form of the language which has become taboo and uses a different grammar (most notably, pronouns are never omitted in it) and vocabulary, many terms are used both in ordinary registers and *skalanu* but have different meanings in the latter. The scripts have one instance of a sentence appearing in both neutral Castithan and *skalanu*:

- *magu je.* (help EMP): help me. (neutral)
- *zara dheru!* (1SG.PEJ help!): help me! (*skalanu*)

*Dheru* means "to praise" in neutral or formal Castithan, whereas *magu* means "to lift" in *skalanu*.

*Skalanu* is triggered by the use of a unique set of pronouns, a return to composure is expressed by switching back to regular ones or by omitting pronouns again. The triggering pronouns are actually archaic ones, which is visible in a line from the second season where Castithan scripture is quoted, the original English script uses obsolete terms such as "thyself" to evoke human scripture whereas the Castithan translation uses now-taboo pronouns with their original meanings:

*Kworo gwola re nuvivana nggo dimodhopsa, gwolo wava ksa ledodhalu myunda, kyuro shi jine re tanda no lasivurudhalu myunda.*

though 2SG.PEJ NOM sin INS cover-PASS-PST, 2SG.PEJ children TOP taint-PASS NEG-FUT, then more 3PL.PEJ NOM father ABL hide-PASS NEG-FUT

"For though thyself be covered in sin, they shall not be visited on thy children, nor should they know not of their father."

Scripture is the only formal context where *skalanu* pronouns may be spoken aloud in modern Castithan.

## Castithan in action

An especially well-documented example of Castithan registers enriching a dialogue is found in a scene of the show's pilot for which Peterson provided a detailed footnote: Elah Bandik, a Castithan from a low *liro*, owes money to Datak Tarr, a Castithan mobster from a high *liro* and one of the show's main characters. When Tarr's collector does not show up at the agreed time, Bandik panics and approaches Tarr directly to assure him that he can pay him back but inadvertently angers Tarr by doing so.

When the scene was written in English, the implication was merely that Tarr was offended by a Castithan from a low *liro* daring to speak to him without permission, but Peterson added a layer to it by having Bandik carelessly address Tarr too informally:

*Tarazwo! Chiráwe nda tsu noraki do ohérulu merushma!*

Tarr-HON! limit over be 2.NFOR ERG think NEG-DES

"Mr. Tarr! I don't want you to think I'm late!"

In his footnote, Peterson details the line's subtleties:

*The cart owner's speech has been modified in a very specific way. He makes several mistakes in speaking to Datak. First, he addresses Datak as Tarazwo, which would be fine, if they were equals, but since Datak is above him, he should've addressed him as Fa-Tarazwo. Next, he uses an improper pronoun, noraki. This is a pronoun that is only between equals, though it's become the common pronoun of the lower castes (and the young). He should have addressed him with yelaki. Further, he doesn't use any honorific at all when addressing him.*

More precisely, he uses a mild honorific with Tarr's name but no honorifics in the rest of the sentence, for instance it is not ending with *zhulawa* even though it is an assertion. Tarr's furious answer is also noteworthy:

*Gwola bira-ka-bira jidhóhe zara hadhalu lena ka zara gwola vanga kyuro sha yazulu.*  
2SG.PEJ face-and-face like-this 1SG.PEJ approach again and 1SG.PEJ 2SG.PEJ hand then more break  
"You approach me personally like this again and I'll break more than your hand."

The English sentence is threatening but does not contain explicit profanity. Its Castithan version is considerably stronger language, however, in that it is entirely in *skalanu*, which is made clear as soon as it begins by the use of the *skalanu* pronoun *gwola*. No profanity per se was added, but the different pronouns are enough to convey Tarr's fury.

## Unexpected uses of taboo Castithan

### Determination

Since Tarr is a violent criminal with many enemies, he frequently uses *skalanu* in the show, but some lines also showcase other interesting non-aggressive uses of this register. A flashback of Tarr's youth in the third season reveals that when his homeworld was evacuated, his father, a priest, refused to leave because of his sacred duties. When he learns that, Tarr reacts in neutral Castithan at first:

*Sho me ksa? Gyenda re vuzula.*  
what for TOP? world NOM die  
"Why? Our world is ending."

When his father persists, Tarr switches to *skalanu*:

*Zara gwola shuluganula.*  
1SG.PEJ 2SG.PEJ leave-NEG  
"I won't leave you."

The use of *skalanu* here is not disrespectful, but conveys Tarr's resolution more explicitly than the original English does, it makes it clear that Tarr means every word of what he just said. But this does not convince his father, who continues the conversation in neutral Castithan without ever switching to *skalanu*, implying that he has accepted his fate and refuses to argue. After hearing his father's last wishes, Tarr finally stops insisting and promises his father he will fulfill them with a very concise answer:

*Vospa je.*  
promise EMP  
"I promise"

Once again, this is neutral Castithan, Tarr no longer uses the *skalanu* pronouns, signaling his resignation and the sincerity of his promise. The resulting dialogue is realistically nuanced in ways impossible to perfectly translate into English.

### Usage by younger speakers

Another interesting instance of non-disrespectful *skalanu* occurs during the first season in a dialogue between 2 Castithan youths, Datak Tarr's son Alak and his friend Kupack Kurr, whom Alak recruits for a mission for his father. Peterson accounted for the differences in speech patterns between generations of Castithan speakers and made youths use *skalanu* more liberally as slang, when Alak warns Kupack that what he has to do is "bad", he boastfully answers in *skalanu*:

*Zara ksa nuve ya.*  
1SG.PEJ TOP bad be  
"I'm bad."

Alak affectionately replies in *skalanu* too:

*Gada su, gwola ksa nuve ya.*  
INTS yes, 2SG.PEJ TOP bad be  
"Damn right, you're bad."

The use of *skalanu* here is much more light-hearted than in the previous examples, it conveys neither offense nor determination, just camaraderie, much in the same way that real-world profanity tends to become milder and be displaced over time by new, stronger swear words. Such a usage would sound unacceptably vulgar to older speakers.

Furthermore, a very subtle detail characterizes Alak's speech as even more unlike that of the previous generation: unlike his parents, he was born on Earth, grew up among English speakers and even eventually marries a human, so he uses more loanwords from English, the intensifier *gada* is actually an approximation of the English word *goddamn* through the law of Hobson-Jobson. It is not considered profane in Castithan but is associated with younger speakers, older ones usually use native, sentence-final emphatic particles instead.

### Other subtleties

#### Contractions

Like English, Castithan has optional contractions of very common words such as the locative postposition *ike*, which is usually reduced to *'ke* except in careful speech such as when reciting scripture. However, most of these contractions are considered much more informal in Castithan than in English and proscribed in all formal registers.

When Datak Tarr is introduced in the show, he is part of the highest *liro*, the Castithan equivalent of the aristocracy. However, he was not born into it and owes his status to his wife Stahma, who was. He usually avoids using informal contractions but in the second season, after Stahma takes control of his gang and expels him from her household, he is shown to make a living as a grifter and addresses his marks with informal contractions such as shortening the topic marker *ksa* into *ks'*:

*Shafya ks' ovásho yenji?*  
who TOP lucky feel?  
"Who's feeling lucky?"

This implies that when he was a member of the highest *liro*, he carefully watched his language to keep it up to his *liro*'s standards, but after ending up destitute, he relapsed into the register he grew up with. He later manages to convince Stahma to take him back and stops using informal contractions again once he regains his aristocratic status.

The English script has no such shift in any of Datak's lines. Theoretically, a similar effect could have been achieved by using stigmatized English contractions such as "ain't" in the subtitles, but this was not considered.

### **Choice of pronouns**

Most of Castithan's pronouns do not distinguish number and many do not distinguish between the second and third person. However, in addition to formality, they vary depending on gender, age and the status of the addressee. Though many lines of the show just omit pronouns, some use them to convey nuances regarding how the speaker perceives their relationship to the addressee.

In the second season, after Stahma allows Datak to return home as previously mentioned, Alak's wife Christie disapproves of this decision and openly tells her father-in-law, whom she despises, that she will not accept him:

*Wozhe do yenake re ugano hinjiganunda je.*

2.DEPR ERG unborn.child ABS never know-NEG-FUT EMPH

"You will never know my child."

The sentence is made more impactful in Castithan by the use of the pronoun *wozhe*, which is normally used to address someone of lower status, Datak often uses it to speak to his own son since Castithans consider children subordinate to their parents even after they reach adulthood. Since Stahma has welcomed Datak back, Christie should respectfully address him as a parent, but her choice of pronouns makes it clear that she still refuses to regard him as family.

### **Conclusion**

Many works involving fictional civilizations use inconsistent gibberish when a scene involves a character speaking their fictional native language, when they do not just have everyone conveniently speak English. Such tricks are missing an important point: a realistic fictional language raises the same questions as a natural one when it comes to translating into and from it and therefore the same opportunities to play with what is lost in translation on either side.

*Defiance* demonstrates this by extensively featuring characters speaking a consistent language whose politeness system is intentionally designed to be impossible to straightforwardly translate into English in many cases. Not only does this enhance the show's verisimilitude, but it adds hidden depths to it that will not be obvious to most viewers but will reward curious ones. The translation into Castithan made the lines more meaningful than what they would have been if the show had just used nonsense or made the Castithans always speak English.

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