

Lomotor's talk, or the imperial gerund

In this paper I take a closer look at part of a conversation that I had in July 1973 with my friend Lomotor, brother-in-law of Baldambe (see Lydall and Strecker 1979a; Strecker 1998). Our theme was the background of current feuds between the Hamar and some of their neighbours, and at one point Lomotor related to me what was said at a meeting, which had recently been held between the Hamar and the Galeba (Dassanech). This passage, included in the ethnographic album *Music of the Hamar* (Strecker 1979), is especially moving and worth listening to for its own sake. It has even inspired artists—first Tilman Künzel and later Carmen Eder—to accompany it with music that emphasizes its prosody, its rhythms, its modes and tones of feeling. But here I examine this extraordinarily powerful instance of Hamar oratory partly to demonstrate a culture specific style of speaking, partly to highlight a particular aesthetic, but above all to make the more general point that *tension phenomena* are worth our attention, for tension is inherent in nature, inherent in life, inherent in human experience, and therefore also inherent in the use of language.

As the dictionary tells us, 'tension' involves a state of being stretched, strained and filled with excitement, like the stress by which a bar or a string is pulled. This relates to the verb and adjective 'tense' meaning "(of cord, membrane, or figuratively of nerve, mind, emotion) stretched tight, strained to stiffness, causing tenseness (a tense moment)" (The Oxford Concise Dictionary).

One of the most effective ways to create tension in discourse is to use gerund clause structures, which carry the hidden

message that just as the author masters the complex structure of the sentence, he or she is able to grasp difficult issues, and above all, is able to master people. This is why one can speak of the 'imperial' gerund.

Lomotor's speech begins with a gerund, which is supported by a short ejection and a chuckle that are repeated:

Maxulo d'abais

Maxulo having risen (Maxulo: a spokesman of the Galeba)

Ye, Maxulo! Eh.

Oh yes, Maxulo! (Lomotor imitates the inviting character of the meeting and laughs because of his satisfying memories)

Maxulo d'abais

Maxulo having risen [...]

Then Lomotor imitates Maxulo and other speakers with a series of directly quoted utterances until, in the end, Lomotor finishes saying:

Amais tau won dalkono

Having said which, wasn't it, what we talked about." (Strecker 1979b: 22).

Tellingly, the use of the gerund is here associated with the physical act of rising, and taking a spear. This amplifies what we already know from the handbooks both of grammar and of rhetoric: gerunds have a projective, tension-raising property. They 'raise matters', analogous to the way in which Maxulo raises himself physically and takes a spear into his right hand in order to address the audience and make it the target of his rhetorical will. In 1973 I recorded a public meeting that took place at the Hamar cattle camps. The description I provided for the resulting record gives a picture of such a speechmaking situation:

In the grazing areas of the Lower Omo where the territory of the Hamar borders those of the Galeba and Bume, the young Hamar men have slaughtered an ox. The meat has been roasted

over a fire and served on freshly cut bunches of green leaves which are placed on the ground in a wide semicircle. About one hundred Hamar men sit down and begin to eat the meat.

At first, while they eat, everyone is silent. Then after a while, one of the oldest and most influential men present rises. He takes a special spear, which is a symbol for his privilege to speak in a public meeting. He removes the leather cover that protects the sharp blade of the spear and walks over to the centre of the semicircle. Here he takes some of the contents of the ox's stomach—the partly digested green substance consists of grasses, herbs and leaves, and symbolises health and fertility—and rubs it on his forehead, chest and knees. Then, according to his personal temperament and the content of his speech, he passes repeatedly in front of the semicircle of sitting men with a fast or slow stride. First he does not say a word and one only hears his steps on the ground. The stillness and tension grows until eventually he breaks it with the loud cry: "*Hai!* Hamar, listen to me!" Then he begins his speech. At first he scolds the men and intimidates them. In particular, he addresses himself to the younger men and says that only they should speak from now on, as it is they who are interested only in evil and not in good. He accuses them of having brought bad luck, saying that war, sickness, drought and all other suffering are ultimately the outcome of their bad social behaviour and their careless enactment of the rites for the dead.

After his vehement introduction the speaker turns to the special problems of the immediate situation. On the day of the recording (June 1, 1973) the war with the Bume was at issue. The first speaker and then the one who follows him admonish the men and tell them to leave the Bume in peace so that they can concentrate on the defence against the Galeba who are by far the more dangerous. However, the men are eager to fight. They want to settle old debts with the Bume, the sooner the better. Therefore they raise their voices and chant war songs, which are led by a solo singer. The speakers ask them to stop

and continue to speak for peace. But the singers don't stop. In their songs they ridicule the enemy. Sometimes they get on their feet, individually or in groups, and while they call out the names of their dance oxen they trample on the ground and point with their weapons in the direction of the enemy. In this way the public meeting changes into a dynamic opposition between individual speakers and the singing collective. The process continues until a decision has been reached. If those who want peace succeed (as in fact happened on this day) the final speaker lifts both his arms and calls for rain, bees, health, fat ... If those who want to fight succeed the speaker points his spear towards the enemy" (Strecker 1979b: 23-24).

It was a public meeting like this one, which Lomotor witnessed and reproduced for my favour, and which I will now give in full. Lomotor's account is energized by a wide-spanning gerund that acts as a bow of tension with which the speaker shoots off rhetorical arrows. These are indicated on the right side of the text and summarized in a diagram that follows below.

Lomotor's account of Maxulo's speech

1. *Maxulo d'abais*
Maxulo having risen,
2. "Ye! Maxulo!" "Eh."
PROTASIS/GERUND
"Oh, Maxulo!" "Yes."
3. *Maxulo d'abais:*
Maxulo having risen (said):
...
4. *Edi ogoro – kutsona atadau?*
Are these people fathered for vultures?
5. *Guderina atadau?* INDIGNANT
QUESTION
Fathered for hyenas?

6. *Ai ai aina atadau?*
 Fathered for the sun, sun, sun?
 ...
7. *Edi edina ko atade.*
 (No,) people are fathered for people.
8. *Angi ataise wakider ki gutade.*
 Fathering a son, so that he may go with the cows.
9. *K'ulider ki gutade.*
 That he may go with the goats.
10. *Amider ki gutade.*
 That he may go to the fields. AFFIRMATIVE
 ANSWER
11. *Otoder ki gutade.*
 That he may go with the calves.
12. *Ankasider ki gutade.*
 That he may go with the lambs.
13. *"Goba, sa ainexal yir tio" amaise erga ki yitade.*
 That he may be sent on errands saying: "Run over there
 and get me something from him!"
 ...
14. *Ae a atan – kutso.*
 He whom you fathered –
 vulture (eaten by vultures).
15. *Ae a atan – kutso.*
 He whom you fathered – vulture.
17. *Ae a atan – kutso.*
 He whom you fathered – vulture.
 LAMENTATION
18. *Ae a atan – kutso.*
 He whom you fathered – vulture.
19. *Ogoro hamo ko da'ai?*
 Where does this lead to? LAMENTING QUESTION
 ...
20. *"Shada daidu?"*

Is Shada (Hamar spokesman) there?

21. "Daidi."

He is.

22. "Ariangule daidu, Boia?"

Is Araingule there, Boia?

23. "Daidi."

He is.

24. "Lomotor daidu?"

Is Lomotor there?

SELF

POSITIONING

25. "Daidi."

He is.

26. "Korre daidu?"

Is Korre there?

27. "Daidi."

He is.

28. "Baido daidu?"

Is Baido there?

29. "Daidi."

He is.

...

30. "Ye! Aena igira arna oisai?"

Ye! Why do you ask about these men?

31. *Anama inna ne.*

They are my age-mates.

32. *Ayona ne.*

They are leaders.

33. *Dalkaina ne.*

They are speakers.

EMPHATIC

POSITIONING

34. *Donzana ne.*

They are adult men.

35. *Na imbet bankin tiate 'hai!' amaise dalkana.*"

The ones who yesterday taking the spear
together with me, calling 'hey!' spoke.

36. *"Eh, eh. Aena igira niekinie. Yeria i dalke."*

Eh, eh. They shall come. Man, let me speak.

* * * *

37. *Amakisaxa yeria inta niab,*

When he (Maxulo) said this,
man (then) I came

INTERLUDE

38. *woxa ukab, kulla lamma, woxaxa makan.*

slaughtered an ox, two goats,
together with the ox, three.

39. *Yeria ukab.*

Man, these I slaughtered.

* * * *

40. *"Lomotor, dorka.*

Lomotor, sit down (Maxulo says).

41. *Nyangole, dorka.*

Nyangole, sit down.

42. *Shada, dorka.*

Shada, sit down.

SINCERE INVITATION

43. *Korre, dorka.*

Korre, sit down.

44. *Nana sherkana kira yedi pen kaisaina, kira,*

You young boys who
destroy the country,

45. *kira edi binna dalke.*

SARCASTIC

INVITATION

only you should speak.

...

46. *Wunga amba wunga yisa nokon payan wuchaina,*

The cattle of your father who drink the good water,

Haven't you abandoned the talk
of the Government?

69. *"Ya! Mengisto ainu!" a amata?*
"Ya! The Government, who is that?"
Didn't you say this?

70. *Pogamonka asa. Har aia, ya?*
That's your falseness.

THREAT

What have you achieved?

71. *Ta mengist gon dalkab. Bairo mengist.*
Now the Government has spoken truly.
Bairo (luck, fortune) is the government.

...

72. *Ogoen garata?*
Didn't you leave all this?

73. *"Hai! Wunga anna gishima*
k'ulla anna gishima,

LAMENTATION

amin annun koi'ma,"
"Hey! Herd your cattle, herd your goats,
dig your field",

74. *in amen garata?*

LAMENTING

QUESTION

when I said this, didn't you reject it?

...

75. *Ana faya: Rana kumo, iinka rana bao,*
What you like is to drink milk
and carry it in your belly,

76. *gobo, gobo, gobo, chober Galata*
daeso kutsona imo!

run, run, run, kill a Galeba down

SARCASTIC

ACCUSATION

there and give him to the vultures.

77. *Gobo, gobo, gobo, gobo, gobo Hamartal*

kote daeso kutsona imo.

Run, run, run, run, run, kill a Hamar
here and give him to the vultures.

78. *Ana yin tei, ana fayano?*

Isn't this so,

CONCILIATORY

QUESTION

what's good for you?

79. *Wunga enna dibadana, ki kaie.*

The cattle which were stolen before,
let them get lost.

80. *Murrana pent bankin utono ko kaie.*

The rifles that came into the

CONCILIATORY

INVITATION

country with the war,

(retrospective)

let them get lost.

81. *Nana enna diana ki kaie.*

The children who have died, let them get lost.

82. *Nasa ta iinka badana,*

For the boy who is now carried in the belly,

83. *nasa ta wunga gishaena.*

for the boy who now herds the cattle,

84. *k'ulla taki imba kulla diana ki kaie!*

now let my father's goats
which have died, get lost!

85. *Ta k'ullin donna, wungen ta donna,*

for the goats which exist now,

CONCILIATORY

INVITATION

for the cattle which exist now,

(prospective)

86. *shuphoa paya ka taki in dorkana,*

bunna dorkaise in wuchaina,

for the good shade in which I sit now,

for the coffee which, having sat down, I drink,

87. *wo dalke!*"

let us talk!

...

88. *Amais tau won dalkano.*

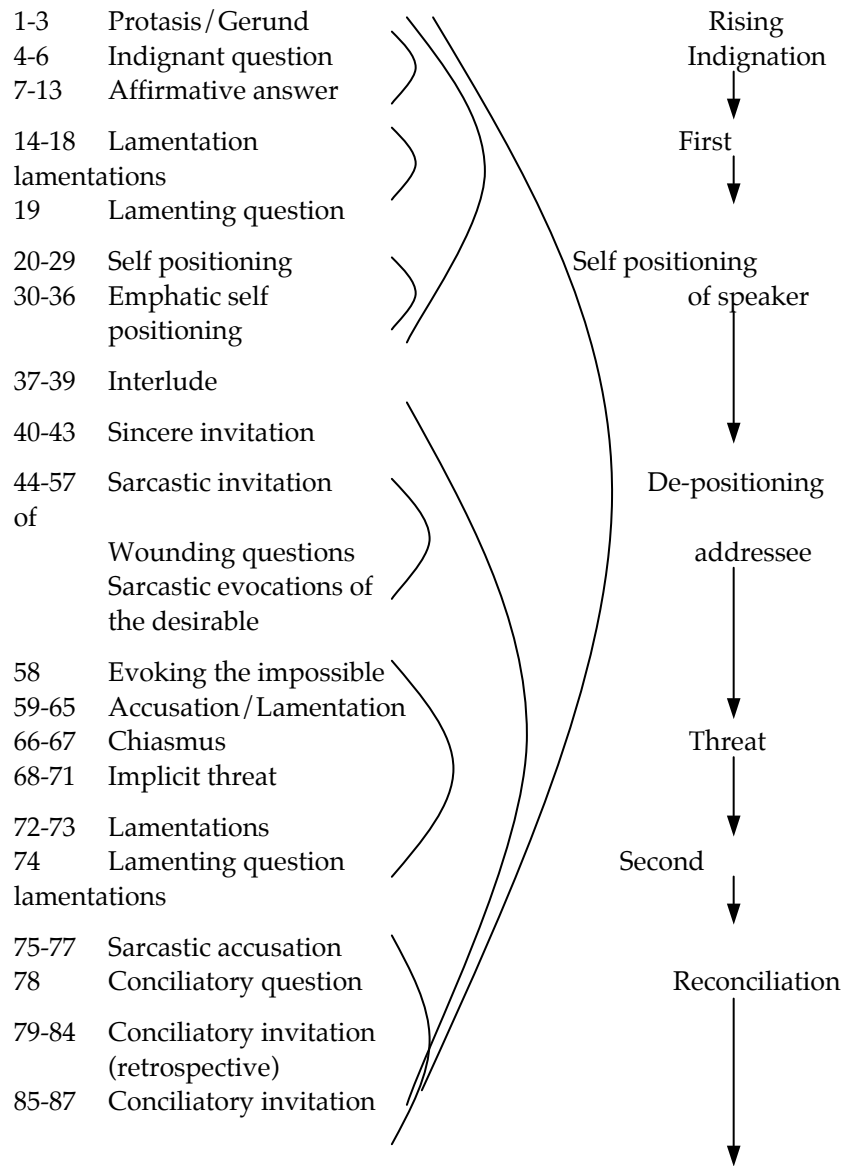
Having said which, isn't it,
what we talked about.

APODOSIS/GERUND

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The diagram that follows below is meant to bring out the over-all structure of Lomotor's speech more clearly. It concentrates on a single instance of Hamar speech competence –the imperial gerund. A host of questions remain if one wants to understand the many rhetorical strategies employed by Lomotor. The use of central figures of speech such as hyperbole, irony, sarcasm, chiasmus, metonymy, synecdoche, metaphor, as well as strategies of politeness (Brown and Levinson 1987) or rather strategies of domination (Strecker 1988) would be of prime interest here. But these, as well as other instances of Hamar rhetoric, will have to be dealt with elsewhere and at some other time.

Diagram: The Gerundial Bow of Tension



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Lomotor's talk, or the imperial gerund

(prospective)

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Apodosis/Gerund

Settling down