Future Tense

Anne Storch

1 Introduction

In her book *Imperatives and Commands*, Alexandra Aikhenvald discusses the many meanings of ‘future’. Imperatives constructed in the future tense are a rich and interesting category, ranging from a ‘delayed imperative’ (Aikhenvald 2010: 133) to ‘indirect commands’ (Aikhenvald 2010: 266) – directing someone to do something later, at another place, from here to there, or from top to bottom. The latter is what indirect commands do; they encode both the difference in social status between the speaker and addressee, and the command to perform certain tasks on the part of the addressee. In such constructions, the future expresses a deontic modality, which is used to indicate how things ought to be in this world, how we expect them to be, what we should do to remake them according to our norms, standards and desires. In other words, in imperative constructions the future tense indicates normativity and some kind of unquestioned adherence of hegemonic order.

The concept of the ‘future’, Souleymane Bachir Diagne observes, belongs to the most contested topics in African philosophy – those that are hybrid, negated, othered. The future, he argues in his work on *The Ink of the Scholars*, needs time: “Our capacity to create time by means of our project has nothing to do, anymore, with a cultural conception expressed in the calendar used in the sorcerer’s village, or in the verbal tenses of the languages spoken there. We do not need to find out if the future is *given* in these languages as the time of a sufficiently far-off future: we assert that the future is what we *create*” (Bachir Diagne 2016: 45).

‘Future’ is a word that helps us speak not so much about tomorrow as about the order of things and our capacity to create that order. Yet, we not only have to speak in the future tense, but we also have to think how we can ‘speak anew’. Michael Taussig (1984: 470), writing about terror, the complete annihilation of any future, urges us to think about a counterdiscourse and its possible form: “the question is raised not only concerning the power to speak and write, but as to what form shall that counterdiscourse take.”

Perhaps an answer to this question is to sit and hum: do something that is not easily interrupted by time, and that replaces imperatives with hospitality. Does this make sense? Time remains unconnected to words, does it not? Unless language is made to last – as a description, magic, or inscription – it

evaporates after it has been produced. We speak, are heard (or not) and then that is that. Gottfried Benn (1948), in his poem 'Ein Wort' [A word], reflects on this evasive nature of words in the sense of an utterance, or as a language. A word offers a sudden revelation, an understanding of the world and of life, and then returns to nothing, returns to 'darkness', as he puts it. Words, says Benn, do not fill empty spaces. What a liberating way to think about language, now removed from the impositions of writing, standardizing, mother-tonguing and correcting. Just a voice, and nothing else. Whatever there may be as well: that is a different matter. There is an inferred sense here of what we impose on a voice, through linking whatever sound it produces to the complex epistemologies and ideologies that are at the basis of fixing language and turning it into material culture. Yet, these impositions seem necessary because, without them, what remains? The fading memory of lightning, a shooting star, an expiring flame – not very hospitable. And language should be hospitable, as of course it is – although Benn might not see this in the same way as others do, his poetry being closely connected to his experiences of the catastrophe of war – and it is precisely the elusive word from which this hospitality comes.

To make this more inviting, let us bring in a bit of material culture right now so that the hum can really take place. Let us think of a chair, of all the many chairs, benches and stools that are everywhere. Walking around cities, villages and farmlands, one normally sees such chairs. Often, these chairs are simply there, and nobody sits on them. But one could sit there, and if one does, one may chat. One word would follow another, and there would be the sound of soft talk, some laughter, silence, and again more words.

We might hang out for a while to see what people are doing, what they like to eat, or where they buy their fruit and meat, and then we spend some time at a corner shop and sip a malt from a dusty bottle, while eyeing the stickers and advertisements that local spiritual doctors have left on the poles of the street lights. We get up and go on a bit further, noticing a chair or two more, and decide to visit somebody, and sit there and chat. A stream of words forms a humming sound, something with no end, and also no beginning, as there cannot be any first or last word in anything shared quite as intimately as language.

It is interesting to think of different kinds of hums emerging from time spent together. How intense does it become, and how polyphonic? Perhaps the chair could be conceptualized as context, in a sociolinguistic sense: then its placement, condition and form would be relevant for whatever kind of hum there was. In any case, however, it remains a hum; as we continue to think about the materiality and space of hospitality, the chairs in question are metaphors and instruments for spending time together, resulting in a hum. Words flowing out of conversation – a continuous hum.

FIGURE 1 Chair, Alice ANNE STORCH

What might also transpire, however, is that one does not sit on a chair in an area with which one is familiar. One could also be a pilgrim, or one could get lost (though this can be the same thing really), finding oneself walking down an unfamiliar street. After a while, this might become tiresome, the chair becoming a welcome sight. Somebody else might be there, and one could ask this person for assistance: the right direction, or the nearest bus stop. Perhaps

the chair in question is a comfortable one, a comfy seat. A cat might come and sniff at the soles of our sandals. A neighbour might join in: where is it that you want to go? And we would bend over a map and hum. Other people would see that we are looking for a place on a map, but the hum would not reveal which or why.

On such a chair, with neighbours coming over for help, there would be a foreseeable ending to the hum. Time would pass, words would be shared, but at a certain point hospitality would be over. We would need to go on in order to reach somewhere. There would be talk about the future.

There is also the possibility that one does not reach somewhere on one's own account, but rather because one is brought there. For example, one could be told that what one is looking for is somewhere else, somewhere to which one needs to be taken: let me bring you there; it is difficult to find. It is not far. I really wanted to go there myself. But then one is brought after all. And being brought creates potential, as it places us in the hands of others. Because of all of this opacity business of the 'other', there can be all kinds of intentions behind such an offer, which – this we must confess – is per se a fundamentally hospitable offer. But who knows? It could also take us to an abyss where we never wanted to be. Another future tense construction might be in place.

Of course, such fears come from reading too many books on youth languages or related topics. As if those whom one meets in the street were always gangsters! Most people are like us, this is clear, kind and ready to like others and to be likeable. This might not always work out (especially the latter), but so what. We decide to come along, perhaps even to sit in a car. And then we are brought.

We can also be brought right from the beginning, for example when traveling to the field where a marginalized language needs to be described. This would entail a lot of being brought, to far places and to the homes of people who lead marginalized lives and utter marginalized words. The interesting thing that happens after we have been brought, is that this entire marginalization business of the 'other' becomes really weird. Because there too, we will sit on a chair, we have to, this is hospitality, and it is not a cat that comes by but a chicken, and the chicken is slaughtered immediately because of all this hospitality business of the 'other' and also because of politeness strategies that need to be made clear to us. So, we sit on the chair (we share one now, this is a rural area), and try to make conversation. Hi, we come for fieldwork. Is the chief at home? We would like his permission to fill in a few questionnaires.

And because the marginalized language is only marginalized elsewhere but not in its home, everybody speaks to us in this language that we still do not understand (we have not yet begun to fill in the questionnaires, right). The only thing that is marginalized here is the part of our respective buttocks that

cannot rest on the chair. Thus, we balance, and smile shyly. Not enough stability to make gestures, we would otherwise fall off the chair, and that could be face-threatening. A hum unfolds. We listen and add things such as hmmm ahhh hmhm to it, *Urlaute*, ancient Vedic noise. The hum continues as we eat the chicken. The marginalized language sounds pleasant.

Of course, we do not understand what the hum is about in detail, but we remain comfortable. The stackable plastic chair is there, the mighty metaphor for language as something shared and as a means of building connections to others. And we know that even though we bumped in, were brought without

FIGURE 2 Chair, Cairo ANNE STORCH

previous notice of our coming, this is somehow fine. Alessandro Duranti, with reference to Heidegger's observation that the other is always already there regardless of what the focus of our intentions may be, suggests that "different cultural traditions may or may not recognize or encode in their language the wide range of our human ways of being-with-others, but we know that they are there. Our intentions, together with our language, are always in a world of others" (Duranti 2015: 232). We always consider the other as a possible presence, and *vice versa*. Otherwise, there could be no self. And without a self, there is no use for menus and different colours and wine and so on. Just imagine: what would *you* like to eat? – I don't know, I don't even have an idea of the self, so I never had a chance to develop a personal taste. I eat what grows between highway lanes. At least you wear a nice shirt. I like the colour. Do I wear a shirt?

In order not to digress, let us look for a restaurant and sit there. A refreshment would be good. Perhaps no wine right now but rather a coffee. Surely there will be chairs too, and hospitality. Isn't the tourism industry also called the hospitality industry? Restaurants and cafés belong there. We select a place and enter and take a seat on the veranda. We are not made to sit down, but we take one – a seat. It does not matter. This is sunny and quiet and one has a nice view of the garden.

The difficulty with the seat right now is that it is not accompanied with a hum. One may have a hum if one brings one's hummers along, but the chair itself does not automatically offer a hum in places where hospitality is an industry. Instead, there is something else, namely an upgrade of language materiality. There are not only chairs (metaphors), but usually also tables and on them menus. Menus are based on the discovery that language can be transformed into written text. The graphemes used for writing have an arbitrary relationship with the sounds they represent, and because this is part of an incredibly complex history, we need to take into account the notion that written text makes these complexities visible; it turns hummers into ladies and gentlemen. On the doors of the lavatories of the cafés and restaurants where we sit and read menus, there are usually also 'Ladies' and 'Gentlemen' signs.

Ladies + Gentlemen
 "Man is a talking clock"
 man, as talking clock.
 Silence against Time.

This short text by William Kentridge (2011: 43) is part of his work on *The Refusal of Time*. It is on the discovery of Einstein and on everybody in motion carrying his or her private time. Time is not a universal rhythm, and being presented

FIGURE 3 Chairs, Diani ANNE STORCH

as universal is, Kentridge suggests, a form of political power over people and nature. This is the refusal of time as something that cannot be refused because it is in everything that moves, it is an act of colonization and a form of power. With this in mind, we take a look at the menu:

The opposite of a hum and of an *Urlaut* – not private time but stereotyped time. We want to say, but hey: time is private with everything that moves. It

FIGURE 4 A menu ANNE STORCH

is a totally complex physical problem, how can you even ...? But the owner is busy elsewhere. Such places are busy places and one cannot use such a table to spend time at, as one would a shared chair. We share one coffee instead and then leave. Time is not simply something one shares. It is power, for example in its potential to be used to construct allochrony. As Johannes Fabian (1983)

has shown, a powerful instrument of the colonial disciplinary production of knowledge on the colonial other was the placing of this other in another time. People elsewhere thus became the Europeans' *Wiedergängers*, representations of their imagined medieval or Neolithic pasts. Here, something similar seems to be at work: just be generous and gift them with some extra time (for 'development' Fabian would have said). This is the super deontic future tense, and since such constructions are neither about shared time, nor about hospitality, but rather about given time and hostile generosity let us move on.

"Time: Is iconic," Michael Taussig (2015: 157) writes in his chapter, 'Iconoclasm Dictionary'. In a reflection on Walter Benjamin's observation that one can distinguish between homogenous and heterogeneous time (Benjamin 1968), Taussig draws our attention to heterogeneous time as the "time of the now" (the other time is the unruptured time of the clock and of progress; it is boring and inhospitable). Heterogeneous time is rupture, allowing us to link the present to the past, which all of a sudden can become part of the now. It jumps into our faces, just like that. This is what happens when we look at menus and forget about food and wine. Taussig suggests that ruptures in time have much more power because they are the cracks in the wall of time-as-power through which a messiah could emanate, through which salvation (or healing) could come, or does not come. This depends on what chair one sits on. Taussig also writes that Benjamin has thought about vacation and certain memorial days as vestiges of these ruptures, vestiges that seem to have been more salient in the past.

Which brings us back to travel. We move on, and as we do this, we stand still. Sit in a waiting room to wait for a flight. Time stands still so that it can later pass quickly. While sitting there, one can hastily write two or three emails. Not waste any time. Waiting rooms, like holiday resorts, parking lots and supermarkets are what Marc Augé (1995) has called non-places. Places, in other words, where one spends but does not share time. Talk is cheap here. The non-place is where one wastes time. Should you ever be undecided as to whether some place is a non-place or a place, just ask yourself: Is this a place where one wastes one's time? If you *quickly* need to do something completely *unrelated* to this very place (for example, send messages to people), then you can be almost 100 per cent sure that you are at a non-place. Any place can turn into a non-place by the way; it is a matter of economy, not of architecture, even though architecture is crucial, as there is a particular way these places are built. They also sound particular, because they have their own music (ambient music). Imagine a waiting room where Dido and Aeneas are played from beginning to lament, in an adequate volume (rather loud).

But they don't. Instead, soft piano. The man next to us asks, "Where are you from?" Conversation, small talk. From Cologne, Germany. "Ah, this is why you are early. Always on time." Turns the page of his magazine and dies.

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