

Imperatives: Meaning and illocutionary force

Cleo Condoravdi • Sven Lauer

Abstract In this paper, we investigate some general constraints that all uses of imperatives are subject to. These allow us to approach the question of which implications are conventional from a new angle. We propose a semantic analysis which captures these constraints. We then compare our analysis to two recent influential proposals, by Kaufmann (2012) and by Portner (2007). Finally, we argue that the fundamental features of a successful account of imperatives are largely independent from the choice of denotation type.

Keywords imperatives · illocutionary force · performative · preference structure · effective preference

C. Condoravdi, Stanford University, cleoc@HIDE.stanford.edu

S. Lauer, Stanford University, sven.lauer@HIDE.stanford.edu

In Christopher Pinon & Laurent Roussarie (eds.), Empirical Issues in Syntax and Semantics 13, 137–148. Paris:

CSSP. <http://www.cssp.cnrs.fr/eiss13/>

© 202X Cleo Condoravdi & Sven Lauer

1 Beyond obligations: The variable force of imperatives

Certain types of utterances, by virtue of being made, bring about obligations on their speakers or addressees. An utterance of a performatively used necessity modal brings about an obligation for the addressee (Kamp 1973). Explicitly performative utterances constituting promises or orders do the same for the speaker and addressee, respectively (Searle 1964; Alston 2000; Truckenbrodt 2009). It would seem that in the same fashion an utterance of an imperative creates an obligation for the addressee, a view espoused by Lewis (1969).

- (1) [Lecturer to class]
The assignment must be in my mailbox by noon.
(performative use)
↪ *The students are obligated to return the assignment in the lecturer's mailbox by noon.*
- (2) I promise you that the report will be in your mailbox by noon.
↪ *Sp is obligated to Addr to have the report in Addr's mailbox by*

noon.

- (3) I order you to have the report in my mailbox by noon.
 $\hookrightarrow$ *Addr is obligated to Sp to have the report in Sp's mailbox by noon.*
- (4) Have the report in my mailbox by noon!
 $\hookrightarrow$ *Addr is obligated to Sp to have the report in Sp's mailbox by noon.*

Indeed, orders are the stereotypical uses of imperatives, and are often taken to be the core use semantically. On such a view, it is tempting to assume that imperatives create obligations for the addressee by virtue of linguistic convention. However, this cannot be right, given that imperatives are also used with a weaker directive force in requests, pleas, warnings, etc. What directive uses have in common is that they are all attempts by the speaker to get the addressee to do something (Searle 1975). Suppose we had an account of how this happens. Then we could construe order uses simply as attempts to get the addressee to do something in contexts in which the speaker happens to have authority over the addressee, where “authority” means that the addressee is obligated to comply with such attempts of the speaker. Looking at things this way, it is only by extra-linguistic circumstance that such directives sometimes create obligations.

A directive utterance of an imperative (I) expresses a certain content related to the addressee's future actions; (II) conveys that the speaker wants the content to become reality; and (III) acts as an inducement for the addressee to bring about the content. The imperative in (5a), intuitively, has the overall effects in (5b).

- (5) a. Leave!
- b. (I) expresses: 'The addressee leaves'; (content)
- (II) conveys that the speaker wants the addressee to leave; (speaker desire)
- (III) acts as an inducement for the addressee to leave. (addressee inducement)

The content is presumably determined by the system of semantic composition,¹ but what about (II) and (III)? Are they both determined by lin-

¹Throughout, we use *content* to refer to the proposition that needs to become true for the imperative to be fulfilled. We leave it open whether the content should be identi-

guistic convention, or is only one of them so determined, with the other arising in context where appropriate? In order to answer this question, we have to consider the full range of uses that imperatives can have in context, since any effect that is present as a matter of linguistic convention must be universally present.

As observed by Schmerling (1982), imperatives have a wide range of uses going beyond even the extended sense of directive uses mentioned above: they can be used to merely express a wish, to permit, concede, offer or invite, and also to give advice. We divide the uses of imperatives into four groups, based on how they line up with respect to speaker desire and addressee inducement and the kinds of issues they raise about the proper analysis of imperatives.

A linguistic reflex of the fact that imperatives come with a variety of “illocutionary forces” and that uttering them brings about the corresponding kind of speech act is that imperative utterances can be subsequently described, depending on the context they are uttered in, with various verbs for acts of communication. In the examples below, utterances of imperatives in (i) can be described after the fact with the corresponding sentences in (ii).

Group I: Directives This group encompasses uses of imperatives that are intended to get the addressee to do something or refrain from doing something. It comprises orders, warnings, requests, as well as certain kinds of advice and pleas. The implications of speaker desire (II) and of intended addressee inducement (III) are both present.

- | | | | | |
|-----|----|------|--|-----------|
| (6) | a. | (i) | Stand at attention! | (command) |
| | | (ii) | He ordered me to stand at attention. | |
| | b. | (i) | Don't touch the hot plate! | (warning) |
| | | (ii) | He warned me not to touch the hot plate. | |
| | c. | (i) | Hand me the salt, please. | (request) |
| | | (ii) | He requested to be passed the salt. | |
| | d. | (i) | Take these pills for a week. | (advice) |

fied with the denotation of the imperative, or be part of this denotation (as in Kaufmann 2012), or be derived from it (as in Portner 2005). We also set aside the question of the status of the understood second person subject.

- (ii) He advised me to take the pills for a week.
- e. (i) Please, lend me the money! (plea)
- (ii) He pleaded with me to lend him the money.

Group II: Wish-type uses Imperatives can express mere speaker wishes, such as well-wishes, ill-wishes/curses, and even addressee-less or “absent” wishes. Though often ignored or set aside, wish uses are real, in the sense that they derive from the meaning of imperatives,² and, as Schmerling (1982) and Kaufmann (2012) argue, analyses of imperatives ought to be responsible for them. Characteristic of these uses is that they do *not* induce the addressee to act. Indeed, they occur precisely in contexts in which it is taken for granted that the addressee (if there is one) cannot do anything about the realization of the content of the imperative, a restriction that a successful analysis of imperatives should explain. Wish-type uses thus suggest that speaker desire (II) is conventional, while addressee inducement (III) is not.

- (7) a. (i) Get well soon! (well-wish)
- (ii) He wished me to get well soon.
- b. (i) Drop dead! (curse)
- (ii) He cursed me to drop dead.
- c. (i) Please, don't rain! (addressee-less wish)
- (ii) He expressed the wish that it not rain.
- d. (i) [On the way to a blind date] Be blond! (absent wish)
- (ii) He wished for his date to be blond.

Group III: Permissions and invitations This group encompasses uses that don't really express that the speaker wants something to happen, but rather communicate, in response to a manifest or potential addressee desire, that the speaker does not mind something happening. Examples are permissions, concessions, offers, and invitations. These uses create particular problems for a uniform account of imperatives, as they seem to be associated with neither implication (II) or (III). To the extent that permissions and offers are enticements to action, this is so because of a potential pre-

²The cross-linguistic variation in the availability of wish uses supports this point. Greek, for instance, disallows wish uses for imperatives.

existing addressee desire.

- (8) a. (i) Okay, go out and play. (permission/concession)
 (ii) He allowed me to go out and play.
- b. (i) Have a cookie(, if you like). (offer)
 (ii) He offered me a cookie.
- c. (i) Come to dinner tonight(, if you like). (invitation)
 (ii) He invited me to go to dinner that night.

Group IV: Disinterested advice A special class of advice uses is one where the speaker has no interest in the fulfillment of the imperative. These uses are different from advice uses where there is a salient goal shared between speaker and addressee, which fall in Group I. Disinterested advice uses suggest that the implication of speaker desire might not be a conventional effect of imperatives. Moreover, it does not seem quite right to say that, on these uses, the addressee is enticed *by the imperative* to realize the content. Rather, any motivation the addressee may have for doing so derives from a prior goal of his.

- (9) [Strangers in the streets of Palo Alto]
 A: Excuse me, how do I get to San Francisco?
 B: Take the train that leaves from over there [points to train station]
 in 10 minutes.

There are also things imperatives can *never* do: they can never be used to assert or claim that their contents are true, nor can they be used to promise that their contents will become true. The imperatives in (10) can never be described with the declaratives with which they are paired.

- (10) a. (i) Be at the airport at noon!
 (ii) He promised me that I will/would be at the airport at noon.
- b. (i) Stay out of trouble!
 (ii) He claimed that I (would/will) stay out of trouble.
- c. (i) Take the Northbound train (to go to San Francisco)!
 (ii) He claimed that I will take the Northbound train (to go to San Francisco).

How can the heterogeneity and systematic exclusion of speech act types associated with imperatives be captured without disjunctively listing illocutionary forces in the semantics of an imperative operator? This is actually an instance of the central question for theories of the form-force mapping, which imperatives present in a particularly pressing manner. A typical way to answer this question from the viewpoint of formal semantics is to determine the denotational meaning of a given clause type, and then seek a uniform context-change effect for objects of this type, after which a pragmatic theory would have to fill in how this context-change effect gives rise to the various uses a sentence can be put to. However, prior to investigating the uses of imperatives, we have no idea what their denotatum or context-change effect is. For this reason, one cannot even begin to study the semantics of imperatives without first understanding the uses they are put to. As we have seen in this section, different use types point in different directions about the conventional status of implications (II) and (III). In what follows, we first investigate some general constraints that all uses of imperatives are subject to. These allow us to approach the question of which implications are conventional from a new angle. We propose a semantic analysis which captures these constraints. We then compare our analysis to two recent influential proposals, by Kaufmann (2012) and by Portner (2007). Finally, we argue that the fundamental features of a successful account of imperatives are largely independent from the choice of denotation type.

2 Four challenges of imperatives

In this section, we outline four non-obvious challenges that any successful theory of imperatives has to meet. Although some of the observations in the discussion below have been made before, here we bolster them, generalize them, and bring out their significance in a new way.

2.1 Contextual inconsistency

Portner (2007: 367) observes:

[I]t's odd to give conflicting imperatives even when they are of different subtypes (unless you have changed your mind, of course), as shown in example [(11)]. This pair of sentences cannot be coherently uttered by a single speaker.

- (11) Stay inside all day! (order)
 #Since you enjoy the nice weather, go out and play a little bit.
 (suggestion)

More generally, we observe that if two imperatives have contextually inconsistent contents, then uttering one after another always constitutes a (partial) retraction or further specification of the first, even if the two imperatives have different forces, and even if there is considerable temporal distance between the two utterances. As seen in the examples below, the second imperative limits the scope of the first: the command in (12a) does not apply to the afternoon, the permission of the first imperative in (13) is not operative for the time just after the time of utterance, and a similar effect is seen in the two imperatives in (14).

- (12) a. Stay inside all day! (command)
 b. Okay, go outside and play in the afternoon!
 (permission/concession)
- (13) Okay, go but don't go quite yet! (permission – request)
- (14) Okay, stay out late but be sure to be back by 1!
 (permission – command)

At first glance, this may appear unsurprising given the “action-inducing” nature of some of the uses of imperatives. After all, what would be the point of commanding or requesting two incompatible things? However, the contents expressed with imperatives are required to be consistent even when the imperative does not constitute an enticement to action. Surprisingly, contradicting imperatives expressing wishes are incoherent, as seen in (15).

- (15) a. Please, rain tomorrow so the picnic gets cancelled!
 b. Please, don't rain tomorrow so I can go hiking!

There is no obvious pragmatic, rationality-related explanation for this, as it is quite possible to desire two incompatible things. The following desiderative assertion is unexceptional and makes perfect sense.

- (16) I want it to rain tomorrow so the picnic gets cancelled but, on the

other hand, I don't want it to rain tomorrow so I can go hiking.

So, why can the two imperatives in (15) not be interpreted as an admission of incompatible desires (as in (16)), but instead sound like the speaker is vacillating between his two desires? The only viable explanation seems to be that it is a general fact about imperatives that different utterances of imperatives (from the same speaker, towards the same addressee) must be *consistent* (and hence contradicting utterances must be interpreted as revisions).

Given the functional heterogeneity associated with imperatives, how do we ensure that they have to be consistent? A satisfactory analysis would explain this without simply stipulating the consistency requirement as a constraint on imperative use.

2.2 Speaker endorsement

Although the enticement to action implied by directive uses cannot be built into the meaning of the imperative, as it does not square with wish uses, the bouletic implication of wish uses is compatible with directive uses. This raises the question whether speaker desire is a basic common core across imperative uses. As observed by Schwager (2006) and Kaufmann (2012), imperatives, in *all* their uses, imply that the speaker endorses the realization of the content in some way. She notes that it is not felicitous to follow an imperative with an assertion that the realization of the content goes against the speaker's desires:

(17) #Call him at home! I don't want you to but he is fine with that.

This effect could be argued to follow from general pragmatic considerations for directive and wish uses, but this is not possible for "disinterested advice" uses, as exemplified by (9). B can use the imperative *even when* it is mutually manifest that he does not share A's goal. So in such cases there is no pragmatic basis to assume that the speaker has a desire for the addressee to take the train. However, even in these cases, the speaker cannot follow his piece of advice with a declaration that following that advice goes against his wishes:

(18) A: How do I get into the building?

- a. B: Officially, you are not allowed to but just go through this door.
- b. B: #I don't want you to but just go through this door.
- c. B: The only way is through this door. But I don't want you to go / you are not allowed to go through this door.

In response to the question in (18), it is perfectly fine to both give the information sought after and assert that the speaker does not want the addressee to act on this information (as is done in (18c)). However, as the infelicity of (18b) illustrates, this is *not* possible when the imperative is used. At the same time, the imperative is fine even with a statement that acting on the information is not permitted (as in (18a)).

What are we to make of these observations? It seems that there *is* a bouletic component conventionally associated with imperatives. For if it were not conventional, we would expect this constraint to be absent in scenarios in which the speaker can be assumed to not share the goals of the addressee, [...]

3 Imperatives as preferential attitudes

In Condoravdi & Lauer (2011) we propose an account of explicit performatives that directly links the illocutionary act performed by such utterances to their meaning, and provide a straightforward answer to the question of how saying so makes it so. Our analysis rests on the assumption that the conventional effect of assertions is to bring about a doxastic commitment on the part of the speaker and takes explicit performative verbs to denote communicative events that bring about speaker commitments to a belief or an intention. We propose that the same constructs are involved in the analysis of imperatives. We take imperatives to commit the speaker to a particular kind of preference,⁵ and to be bounded by a condition that limits his active involvement in making the content true.

Functional heterogeneity is captured through the interaction of the constant meaning of imperatives with varying contextual conditions. Imperatives do not create obligations as a matter of course by linguistic convention, but give rise to obligations only indirectly when the context is right.

⁵In this respect, our analysis similar in spirit to the proposals by Bierwisch (1980), Wilson & Sperber (1988), and Davis (2009; 2011).

3.1 Effective preferences

An agent is generally subject to a large number constraints and attitudes that influence his actions: desires, inclinations, personal moral codes, and obligations, to name but a few. All of these come in different degrees of importance (Condoravdi & Lauer 2011). We use *preference structures*, as defined in (28), to model ranked preferences and assume that, at any given time, an agent has a family of such structures representing the various sources of his preferences.

- (28) A *preference structure* relative to an information state W is a pair $\langle P, \leq \rangle$, where $P \subseteq \wp(W)$ and $\leq$ is a partial order on P . (Condoravdi & Lauer 2011)

An agent may well have inconsistent preferences, such as the simultaneous desires reported in (16). However, if an agent is to *act*, he needs to resolve these conflicts as he cannot act on a preference for two incompatible things. If the agent is to decide on a course of action, he needs to integrate all his preference structures into a global set of preferences subject to a consistency constraint, which the underlying preferences do not necessarily obey. This is captured in the following definition of *consistency* for preference structures.

- (29) A preference structure $\langle P, \leq \rangle$ is *consistent* iff for any $X \subseteq P$, if $\bigcap X = \emptyset$, there are $p, q \in X$ such that $p < q$.⁶

A rational agent A at a moment (= world-time pair) w will have a distinguished, consistent preference structure $\langle P_w(A), \leq_{P_w(A)} \rangle$. We call this A 's *effective preference structure* at w . We write $EP_w(A, p)$ for ' p is a maximal element of A 's effective preference structure at w .' Due to the consistency requirement on effective preference structures, if p and q are believed to be incompatible, $EP_w(A, p)$ and $EP_w(A, q)$ cannot be jointly the case.

Effective preference structures can be linked to action choice by adopting the conceptualization of Belnap (1991: 791):

As for choice, we idealize by postulating that at each moment w_0 ,

⁶This definition of consistency is a generalization of the definition in Condoravdi & Lauer (2011).

there is defined for each agent a a (possibly one-member) *choice set*, that is, a partition of all of the histories passing through w_0 . A member of a choice set is called a *possible choice*, so that a possible choice is a set of histories.

A 's effective preference structure at w_0 , then, is used to determine (together with A 's beliefs) which element of the choice set is chosen. In the general case, a (persistent) effective preference will influence action choices at a (possibly large) set of moments. Suppose my effective preference now is to be at the airport at noon tomorrow. What is required for this to be achieved is a complex ensemble of actions that result in my being at the airport at noon, such as setting the alarm, getting up when it rings, taking the train rather than the bus, or alternatively asking for a ride, etc. All these action choices are required by my maximal effective preference to be at the airport at noon. We say that an agent A 'is an agent for p ' if p is either about a volitional action of A or if the agent has an effective preference for p that determines his action choices so as to bring about p .

3.2 Commitments

We take the basic effects of many kinds of utterances as being constituted by the commitments they engender for their speakers, constraining their future actions, linguistic and non-linguistic. Commitments are always *commitments to act* in a certain way: keeping a commitment means making the right action choices. Action choices are determined by an agent's effective preferences together with his beliefs, and hence, a speaker can only be committed to beliefs and preferences: being committed to having a certain preference means being committed to choose one's action as if one really has this preference, and similarly for belief.

[...]

Acknowledgments We would like to thank Magda Kaufmann, Frank Veltman, Stefan Kaufmann, and Donka Farkas for discussions about many of the issues we are grappling with in this paper. [...]

References

Alston, William P. 2000. *Illocutionary acts and sentence meaning*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

- Belnap, Nuel. 1991. Backwards and forwards in the modal logic of agency. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 51. 777–807.
- Bierwisch, Manfred. 1980. Semantic structure and illocutionary force. In John R. Searle, Ferenc Kiefer & Manfred Bierwisch (eds.), *Speech act theory and pragmatics*, 1–35. Dordrecht: Reidel.
- Condoravdi, Cleo & Sven Lauer. 2011. Performative verbs and performative acts. In Ingo Reich, Eva Horch & Dennis Pauly (eds.), *Sinn and Bedeutung*, vol. 15. 149–164. Saarbrücken: Universaar – Saarland University Press.
- Davis, Christopher. 2009. Decisions, dynamics, and the Japanese particle *yo*. *Journal of Semantics* 26. 329–366.
- Davis, Christopher. 2011. *Constraining interpretation: Sentence final particles in Japanese*: University of Massachusetts at Amherst dissertation.
- Kamp, Hans. 1973. Free choice permission. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 74. 57–74.
- Kaufmann, Magdalena. 2012. *Interpreting imperatives*. Springer.
- Lewis, David. 1969. *Convention: A philosophical study*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Portner, Paul. 2005. The semantics of imperatives within a theory of clause types. In Robert B. Young (ed.), *Semantics and linguistic theory (SALT)*, vol. 14. 235–252. Ithaca, NY: CLC Publications.
- Portner, Paul. 2007. Imperatives and modals. *Natural Language Semantics* 15. 351–383.
- Schmerling, Susan F. 1982. How imperatives are special and how they aren't. In Robinson Schneider, Kevin Tuite & Robert Chametzky (eds.), *Papers from the parasession on nondeclaratives*. 202–218. Chicago Linguistic Society.
- Schwager, Magdalena. 2006. *Interpreting imperatives*. Frankfurt am Main: Johann Wolfgang Goethe-Universität dissertation.
- Searle, John R. 1964. How to derive “ought” from “is”. *Philosophical Review* 73. 43–58.
- Searle, John R. 1975. A taxonomy of illocutionary acts. In Keith Gunderson (ed.), *Language, mind, and knowledge*, 344–369. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Truckenbrodt, Hubert. 2009. Performatives and agreement. Manuscript, ZAS, Berlin.
- Wilson, Deidre & Dan Sperber. 1988. Mood and the analysis of non-declarative sentences. In Jonathan Dancy, Julius Moravcsik & Christopher Taylor (eds.), *Human agency: Language, duty and value*, 77–101. Stanford University Press.