Imperatives and Public Commitments[*]

Cleo Condoravdi

Palo Alto Research Center & Stanford University

Sven Lauer

Department of Linguistics, Stanford University

> "In order to say what a meaning *is*, we may first ask what a meaning *does*,
> and then find something that does that."
> David Lewis (1970)

1 Introduction

- An **assertion** p ($\simeq$ any utterance of an indicative) adds p to the public beliefs of the speaker, thereby publicly committing the speaker to **act as though he believed p.**

- This is surely a minimal requirement for any account of assertions, and we regard it as the **minimal effect** of assertions, in the sense of Zeevat (2003).

- Additional properties of assertions can arguably be explained as pragmatic inferences on the basis of this speaker-commitment (cf. Searle (1975) and Searle (2001) for a recent defense of this view).

  - One of these effects is that it becomes common ground that p.

  - With Gunlogson (2003) and Davis (2009) we assume that an assertion becomes part of the common ground only as a secondary effect, after the hearer has accepted the assertion.

- ➡ Can we find a corresponding 'minimal commitment' for utterances of imperatives?

---

[*]The names of the authors appear in alphabetical order.

> **The 'man in the street' view**
>
> Utterance of an imperative $p!$ imposes a commitment on the addressee to bring about p.

- For this to be turned into a theoretical proposal, the notion of 'bringing about p' needs to be appropriately explicated so as to cover, for instance, the cases in (1).

  (1)   a.   Stay seated!
            b.   Be good!
            c.   Please, don't die!

> **The 'addressee-commitment only' view**
>
> Utterance of an imperative $p!$ commits the addressee to act as though he preferred p.

- The 'act as though' bit is crucial: Imperatives influence public, action-relevant preferences.

- 'Action-relevant' preferences constitute a consistent system of consolidated preferences.

  - An agent may have many conflicting preferences, and his preferences may conflict with other factors that guide his action (e.g. obligations he is under).
  - In order to act, then, an agent has to consolidate his preferences, obligations, etc. into a consistent system of preferences.
  - It is this consolidated system of preferences that imperatives target.

- This view is well-suited for command-uses of imperatives, as in (2), but what about Schmerling's (1982) (3)?

  (2)   [Mother to child] Clean up your room!

  (3)   Please don't rain!

- For uses like (3), it seems more appropriate to assume that imperatives commit **the speaker**, rather than the hearer, to a certain preference:

> **The 'speaker-commitment only' view**
>
> Utterance of an imperative $p!$ commits the speaker to act as though he preferred p.

- A hybrid, the **underspecification view**, would on the face of it seem better able to accommodate both command-uses and wish-uses:

> **The underspecification view**
>
> Utterance of an imperative $p!$ commits an agent a to act as though he preferred p, where a is either the speaker or the hearer.

- Some proponents of these views:

    - Wilson and Sperber (1988) and, arguably, Schwager (2006)[1] can be construed to propose an underspecification view.
    - Davis (2009) and Condoravdi and Lauer (2009) defend the 'speaker-commitment only' view.
    - Portner (2005, 2007) proposes an elaborate set-up which ends up being equivalent to the 'addressee-commitment only' view (in virtue of his "Agent's commitment" principle (Portner 2007, p. 358, no. 17))

- The 'man in the street' and the 'addressee-commitment only' views are rather problematic for any use of an imperative other than command uses.

    (4) a. Please, lend me the money!   PLEA
         b. Okay, go out and play.   PERMISSION/CONCESSION
         c. Have a cookie(, if you like).   INVITATION
         d. Step aside, please   REQUEST
         e. Get well soon!   WELL-WISH
         f. Please, don't have broken another vase!   WISH ABOUT THE PAST

- To defend a version of the 'addressee-commitment only' view, one would have to assume that each of the uses in (4) directly, as a matter of linguistic convention, imposes a commitment to fulfill the imperative on the hearer.

---

[1]Schwager also leaves the nature of the affected attitude underspecified, while the definitions here fix the attitude to be a 'public, action-relevant preference'. It is part of our point here that this more restrictive view is superior.

- We think this is untenable.

- In general, we are wary of accounts that let a speaker, *as a matter of linguistic convention*, modify the commitments of other agents.

- But there is a variant of this view which does not require undue theoretical commitments about the magical power of imperative-uttering speakers:

The 'speaker-preference for a hearer-commitment' view

Utterance of an imperative $p!$ commits the speaker to act as though he had a preference for the hearer committing himself to act as if he preferred p.

- Simplifying somewhat, on this view, an imperative $p!$ is used by a speaker to **request from the addressee that he add p to his public preferences**.

The rest of this talk:

- Examines the three most plausible alternatives: The 'speaker-commitment only' view, the 'speaker-preference for a hearer-commitment' view, and the underspecification view.

- Argues that the former two views could be made to work despite apparent counterexamples, and that the underspecification view, once properly worked out, ends up being more complicated than the other two.

- Shows that the 'speaker-preference for a hearer-commitment' view naturally fits into a general system of the contextual effects of the 'major clause-types': Indicatives, Imperatives and Interrogatives.

- Sketches how the relevant preferences can be represented formally, by means of **preference structures**.

- What is the scope of an adequate analysis of imperatives?

- For now, let us say that an analysis of imperatives should explain at least how the following kinds of uses come about:

(5) a. [Mother to child] Clean up your room!   COMMAND
     b. Step aside, please.   REQUEST
     c. Please, lend me the money!   PLEA
     d. Okay, go out and play.   PERMISSION/CONCESSION
     e. Have a cookie(, if you like).   INVITATION
     f. Get well soon!   WELL-WISH
     g. Drop dead!   ILL-WISH/CURSE
     h. [Doctor to patient] Take these pills for a week.   ADVICE
     i. Please, don't have broken another vase!   WISH
     j. Come on, take the ball from me (if you dare)!   DARE

- We don't take all these uses to be distinct speech-acts, each with their own conventional features.

- Rather, we aim to analyze the utterance of an imperative to have the same kind of effect across all uses.

- The perceived differences in the 'force' of the imperative are, we claim, due to features of the context that work jointly with the effect of the imperative utterance.

- Condoravdi and Lauer (2009) spell out how this can work for the 'speaker-commitment only' view.

- We follow the general strategy of that proposal here.

Epistemic uncertainty constraint

The utterance of an imperative p! is felicitous only if the speaker is **uncertain** about whether p is true.

---

2   Imperatives as expressing speaker preferences

Recall:

> **The 'speaker-commitment only' view**
>
> Utterance of an imperative p! commits the speaker to act as though he preferred p.

- Put differently, a speaker uses an imperative p! to **add p to his public preferences**.

- **absent-wish**-uses (6a), **ill-wishes** (6b) and **well-wishes** (6c) are directly accounted for: They are simply wishes expressed by means of an imperative.

  (6) a. Please, don't rain!
       b. Drop dead!
       c. Get well soon!

- Despite first appearances, this analysis easily accounts for **commands** (7a) and **requests** (7b) (Condoravdi and Lauer 2009):

  (7) a. [Mother to child] Clean up your room.
       b. Pass me the salt, please.

    – Command-uses will be felicitous only if the speaker has the requisite authority.

    – But having this authority just amounts to a socio-cultural circumstance in which the hearer is obliged to defer to the preferences of the speaker.

    – Support: The assertion of a desiderative indicative can have the effect of a command, in exactly the contexts in which a command-imperative is felicitous (Condoravdi and Lauer 2009).

  (8) [Mother to child] I want you to clean up your room (now)!

    – Caveat: In some sense, the imperative in (7a) prompts action more directly than (8)—a point to which we will return below.

- Certain **advice**-uses are easily accounted for:

  (9)   a.   [Doctor to patient] Take these pills for a week.
              b.   Take a left here.

    – These uses involve a **salient shared goal** of speaker and hearer.
    – By assumption, an utterance of an imperative expresses a speaker-preference.
    – By communicating this preference, the speaker may indicate that the content of the imperative serves to attain the shared goal.

- The same goes for permission-uses

  (10)   Daughter: Can I go out and play?
            Mother: Okay, go out and play.

    – Assume a speaker who utters an imperative p! has the authority to permit and prohibit p.
    – Assume further that it is commonly known that the addressee wants p to be true.
    – Then, by committing herself to act as though she preferred p, the speaker, in effect, gives permission to p.

- **Problem 1: Advice**-uses in which it is implausible to assume a salient shared goal.

  (11)   A: Excuse me, how do I get to San Francisco?
            B: Take the North-Bound Caltrain.

  > **The 'cooperation by default' principle**
  >
  > If an agent a does not care whether p becomes true, and knows that another agent would be better off if p (has p as a goal), then a will act as though he weakly preferred p, in a sense to be made precise.

    – If we can assume a principle like this is generally (expected to be) adhered to, these cases do reduce to the advice-cases discussed above.
    – Support: It seems to us that it would constitute a violation of the speaker's commitments if, after uttering (11b), he took steps to ensure that the addressee cannot take the Caltrain.
    – And: It clearly is the case that the speaker minimally must not care about p becoming true:

(12) [Context: Teenager Carl wants to join his older brother Bill and his friends when they go to the movies. Both know that Bill does not want to have Carl tag along.]
Carl: How I can make sure I go with you guys?
Bill: Stay at home until eight.

- **Problem 2: Invitations** and **offers**, as in (13a) and (13b), resp.[2]

(13) a. Have a cookie (if you like).
  b. Sit down (if you like).

  – (13a) does not suggest that the speaker unconditionally wants the hearer to take a cookie.

  – The optional presence of 'if you like' suggests that a plausible way to overcome this limitation is conditionalizing on a relevant hearer-desire.

  – With such a move then (13a) would be roughly paraphrased as 'If you want to have a cookie, I want you to have a cookie.'[3]

  – Note that on the 'speaker-commitment only' account, we can treat 'if you like' as an entirely standard (reduced) conditional, in contrast to Schwager, who has to assume a special semantics for these.

  – Granted, the implicit conditionalization for ('if you like'-less) invitation uses needs to be motivated.

  – But: No account that we know of can handle these kinds of uses.

- **Problem 3:** If an imperative p commits the speaker to act as though he preferred p, we would expect that imperatives can be used to make **promises** and **threats** (more generally, can be used as **commissives**).

(14) a. Get a promotion!
  b. Get fired!

(15) a. I want you to get that promotion.
  b. I want you out of this organization.

  – (14a) cannot be used to assure the hearer that the speaker will do everything in his power to ensure that he gets a promotion.

  – (14b) cannot be used to threaten the addressee that the hearer will do everything in his power to ensure that he gets fired.

---

[2]We differ from Schwager (2006) in that we take it to be obvious that in invitations and offers it is usually not taken for granted that the hearer wants to comply with the imperative.

[3]This account is immune to the objections raised by Hamblin (1987) and Schwager. Their objections against conditionalization rely on the assumption that permissions/invitations are **conditional obligations** or **conditional teleological necessities**.

- Possible way out: Assume that an imperative p! comes with a felicity condition / implication to the effect that the speaker, though preferring p, does not intend to actively bring about p.

- **Problem 4: Dares**, as in (16), remain unanalyzed, and presumably have to be treated as some kind of insincere utterance.

  (16)   Come on, take the ball from me (if you dare)!

3   The underspecification view

Recall:

The underspecification view

Utterance of an imperative p! commits an agent a to act as though he preferred p, where a is either the speaker or the hearer.

- In this form, the underspecification view is not as successful as one might think at first.

- Either it is subject to the same criticism that led us to reject the 'addressee-commitment only' view in the Introduction

  – that is, it imbues the speaker, as a matter of linguistic convention, with the power to change the commitments of the addressee.

- Or, one might avoid this, by saying that the lack of authority (in all uses but the command-uses) ensures that the free parameter is resolved to the addressee only in commands.

- But recall that *commands* actually were unproblematic for the 'speaker-commitment only' view.

- Thus, this view would end up being equivalent to the 'speaker-commitment only' view.

- An alternative would be an underspecification view that is simply the disjunction of the 'speaker-commitment only' view and the 'speaker-preference for a hearer-commitment' view.

4 Imperatives as expressing speaker preferences for hearer preferences

Recall:

> **The 'speaker-preference for a hearer-commitment' view**
>
> Utterance of an imperative p! commits the speaker to act as though he had a preference for the hearer committing himself to act as if he preferred p.

- Somewhat simplifying, in uttering an imperative p! the speaker requests that the hearer add p to his public preferences.

- Accepting an imperative, then, brings about precisely this commitment on the part of the hearer.

- **Orders**, **requests** and **pleas** come out very naturally under this view:

    - By assumption, an imperative p! is a request for the hearer to add p to his public preferences.
    - If the speaker has the requisite authority, the hearer is obligated to comply with this request
      ⤳ Order/Command
    - Otherwise we get a request or plea

- It also explains how imperatives are 'more directly action-inducing' than desiderative assertions (recall (8)), as they involve requesting a commitment to act in a certain way.

    (8)   [Mother to child] I want you to clean up your room (now)!

    (17)   [Mother to child] Clean up your room now!

- **Advice**-uses can again be accounted for (in a sense, more directly than before) if there is a salient shared goal, or if the speaker is disinterested but obeys the 'cooperation by default' principle.

- **Ill-wishes/Curses** are also straightforwardly captured:

    (18)   Drop dead!

    - By assumption, (18) expresses a speaker-desire that the addressee commit himself to dropping dead.

- Of course, the speaker will know that the hearer won't take this commitment on.
- Thus (18) and other ill-wishes would be analogous to the combative assertion of a proposition known to be controversial.

- The problem of **promises** and **threats** does not arise, as the speaker does not commit himself to bring about p.

- **Problem 1:** Permissions and invitations.

(19)   Daughter: Can I go out and play?
       Mother: Okay, go out and play.   =(10)

  - Again, for **invitations**, we would have to assume implicit conditionalization.
  - For **permission**, what we want to derive is that the speaker is at least indifferent as to whether p (in (19): the child goes out and plays) becomes true
  - But that will be a contextual entailment in many circumstances: In any situation in which the speaker can be presumed not to be 'spoiling for a fight', he will request that the hearer commit himself to something only if he is at least indifferent.
  - What though, about contexts in which it is commonly known that the speaker is in the mood to fight?
  - In these contexts, the imperative ends up not as permission, but as a **dare**:

(20)   Come on, take the ball from me (if you dare)!   =(16)

- **Problem 2:** Wishes.
  - Wishes that are uttered in the presence of an addressee arguably can receive a treatment parallel to the permission cases.
  (Except that this time, if the hearer is 'spoiling for a fight', we get ill-wishes).
  - But there is a class of uses where the 'addressee' of the imperative is either an inanimate object or not present during the utterance (Schwager calls these **absent wishes**).

(21)   [After having just bet that the next number that comes up in roulette will be prime.]
       (Please,) be prime!

(22)   [On the way to a blind date]
       (Please,) be blond/rich/good-looking!

(23)   [After having heard a telling noise in the other room]
       (Please,) don't have broken another vase!

(24)   [Walking home without my keys, about my roomate]
        (Please,) be home already!

  – These are obviously very hard to treat on the present analysis: Since these have
    no proper addressees, they cannot be really viewed as a request to the addressee
    to commit himself to something.

  – It may seem tempting to argue these away as marginal cases which involve pre-
    tending the addressee were there/animate.

  – Though, even if this is plausible, who (the hell) is the addressee in (25)?

(25)   (Please,) don't rain!

The 'speaker-commitment only' view

  • Treatment of offers and invitations requires appeal to conditionalization.

  • In order to avoid the promise-problem, we need to stipulate an otherwise unmotivated
    felicity condition.

  • Dares remain unaccounted for.

The 'speaker-preference for a hearer-commitment' view

  • Treatment of offers and invitations also requires appeal to conditionalization.

  • Absent wishes cast doubt on the idea that the preference makes reference to another
    agent.

5   Indicatives, Interrogatives, and Imperatives

- An utterance of an **indicative** p commits the speaker to act as though he **believed** p.

- An utterance of an **imperative** $p!$ expresses a speaker preference for the hearer to commit himself act as though **he preferred** p.

- What, then, is the 'minimal effect' of an utterance of an interrogative? Easy:

- An utterance of an **interrogative** $Q?$ commits the speaker to act as though he preferred that the hearer commit himself to act as though he **believed an answer of** Q.

    – This characterization not only accounts for **information questions**,

    – but also for **exam questions**

    – and **rhetorical questions**, provided we assume that a question is rhetorical iff both agents are already (perhaps implicitly) committed to an answer, or if we assume that a rhetorical question is simply a question whose answer is so obvious that, upon considering it, the hearer, as a rational being is automatically committed to it (cf. command-uses of imperatives!).

- We thus get a nice symmetry, except that one possibility is missing:

	the speaker commits himself …	the speaker requests that the hearer commit himself …
…to a belief	Assertion	Question
…to a preference	?	Imperative

- An utterance of a **commissive** $p_¡$ commits the speaker to act as though he **preferred** p.

- Some philosophers think that it would be surprising if an actual natural language had such a clause type:

    "Commissives are an important category of illocutionary acts, but it would be surprising if there were a special commissive mood of verbs or other such grammatical device realized in the surface structure of the sentences of actual natural languages, because commissives are rather uncommon in ordinary speech."

    Searle (2001)

- But: Korean has a **promissive** (which maybe should be better named **commissive**):

(26) Nayil   cemsiym-ul sa-ma.
      tomorrow lunch-ACC buy-Promissive
      'I promise to buy lunch tomorrow.'

Pak, Portner and Zanuttini (2007, ex. 1)

6 Representing ranked preferences

- Recall how an agent's preferences (and obligations, etc.) are represented in analyses of modality following Kratzer (1981):

  - A function f assigns to each world a set of worlds, the **modal base**.
  - A function g assigns to each world a set of propositions, the **ordering source**
  - The ordering source is used to **rank** the worlds in the modal base, by ranking more highly worlds that make more[4] propositions in the ordering source true.
  - A modal quantifies over the most highly ranked worlds in the modal base.
  - These ordering sources can contain incompatible propositions.
  - Suppose for instance, Sven desires to finish his QP.
  - Sven also desires to lie around all day, doing nothing.
  - Thus, his bouletic ordering source should include the propositions expressed by (27) and (28):

  (27)   Sven finishes his QP.

  (28)   Sven lies around all day, doing nothing.

- A **preference structure** relative to an information state W is a pair $\langle P, \leqslant \rangle$, where $P \subseteq \wp(W)$ an $\leqslant$ is a partial order on P.

  - You may think of a preference structure as a modal ordering source plus and 'importance' ranking.

- A preference structure $\langle P, \leqslant \rangle$ is **consistent** iff for any $p, q \in P$ such that $p \cap q = \varnothing$, either $p < q$ or $q < p$.

  - Consistency requires that if two propositions are incompatible, they must be strictly ranked.

---

[4]Where 'more' is either explicated in terms of cardinality or a subset-relationship.

- Recall that the propositions in P are subsets of an information state (typically, the agent's doxastic state).

- Thus, the consistency requirement would force a ranking of **contextually incompatible**, as well as **logically incompatible** propositions.

- For example, Sven knows that he won't finish his QP if he lies around all day, doing nothing.

- So, if the preference structure representing his desires is to be consistent, the two propositions in (27) and (28) must be strictly ranked.

- An inconsistent desire structure is perfectly fine, until Sven wants to **act** on his desires.

- For how will Sven decide what to do, unless the two incompatible propositions are strictly ranked?

- More generally, the **consistent** preference structures are those that can be used as a guideline for action.

• We assume that the desires, preferences, and obligations of various kinds of an agent A a represented by a set $\mathbb{P}_A$ of preference structures.

  - Not all of these need to be consistent. For example, preference structures representing **desires** often will not be.

  - Other preference structures will be consistent (that is what one would hope, e.g. for the ones that represent **what the law requires**.)

• A (consistent) preference structure induces a 'lexicographic' ordering on a set of worlds.

• A rational agent A will have a distinguished, consistent preference structure $\langle P_A, \leqslant_{P_A} \rangle$.

  - This is intended to be consolidated preference structure that the agent uses to decide upon actions.

• We require that $P_A = \bigcup \mathbb{P}$ and further that if $p, q \in P_A$ such that there is $\langle P, \leqslant_P \rangle \in \mathbb{P}$ and $p <_P q$ and there is no $\langle P', <_{P'} \rangle \in \mathbb{P}$ such that $q \leqslant p$, then $p <_{P_A} q$.

  - These requirements ensure that there are no spurious goals introduced into P_A, and that rankings that are consistent are kept in the preference structure.

• As mentioned in the introduction, we propose that imperatives target this global structure P_A.

• More concretely, taking on a public commitment, on our view amounts to adding a proposition to the set P_A **such that it is a maximal element** in this set.

- Since P_A must be consistent, this predicts the following observation of Portner (2007): If two imperatives are conflicting and uttered one after another, the second imperative must be interpreted as a **correction** of the first, even if these imperatives are put to different uses (command and permission, say):

  (29) a. Stay inside all day!
        b. Okay, go out an play.

- Preference structures also give us the necessary apparatus to be more precise in the formulation of the 'cooperation by default' principle:

- The result of this will be that an agent will only act on these 'foreign' preferences if none of his own preferences interfere.

Acknowledgements

References

Condoravdi, C. and Lauer, S.: 2009, Performing a wish: Desiderative assertions and performativity. Talk presented at California Universities Semantics and Pragmatics (CUSP) 2, UC Santa Cruz, November 2009.

Davis, C.: 2009, Decisions, dynamics, and the Japanese particle *yo*, *Journal of Semantics* **26**(4), 329–366.

Gunlogson, C.: 2003, *True to Form: Rising and Falling Declaratives in English*, Routledge, New York.

Kratzer, A.: 1981, The notional category of modality, *in* H. J. Eikmeyer and H. Rieser (eds), *Words, Worlds, and Contexts. New Approaches in Word Semantics*, de Gruyter, Berlin, pp. 38—74.

Lewis, D.: 1970, General semantics, *Synthese* **22**(1), 18–67.

Pak, M., Portner, P. and Zanuttini, R.: 2007, Agreement and the subjects of jussive clauses in korean, *The Proceedings of NELS 37*, GLSA, Amherst, MA.

Portner, P.: 2005, The semantics of imperatives within a theory of clause types, *in* K. Watanabe and R. B. Young (eds), *Proceedings of SALT 14*, CLC Publications, New York.

Portner, P.: 2007, Imperatives and modals, *Natural Language Semantics* **15**, 351–383.

Schmerling, S.: 1982, How imperatives are special and how they aren't, *Chicago Linguistics Society: Parasession on nondeclaratives* pp. 202–218.

Schwager, M.: 2006, *Interpreting Imperatives*, PhD thesis, Johann Wolfgang Goethe-Universtät, Frankfurt am Main.

Searle, J. R.: 1975, A taxonomy of illocutionary acts, *in* K. Gunderson (ed.), *Language, Mind, and Knowledge*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis.

Searle, J. R.: 2001, Modals and illocutionary forces. Reply to Zaefferer., *Revue Internationale de Philosophie* **216**(277–297).

Wilson, D. and Sperber, D.: 1988, Mood and the analysis of non-declarative sentences, *in* J. Dancy, J.Moravcsik and C. Taylor (eds), *Human agency: Language, duty and value*, Stanford University Press, pp. 77–101.

Zeevat, H.: 2003, The syntax semantics interface of speech act markers, *Proceedings Diabruck, 7th Workshop on the Semantics and the Pragmatics of Dialogue*, Wallerfangen.