

Crosslinguistic variation in a minor sentence type: Melioratives in Dutch and German

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Melioratives are forms with an imperative-like function that are formed with a version of the adverb *better*. Oikonomou (2016) discusses such forms in Greek and English, and analyzes them as composed of an initial *better* plus an imperative. Here, we discuss melioratives in Dutch and German, which are formed differently, and have a range of uses that overlaps with, but is not identical to, the ones described by Oikonomou for English and Greek. We provide a preliminary analysis that captures the pragmatic effects of melioratives in Dutch and German.

Morphosyntax. *German* has two meliorative forms, which consist of a declarative (1) or an imperative (2) root clause, together with *besser* ('better') in an adverb or particle position. We have not found evidence for any semantic/pragmatic difference between these two forms, so we describe and analyze them as having an identical meaning and discourse effect.

- (1) Du gehst besser nach Hause. (2) Geh besser nach Hause.
You go-PRES-2 better to home. Go-IMP better to home.

In *Dutch*, melioratives are restricted to a particular sociolect (the colloquial speech of younger speakers). They are formed with an initial *beter* ('better'), plus an imperative or bare form of the verb (indistinguishable in the sociolect). Melioratives differ from regular imperatives in requiring an overt subject, which follows the verb form in melioratives, as in (3).

- (3) Beter ga je naar huis.
Better go you to home.

Melioratives and comparatives. Oikonomou (2016) reports that Greek melioratives are compatible with a *para* ('than')-clause, and hence gives them a comparative meaning. German and Dutch do not behave uniformly in this respect: German allows *als*-clauses, cf. (4). Dutch disallows *dan*-clauses in melioratives.

- (4) Du gehst besser nach Hause als zur Arbeit.
you go better to home than to work.
(5) Beter ga je naar huis *dan naar werk.
better go you to home than to work.

Uses of melioratives. Crosslinguistically, melioratives can have a subset of the uses available for imperatives. In German, they can be used for ORDERS and WARNINGS (but not for other directives such as REQUESTS or PLEAS), and both for interested advice (*Nehmen Sie besser diese Pillen (als jene)*, 'Better take these pills (rather than those)'), and for disinterested advice, as in (6). They cannot be used to PERMIT, nor to OFFER or INVITE, nor to express mere wishes.

- (6) A: I want to go to Harlem. Should I take the B train?
B: Nein, nehmen Sie besser den A-Zug.
No, take you better the A train.

Dutch melioratives can be used for the same kinds of directives as in German (ORDERS and WARNINGS), but in addition, they can be used to express mere wishes (7). Normally, they

cannot be used for disinterested advice, and, as in German, they cannot be used to PERMIT, to OFFER or to INVITE.

- (7) Beter wordt je snel beter! / Beter regent het niet!
Better become you fast healthy! / Better rain it not!

The *if you know what is good for you* effect. In both languages, melioratives show a peculiar effect. If they are used as commands, they generally imply a threat of dire consequences if the command is not fulfilled. A similar effect occurs in English with an assertion about addressee desires: *You (really) want to clean up your room now*. In Dutch, but not in German, a version of this difficult-to-explicate ‘or else’-implication is present in non-command uses, as well.

Towards an analysis. Analyses of melioratives should account for the similarities and differences between melioratives and imperatives on the one hand, and the similarities and differences between melioratives crosslinguistically. They should also account for the different *at-issue* status of the ‘prejacent’ of *besser/beter*: In German, the prejacent can be at-issue, while in Dutch it appears never to be (data illustrating this suppressed for length). Taking the morpho-syntactic differences in the two languages as a starting point, we propose a *non-uniform* analysis. Like Oikonomou (2016), we do not take *besser/beter* to be identical to the standard comparative form of *good*, but rather assume it is a homonym thereof.

For **German**, we take meliorative sentences to be genuine declaratives and imperatives, respectively, and analyze meliorative *besser* as a modal particle that makes a separate contribution, akin to *ja*, *wohl*, *ruhig*, etc. The effect of a meliorative utterance will hence arise from a combination of the basic effect of the sentence type and the effect of *besser*. While we generally assume a commitment-based analysis of declarative and imperative force à la Condoravdi and Lauer (2012), we deviate from this analysis and follow Faller (ms., *The discourse commitments of illocutionary reportatives*) in assuming that declarative and imperative force consists in the ‘presentation’ of a proposition, which makes the proposition at issue, but leads to a (doxastic or preferential) commitment only as a default which can be blocked by other elements of the sentence. In melioratives, the contribution of *besser* blocks this default, which accounts for the fact that, e.g., (1) makes the proposition expressed by *you go home* at-issue, but does not commit the speaker to its truth.

For the semantic contribution of *besser*, we largely follow Oikonomou (2016)’s analysis of Greek *kalitera*: It expresses a Kratzer-style comparative modality that compares the prejacent to an alternative. We deviate from Oikonomou’s analysis of Greek melioratives in two respects. First, we assume that the modality in question is based on the *addressee’s* rather than the speaker’s preferences. Second, we assume that the ordering source of *besser* is restricted to *self-motivated effective preferences* in the sense of Condoravdi and Lauer (to appear, *Conditional imperatives and endorsement*). We show how the move from speaker preferences (for imperatives) to addressee preferences derives set of uses of German melioratives, and how the restriction to *self-motivated* preferences derives the *if you know what is good for you* effect.

For **Dutch**, we assume that *beter* has grammaticalized into the marker of a (minor) sentence type which no longer has a comparative semantics. We analyze the force of the sentence type with a version of Eckardt (2011)’s proposal for plain imperatives and IoD-pseudo-imperatives. Dutch melioratives hence relate the prejacent *p* to an alternative *q*, which can be implicit or overtly presented by means of an *or else*-clause (rather than a *than*-clause). The utterance conveys (i) that *p* and *q* jointly exhaust the space of (relevant) alternative future continuations of the world of evaluation and (ii) that *p* is preferred by the addressee over *q*. As a consequence, *q* is naturally interpreted as an undesirable consequence of $\neg p$, which we argue accounts for the set of uses of Dutch melioratives, and the *if you know what is good for you* effect.

We conclude the talk by speculating about how our preliminary analysis can be extended to account for the fact that meliorative *besser/beter* apparently co-occurs with modals. Particularly puzzling is the case of Dutch, where meliorative *beter* can co-occur with the possibility modal *kunnen*, leading to a weak-necessity-like interpretation:

- (8) Je kan beter naar huis gaan.
You can better to home go.
'You should go home. / You better go home.'

References

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