

Imperatives and Public Commitments

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If an assertion of p is used to commit the speaker to the belief that p , what type of commitment does an utterance of an imperative $p!$ give rise to? Some accounts of the semantics of imperatives construe them as expressing commitments to act as though a certain agent had a certain preference (Wilson and Sperber 1988, Davis 2009, Portner 2007). Taking this basic assumption as a starting point, we investigate two intertwined questions: (a) Whose commitment to preferences do imperatives talk about? (b) What kind of preferences do imperatives talk about and how can they be represented formally?

In some uses, such as the command in (1), imperatives are arguably about hearer commitments, either directly imposing such a commitment or by expressing a speaker preference for the hearer to take on such a commitment. In other uses, such as the wish in (2), they are more plausibly seen as expressing speaker commitments. This has led Wilson & Sperber and more recently Schwager (2006) to propose that imperatives are *underspecified* with respect to the agent of the attitude expressed.

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| (1) | [Mother to child] Clean up your room! | COMMAND |
| (2) | Get well soon! | WISH |

We outline two defensible ways in which imperatives can be construed, across all their uses, to express an attitude of a single agent. We point out crucial challenges for each approach, and propose ways in which these can be overcome. A criterion for evaluation on theoretical grounds is how well they can be integrated into a general account of clause-typing. We show that one approach is especially well-suited to capturing the similarities (and differences) between imperatives and other sentence types, in particular assertions and interrogatives.

We conclude by presenting an answer to the second question posed above, introducing the notion of a *preference structure*, which serves as a general tool for encoding (ranked) preferences of agents. The notion can be seen as generalizing the familiar notion of an *ordering source* in analyses of modality following Kratzer (1981).

References

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