

**The Semantics of Weak Imperatives Revisited:
Evidence from Free-Choice Item Licensing**

Tamás Halm (halmt@nytud.hu)

Research Institute for Linguistics (Hungarian Academy of Sciences)

The goal of my talk is to provide a new analysis for the semantics and pragmatics of weak (permission / acquiescence) imperatives. Based on observations concerning the licensing of free-choice items in imperatives and other evidence, I will propose a significant modification to the To-Do-List (or minimal semantics – strong pragmatics) theory of imperatives (Portner 2007, 2012, von Stechow and Iatridou 2017). I will argue that in weak imperatives, the utterance of the imperative is directed not at the To-Do-List of the addressee, but at a separate component of the common ground which contains the set of possible courses of action contemplated by the addressee (which I will term the List of Actions Under Consideration by the addressee).

The first piece of evidence comes from the licensing of free-choice items (such as *cualquier* in Spanish, *n'importe quel* in French or *opjo-* in Greek). Our starting point is the empirical observation that FCIs are licensed in weak imperatives but not in strong imperatives (the examples are from Hungarian):

- (1) a. #*Azt parancsolom, hogy vedd fel bármelyik ruhát.*
it-ACC command-1SG that take-IMP-2SG PRT any dress-ACC
'I command you to take any dress.'
- b. #*Most azonnal vedd fel bármelyik ruhát.*
now at once take-IMP-2SG PRT any dress-ACC
'Take any dress right now.'
- c. ?*Vedd fel bármelyik ruhát.*¹
take-IMP-2SG PRT any dress-ACC
'Take any dress.'
- d. *Nyugodtan vedd fel bármelyik ruhát.*
nyugodtan² take-IMP -2SG PRT any dress-ACC
'Just take any dress.' (permission/acquiescence reading)
- e. *Meg engedem, hogy fel vedd bármelyik ruhát.*
PRT allow-1SG that PRT take-SUBJ-2SG any dress-ACC
'I allow you take any dress.'

I will show that current theories of the semantics and pragmatics of imperatives cannot properly accommodate this fact: strong semantics approaches appear to predict that FCIs should be licensed in strong and weak imperatives alike, contrary to fact; whereas TDL-style approaches would predict that imperatives (whether strong or weak) containing FCIs should be uninterpretable and thus unacceptable, which is again not the case.

I will argue, following the dependent indefinite analysis (Giannakidou 2001), that FCIs need a (non-singleton and non-empty) set of <accessible possible world, individual> pairs in order to be licensed. Furthermore, I will point out that weak imperatives in general (whether containing an FCI or not) are only felicitous if the fact that the action described in their prejacent is already being

-
- 1 In the absence of any cues (a pragmatic marker, an adverb or the context), both the strong imperative and the permission imperative reading is available. The sentence is felicitous with the weak imperative (permission) reading but infelicitous with the strong imperative (order) reading.
 - 2 *nyugodtan* literally translates as 'calmly, peacefully, in a relaxed fashion', but in imperatives it has a grammaticalized function to indicate permission or acquiescence, cf. the very similar use of *ruhig* 'calmly, peacefully' in German (von Stechow-Iatridou 2017, 10-11)

contemplated by the addressee is part of the common ground. Based on this, I will argue that in contrast to strong imperatives which affect the TDL of the addressee, weak imperatives affect a separate component of the common ground, the so-called List of Actions Under Consideration by the addressee, and their effect is the lifting of any prohibition that the addressee may have ascribed to the speaker with regard to the action described in the prejacent.

This List of Actions Under Consideration naturally contains alternatives, which satisfies the need of FCIs for a set of <possible world, individual> pairs: this explains why FCIs are licensed in weak imperatives but not in strong ones. The observation that strong imperatives are felicitous out of the blue whereas weak imperatives need the prejacent to be already part of the context also falls out freely from this model.

Furthermore, this modification also helps us to avoid the unwelcome situation of weak imperatives creating obligations (something which has long been recognized as a very problematic prediction of the TDL approach): I will argue that whereas strong imperatives indeed add properties-to-be-made-true to the TDL of the addressee and thus create obligations, weak imperatives do not directly affect the TDL and do not create any obligations.

I will also look at the issue of speaker endorsement. A well-known concept in declaratives and interrogatives, it has been introduced as a parameter of the semantics of imperatives by von Stechow and Iatridou (2017) in order to account for the weak vs strong imperative distinction. I will argue that the real difference between strong and weak imperatives lies in what kind of addressee-oriented list they manipulate: whether the To-Do-List or the List of Actions Under Consideration. The degree of speaker endorsement is orthogonal to the strong vs. weak semantics distinction; it does, however, play a role in the segmentation of the TDL (into order, invitation, advice etc. imperatives) and of the LAUC (into permission, acquiescence, indifference etc. imperatives).

Finally, I will revisit Poletto and Zanuttini's (2003) analysis of imperative particles in Rhaetoromance. Their analysis was that these particles encode the 'order' (given from the point of view of speaker) vs. 'advice and permission' (given from the point of view of addressee) distinction. I will argue that based on the data presented in their paper (such as the fact that 'advice and permission' particles are admissible in the first conjunct of imperative and declarative constructions whereas 'order' particles are not), one can conclude that what these particles encode is in fact the strong vs. weak imperative distinction.

The fact that the strong vs. weak imperative distinction is obligatorily encoded as a clear binary distinction on the overt morphosyntactic level in some languages supports a 'binary' model (such as the one proposed here, where strong imperatives affect the TDL whereas weak imperatives affect the LAUC) as opposed to a 'graded' model (such as von Stechow and Iatridou's 2017 proposal where all imperatives affect the TDL and the strong vs. weak distinction is a function of speaker endorsement). A binary model predicts that an imperative is either strong or it is weak, with no shades in between (since it either affects the TDL or the LAUC). A graded model predicts that the strong vs. weak imperative distinction is to be conceived of as a spectrum: since speaker endorsement can freely range from the very weak to the very strong, one would expect that besides the prototypically strong and weak imperatives, there should be imperatives of 'medium' strength as well (in the case of 'medium' speaker endorsement). The evidence from Rhaetoromance thus supports a binary model over a graded model.

References:

- von Stechow, Kai, and Sabine Iatridou. 2017. A modest proposal for the meaning of imperatives. In Arregui, Ana et al. (eds.), *Modality Across Syntactic Categories*, 288-319. New York: OUP.
- Giannakidou, Anastasia. 2001. The meaning of free choice. *Linguistics and Philosophy* 24, 659-735.
- Poletto, Cecilia and Raffaella Zanuttini. 2003. Making imperatives: evidence from central Rhaetoromance. In Tortora, Christina (ed.) *The syntax of Italian dialects*, 175-206. Oxford University Press.
- Portner, Paul. 2007. Imperatives and modals. *Natural Language Semantics* 15(4). 351-383.
- Portner, Paul. 2010. Permission and choice. In Grewendorf, Günther and Thomas Ede Zimmermann (eds.): *Discourse and grammar: From sentence types to lexical categories*, 43-68. De Gruyter.