Rethinking Imperatives as a Clause Type

According to Sadock & Zwicky (1985), Portner (2004, 2011), and others, morphologically imperative verbs (MIVs) and ‘suppletive imperatives’ (i.e. performative uses of subjunctives, infinitives, etc.) have no status in the grammar besides indicating the ‘imperative’ clause type, an obligatorily root clause-type. In this paper, I argue that MIVs formally represent a meaning independent of clause type, specifically weak (not strong) necessity (pace Kaufmann 2012). However, due to a syntactic constraint, MIVs in many languages (e.g. English) are obligatorily associated with performative, main-clause meaning (cp Zanuttini 2008, Han 2000), which I formalize in terms of Kaufmann’s (2012) imperative presuppositions. I also argue that suppletive imperatives share the presuppositional meaning of MIVs in performative contexts, thought MIVs and suppletives can vary in terms of modal specification. This paper therefore reformulates the relevant main-clause meaning associated with MIVs and suppletives, while offering a new account of MIV semantics.

Under the clause-type hypothesis (CTH), sentences with MIVs are a proper subset of imperative sentences. Two data sets motivate the CTH. First, there is purported semantic identity (Portner 2011) between MIVs and suppletive imperatives, which predicts equivalence between (1a) and (1b). While both forms can be used as a command, they are not equivalent. According to von Fintel & Iatridou (2010), Catalan MIVs (1a) can support permission readings, whereas infinitives (1b) cannot, e.g. in response to the question Puc anar a dormir? ‘Can I go to sleep?’

(1) a. Si, vés-hi! to sleep.imp-cl
Yes, go-cl.
b. # A dormir! to sleep.inf
Go to sleep. (# as permission)

In fact, according to von Fintel & Iatridou (2010), a permission reading is always possible for MIVs across languages, but the availability of a permission reading for suppletive forms varies by specific verb form and language. (von Fintel & Iatridou 2010 also suggest that permission readings are a necessary condition for a verb form to license a subset of ‘Imperative and Declarative’ constructions.)

The second data set motivating the CTH is the purported inability of MIVs to appear in embedded clauses of declarative or interrogative sentences (reports of embedded MIVs in e.g. Crnić & Trinh 2008 and Zanuttini et al. 2012 involve MIVs embedded within ‘imperative’ sentences). However, Author (to appear) shows that MIVs in languages with rich person imperative morphology (e.g. Ancient Greek, Slovene, Bhojpuri) can occur in embedded clauses of declarative (2a) and interrogative (2b) sentences.

(2) a. To je avto katerega prodaj čimprej.
this is car which sell.imp.2ndsg as-soon-as-possible
This is a car which [you must] sell as soon as possible. (Slovene, based on Rus 2005)
b. Tu John-se milai-hai je ihaan tini baje aaye?
you John-the met who here three o’clock come.imp.3rdsg
Have you met John who [must] come here at 3 o’clock? (Bhojpuri, author notes)

In sum, (1-2) show that the CTH, which treats clauses with MIVs as a subset of the ‘imperative’ main-clause type, makes wrong predictions regarding the interpretation and distribution of MIVs.

These data, and especially (2), motivate a new analysis of (morphological) imperative semantics such that MIVs have a semantic value separate from main clause, performative force. In order to capture permissions and other ‘weak’ imperative interpretations (e.g. absent wishes, advice, etc.), I propose a bipartite analysis for MIVs such that MIVs are directly associated with a weak necessity modal represented clause internally (within TP or within a modal projection above TP), while performative force is associated with MIVs (obligatorily in some languages) at the CP level.

I adopt Silk’s (2013) formalization (3) of weak necessity for the modal analysis of MIVs: (3) relies on ‘premise sets’ $P$, such that $P_w$ represents “all maximally consistent subsets of $F_w \cup G_w$ that
include $F_w$ as a subset” within Kratzerian semantics (Silk 2013). (3) allows a direct comparison between weak and strong necessity, such that weak necessity is understood as contingent necessity.

(3) ‘Ought $\phi$’ is true at $w$ iff ‘Must $\phi$’ is true at all worlds $w' \in s(w, \chi)$ iff $\forall w' \in s(w, \chi): \cap P_{w'} \subseteq [[\phi]]$ (Silk 2013)

(4) shows that MIVs do indeed signal contingent necessity. While the MIV (4a) allows an alternative possibility, must (4b) is more exclusive. This analysis of MIVs in terms of weak necessity also naturally captures permissions and other ‘weak’ readings of MIVs, e.g. (5) and others discussed by von Fintel & Iatridou (2010) and Condoravdi & Lauer (2012). However, weak necessity can approach strong necessity under the right contextual contingencies, deriving command interpretations of MIVs.

(4) a. (to get to Harlem) Take the A-train, but there’s also a bus if you want.
   b. (to get to Harlem) #You must take the A-train, but there’s also a bus if you want.

(5) spoken by fan to an in-flight baseball Be a home run!

Associating imperative morphology with only a weak necessity modal also characterizes the semantics of MIVs without referring to addressee-orientation or sentence-type; this is desirable because languages with CP-embedding (2) and 1st and/or 3rd person MIVs are attested. That MIVs in e.g. English are obligatorily performative follows from the syntactic proposal in Author (to appear), according to which a ‘directive’ (= performative) head must select imperative $T^0$ in languages with only 2nd person imperatives. In this paper, I specify the semantics of this ‘directive’ head in terms of presuppositions developed by Kaufmann (2012), which indicate tense, speaker authority, epistemic uncertainty, and ordering source restrictions. Under this account, (6) represents all sentences with MIVs in English-type languages and (only) main-clause, performative MIVs in languages with rich imperative person paradigms; in other words, MIVs in English are effectively performative weak necessity modals, given the combination of weak necessity modality with the relevant presuppositions.

This proposal allows a formal reanalysis of data formerly understood as being accounted for by the ‘imperative’ clause-type, e.g. (1); the ‘imperative clause type’ is defined by left-peripheral properties as specified in (6), but with an unspecified modal, e.g. possibly strong necessity for infinitival (1b). This paper therefore recasts the relevant sentence-level data while providing a new semantic analysis of MIVs. In addition, this proposal for MIV semantics appeals only to independently motivated semantic approaches to modals and presuppositions.