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This is a contribution from *Imperative Turns at Talk. The design of directives in action.*

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## Epilogue

### Imperatives – The language of immediate action

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Part of the fascination of the imperative is due to the fact that it allows us a glimpse into the very early stages of the evolution of language. Particularly the 2nd person singular imperative, the most frequent one across the languages of the world, and often expressed by the mere stem of a verb, i.e., by reduction to the morphological minimum, seems to be among the most archaic parts of grammar. As Aikhenvald (2010: 339) shows in her comprehensive typological study, it is “often inherited, unchanged, from the protolanguage”. Imperatives regularly serve as the source of grammaticization processes (take [sic] the engl. conjunction *let alone*), while the (2nd person singular) imperative itself cannot be shown to be the result of such grammaticization. This makes it different from most other grammatical categories (from tense forms to inflection). Imperatives appear to be grammatically irreducible.

There is, then, something primordial about this grammatical category. And of course, the special status of the imperative invites speculation about its *raison d'être*. What is it that imperatives do that makes them so central to language? What is so essential for human interaction that it became grammatical form so early in the evolution of language? The contributions in this volume give an answer by investigating imperatives for the first time in their “natural habitat” of face-to-face interaction, embedded into bodily forms of action, through close multimodal analysis. The speakers documented in this volume who use the imperative not only speak, they also move and handle things, often in joint action.

A comparison to demonstratives – another irreducible grammatical category (cf. Diessel 1999, 2006) – is instructive. When investigated in their “natural habitat”, demonstratives can be shown to have a clear function: they co-orient participants' attention to an object, a basic requirement of human cooperation (Tomasello 2008). As the development of pointing and deixis in young children shows, the earliest forms of pointing originate from the child's simple and egotistic desire to get something. But soon, and just before they begin to speak, children learn to point in order

to draw someone's attention to an aspect of the situation which they think should be of relevance to both co-participants, thereby laying the ground for cooperative engagement. Bates, Camaioni and Volterra (1975) call pointing in the first phase "proto-imperative", while they call the second form "proto-declarative".

Against this background the grammatical imperative might seem to be nothing but the verbal alternative to proto-imperative pointing. However, if imperatives only served individuals' desire to control others for their own benefit, their early emergence in language evolution would not support Tomasello's cooperative and even altruistic view of the central functions of human language. And indeed, the reputation of the imperative has not been the best over the past centuries. Once social power and dominance started to become concealed and to be exerted in disguise only, telling someone to do something increasingly ceased to be considered acceptable linguistic behavior; alternative ways of formulating directives developed, avoiding the direct, "bald" and therefore impolite (Brown and Levinson 1978) social implications of the imperative.

But is the imperative really the grammatical format in which we command, as its name suggests (*imperare* in Latin means 'to command', but also 'to reign'), is it the linguistic correlate of undisguised power and dominance? The chapters in this book provide a different picture. First of all, they demonstrate that the imperative continues to be used widely in many languages and in many contexts. Its retreat is restricted to certain, particularly written genres. But in addition, they also suggest that its primary function is not that of verbal coercion, i.e., of getting someone to do something that may not be in his or her interest, while it benefits the speaker. Even the wide-spread "not-quite-command" functions of the imperative, which Aikhenvald finds in the languages of the world and among which she counts "inciting, advising, requesting, suggesting, permissive forms" (2010: 223), do not really seem to capture the central function of the imperative according to the studies of this volume.

What emerges from an analysis of its complex and numerous "empractical" (Bühler 1934) embeddings is a rather different "core meaning". Two central aspects can be identified: first, it is part of some joint (and often mutually beneficial) action, and second, it is the language of action in the "here" and "now" of the speech situation (cf. Vine 2004). As Zinken and Deppermann, Mondada, Rossi (also cf. Rossi 2012), Rauniomaa, Stevanovic, Raevaara as well as Lindström et al. show in this volume, imperatives are used regularly to coordinate ongoing activities, very often in the context of a trajectory of joint non-verbal action which has already been agreed upon by participants, and in which the imperative marks a next step in this trajectory. Typical oral genres of face-to-face interaction in which imperatives occur in this function are those of instruction and practicing (such as driving lessons or training for sport activities or teaching somebody to play an instrument or to cook),

and joint manual activities (such as preparing or having dinner, painting a room, or playing board games), all of which are covered in this volume.

Often the imperative simply indicates the right point in time at which an action must or should be done, or at which the recipient is given the permission to carry out such action. Mondada (this volume) additionally shows that the temporal synchronization between the flow of some non-verbal action and the utterance time of the imperative turn can be astonishingly precise. Negated imperatives may be used as well, by which the speaker urges the addressee not to do a foreseeable action, or stop an action s/he is already engaged in; again, this stopping or not doing is something that is due at this particular moment in time, and it often needs to be done in order to avoid negative consequences not only for the speaker, but particularly for the addressee.

Several authors in this volume note that prototypical imperatives of this *hic-et-nunc* kind tend to occur in turns that consist of little more than just this imperative. There seems to be an iconic relationship between the shortness of the imperative turn and the immediacy of action required. Imperatives without a (full) nominal complement (such as *push! wait! stop!*) might be the most extreme form. The tendency to shorten the linguistic material to the minimum is also compatible with the above-mentioned observation that imperative forms in many languages consist of the mere verbal stem, without tense or person marking. There seems to be a language of immediate action that is characterized by reduction both on the grammatical (word) and interactional (turn) level. This language of immediate action would include, in addition to the imperative, “elliptical” utterances consisting of a verbal argument only (*hammer!*), in some languages stand-alone infinitives (German *abbremsen!* ‘break’), stand-alone adverbs (*now!*), etc. But contrary to these latter forms, imperatives are deictic grammatical forms, “appealing” (as Bühler says) qua form to the addressee of the utterance. The tendency to add a particle to the imperative in not-so-urgent cases, which is observed in many languages (as pointed out in this volume by Zinken/Deppermann for Polish *weź* and German *mal*, and by Stevanovic for the Finnish clitic particles – *pA/-s/pAs*), might count as an iconically manifest, first mitigation of this iconic expression of immediacy through shortness/reduction.

If the core function of the imperative is linked to an immediately relevant and mutually beneficial action it is easily explained that although there are some (written) genres from which the imperative has disappeared (such as cooking recipes), imperatives abound in others today, such as in commercials and advertisements (cf., e.g., Janoschka 2004: 135–138); also, some of the most successful brand slogans of the last decades employ imperatives (such as Coca Cola’s *Taste the feeling*, or Nike’s *Just do it*). If one looks at the semantics of these imperatives, terms such as “command” or “coercion” (or even “request”) do not seem to be right. Rather,

the linguistic utterances containing these imperatives express some form of advice, suggestion, or even encouragement. What they want the addressee to do is not to the advantage of the speaker, but rather to the (proclaimed) benefit of the addressee; they are “benefactives” rather than “coercives”, which is particularly obvious in slogans with non-agentive verbs such as *Find the nearest McDonald’s* (presupposing the act of searching and focusing on its successful outcome). In addition, the pervasiveness of imperatives in commercials also goes well with its core meaning of immediacy, which brings in a dimension of urgency in the decision of the recipient to buy the product.

If we assume that imperatives are prototypically used for prompting (or stopping/preventing) an immediate action in a tight and well-defined temporal framework, which at the same time is not to the benefit of the speaker (alone), but either to that of the recipient or to both participants, we are also in a position to explain less prototypical cases in which one or the other of these two core features is relinquished.

On the one hand, the addressee’s action may be relevant “here and now”, but in the interest of the speaker more than in that of the recipient – these imperative usages can be called requests with some justification. As Rossi (in this volume) points out, they are often at least slightly mitigated (for instance, with a politeness marker such as *please*), although language communities seem to differ in this respect (cf. Bolden, this volume, on Russian conversation, which apparently can do without such mitigation). Also, of course, this mitigation depends on the situation and the relationship between the participants. (Commands to dogs are usually not mitigated.) For instance, if someone is just about to leave the room to fetch something, this may be an occasion to ask this person to fetch something for the speaker as well – a request that can be fulfilled only at this particular moment in time. It seems that requests of this kind must not ask too much from the recipient. Usually, they are about small favors, for which compliance can be taken for granted (“low cost imperatives”, as Bolden calls them).

The immediacy component of the imperative is the starting point of many processes of grammaticization. Above all, the numerous cases in which imperatives of verbs of perception (*look!*, *listen!*), of saying (German *sag (mal)* – lit. ‘say!’), or of movement (Fr. *allez!* – lit. ‘go!’<sup>1</sup> – , German *komm!*, *geh!* – ‘come!’; ‘go!’) have become routinized as discourse markers are based on the immediacy part of the core function of imperatives. The same is true for text-organising imperatives such as *take X*, *see above*, *consider Y*, etc. In many cases, grammaticization processes are still incomplete; an example is the use of *vergiss es/forget it* – in German/English,

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1. Exceptionally, this discourse marker derives from the VOS-form (=2nd ps. plural form) of the imperative.

which is developing into a discourse marker for breaking off an action (sequence) in a one-sided manner, but still retains some of its literal meaning in the sense of winding back the situation to a previous state (with the implication ‘do not spend any thought on this issue from now on’). In the same vein, cf. *suit yourself! do as you please!* (German *mach was du willst!*).

All in all, imperatives requiring immediate action are by far the most frequent, certainly in my data of informal face-to-face interaction. But there are also uses of the imperative in which immediacy of action is not required (the action can take place in the remote future), while the beneficial character of the suggested or recommended action for the addressee is foregrounded. In this case, the second part of the core meaning of the imperative is retained. Often, these uses are heard as recommendations. Also, imperatives can be used to formulate invitations, suggestions, and proposals (as in various examples in Etelämäki and Couper-Kuhlen’s contribution in this volume). It is this type of imperative which is found in moral imperatives known from antiquity, cf. *ora et labora* or *carpe diem*. They also are the basis of routinized farewell formulae and wishes such as *go in peace, take care, come back safely, have a good trip*, German *mach’s gut* (lit. ‘do it well’), etc.

Among uses of the imperative that foreground the benefactive part of the core meaning while suspending immediacy, we may also count responsive imperatives (treated by Sorjonen as well as by Keevallik in this volume); in a special format of these responsive imperatives, the equivalent of the verb ‘to do’ is used (see extr. (1) below). Of course the meaning of these response imperatives depends on the first action. In one large group, these are statements by the first speaker that s/he is considering some future action; the responsive utterance including the imperative then supports the first speaker’s intention and encourages the speaker go ahead with that action, implying that it will be to the speaker’s benefit. In the second case (dealt with by Keevallik in this volume), the first action is an offer, and the imperative usually a (partial) declination of the offer. Keevallik argues that in this case, participants’ relative “deontic rights” are renegotiated. In her example, the responding daughter, by (partially) refusing the mother’s offer, insists on her own rights. While this may be true in this particular case, on a more general level it appears that refusing an offer is a form of politeness that is used to (symbolically) downplay the obligation put on the co-participant. In this sense, it benefits (or at least pretends to benefit) the recipient (i.e., the offering party).

But of course, responsive imperatives are versatile conversational objects. In the following example, the responsive imperative is of the first kind, i.e., it follows a first speaker’s announcement of his intention or willingness to do something (here: live without a car in order to help the environment). At first sight, it seems that Joana

and Manuela, who both respond with an imperative turn, want to encourage the first speaker to do what he said he would consider doing:<sup>2</sup>

(1) [from: Big Brother, German version, first season, 2000; group discussion about how to improve the environment]

- 01 Man: worauf würdest du  
what AUX\2.COND.SG you  
what would you
- 02 der umwelt zuliebe verZICHten.  
ART.DEF.SG.F.DAT environment sake\_of renounce-INF  
give up for the sake of the environment.
- 03 Jrg: also ICH würde  
PRT 1SG AUX\2.COND.SG  
well I would
- 04 der umwelt zuliebe darauf verZichten;  
ART.DEF.SG.F.DAT environment sake\_of that renounce-INF  
give up for the sake of the environment;
- 05 (--)<sup>o</sup>h weil ich (-)  
because 1SG  
because I
- 06 in=ner STADT wohne-  
in=ART.INDF.SG.F.DAT city live  
live in a city-
- 07 wo\_n ENG (-) gestricktes;  
where=ART.INDF.SG.NOM.N tightly knit-PPL-SG.NOM.N  
where there is a tightly woven;
- 08 (1.0) STRAßenbahnnetz und ESbahnnetz ist- (-)  
tram\_net and train\_net be-3.SG.PRS  
tram and train network-
- 09 ich würde weniger AUTofahren. (--)  
1SG AUX\1.COND.SG less car\_drive-INF  
I would use the car less.
- 10→Joa: <<chewing>dann MACH das (dann) [auch.>]  
then do[2.SG.IMP] that then also  
then also do it (then).
- 11 Man: [(ja). ]  
(yes)
- 12→ dann MACH das doch.=  
then do[2.SG.IMP] that PRT  
then just do it.
- 13 Jrg: =weil ich das nicht brauch;  
because 1SG that.SG.ACC not need[1SG.PRS]  
because I don't need it;

2. The transcription conventions in this chapter follow the GAT 2 conventions, see <http://www.gespraechsforschung-ozs.de/heft2011/px-gat2-englisch.pdf>

- 14 ja.  
yes.
- 15 MACH ich ja schon;  
Do[1SG.PRS] 1SG PRT already  
I'm doing it already;
- 16 Adr ICH MACH das. (.)  
1SG do[1SG.PRS] that.SG.ACC  
I do it.

The Big Brother inmates have been given the topic “what can we do for the environment” for group discussion. Manuela reads out this topic in lines 1–2. Jürgen volunteers and answers first, enacting the “good guy”; his verbatim repetition of the question frames the following answer like that of a smug schoolboy endearing himself to the teacher. The two girls tell Jürgen to do what he pledges to do, but instead of an encouragement, their responses sound like reproaches – as if it is shameful that he is still driving a car at all, perhaps even insinuating hypocrisy. Jürgen’s answer in 15 (‘I’m doing it already’) consequently is a defense against these reproaches. (Of course, his original answer in lines 3–9 is invalidated through this remark: if he already uses the car less, the promise to do so is not an adequate answer to a question about what sacrifices someone would be prepared to make – additionally, and at the moment of speaking still hypothetically – for the environment.) For Jürgen, the development of the sequence becomes unexpectedly antagonistic; he was not prepared to receive such a negative comment to his perhaps well-intended answer (as can be seen from the delayed uptake in line 15, skipping line 13).

Just like in Keevallik’s cases, the imperatives in this case are about deontic rights. While Jürgen suggests the possibility of doing something as if it was a major concession for the sake of the environment, Joana and Manuela insist that this should have been done anyway and won’t count much. However, it would seem that even in such a case, the beneficial meaning of the imperative is not suspended. Joana and Manuela do not contest the fact that driving less would be to the (moral) benefit of the other (in the sense of quieting his conscience); they just reset the scale and turn a big thing into a small thing that should have been done anyway much earlier.

So far I have argued (in line with the papers in this volume) that imperatives are mostly linked to the here-and-now of the speech situation and/or that often, the speaker who uses them suggests that the addressee do something which is, or is presented as being, in his/her interest. There are, however, some uses of imperatives for which neither of these features hold.

In one case, a particular constructional format is at stake, i.e., the imperative is part of an (emerging) conditional construction. Constructions such as *do that again and you’ll regret it*, or *feel slightly off-color and he thinks you are dying* are frequent and found in various languages, as Aikhenvald observes (examples from





not know the simple rules of life, such as the one he proclaims in lines 1–2: Life is a continuous give and take. Andrea’s response, beginning in overlap with Jürgen’s turn and in a loud voice indicative of her anger, has two parts, which formulate two temporally ordered actions in a hypothetical manner: first you give me something (lines 4–5), then I’ll give you something (line 7). By telling Jürgen (in the grammatical format of the imperative) to do something ‘first’, before she will give him something, she transforms the moral principle of a “continuous give and take” into a temporally – and hence (*post hoc ergo propter hoc*) also conditionally – formatted sequence. The turn is produced incrementally: The TCU in lines 4–5 ends with falling pitch and is presented as complete. Andrea then adds a reinforcing *ja* ‘right’, again with falling intonation. It is only then that the apodosis of the conditional construction is produced explicitly in line 7. This incremental production already suggests that no fully grammaticized two-part constructional format is available. Also, contrary to the fully grammaticized version of the construction in examples such as *do that again and you’ll regret it*, this case of a conditional construction can still be interpreted literally: the action in the scope of the imperative could be done as requested, i.e., it is not completely hypothetical, while in the fully grammaticized case the interpretation is hypothetical and the speaker warns the recipient *not* to do it. Hence, Jürgen could respond to lines 4–5 by saying something like ‘ok, what do you want me to do?’. More likely, however, lines 4–5 will be heard as a reproach for not having done enough for Andrea in the past – and hence a justification for not doing him the favor of cooking a vanilla cream now. This is in fact the interpretation Jürgen chooses, as is evident from his response in lines 8–10, where he defends himself against this reproach.

Even less grammaticized, but also open to a conditional reading is the following example, in which instead of the conjunction ‘and’, the originally temporal adverbial *dann* is used, which can also introduce the apodosis of a conditional construction in German. The extract is taken from the same sequence between Andrea and Jürgen about the vanilla cream but occurs a bit earlier:

(3) [Big Brother Germany, 2000]

01	Jrg:	wie	WÄR_s_n	mit_m	
		how	be-3SG.COND=3SG.N.NOM=PRT	with=ART.INDF.DAT.SG.N	
		how	about	a little	
02		vanIllepüddingschen.	(.)		
		vanilla_cream-DIM			
		vanilla	cream		
03		da	könnte	man	vielleicht
		there	can-3SG.COND	one	perhaps
		one	could	perhaps	also

- 04       äh (-) KIwi reinschneiden. (.)  
           kiwi cut\_add-INF  
           add slices of uhm (-) kiwi
- 05       und (-) oRANGen.  
           and orange-PL  
           and oranges
- 06 ADR: ja.  
           well.
- 07       du kannst doch LEsen.  
           2SG can-2SG.PRS PRT read-INF  
           you can read.
- 08 Jrg: ↑was denn LEsen.  
           what PRT read-INF  
           read what
- 09 ADR:→ ja nimm die  
           yes take[IMP.SG] ART.DEF.ACC.SG.F  
           well get yourself
- 10       va~NILLEpuddingpackung dann ^WEISS\_te  
           vanilla\_cream\_package then know-2SG.PRS=2SG  
           the vanilla cream package then you'll know
- 11       wie=s geht.  
           how=3SG.NOM.SG.N go-3SG.PRS  
           how it's done.
- 12 Jrg: ach bei mir brEnnt der doch ↑AN.  
           PRT with 1SG.DAT burn-3SG DEM-3SG.NOM PRT VERB-PRT  
           oh it always gets burnt when I do it
- 13 ADR: ja;= dann has\_te PECH gehabt.  
           yes then have-2SG.PRS=2SG.NOM bad\_luck have-PTCP  
           well then bad luck for you

Jürgen's request that Andrea cook a vanilla cream for him and add kiwi and oranges is met with the response 'well you can read', which in this context is a puzzle; as a consequence, Jürgen initiates repair ('read what'). Now Andrea is in the sequential position of needing to deliver a response proper to Jürgen's request. Her response (lines 9–11) suggests that he should read the instruction on the package so that he will know how to make instant cream.

Again, the utterance part that contains the imperative ('take the vanilla cream package') can be understood literally, and Jürgen could respond to it by doing what Andrea suggests. In this case, the imperative would be used in the canonical way described above (immediate action, beneficial for recipient). But more likely in this sequential context is a conditional-hypothetical reading. According to this understanding, the imperative opens up a possible mental space in which Jürgen is in a position to prepare the cream himself. By referring Jürgen to this alternative, Andrea refuses his request that she do it herself.



14 (1.1)  
 15 Jrg: <<p, pressed> lECKT (.) MICH.>  
                           lick[IMP.PL] lSG.ACC.  
                           kiss          my ass.

This is a teasing sequence in which Alex and John (starting in line 7) are making fun of Jürgen, who is exhausted after a day of sports. Alex wishes Jürgen sweet dreams, using the imperative of the verb ‘to dream’ – *träum!*. This use of the imperative in formulaic wishes was already mentioned above. But John’s turn in line 11 is different. Although it formally echoes Alex’s format, ‘don’t smack your lips again while you are sleeping’ is neither a routine nor a wish. Instead, by alluding to the previous nights’ experiences (with Jürgen making smacking noises in his sleep), the imperative is used for an unmitigated (“bald”) request that can hardly be fulfilled (since no one is in control of what s/he does when asleep) and which, because of its personal character, is offensive. This is shown by Jürgen’s response: he closes the sequence with another imperative turn, the (formulaic) invective ‘kiss my ass’. Both turns – John’s and Jürgen’s – cross the line of “polite” behavior. They are possible here because the two men know each other well, and because the whole sequence is framed as playful through laughter.

In conclusion, a clear pattern emerges from this book. Imperatives are not at all infrequent, and they are certainly not generally avoided. This is so because most imperatives are not “commands” and hence not indexical of a power imbalance between the speaker and the addressee. Rather, imperatives are used to prompt actions by the addressee that are in the prototypical (and most frequent) case beneficial to the addressee (and perhaps also to the speaker). Even more importantly, the imperative is a deictic grammatical category and part of the grammar of immediate action: most turns containing an imperative are used to make the addressee do (or stop doing) something right now. Both features of the imperative, however, can be suspended. For instance, we find imperatives that are used to request an action from the addressee that is due at this precise moment without being beneficial for the addressee (although in this case, it is mostly only small favors that are being requested); from here, a grammaticization path leads to imperatives that have turned into discourse markers, which function, for instance, as attention-getters, as well as to discourse- and text-organizing formulaic usages. On the other hand, the feature of immediate relevance may be neutralized. From these uses, the grammaticization of wishes and other routines ensues. It has also been pointed out that some imperatives do not show either of the features of the prototype. They may open up hypothetical mental spaces and lead to the grammaticization of conditional constructions. The imperative as a pure form of “commanding”, however, seems to be almost inexistent.

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