The Semantics of Weak Imperatives Revisited: Evidence from FCI Licensing

Tamás Halm
Research Institute for Linguistics (Budapest)

Abstract

The problem: Are FCIs licensed in imperatives?

Observations:
- FCIs are licensed in weak imperatives and not licensed in strong imperatives,
- strong imperatives OK out of the blue, weak imperatives need context,
- strong imperatives create obligations, weak imperatives do not,
- strong-weak distinction encoded morphosyntactically in some languages.

Proposal:
- Weak imperatives are directed not at the To-Do-List of the addressee (Portner 2007, 2012, von Fintel and Iatridou 2017), but at the List of Actions Under Consideration by the addressee.

The Problem

Are free-choice items (*cualqier, n'importe quel, opjosdhipote, any*) licensed in strong and/or weak imperatives?

Distinction between strong imperatives (necessity, command flavour) and weak imperatives (possibility, permission flavour) can be encoded via grammaticalized adverbials (German *ruhig*, Italian *pure*, Hungarian *nyugodtan*) or imperative particles (Rhaetoromance).

Acceptability of FCIs a function of strong/weak status:

(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*
      take-IMP-2SG PRT any   dress-ACC
      'Take any dress.'

   d. *Nyugodtan vedd   fel bármelyik ruhát*
      PERMISSION take-IMP-2SG PRT any   dress-ACC
      '(Feel free to) 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.'

Previous research

FCI licensing in imperatives:
- Strickland 1982, Haspelmath 1997: unacceptable in strong imperatives, OK in weak imperatives
- Giannakidou 2001, Giannakidou and Quer 2013: licensed in both strong and weak imperatives, but pragmatically infelicitous in strong imperatives
- Aloni 2007, Kaufmann 2012: licensed and felicitous in both strong and weak imperatives

Free-choice items (*cualqier, n'importe quel, opjosdhipote, any, bármi*)
- Free choice (Vendler 1967)
- Licensed in modals, generics, non-veridical contexts; not licensed in affirmative episodic sentences
- Issues: FCIs as NPIs, quantificational force, scalarity, domain widening, indefinite status
- universal free choice analysis (propositional alternatives and Hamblin sets) (Kratzer and Shimoyama 2002, Aloni 2007, Menéndez-Benito 2010)
- dependent indefinite analysis (Farkas 1997, Giannakidou 2001, Giannakidou and Quer 2013)

Previous research (cont'd)

Semantics and pragmatics of imperatives:
- *Come in!*: how to get from denotational semantics ('the addressee comes in') to illocutionary force (the addressee is obliged to go home)
- Rich denotational semantics models (e.g. Kaufmann 2012):
   - necessity modality is part of semantics,
   - performative effects derived from presuppositional meaning component
- Thin denotational semantics models (Portner 2007, 2012):
   - an imperative denotes a property restricted to the addressee,
   - the task of making it true is added to addressee's To-Do-List in the dynamic pragmatics component
- Weak (permission/acquiescence/indifference) imperatives:
   - rich denotational semantics models: contextual weakening
   - thin denotational semantics models: separate segment of To-Do-List (Portner 2012) or weak speaker endorsement (von Fintel and Iatridou 2017)

Proposal

Strong denotational semantics approach struggles with weak imperatives in general (cf. von Fintel and Iatridou 2017), TDL approach would predict FCIs in imperatives to be uninterpretable:

(2) a. *Nyugodtan vedd   fel a kék ruhát*
      PERMISSION take-IMP-2SG PRT the blue dress-ACC
      '(Feel free to) take the blue dress.'

   b. *Nyugodtan vegyél   fel egy ruhát*
      PERMISSION take-IMP-2SG PRT a dress-ACC
      '(Feel free to) take a dress.'

   c. *Nyugodtan vedd   fel bármelyik ruhát*
      PERMISSION take-IMP-2SG PRT any   dress-ACC
      '(Feel free to) take any dress.' -> what is the property-to-be-made-true?

Weak imperatives felicitous only if it is common knowledge that the action described by the prejacent is being considered by the addressee:

(3) a. *Állj   meg*
      stop-IMP-2SG PRT
      'Stop.' (felicitous out of the blue)

   b. *Nyugodtan állj   meg*
      PERMISSION stop-IMP-2SG PRT
      '(Feel free to) stop.' (felicitous if addressee is visibly tired, needs a rest)

Proposal:
- In weak imperatives, it is not the TDL (a list of obligations) that is affected (*pace* Portner 2007, 2012, von Fintel and Iatridou 2017), but rather, the List of Actions Under Consideration by the addressee: those actions of which it is part of common knowledge that the addressee in considering them
- Pragmatic effect of weak imperative is to lift a prohibiton (cf. Kamp 1973)

Advantages of proposal:
- Explains why weak imperatives need context: prejacent needs to be on List of Actions under Consideration
- Explains why FCIs are licensed in weak imperatives: set of <possible world – value> pairs needed for licensing (Dayal 1997, Giannakidou 2001) provided by LAUC:

(4) a. 'Take the blue dress.' in w_1, the addressee takes the blue dress
      'Take the lilac dress.' in w_2, the addressee takes the lilac dress
      'Take the pink dress.' in w_3, the addressee takes the pink dress
- Weak imperatives creating obligations paradox solved: weak imperatives do not affect TDL
- Speaker endorsement is orthogonal to strong vs. weak: strong imperatives (command, invitation, advice), weak imperatives (permission, acquiescence, indifference)
- Rhaetoromance imperative particles (Poletto and Zanuttini 2003) encode binary (non-graded) strong vs. weak distinction

Contact

Tamás Halm
Research Institute for Linguistics (Budapest)
Email: halmt@nytud.hu
Website: www.nytud.hu/depts/tlp/halm/
Phone: +36302141385

Acknowledgements

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