

IMPERATIVES AND TO-DO LISTS: 3 OBJECTIONS

JOINT SESSION

OXFORD, 8 JULY 2018

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Purpose: to present 1+3 objections against Portner's view of the pragmatics of imperatives.

The pragmatics of imperatives is structurally analogous to the pragmatics of assertion.

Note

Some discrepancies between the talk and the abstract.

Warning

Quotations modified, formalism avoided. Less precision, more accessibility.

Bibliographical note

Portner's proposal builds on the earlier ideas of Craige Roberts and others. I ignore these connections here.

BACKGROUND: STALNAKER'S DYNAMICS

COMMON KNOWLEDGE (MUTUAL KNOWLEDGE)

It is common knowledge that ϕ in a group of knowers G if and only if all members of the group know that ϕ , all know that all know it, all know that all know that all know it, etc. ad infinitum. (Stalnaker, 2014:44)

Common ground has the structure of common knowledge and belief, with an accessibility relation defined in terms of the transitive closure of the accessibility relations for a notion of *acceptance for the purposes of the conversation*. (Stalnaker, 2014:45)

[T]he speech act of assertion is governed by the following rule: an assertion changes the context by adding the propositional content of the assertion to the common ground. Assertion is, in effect, *a proposal to change the context* (the common ground) in a certain way, a proposal that takes effect if it is not rejected. (Stalnaker, 2014:51)

BEYOND ASSERTION: DIRECTIVES

What is left out?

Assertion is just one class of speech acts.

What about others?

So, in particular, what about directives—commands, requests, instructions?

What is the pragmatic mechanism through which the speaker directs (commands, requests, instructs) the hearer to perform a particular action?

TRADITIONAL ANSWERS TO THE REPRESENTATION PROBLEM

Directives were said to ‘invoke the authority’ of the speaker, to represent an attempt to get the hearer to act, or to give the hearer a ‘sufficient reason’ for performance.

This is metaphorical and imprecise...

Supposing that a pragmatic mechanism of directives is found, what are the right elements of context?

If directives are assigned truth-conditional semantic content, then: both the representation problem and the problem of contextual fit are solved.

Thus we could say that commands express deontic modalities (Kaufmann).

So directives could be treated in the same way as assertions.

So: their truth-conditional semantic content can be added to the common ground.

And: propositions will be the elements of their context (as with assertion).

‘Give me the keys!’ = ‘You ought to give me the keys.’

‘Fire!’ = ‘You ought to fire.’

Etc.

But let us put this view aside here.

What now?

PORTNER'S PROPOSAL

People come equipped to the conversation not only with beliefs (about the state of the world broadly construed).

Say that each participant has a **To-Do List** (TDL), a list of tasks to fulfil.

Technically TDLs cannot be shared by different participants: different people have different TDLs.

The remedy is easy: we can introduce a To-Do function that assigns TDLs to each participant.

What does a TDL contain?

Not a proposition—because this means we associate propositions with imperatives, just as the Truth-conditional account demanded.

Instead: a property-construct.

SEMANTICS OF IMPERATIVES: EXAMPLE

Abe says to Ben, 'Fire!'

The semantic object associated with Abe's utterance is a lambda-calculus property construct 'x fires' uniquely satisfied by Ben in the given context.

(The formal details are not important, as long as two claims are granted: that imperatives do have semantic contents, and that those contents are not propositions.)

Key idea

When a speaker addresses an imperative $!\phi$ to the hearer, the semantic object associated with it (the property-construct) is added to the TDL of the hearer.

Before: Ben has on his TDL the items [tie the boots, brush the teeth].

Abe says to Ben, 'Fire!'

After: Accepting the command means updating the TDL, so that it now has [fire the gun, tie the boots, brush the teeth].

But now, I have cheated (perhaps you already know that and are embarrassed!).

THE TWO FORCES

I have talked about **directives**, but Portner's project is to create pragmatics for **imperatives**.

The difference is between **illocutionary force** and **sentential force**.

The distinction is easiest with interrogatives.

ILLOCUTIONARY FORCE: DIRECTIVE

Abe to Ben: 'Would you pass the salt?'

In a standard context, Abe is requesting Ben to pass the salt.

Or perhaps demanding or even ordering: this can be extracted from particular contexts.

What Abe is **doing** is directing Ben, politely, to pass the salt.

So, the utterance has the illocutionary force of a **directive**, more exactly of a request.

‘Would you pass the salt?’: still a question.

This fact is registered by assigning to it the sentential force of **interrogative**, not of an imperative.

ILLOCUTIONARY, SENTENTIAL: IMPERATIVE

Utterance	Sent-force	Ill-force
'See who is here!'	Imperative	Exclamation
'You will leave the room now!'	Declarative	Order
'I suggest you shut up now.'	Declarative	Order (indirect)

There are just three sentential moods mapping on three sentential forces (excluding minor moods).

This is in contrast to the great variety of illocutionary forces.

‘**Sentence mood** is an aspect of linguistic form conventionally linked to the fundamental conversational functions within semantic/pragmatic theory.’

‘**Sentential forces** are the fundamental conversational functions with which sentence moods are associated.’ (Portner, 2018:122–23)

So the claim is: The pragmatics of **imperatives** is given by the To-Do list update function.

That is: The pragmatics of the imperative sentential force—its pragmatic mechanism—is given by TDLs.

But this is odd!

OBJECTION ZERO

SENTENTIAL FORCE: SOME QUOTATIONS

Not all meaningful uses of imperatives need be characterizable as any specific kind of illocutionary act of the directive variety. The imperative sentence 'Have a wonderful time', for example, would rarely, if ever, be used to direct the addressee to do something, yet it need not be viewed as therefore nonliteral or indirect. [I.e. it still has the sentential force of an imperative, but not the illocutionary force of a directive.] (Chierchia and McConnell-Ginet, 1990:173)

SENTENTIAL FORCE: MORE QUOTATIONS

Distinctions among subtypes of imperatives—orders, requests, permissions, etc.—should not be understood at the level of conversational force [i.e. sentential force]. That is, they all share the [sentential] force of Requiring, as they all conventionally add a property to the addressee's To-Do list. Rather, these differences have to do with the pragmatic or sociolinguistic basis for the speaker's attempt to add a property to the addressee's To-Do list. (Portner, 2004:237–238)

OBJECTION ZERO

But how can all imperatives have the force of 'Requiring' and add anything to TDLs, if some of them, on most (all?) occasions, are **not** used to direct the addressees, or 'require' them to do anything?

I.e. how can we say that an utterance has an imperative sentential force with **definite** pragmatic features?

Note that this view is not an extension of Stalnaker's.

Stalnaker does not give an account of declaratives (sentences individuated by sentential force), but of assertions, speech acts individuated by illocutionary force:

The speech act of assertion is governed by the following rule: an assertion changes the context by adding the propositional content of the assertion to the common ground. (Stalnaker, 2014:51)

OBJECTION ZERO (CONT.)

In general: does it even make sense to talk about the pragmatics *of* sentential forces, describing how speakers (users of sentential force, so to speak) relate to hearers, what they **do** in a conversation—while at the outset deny that there is any determinate connection between sentential forces and illocutionary facts?

Certainly: some sentential forces may be better adapted to generate certain illocutionary forces (see Politeness, Relevance).

But: sentential forces cannot, on their own, have determinate pragmatic features—only illocutionary forces do.

OBJECTION ZERO: AUDIO FORCES?

If we are allowed to talk of sentential forces, can there also be pragmatic features associated with **sounds**?

Would different forms of shouting be associated with orders and exclamations?

Would other sounds have the pragmatic force of begging or (confident) assertions?

OBJECTION ZERO: AUDIO FORCES? (CONT.)

This idea sounds mad.

And it is.

But perhaps not that mad: different intonations are used by linguists to assess whether a given sentence has the linguistic form of interrogative or declarative.

OBJECTION 0.5: SEMANTIC CONTRIBUTION TO PRAGMATICS

Imperatives are assigned inert (static) semantic content.

But can such static semantic object (a λ -construct) explain **dynamic** pragmatic features of imperatives?

I.e. generally: can dynamic pragmatics be combined with static semantics? Wouldn't that deprive semantics of much of its explanatory value?

(I think the question makes a lot of sense, but I have no idea how to even begin answering it.)

OBJECTION ONE: REGRESS

Suppose we agree that the speaker Abe intends to update the hearer Ben's TDL.

But: when Abe commands, he should **command** Ben to adjust his list.

When Abe requests Ben to do something, he should **request** Ben to adjust the list.

And so on.

INFINITE REGRESS (CONT.)

So: the original 'Fire!' induces another imperative (directive?? never mind...) 'Place "Fire!" on your To-Do list!'.

These further imperatives get the same treatment as the original one.

We end up with an infinite sequence of imperatives to perform ϕ -ing, TDLs, imperatives to update TDLs, meta-TDLs, imperatives to update meta-TDLs, and so forth.

How to stop the regress? No idea...

► [Jump to end](#)

OBJECTION TWO: THE POINT OF IMPERATIVES

Forget Objection Zero.

Assume with Portner that imperatives have a primitive
'Requiring' sentential force.

WHAT IS THE POINT OF IMPERATIVES?

What is the point the speaker makes when uttering an imperative? (Remember, always with a Requiring force.)

Portner seems to say: the point is to insert the semantic value of the command on the TDL of the hearer.

A rational hearer would then at least 'attempt' (Portner's words) to perform the relevant action.

THE POINT OF COMMANDS: ACTIONS, NOT TDL UPDATES

When Abe shouts, 'Fire!', he wants Ben to fire.

Of course a change in motivation may reliably produce the action.

But generally, Abe does not **care** what priorities and desires Ben has.

So the problem: Portner's theory ignores the action performance itself.

NOTE: REQUESTS

Requests and other polite speech acts may be different:
perhaps the speaker cares about the hearer's motives.

The least we can say: there have to be fine-grained distinctions in the Requiring force if the account describes the workings of imperatives.

▶ [Jump to end](#)

OBJECTION THREE: DEEPER INTO TDLS

When you receive a request and accept, you have updated your TDL.

But then you fail to perform, because there are other things to do.

That is no evidence for your ‘irrationality’.

But Portner’s theory has nothing to say about that.

DIFFERENT KINDS OF DIRECTIVE FORCE

Or suppose you receive a command to fire.

It might matter to you exactly whether it is a command ('If you asked me nicely, I would have considered it...').

So TDLs are updated often because of the particular **directive** force associated with the utterance.

DIFFERENT KINDS OF DIRECTIVE FORCE (CONT.)

That is, for the hearer's rationality to be interpreted, we have to take into account the directive force of the utterance.

Again, Portner **must** ignore all these facts about the directive force.

QUESTIONS?