

# Imperative Answers to Questions Under Discussion \*

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## 1 Introduction

- Imperative constructions are universally attested in natural language (Portner 2004a); a complete pragmatic theory must explain their behavior in discourse.
- Recent semantic work proposes restrictions on when imperatives are felicitous.
  - Restrictions on the addressee (Portner 2004a).
  - Restrictions imposed by the speaker’s knowledge (Portner 2007:364).
  - “Presuppositional” constraints on the timeframe of the commanded action (Kaufmann 2011).
  - Constraints on the speaker’s authority (Kaufmann 2011).
- All of these restrictions on imperatives are independent and target different aspects of discourse.
- None make reference to a major criterion for the felicity of an utterance: *relevance* (Roberts 2004; Roberts et al. 2009; Simons et al. 2011).
- The relevance literature provides robust definitions for the relevance of assertions and questions relative to a Question Under Discussion (1), but a more general one for commands (2).

(1) a. An assertion is relevant if it contextually entails a partial or complete answer to the QUD.

b. A question is relevant if it has an answer which contextually entails a partial or complete answer to the QUD.

(after Simons et al. 2011: ex. 13)

(2) A move *m* is Relevant... if *m* is... an imperative whose realization would plausibly help to answer [the QUD]. (Roberts 2004:216)

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- I propose a new definition of relevance for commands (3), based on those of Simons et al. (2011).
- (3) A command is relevant if what it prefers contextually entails a partial or complete answer to the QUD.
- Defining command relevance this way has several benefits:
    - No imperative-specific discourse components/processes are required.
    - Allows direct interaction between imperatives and QUDs.
    - Leads to a generalization of relevance over all clause types and utterances.

## 2 Responding to and with imperatives

### 2.1 Illocutionary and propositional components of imperatives

- The types of felicitous responses to imperatives are restricted.
  - Imperatives are not truth-evaluable, and resist direct challenges of truth/falsity.
- (4) A: Take out the trash!  
 B1: #That's true! I (will) take out the trash.  
 B2: #That's false! I won't / don't take out the trash.
- Some have used data like (4) to argue that imperatives are non-propositional.
  - Cormany (to appear) argues that **all clause types have propositional content**.
  - Clause types vary in *illocutionary relation* (Murray 2010), a function that takes the discourse context and a proposition, and returns an updated, structured context.
  - Illocutionary relations map to clause types as follows:
    - Declaratives canonically perform set intersection (assertion).
    - Interrogatives canonically impose a partition or cover (questioning).
    - Imperatives canonically impose a preference relation (commanding).
  - This view is similar to the division of a speech act into *force* and *radical* (Searle 1969; 1975).

- However, illocutionary relations are not equivalent to embedding a declarative sentence under a lexical verb indicating force — they encode force as part of a single clause.
- Illocutionary relations are bridging functions.
  - They are used *in* a context.
  - They scope *over* a propositional constituent.

## 2.2 Examples of imperative responses

- Imperatives are natural responses to certain questions.

(5) A: Are you going out for lunch today?  
 B: Yes, but I don't know where to go.  
 A: Go to the taco place! They have a special today.

- Two QUDs are raised and answered in the discourse in (5).
- QUD 1: “Are you going out for lunch today?”
  - Set of potential answers: {*B is going out for lunch today, B is not going out for lunch today*}
  - Response: “Yes.” (Elliptically asserts *B is going out for lunch today*)
- QUD 2: “where to go?”
  - Set of potential answers: {*B goes to the cafeteria for lunch, B goes to the hot dog stand for lunch, B goes to the taco place for lunch, ...*}
  - Response: “Go to the taco place!” (Prefers *B goes to the taco place for lunch*)
- There are many questions that imperatives cannot address.

(6) A: Where's Bob? I need to talk to him about our project.

- The potential answers to (6) are {*Bob is at his desk, Bob is in the lounge, Bob is at the coffee shop, ...*}
- No imperative can prefer one of these answers, since Bob is a third party to the conversation, and imperatives are necessarily addressee-oriented.

### 3 Generalizing relevance

- Depending on their propositional content, imperatives can address QUDs.
- The definition of imperative relevance in terms of this propositional content (9) follows.
- Imperative relevance fits into the larger paradigm of relevance with (7) and (8).

(7) An assertion is relevant if it contextually entails a partial or complete answer to the QUD.

(8) A question is relevant if it has an answer which contextually entails a partial or complete answer to the QUD.

(9) A command is relevant if what it prefers contextually entails a partial or complete answer to the QUD.

- All three definitions are of the same form: a propositional component of the utterance is compared to the propositional potential answers of the QUD.
- Thus I unite them as variations of a single rule; they are not distinct members of a paradigm.

(10) *Unified Definition of Relevance*

An utterance is relevant if the propositional argument of its illocutionary relation contextually entails a partial or complete answer to the QUD.

- Under (10), relevance of commands can be determined by comparing only the imperative utterance and the QUD.
  - There is no need to recover propositions from other discourse components, such as the To-Do Lists of Portner (2004a; 2007)
  - Unified relevance does not predict that imperatives and declarative modals have identical relevance, as in Kaufmann (2011).

### 4 Answering different types of QUDs

- The propositional content of a QUD affects whether an imperative can answer it.
- So do other factors, including the information structural requirements of the QUD.

## 4.1 Polar questions

- Polar questions have just two possible answers.
- Thus they have no partial answers, only complete answers.

(11) A: Will I win the race?  
B1: You'll win the race. (Everyone else is slower than you.)  
B2: #Win the race! (Everyone else is slower than you.)

- QUD: "Will I win the race?"
  - Potential answers: {*A wins the race, A does not win the race*}
  - Response: "Win the race!" (B2) meets the criterion of relevance by preferring *A wins the race*, yet is infelicitous.
- B2 is strictly speaking relevant, but imperatives cannot be used to make predictions of future facts.
- Imperatives cannot reaffirm predictions of future facts, either.

(12) A: I will win the race. Everyone else is slower than me.  
B1: Yes. You will win the race, then.  
B2: Yes. #Win the race, then!

## 4.2 Argument Wh-questions

- Object Wh-questions are straightforwardly answered; see (5) above.
- Subject Wh-questions, on the other hand, resist imperative answers.

(13) A: Who takes out the trash (this week)?  
B: #Take out the trash!

- QUD: "Who takes out the trash?"
  - Set of potential answers: {*A takes out the trash, B takes out the trash, C takes out the trash, ...*}
  - Response: "Take out the trash!" prefers *A takes out the trash*, yet is infelicitous.
- However, B's utterance fails information structural requirements — a subject-Wh question demands a response with a foregrounded subject.

- A null subject is backgrounded, so the imperative is not *congruent to the QUD* (Roberts 1996).
- There is a method for foregrounding imperative subjects: *vocatives*.
- Portner (2004b) likens the information structural status of vocatives to sentence topics.
- However, adding a vocative to the response in (13) only marginally improves it.

(14) A: Who takes out the trash (this week)?  
 B: #?You, take out the trash!

### 4.3 Multiple Wh-questions

- Multiple Wh-questions also resist bare imperative responses.

(15) John: So, Bob, you're in charge. Who has what job?  
 Bob (to John): #?Take out the trash!<sup>1</sup>

- Adding a vocative significantly improves these responses (even when giving partial answers).

(16) John: So, Bob, you're in charge. Who has what job?  
 Bob: John, take out the trash! Mary, sweep the floor! I'll do the dishes.

Bob: John, take out the trash! I haven't decided what the rest of us should do.

- In English, multiple-Wh questions require pair-list answers.
- An imperative with a vocative foregrounds both elements of the pair: subject and VP.

### 4.4 Adjunct Wh-questions

- Adjunct Wh-questions are semantically represented in the same way as other Wh-questions.
- Certain adjunct Wh-questions also appear to resist imperative answers.

(17) A: Why does everyone assume that I smell bad?  
 B1: (It's because) you take out the trash.  
 B2: #Take out the trash!<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Thanks to an anonymous TLS 13 abstract reviewer for raising this issue and providing a similar example.

<sup>2</sup>Thanks to an anonymous TLS 13 abstract reviewer for providing this example.

- This is a deceptive result. The answers to the QUD in (17) appear to be *{A takes out the trash, someone started a rumor that A smells bad, ...}*.
- However, the potential answers to the question *When did Bob eat dinner?* are not *{6:00, 7:00, as soon as he got home, ...}*.
- The true answers to the QUD are *{everyone assumes A smells bad because A takes out the trash, everyone assumes A smells bad because someone started a rumor that A smells bad, ...}*.
- None of these are preferred by B2. Nor can the imperative be an elliptical response, like B1.
- Restoring the putatively elided material yields *\*It's because take out the trash!* (or perhaps *\*Be because you take out the trash!*).

## 5 Open issue: Modal QUDs

- Imperatives have variable behavior as responses to modal questions.
- In some cases, such as the modal polar question in (18), they are far worse than declarative responses.

(18) A: Do I have to take out the trash?  
 B1: You do (have to take out the trash).  
 B2: #?Take out the trash! / #?Do it!  
 B3: You don't (have to take out the trash).  
 B4: #Don't take out the trash! / #Don't do it!

- A possible analysis is that they do not prefer potential answers to the QUD.
- QUD: "Do I have to take out the trash?"
  - Set of potential answers: *{A has to take out the trash, A does not have to take out the trash}*
  - Answer B3 prefers *A takes out the trash*, which is not a potential answer.
- However, applying the same reasoning would rule out many felicitous responses to modal questions.

(19) A: Who should I see at the conference?  
 B: See Mary! She always gives fantastic talks.

- B's response in (19) prefers a non-modal proposition (*A sees Mary at the conference*).

- But it is felicitous, despite the fact that the QUD has no non-modal potential answers.
- The definition of relevance may permit this flexibility without alteration.

(20) An utterance is relevant if the propositional argument of its illocutionary relation *contextually entails* a partial or complete answer to the QUD.

= (10), emphasis added

- The question then is whether *A sees Mary at the conference* entails *A should see Mary at the conference* in the relevant context.
- Further behavior of *should* indicates that it may well do so.
  - *Should* has a default deontic reading, which licences imperative responses.
  - In the proper context, *should* can have an epistemic reading, which resists imperative responses.

(21) *Context: Mary is sick and consulting a doctor, who has just prescribed some medicine for her.*

Mary: So I have to take these pills for two weeks, right?

Doctor: Yes, that's right.

Mary: Should I start feeling better before the two weeks are up?

Doctor: Yes, you should start feeling better in about three days.

(22) Mary: Should I start feeling better before the two weeks are up?

Doctor: #Yes, start feeling better in about three days!

- Modals such as *must* are ambiguous between the two readings.
- The relevance of imperative responses varies according to the type of modality expressed.

(23) A: Who must I see at the conference?

B1: You have to see Mary. She always gives fantastic talks.

B2: See Mary! She always gives fantastic talks.

B3: You have to see Jane. I know you don't like her, but she's running the registration desk.

B4: #See Jane! I know you don't like her, but she's running the registration desk.

## 6 Conclusion

- Imperatives, like all clauses, have an illocutionary and a propositional component.
- The propositional component determines their relevance to a QUD.
- The illocutionary component restricts what propositions imperatives can prefer.
  - Requires an addressee-oriented proposition.
  - Neither requires nor enforces the truth of the proposition.
- Information structure also plays a role in command relevance.
  - All and only the constituent(s) targeted by the QUD must be foregrounded.
  - Vocatives are a strategy for foregrounding imperative subjects.
- Modal questions affect command relevance based on type of modality.
- I leave the exact link between preferred non-modal propositions and modal potential answers for future work.
- With generalized relevance, other future modifications to the concept and formalization of relevance can immediately apply to imperatives.

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