

## ON THE PERFORMATIVE ANALYSIS OF IMPERATIVES

TERESA RETELEWSKA

*Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań*

The aim of this short paper is to present a few arguments in defense of the performative analysis of imperatives and to give a rough sketch of such an analysis as applied to a corpus of OE sentences.

The frame of reference used here is that of generative semantics. We believe, it is powerful enough to allow a broader perspective on the syntax and semantics of imperatives than the one offered by the classical TG theory.

It should be stressed that our effort is by no means a pioneering one in this field, but is only meant to provide more evidence in support of the performative analysis of imperatives.

The concept of speech act has long been recognized as fundamental for semantics and the philosophy of language in general. According to Austin (1962) who was first to expound the speech act theory, each speech act has its own characteristic illocutionary force. Generally speaking, acts of asserting, commanding, questioning etc., can be called illocutionary acts, as distinct from acts of referring and predicating which constitute propositional acts. The distinction is a significant one since there may be instances of illocutionary acts being performed with no propositional content, while the reverse is impossible. Also a single proposition can be used on various occasions to perform a number of illocutionary acts. It is chiefly among the adherents of the generative semantic school that Austin's illocutionary force theory found its propagators. A few proposals have recently been put forward (Ross 1970; Lakoff 1970, 1971; McCawley 1968) all unanimous in the conclusion that the semantic representations of utterances to give full account of meaning, should not only be restricted to the propositional content of the sentence but should also explicitly specify the illocutionary force of the utterance in question, i.e., they should indicate the kind of speech act involved (e.g. command, assertion, request, etc.). The illocutionary force should be indicated in the semantic

representations by means of an abstract performative predicate. Later rules will in most cases delete the performative, though in some the performative verb may appear in the surface structures as a lexical verb (e.g. the performative verb of saying, wishing, ordering etc.) characterized by first person indicative present whose subject must perform the action of the verb when he is using it. Thus all sentences, even if they do not contain an overt performative verb, must be treated as if their performative verb was deleted. This conclusion pertains not only to interrogatives and imperatives but also to declaratives (Ross 1970).

An extensive array of evidence in support of the performative has been given by G. Lakoff (1970). Such an analysis making use of the higher performative predicate with its various semantic properties can account for various co-occurrence restrictions as well as for rule applicability and thus is superior to the symbols used by the traditional phrase structure rules: Imp, Q which were devised for mere rule triggering. The presence of Imp in the deep structures has been proved to be unjustified, for what is actually present in the deep (semantic) structures are modalities of various shades represented by appropriate performative verbs and which are signalled on the surface by means of the imperative inflection. The surface structures then, do not render all the subtleties of meaning. Any analysis of modality in general and imperatives in particular cannot limit itself to the description of the surface and shallow structures (cf. Lakoff 1971: 233) but must necessarily include an examination of the semantic relationships underlying them.

For all the advantages which, we hope, the performative analysis of imperatives can bring, there still remains an unsolved problem of how the performative verbs should be represented in the logico-semantic structures as real lexical items or as bundles of semantic features. This is however a matter of dispute among linguists and is at present far from being settled.

Before the main line of analysis is resumed, we should consider in more detail the relationship of the performative element to the propositional element.

In the semantic representations, the performative predicate takes the propositional content as one of its arguments. (There exists a large body of evidence supporting the view (Lakoff 1970). To subscribe to this view, as we do, is to claim that it is possible and purposeful to delineate between the performative sentential meaning and the propositional sentential meaning. The two differ in a very significant way: while the performative sentential meaning can never have a truth value, and whether it is felicitous or not depends on extralinguistic factors, the proposition, on the other hand, may be true or false depending, among others, whether it fulfills the presupposition which in turn is determinable from the structure of the sentence. While the

performative verb describes the very act being performed, the proposition expresses the very meaning of the sentence. Consequently the performative verb does not predicate in the normal sense of the term and stands in different relation to its embeddings than other verbs do.

The incorporation of the illocutionary force into the semantic representation of sentences has been recently attacked from various standpoints. D. Lewis (1969), for example, claims that performative sentential meanings should not be singled out for the purpose of semantic description. The analysis of paraphrased performatives he proposes is supposed to give an equal treatment to both declaratives and non-declaratives, so that the truth value of the proposition could be extended to the paraphrased performative. If possible at all, this could somewhat widen the class of propositions which do have truth value. Yet the class of those which cannot be said to have truth value (e.g. future sentences) is still large enough to make the achievement insignificant. The proposal, very much in the logical vein, is not of much use in the analysis of natural languages which is only marginally involved in the study of truth values *sensu stricto*. One of the class of sentences which cannot be analysed using the method of paraphrased performatives are the imperative sentences since they have an underlying element of future reference, and thus to study their truth values would be a misunderstanding.

The claim that the indicator of the illocutionary force of a given utterance (the performative) should be included in the semantic deep structures is also seriously attacked by those authors who maintain that pragmatic and logical categories should not be put together on one plane.

We are inclined to assume that the performative analysis is best suited for the study of imperatives. Consequently, we assume that modality is a semantic property of a higher (performative) predicate. Imperatives can be treated as surface realizations of modality of volition. The exponent of this kind of modality will take the form of a higher sentence indicating the illocutionary potential of the utterance in question (i.e. the potential of an order, command, request, etc.). The illocutionary potential, in other words, is nothing else than the attitude of the speaker to the proposition which is within the scope of this modal operator.

In accordance with the above assumptions we shall now attempt to discuss the points which are vital for the performative modality of volition.

Whenever illocutionary forces are studied it is essential to investigate first the contexts relevant for the speech acts involved.

The religious corpus from which we draw illustrative material (34 psalms from Kuhn 1965) provide us with the context in which the mutual position of the speaker and the addressee can be very well discovered. From this and the context of prayers we can infer the assumptions underlying the sentences and

guess the beliefs and intentions of the speaker and the addressee for the purpose of determining the kind of illocutionary forces of sentences they utter. The speaker in the psalms is, no doubt, a devout believer, and so he addresses God with the utmost reverence. Thus it is rather inconceivable that he commands God to fulfill his orders, but rather he only may request God. However, whenever the same speaker addresses his brothers in God, his imperatives must definitely have the force of orders to be obeyed, for they concern the object of their worship. The fulfillment of these orders is then a matter of immense importance—salvation or damnation. Should the above assumption prove to hold true for our imperatives it might be helpful for determining the illocutionary forces of sentences under analysis. There is however a serious shortcoming to such a supposition, because there should be other factors, too, which could support conclusions drawn from the context, namely facts which pertain to different co-occurrence restrictions which the performatives of volition of various shades (e.g. request, order, etc.) impose on the embedded verb.

The next step in the analysis of imperatives should now be to determine the kinds of underlying performative verbs, that is, the shades of imperative meanings.

Before a semantic analysis of imperatives can be attempted a brief survey must be made of the syntax of imperative sentences, that is subjectless sentences with the main verb marked by imperative inflection.

In our corpus both the "imperatives" referring to God and those directed to the speaker's audience, display the same surface characteristics, with the exception perhaps, that the former very often contain the addressee's name explicitly mentioned (in brackets we are giving the number of the psalm and the number of line, as in Kuhn 1965).

\* mildsa me, dryht (30,9)

In many parallel cases, however, the address form is omitted from the imperative:

\* genere from sweorde sawle mine (20,18)

\* gefrea me of mute leon (20,19)

Imperatives directed to the speaker's audience do not contain any address form at all. This, however, will seem natural in the light of the fact that the speaker mentions God's name in order to add force to his exhortations, which in this way from mere requests become insistent implorations:

\* god, god min, geloca in me (21,1)

All the verbs inflected for the imperative refer to the second person singular or plural. The corpus offers a few instances of negative imperatives but these

exhibit exactly the same characteristics as any other negatives and therefore are not of much interest.

From the succinct and unrevealing syntactic characteristics given above it must be clear, that no matter what terminology we apply or rules we devise, we shall not be able to account for the intricacies of the modality of volition. What we seek explanation for are the semantic relationships and dependencies of the performative of volition and the embedded true verbs, the semantic categories they belong to, the various restrictions imposed by higher verbs, etc.

It is hoped that such an explanation can be found, at least partly, in structures much deeper than those considered as deep by the classical TG theory, that is in the underlying logico-semantic structures, the assumption being that the relationship between semantic structure and syntactic facts is a causal one. Indeed, many adherents of the generative semantic school claim that semantic features are of syntactic consequence (Postal 1971; G. Lakoff 1971; McCawley 1970). Actually all the points of the syntactic description can be given explanation in the terms of meaning.

The fact that all imperatives are directed to the second person singular or plural, and never, for example, to the first, that is the speaker himself, is logical because the source of volition cannot in a normal situation be its target. The performative verb of ordering present in the deep structures can easily account for this phenomenon by imposing a restriction on the non-identity of subjects of the higher performative sentence and the sentence embedded in it. This restriction may be technically enforced by special rules whose task would be to reject all instances of imperative modality whenever it happens to be directed to the subject of the performative sentence himself, or, as it is in OE the verb in such a case may be marked for the subjunctive with the meaning of optative.

It is obvious, even from a superficial analysis, that not all types of verbs can be used imperatively. So now, we have to attempt to find what semantic features a verb must exhibit in order to qualify to be used imperatively. The imperative sentences taken from our OE corpus will serve as illustration.

The assumption underlying any order is the conviction on the part of the source of volition that the order will be carried out. It can, however be carried out only if the addressee is capable of perceiving the message. Thus the addressee must be a human being (or in marginal cases a member of higher species of animals). Moreover the addressee must also be able to perform the order requested by power of his own will or instinct. It follows then that imperatives cannot refer to states, processes, and events over which the addressee can have no control, no matter how determined he is to fulfill the order. Therefore the classes of verbs which can be used imperatively are almost totally restricted

to the ACT and ACTIVITY types (the terms come from Kenan 1963). Subjects of these types of verbs must be volitive.

The activities and acts denoted by these verbs can take place either in the outside world, and thus may be perceived by human senses, or they can be confined to the closed world of the human mind or senses.

Our OE corpus provides a wide selection of verbs of these two major categories as is exemplified by the sentences below:

physical activity: (perceptible)

\* tobringath to dryht wuldur ond are (28,2)

\* singath him song neowne wel (32,3)

\* sele him efter wercum heara (27,5)

abstract external activity (only results perceptible)

\* gefreme gongas mine in stigum thinum (16,5)

\* hald sawle mine (24,18)

\* genere from sweorde sawle mine (20,18)

mental activity:

\* gemyne mildsa thinra dryht (24,5)

\* mildsa me dryht for thon ic biom geswenced (30,9)

\* bihald boene mine (16,1)

physical perception:

\* gcher dryht rehtwisnisse mine

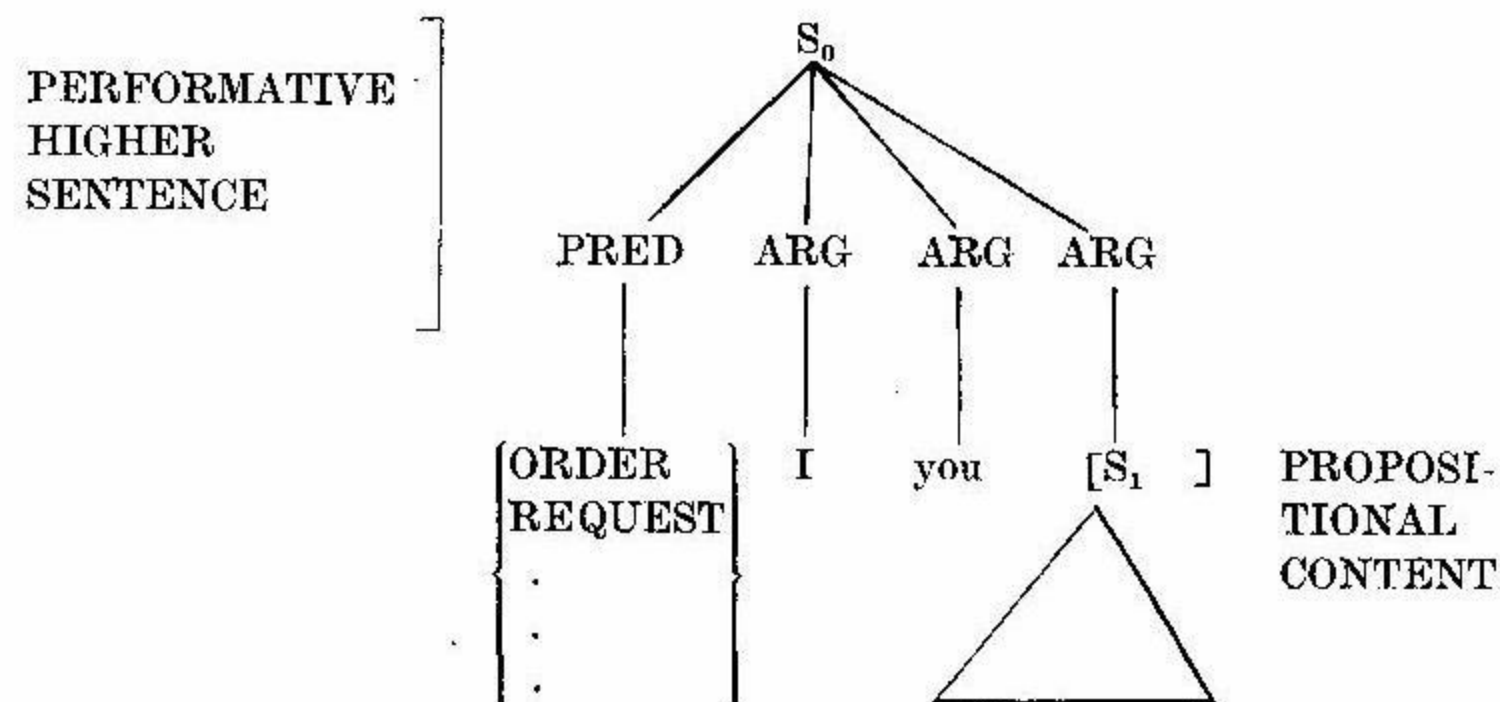
\* gesch eathmodnise mine ond gewin min

It might be interesting to see now what classes of verbs can be used with the various performative verbs of ordering, request etc., and to what extent these sets differ. The scope of the present paper is too narrow, however, to deal with these problems.

Summing up, the considerations above have shown, it seems, that the performative verb can very neatly secure that no unqualified verb appears in its embedding. This can be achieved by constraining the various performative verbs in such a way that they will not permit the embeddings of verbs belonging to some specific semantic categories and classes. And thus performative verbs of request and those of ordering may have the sets of permitted classes different, at least partly. This point discussed by R. Lakoff (1968) and Boyd and Thorne (1969) is just another proof that the semantic fact (e.g. the membership of a semantic class) entails syntactic consequences (e.g. different transformations leading to different surface structures).

Regrettably, the illustrative material we are using here does not contain any clear cut instances of different illocutionary forces of volition. The implications of the speech act context cannot be taken for granted without any evidence of the formal nature.

To conclude we postulate (after Lakoff 1970) that the logico-semantic structures of the modality of obligation should be represented as follows:



where both predicates and arguments comply with the characteristics given above.

It can be marginally noted that since all orders refer to the future time the semantic representations should somehow reflect this fact. Yet the logical status of tenses is still a matter of dispute among linguists.

The deep structures which are actually much more abstract, than this paper might suggest, have to undergo a series of transformations of various kinds which will map them onto their surface realizations. These transformations will, among others obscure most of the semantic subtleties and distinctions, and in the case of imperatives they will blur the difference between requests, orders by eliminating the explicit indicator of the illocutionary force—the performative verb.

It should be stressed that an analysis of the kind outlined above will have other serious shortcomings besides the tentative and vague character of the deep structures. Namely, the informal basis for the determination of illocutionary forces of utterances, which even in the case of overt performatives are never quite unambiguous. The basis of written data makes the position of the analyst still worse.

For all the reservations discussed so far we can look at the performative analysis of imperatives with more optimism. The solution it brings seems much less ad hoc than the one offered by the classical TG theory. It is only the performative analysis of imperatives which gives an opportunity to study wider linguistic context relevant to meaning and allows the making of more subtle distinctions of meaning hidden under the equivocal surface form.

Thus it is able to show that there is no imperative mood as such in the deep structures but a variety of related moods of the same basic overtone.

To our knowledge and belief, no other approach to the study of "the imperative mood" is as revealing and natural as the performative one.

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