

## A Discursive Analysis of Imperatives in the Bible

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### Abstract

Imperatives are attempts made by a speaker to get a hearer to do something. They get associated with a rather heterogeneous range of speech act types. This paper reports on the result of a discursive study on the use of imperatives in the Bible. They have been divided into two categories of command and prohibition. These categories are themselves divided in terms of degree of intensity into four various speech acts: threat, order, blessing and admonition which are considered as commands on the one hand; and dissuasion, warning, inhibition and deterrence as prohibitions on the other. It is also of interest to know how many of them are directly or indirectly mentioned. There is a high occurrence of admonition for commands and dissuasion for prohibition which may indicate that the Bible tries to soften imperatives by applying the least intense forms of them.

**Keywords:** Discursive Analysis, Imperatives, Bible

### INTRODUCTION

In his approach, taken from linguistic philosophy (Linguistic Pragmatics), Searl (1975) defined speech acts as particular fit between words (propositional content) and the world. In addition to the general classification of speech acts as *indicative, question, imperative, exclamative/optative*, Fitch (2008) proposed the following classifications:

Searl's classification of illocutionary speech acts:

1. *Assertives*: speech acts that commit a speaker to the truth of the expressed proposition (assert, claim, affirm, state, deny, disclaim, assure, argue, rebut, inform, notify, remind, object, predict, report, retrodict, suggest insist, conjecture, hypothesize, guess, swear, testify, admit, confess, accuse, blame, criticize, praise, complain, boast, lament)
2. *Imperatives*: speech acts that are to cause the hearer to take a particular action (direct, request, ask, urge, tell, require, demand, command, order, forbid, prohibit,

enjoin, permit, suggest, insist, warn, advise, recommend, beg, supplicate, entreat, beseech, implore, pray)

3. *Commissives*: speech acts that commit a speaker to some future action, (commit, promise, threaten, vow, pledge, swear, accept, consent, refuse, offer, bid, assure, guarantee, warrant, contract, covenant, bet)
4. *Expressives*: speech acts that express the speaker's attitudes and emotions towards the proposition (apologize, thank, condole, congratulate, complain, lament, protest, deplore, boast, compliment, praise, welcome, greet)
5. *Declaratives*: speech acts that change the reality in accordance with the proposition of the declaration, (declare, resign, adjourn, appoint, nominate, approve, confirm, disapprove, endorse, renounce, disclaim, denounce, repudiate, bless, curse, excommunicate, consecrate, christen, abbreviate, name, call)

Austin's (1972) classification:

1. *Verdictives* (type assertion)
2. *Exercitives* (type I urge you to do something)
3. *Commissives* (type I promise to do something)
4. *Behabitives* (all other social agreements)
5. *Expositives* (expressing emotion)

Bach and Harnish (1979) classification:

1. *Constatives*: Assertives, predictives, retrodictives, descriptives, ascriptives, informatives, confirmatives, convessives, retractives, assentives, dissentives, disputatives, responsiveness, suggestives, suppositives
2. *Imperatives*: Requestives, questions requirements, prohibitives, permissives, advisories
3. *Commissives*: Promises, offers
4. *Acknowledgements*: Apologize, condole, greet, congratulate, thank, bid, accept, reject.

Imperatives are the class of speech acts that attempt to fit the world to the words; they are attempts by a speaker to get a hearer to do something. The class of imperatives as Searle proposed it encompassed a wide range of action verbs in English – command, request, plead, invite, permit, and many others – without distinguishing among them in any way. The basic definition of imperatives as attempts to get people to do things does, however, lend itself to a connection with compliance gaining and persuasion in the field of communication. They tend to be made indirectly (Fitch, 2008). Searle took imperatives seriously as examples of how people make sense of indirectness.

There are some central problems for semantic analyses of imperatives. Condoravdi and Lauer (2010) mention the Problem of Functional Heterogeneity Cross linguistically as the first one; imperatives get associated with a rather heterogeneous range of speech act types:

1. Stand at attention! (Command)
2. Don't touch the hot plate! (Warning)
3. Hand me the salt, please. (Request)
4. Take these pills for a week. (Advice)
5. Please, lend me the money! (Plea)
6. Get well soon! (Well-wish)
7. Drop dead! (Curse)
8. Please, don't rain! (Absent Wish)
9. Okay, go out and play. (Permission/Concession)
10. Have a cookie (, if you like). (Offer)
11. Come and take the ball (if you dare)! (*Dare*)

A gradual continuum between e.g. command and request, request and plea, request and advice can be found. They also believe that imperative sentence can be conjoined with sentences in declarative mood. The results are speech acts of different natures, including anti-imperative acts such as threats, like in 12 below.

12. Touch this glass, and I will kill you. (threat + sanction)

Sometimes, the speaker wants the addressee to act as required by the imperative (*Do!*) but sometimes he aims to avoid exactly that, practically intending to say *Don't!* (Schwager, 2006). A commonality of examples like 12 to 14 seems to be that they all can equivalently be expressed by a conditional ('*if you clean your room, then I will take you to the movies*' etc.). This is why scholars have proposed to categorize them as pseudo-imperatives here and propose a common *conditional* meaning for the construction.

13. Clean your room and I will take you to the movies. (request + incentive)
14. Open the newspaper, and you will find the king's picture on page 2. (conditional)

Words for imperatives would vary across languages and contextual variables (Eckardt, 2011; Vine, 2009) such as magnitude of the desired action and relationship between speaker and hearer would affect which kind of imperative might be used, and the varied responses hearers might have to imperatives. Moessner (2010) performed a cross generic diachronic study on imperative speech acts and demonstrated that in the Early Modern English period all three text categories (legal, religious and scientific discourse) show similar frequencies of imperatives, but differ in their realization strategies. In Present-day English, scientific discourse is much less imperative than the other text categories. Diachronic changes are also evident on the plane of realization strategies.

Myhill (1988) suggests that theories about speech acts should be based not upon philosophical speculations using data from a single language, or upon limited linguistic and cultural data carefully selected to support a particular theory, but upon extensive, detailed, and exhaustive linguistic analysis which will clearly establish the descriptive facts of speech act usage in a variety of languages. In his analysis of Imperative Usage in the Bible, he shows that English and Hebrew differ significantly in this regard. The use of

the English Imperative in database is conditioned largely by social and interactive factors, e.g. the relationship between the speaker and the listener, their relative social status, the sensitivity of the action of giving the command, the setting of the interaction, who will benefit from the action, etc.; on the other hand, the usage of the Imperative in the Hebrew database is mainly determined by semantic and structural factors, e.g. the point in time when the commanded action is to take place, the linguistic form of the preceding clause, whether the command is the first in a conversation, etc. It is proposed that the clear differences here indicate that there cannot be any uniform explanation about why imperatives in general are used, as have been proposed in speech act theory (e.g. Searle 1975); on the other hand, it has been argued that these differences are sufficiently complex that they also cannot be accounted for with simple statements regarding cultural differences.

Shulman (2001) distinguished between commands expressed by imperatives and commands expressed by the second person indicative forms, relying on modern linguistics theories in pragmatics and discourse analysis. The study shows that although the two verb forms may be used to issue commands, they carry different implications. Imperative forms are used to present urgent, personal and more subjective commands. Therefore, they typically occur in interpersonal discourse. Indicative forms are used to present commands that the speaker perceives as not urgent, neither personal nor emotional. They convey the speaker's certain or confident knowledge that his command will be carried out. Therefore, they typically occur in contexts where a superior speaker presents instructions, laws and commandments.

Fantin (2010) studied the Greek imperative mood in the New Testament with cognitive and communicative approach. He utilizes insights from modern linguistics and communication theory in order to propose an inherent (semantic) meaning for the mood and describes the way in which it is used in the New Testament (pragmatics). A linguistic theory called neuro-cognitive stratificational linguistics is used to help isolate the morphological imperative mood and focus on addressing issues directly related to this area, while principles from a communication theory called relevance theory provide a theoretical basis for describing the usages of the mood. This book also includes a survey of New Testament and selects linguistic approaches to the imperative mood and proposes that the imperative mood is volitional-imperative and should be classified in a multidimensional manner. Each imperative should be classified according to force, which participant (speaker or hearer) benefits from the fulfillment of the imperative, and where the imperative falls within the event sequence of the action described in the utterance. In this context, sociological factors such as the rank of participants and level of politeness are discussed together with other pragmatic-related information. This book is teaching tool for intermediate and advanced Greek classes, as it mainly deals with the grammar of imperatives.

Boyer (1987) has done a statistical study on imperatives of Bible and classified them as: command and prohibitions, request and prayer, petition and request, permission and

consent, exclamation and finally greeting. He believes that by far the largest number of imperatives (83%) belongs to the category of command and prohibition, which includes both positive and negative commands. The latter, often listed separately under the term 'prohibitions'. Commands include a broad spectrum of concepts--injunctions, orders, admonitions, exhortations--ranging from authoritarian dictates to the act of teaching. He distinguished commands from requests as "telling" is from "asking." The distinction, however, is not made by the mood used but by the situation, the context. They are used in the language of superiors to subordinates and of subordinates to superiors, and between equals. His second class of imperatives is made up of prayers, petitions, and requests. Much fewer than the commands, they still are quite numerous (11 %).

Next in this order of frequency (2%) is that category of imperatives that expresses permission or consent. Rather than an appeal to the will, this category involves a response to the will of another. The command signified by the imperative may be in compliance with an expressed desire or a manifest inclination on the part of the one who is the object of the command, thus involving consent as well as command. This permission may be either willing and therefore welcome to the speaker or reluctant. Less than 1% of the imperative appears as an exclamatory word, introducing another statement, thus acting as an interjection. And he found less than 0.5% of imperatives as greetings, an idiomatic form of salutation. Boyer believes that the strangest and most controversial category of imperatives is that which seems to express some conditional element. Here it is necessary to distinguish two groups. The first is neither strange nor controversial; it includes a large number of instances where it says, "Do something and this will follow." This combination clearly is capable of two explanations. It could well be a simple command followed by a promise. Or it could be understood to imply that the promise is conditioned upon the doing of the thing commanded, "If you do something this will follow." In fact it is sometimes difficult to decide among these possible classifications. In such cases alternate choices have been given.

## THE FUNCTIONAL CLASSIFICATION OF IMPERATIVES

A primary analysis of the texts showed that imperatives can be simply classified as commands or prohibition. Alternative classifications seem to lie in the fact that some imperatives are more direct than the others. Commands and prohibitions can by themselves be classified according to their degree of intensity as threat, order, blessing and admonition, as commands; and dissuasion, warning, inhibition and deterrence as prohibitions.

On the whole 190 imperatives were detected in the Mathew Bible, excluding the direct orders given by Jesus to the disciples to cultivate Christianity, tending to rely on the imperatives addressed to the common people. 100 of these imperatives are commands and the other 90 are prohibitions. Hence, a balance of commands and prohibitions is seen. This balance goes on to the directness of imperatives from which 110 are direct and 80 are indirect. When it comes to the important matters of "worshipping the Only God",

“following the prophet” and “repenting”, direct mode is prevalent. The indirect imperatives are mostly brought up in parables or practices; an instance of indirect command is the story of the withered fig in extract 1.

<sup>18</sup>And early in the morning, as he was on his way back to the city, he was hungry. <sup>19</sup>And when he saw a lone fig tree by the road, he went up to it. And he found nothing on it but only leaves. And he says to it, "May there never be fruit from you again." And immediately the fig tree withered.

<sup>20</sup>And when the disciples saw this they marveled, saying, "How did the fig tree immediately wither?"

<sup>21</sup>And in answer Jesus said to them, "Truly I say to you, if you have faith, and do not second guess, not only will you do something like the fig tree, but also should you say to this mountain, 'Be lifted up and thrown into the sea,' it would happen. <sup>22</sup>In fact anything whatsoever that you ask for in prayer believing, you will receive." (Matthew 21:18-22) Extract1. Indirect command

Several instances of parables can be seen, applied by the bible to explain and clarify imperatives. The parable of net (Matthew 13: 47-50) is an example of indirect prohibition (extract 2).

<sup>47</sup>"Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net cast into the sea and catching every kind of fish, <sup>48</sup>which when full, the fishers pulled up onto the shore, and sitting down, they collected the good *kinds* into baskets, but threw away the bad. <sup>49</sup>This is how it will be at the end of the age. The angels will go forth and will separate the evil ones from out of the midst of the righteous, <sup>50</sup>and throw them into the furnace of fire. There will be weeping there, and gnashing of teeth." Extract 2. Indirect prohibition

## Commands

As stated previously commands can be categorized based on the level of intensity as:

- Threat or warning;
- Order: containing no promise, either good or bad;
- Blessing: including mainly verses that directly bless doers of a specific deed or conformers;
- Admonition: including conditionals that if something is done, something pleasant will follow. The more intense form of admonition is exhortation.

The majority of commands in the Bible are in the form of admonition (55%) with a promise of good (mainly heavenly) consequences. This category encompasses both social and spiritual factors as in “helping the needy”, “feeling the need on God”, “pursuing his Kingdom”. Admonitions, as in extract 3, can be accompanied by blessing as for the factors of “peace making” and “mercifulness”. The least occurring commands are in the form of threat (just 2%, 1 verse, twice). This is the most intensely stated speech act. This type of

command is used only for “repenting”, that can indicate the degree of significance of repenting in the Bible (extract 4.)

<sup>7</sup>Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy. <sup>8</sup>Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. (Matthew 5: 7,8) Extract3.  
Admonition

Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near. (Matthew, 3: 2, 4:17) Extract  
4. Threat

Cases of order include mostly social aspects such as “love for enemy”, “good deeds to neighbors and others”, “lending”, etc. Extract 5 is an example of the cases used for order.

<sup>38</sup>“You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.’<sup>48</sup> <sup>39</sup>But I tell you not to resist the evil. On the contrary, whoever strikes you on the<sup>49</sup> right cheek, turn to him the other also. <sup>40</sup>And the one wanting to sue and take your shirt, surrender to him your jacket as well. <sup>41</sup>And whoever conscripts you for one mile, go with him two miles. <sup>42</sup>Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you. (Matthew 5:38-42) Extract 5. An example for the cases of order

## Prohibition

Categories of prohibition include:

- Dissuasion: trying to persuade not to do something, using parables, comparisons, logic and the like;
- Warning or threat;
- Inhibition: including conditionals that if something wrong is done, something bad will follow up. This is analogous to admonition, in commands, one with a positive consequence and one with a negative consequence.
- Deterrence: being analogous to inhibitions but more intense, the prohibition counterpart of exhortation.

Exhortation in commands was not regarded as a separate category as all of the promises are deemed to be auspicious; however deterrence is a separate category in prohibitions as some of the bad consequences seem to be more catastrophic.

Dissuasion is the most occurring type of prohibition (44%). As can also be seen in extract 6 application of dissuasion mainly concerns social and personal factors such as “worry for life and bread”, “adultery”, “suspicion”, “release”, “judging others”, “slander” and “false testimony”.

<sup>3</sup>“Why do you look at the speck in your brother’s eye, but the log in your own eye you do not consider? <sup>4</sup>Or how will you say to your brother, ‘Let me pluck the speck out of your eye,’ and behold, in your own eye is a log? <sup>5</sup>You hypocrite, first take the log out of your eye, and then you will see

clearly to pluck the speck out of your brother's eye. (Matthew, 7: 3-5)  
Extract 6. Dissuasion

In addition to dissuasion, warning and inhibition can be applied for prohibition. Warnings (about 26.2%) are a bit more prevalent than inhibitions. They are mostly accompanied by “woe”.

<sup>7</sup>Woe to the world, because of those scandalizings. Certainly, the scandalizings are bound to come. Nevertheless, woe to the person through whom the scandalizing comes. (Matthew 18:7) Extract 7.  
Warning

Verses on “adversaries” (as in extract 8) are good examples of inhibitions:

<sup>22</sup>But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother<sup>37</sup> will be subject to judgment. (Matthew, 5: 22) Extract 8. Inhibition

The least occurring form of prohibition is deterrence (about 6%). Cases for deterrence (as in extract 9) include “adultery”, “speaking against the Holy Spirit”, “leading to sin and lawlessness”, “evil deeds” and “lack of faith”.

<sup>31</sup>“Therefore I tell you, all kinds of sin and blasphemy will be forgiven people, but the blasphemy of the Spirit will not be forgiven. <sup>32</sup>And whoever speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit, that will not be forgiven him, either in this age or in the one to come. (Matthew, 12: 31, 32) Extract 9.  
Deterrence

Throughout the Matthew Bible, the most emphasized factors contain factors that relate mostly to obeying, acknowledging, following and serving the prophet (about 12.5% of all of the imperatives). In the next place come those factors that relate to worshiping, trusting, relying on and not testing the God (about 8% of all of the imperatives). These results are shown quantitatively in the following table.

**Table 1.** Distribution of commands and prohibitions with their sub-categories.

Command	52.64%	Prohibition	47.36%
Admonition	55%	Dissuasion	44%
Order	38%	Warning	26.2%
Blessing	11%	Inhibition	23.8%
Threat	2%	Deterrence	6%

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Admonition and dissuasion have the lowest intensity in their own categories of command and prohibition, respectively. The highest occurrence of these two categories and the lowest occurrence of the most intense forms of command and prohibitions (threat and



deterrence) may indicate that the Bible tries to use a less intense language and softens the imperatives by a softer language.

Imperatives in Bible are quite commonplace and the form of imperative used can be a sign of the significance paid on the factor commanded or prohibited. Therefore, a study of imperatives should be done not only keeping an eye on the language, context and audience, but also on the factor that is being emphasized. Personal, spiritual and social aspects are paid attention to and diverse forms of imperatives are applied; however for spiritual factors, admonition and for social ones, order are applied most prevalently, in commanding. The higher number of imperatives regarding prophet rather than those regarding God may indicate Jesus concern and annoyance of the current disobedience and disbelief of the people.

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