

Store in the Lexicon: New Dutch Imperatives?

Within freedom, and/ or its limitations, volition plays an important role. It is said that one is truly free when one is able to do whatever one pleases. The ironic element in this statement is that it purely focuses on the self; it ignores the ability to do that which pleases others. By using language, we can state our wishes, ask for them, or impose them on others to carry out. The imposition of our wishes on others can be done by commanding, which can be expressed by a syntactic construction called the imperative. The imperative clause is a construction in which the subject is usually left out. It has a singular and a plural form, although we do not notice these two forms in English. However, we do notice them in Dutch, although the construction may be somewhat archaic: *'neemt uw boeken'* (take out your books). Note that, except for in reported speech, the imperative does not occur in a subordinate clause. This happens neither in English nor in Dutch (van der Wurff 23).

Working in a store and being a native speaker of Dutch, I have encountered a large number of examples of remarkable grammatical structures. Not too long ago, I heard an utterance that made me consider the Dutch imperative. Applying the rules stated before, a simple (singular) Dutch imperative would be *'kom'* (come). If you specify where exactly you wish the other to go, you add a location. In the case of the verb "come", this would usually be the location you are at, at that moment. In Dutch, this would then be *'kom hier'* (come here), yet the lady in the store said something different. She said *'hier komen'* (come here). The verb she used is an infinitive, and the whole phrase is best regarded as a truncated form of "jij moet nu hier komen!". The lady added, after uttering these two words, a specification of time. You can imagine what specification that was if you understand that this particular lady was rather angry with her child, and had run out of patience. She added *'nu!'* (now!) in a tone which had her child shaking on its tiny legs.

Regardless of the volume of the madam's speech, the structure of the utterance is somewhat off. As we know, a single verb within a main clause must be marked by tense and number. The imperative is no exception to this rule, although it has to leave out the subject of the clause, in order to become an imperative rather than being an indicative. But her utterance had no subject, and her verb was not marked by number as it was an infinitive. This must mean that she formed a new type of imperative. Or did she? In his book *The Structure and Interpretation of Imperatives*, Chung-hye Han states that the term "imperative" in everyday use refers to the function, rather than the form. This is because they share an "illocutionary force of order or request" (3). This would mean that the everyday use of the term *imperative* is not like the definition I gave in my second paragraph, but rather that it can be any command. As linguists, however, we use the term solely when we refer to the sentence form, because imperatives have interesting syntactic properties – not least because the invisible subject is invariably "you". Witness the grammaticality of "behave yourself!" versus the ungrammaticality of "behave himself!".

An interesting question would be whether this seemingly new construction – at least it was new for me – of the imperative only applies to the verb *'komen'*. If this were the case, then it would be best to mark this example as strange or perhaps exceptional. Some might even call it linguistically challenging. But another example, often heard when a parent speaks angrily to his or her child, is *'luisteren!'* (listen). In this example, the same process seems to have taken place: either the subject and finite verb have been omitted, or this verb is a new imperative form, derived from the infinitive. I personally would not argue that this single form word can be an S or an IP,



although it might have a covert addressee functioning as a theme.

'*Luisteren!*' is not the only example which I've come across during my years of working in a store: other examples are '*neerleggen*', '*stoppen*', '*afblijven*', and many more. Whatever is going on here, must, to some extent at least, be productive. And, remarkably and probably not unimportantly, all the utterances are influenced by an emotional state of the speaker.

Another element, which has to be taken into account, is the role the addressee plays in the conversation. Could it be that the addresser, who in all of the given examples was an adult who was at least slightly affected by negative emotions, would have simplified the command to make the addressee understand the message better or more easily?

Dutch also uses *do*-support for phrasal verbs. It is easier to understand for a child when one says '*doe maar neerleggen*' (do ADV put down; '*doe*' is similar to the English dummy *do*, which means that the dummy has to be followed by an infinitive) than '*leg maar neer*' (put ADV down. Note that '*neerleggen*' in Dutch is a transitive verb, but that in common imperatives, the direct object is left out). Taking into account that it is easier for younger children to understand a phrasal verb when presented as a whole (at least, that could be one of the explanations why Dutch has excessive *do*-support, as in '*doe jij dat even vastmaken*', meaning 'do fasten that ADV you'), it might very well be that the utterances are derivatives the command '*jij moet ...*' (you must). It is the Dutch way of obliging someone to do

something in the indicative mood. The tone of the utterance would then stress the urgency and convince the child to act quickly, before his or her parent(s) get angry with them. Raising the tone or volume of an utterance implies that the addressee is urged with more emphasis to do as is told.

It would seem that, although the theory of a new imperative seemed very exciting, the utterances with examples of supposed imperatives are actually forms derived from the declarative command construction. I don't think that we can use the infinitive imperative for all verbs, nor that we would choose it over the regular imperative. In the examples I gave, all of the parents were either angry or on the verge of becoming angry. Their tone and volume were a substitute for the regular construction of the imperative and were just as effective. While I was thinking of all this, the lady was still waiting, and her patience grew ill once more. She looked at the bag of goods in my hand, for which she had already paid. She then looked at me and slowly said "*hier geven, nu*" (give it to me, now).

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Works Cited

- Wurff, Wim van der. *Imperative Clauses in Generative Grammar: Studies in Honour of Frits Beukema*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing, 2007. Print.
- Han, Chung-hye. *The Structure and Interpretation of Imperatives: Mood and Force in Universal Grammar*. New York: Garland Publishing, 2000. Print.