Counterfactual Imperatives across Modalities

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Introduction

Counterfactual imperatives ([a.k.a. reproachatives]) convey a reprimand directed at a second person, with a counterfactual reading:

- Interpretation: from the speaker’s perspective, the addressee had a reasonably good opportunity to have taken an alternative course of action that would have led us to a better world. The fact that the addressee failed to take this course of action is seen by the speaker as particularly unwise or unanswerable. (Vicente 2013)

- Morphosyntactic instantiations:
  1. Infinitive perfect imperative
  2. Imperative-and-Declarative as litmus test

Reprimands in sign language

Catalan Sign Language (LSC) features the imperative form (different from modal statement) to express a reproach.

(3) 2-WARN-3
You should have warned me before.

4) Speak one more word and I’ll leave!

Results

- LSC turns out to display reproachatives that essentially have the formal properties of imperatives (cf. Donati et al 2017). LSC thus reinforces the empirical link between reproachatives and imperatives.

- Counterfactuality is not encoded with past or perfect morphology (rather with lexical past temporal adverbs sometimes).

- Marking:
  - Non-manuals: furrowed eyebrows
  - Manual signs:
    - reprimand
    - better
    - accompanying expressives: you-sei
    - no past or perfect morphology in LSC, but (optional) past adverbs.

- Counterfactual imperatives can be combined with future adverbials, despite talking about a possibility in the past:

  (5) BETTER BUY TOMORROW!
  ‘You should have bought it tomorrow.’

- Counterfactual imperatives, like regular imperatives, can occur in an Imperative-and-declarative structure:

  (6) BEFORE 2-WARN-1, 1-HELP-2 SURE
  ‘You should have warned them before.’

- Modal statements conveying a reprimand in LSC feature formally different properties from counterfactual imperatives:

  (7) MUST 2-WARN-1 BEFORE
  ‘You should have warned them before.’

Getting the interpretation

- Interpretation directly follows from combining:
  - Imperative semantics
  - Counterfactual semantics
  - From the semantics of imperatives:
    - possibility presupposition: the hearer has to know that a better choice is/was available. 9p
    - pragmatic presupposition: the result of carrying out the imperative is good / rewarding (Veltman 2009)
  - From the semantics of counterfactuals:
    - counterfactual presupposition: 9p of KNOWLEDGE, i.e. it has to be common ground that this better choice is not taken, i.e. incompatible with what one takes to be knowledge.
    - Addressee Wants p, Past possible p, but NOT 9p.
    - The reprimand asserts that the speaker tries to make the addressee accept that a good and available possibility with a rewarding outcome has just become unavailable, therefore the actual negative consequences.
    - But it would not work if we were to assume the optative, speaker-oriented hedonic analysis for reproachatives: it is the addressee’s wish, or both the speaker/signer and addressee’s, but not the speaker/signer’s alone, what grounds the reprimand.

Conclusions

- Counterfactual imperatives are a well-identified class in typologically unrelated languages, also in LSC.
- Despite the cross-linguistic rarity of specialized reproachatives, its identification in a sign language argues for its uniqueness.
- Used to convey reproaches.
- Interpretation derivable from the common semanticities of imperativity and counterfactuality.
- Need to be distinguished from alternative modal constructions with priority modalities or optatives (the only available strategies in languages like English).

Some open issues

- Is the existence of counterfactual imperatives in LSC the result of contact with Spanish or Catalan?
- Does Spanish Sign Language (LSE) have it?
- Does it occur in other SLs?

References


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