

## **Illocution & Modality: The Case of the Imperative in English & Serbian**

**Marijana M. Prodanovic**, University Singidunum  
mprodanovic@singidunum.ac.rs

### **Abstract**

Based on the theoretical background from pragmatics and syntax, this paper examines the notion of the imperative mood in Serbian and English, in terms of its illocutionary force and potential relationship between the force and modal verbs. The aim of the paper is to determine similarities and differences in usage (i.e. meaning) of the imperative mood in the two languages, as well as to show that imperative sentences do, actually, bear the same illocutionary force as deontic sentences with modal verbs (or modal constructions). A contrastive research has been conducted, and the results of the corpus-based analysis, proved similarities between English and Serbian, both in terms of usage of the imperative and its interchangeability with some modal verbs.

### **Key words**

syntax, pragmatics, imperative, meaning/illocutionary force, modal verbs, Serbian, English

### **1. Introduction**

The definition of the notion of modality, according to what can be found in literature, and also, as well as on the basis of previous research on modality, by both domestic and foreign authors, is a very complex issue, and consequently, it is very hard to tell what, in fact, is modal in language, and what is not (Ivić, Trbojević-Milošević, Palmer, Nuyts ...).

In this regard, there is no universally accepted and precise definition of modal sentences — on the basis of what we know about language rules, a sentence gets the modal character with the usage of lexical means and the implementation of a special conjugation form of the predicate. However, it is believed that the sentence should be considered modal if it, in addition to information on the situation, also provides an evaluation of the situation. This, of course, says that we should not necessarily consider each sentence with a modal verb to be a modal sentence, because, according to the abovementioned, this is not a necessary and sufficient condition for its modal character; at this place we can also conclude that the determination of modality requires the involvement of many parts of language (but, of course, and cognitive) apparatus.

The bond between logic and modality has been known since Ancient times; anyhow, this paper will not pay a special attention to the mentioned bond, but we

find the attitude of a logician von Wright (1951) worth mentioning at this place; namely, he gives the classification of modal categories: 1) alethic modes (modes of truth); 2) epistemic modes (modes of thought); 3) deontic modes (modes of liability); 4) existential modes (modes of existence / existence). Palmer (1986) himself, as one of the leading theorists of modality, appreciates this classification, especially the part related to the differentiation of epistemic and deontic modality (he also attaches alethic modality to epistemic modality and considers existential modality to be a part of epistemic modality).

At the same time, Lyons (1977) another author who, in many ways, deals with modality, accepts this classification of modality to epistemic and deontic, but separates them into subjective and objective modality. The main difference, he says, is that subjective modality contains the component *I say so*, while objective modality contains the component *It is so* (the above-mentioned components are related to epistemic modality). On the other hand, deontic modality is based on the component *So be it*, but also contains qualitative differences unlike epistemic — quantitative differences (characteristics).

Modality is also interrelated with the *Theory of Speech Acts*, which, in fact, in linguistics, en générale, occupies an important place. The most important names that are related to speech act theory are Austin and Searle. Austin, in his book, *How to Do Things with Words* (1962), identified utterances he named performatives, using which we, at the same time, perform what we say (they operate in the first person singular present tense). The mentioned author, at the same time, proposed a three-member frame (classification): *Locution* — the words that the speaker utters, that is, the literal meaning of the statement; *Illocution* — which bears the force of the utterance, that is, what the speaker wants to achieve with the utterance and *Perlocution* — the effect that the utterance has on the hearer. Austin considers *Illocution* to be the most important part of this tripartite framework, since it bears the *illocutionary force*, which, in some cases, is explicit, and in some cases is not.

Based on the phenomenon of illocution, Searle classifies speech acts as follows:

- a) Assertives — producer is committed to the truthfulness of the utterance (*I claim, I assume*);
- b) Directives — producer makes the recipient perform the action (*I beg, I command*);
- c) Commissives — producer commits himself (*I guarantee, I promise*);
- d) Expressives — producer expresses his attitude (*I congratulate, I thank*);
- e) Declaratives — the current state of the situation is changed by the usage of the utterance (*I resign, I release sbd*) (Polovina, 2010, p. 15).

According to Palmer (1986), each of these types of speech acts is connected with modality (either epistemic or deontic). Assertives can be linked to epistemic modality, because by these speech acts the speaker expresses a *state of affairs*; then, directives, by which the speaker seeks to make the hearer perform an action, which is associated with deontic modality; with the usage of commissives the speaker obliges himself to do something, which is also connected with deontic modality; finally, for expressives and declaratives Palmer himself does not know whether to connect them with modality and call them modal. Be that as it may, the bond between speech acts and modality is indisputable, since speech acts, like modality itself cannot be seen out of context.

Defining the concept of modality largely depends upon the determination of modal meanings of verb forms (and vice versa), since, in fact, both moods and tenses carry a characteristic of modality. However, the category of mood is often difficult to define, since the category of mood overlaps with other grammatical categories. Anyhow, both English and Serbian have, in their linguistic inventories, the imperative, structurally and functionally correspondent within their respective and corresponding systems of mood. According to the cultural stereotypes the Serbian language tends to be more direct and thus more prone to using the imperative than the English language, since the Anglo-Saxon language perceives the imperative as a metaphor of imposition upon the autonomy and personal space of an individual. On the other hand, it is believed that in Serbian the imperative is used more often, even without politeness markers, though the language inventory provides similar number of language markers of this kind.

Mood (even taken in this traditional, syntactic sense) can be viewed through a different prism, which takes into account illocution and modality, and then factuality, as well, where illocution refers to the identification of sentence realization of a given speech act, and modality refers to the modification of the content of the speech act (mood, in this sense, behaving as an illocutionary force indicating device, on the one hand, and propositional content indicator, on the other hand).

Given the abovementioned, the subject of this paper is the link between the imperative mood and modality, as well as the illocutionary force that the imperative bears, and all this on the example of Serbian and English. The aim of this paper is to show the similarities and differences in the usage (meaning) of the imperative in the English and Serbian language, and, at the same time, to examine whether imperative sentences, in fact, do have the force (illocutionary) of *deontic* sentences with modal verbs (or modal constructions). By imperative sentences, in this paper, we will consider all the sentences with a verb in the imperative, and other analytic and synthetic forms of the imperative (if they

occur in the data). On the other hand, by deontic sentences we will consider all the sentences containing a modal verb, such as: *can, must, should, etc.*

## **2. Data & Research Methodology**

To get answers to the questions about the similarities and differences in the usage of the imperative in Serbian and English, and the interchangeability of the imperative and deontic sentences (sentences with modal verbs) we conducted a survey in which academics from universities in Serbia and Great Britain participated. There were 60 of them, 30 per language, both males and females. The participants were informed that all the answers would remain unanimous and used for the purposes of this study only.

A questionnaire made, and distributed to respondents, consisted of nine tasks, i.e. mini-dialogues, which represent everyday-conversation situations. Each situation includes, in one of the sentences, the imperative form, and the task of participants was to choose one of the listed meanings of the imperative that, in their opinion, best described the situation, and then to give the imperative replacement (if possible) with one of the offered modal verbs. The questionnaire itself was designed by the author of the paper, and prior to its distribution to the respondents, it had been completed by a pilot group of respondents, namely EFL teachers (each of them with the history of leaning English for at least 15 years, and all of them being at, according to the Common European Framework of Reference, C2 level, when it comes to the English language competence, meaning that their linguistic competence is either equal or approaching the one of an educated native speaker), in order for the author to get insight into the questionnaire's validity (in both the languages) for the purposes of this study. The pilot study respondents were divided into two groups, one having been given the questionnaire in English and the other one the questionnaire in Serbian.

As for the meanings of the imperative, offered in the questionnaire, there were 9 meanings of this mood, representing the sublimation of all the meanings, which we had previously come across, by a thorough insight in the literature on mood, in both the examined languages, with the freedom of the author when formulating the 'names' of some meanings, as well as with the freedom in making the decision on the meanings which would be incorporated or not, in the questionnaire, as a tool for collecting data for this study. The following meanings (functions) of the imperative are offered in the questionnaire:

*Get out of here, I do not want to see you!*

Command

*Be kind and admit everything you have done wrong, we will not punish you.*

Plea/appeal

*You'd better tell me everything you know, we all save our lives in that way.*

Advice

*Give me the cup for the table.*

Request

*Bring your winter jackets, it is cold in the mountains.*

Recommendation

*Just try me spill the hot liquid on my clothes one more time!*

Threat

*Do not go in, there are a lot of dangerous dogs out there!*

Warning

*Do not cry, everything will be fine, you'll get over it.*

Comfort

*Leave your car in my yard.*

Permission

The questionnaire was designed in both Serbian and English (with complementary examples, each of which was designed by the author of the paper), and the questionnaire sample (in English) can be found in the appendix to this work. Half of the subjects (academics from Serbia and Great Britain) were given a questionnaire in Serbian and the other half of the subjects in English. All the respondents were informed about the nature of the study and accepted to fill in the questionnaire voluntarily. The purpose of this method of data collection was to, in the data analysis itself, provide the contrasting of Serbian and English meanings of the imperative and the usage of modal verbs that match the meanings.

### **3. Data Analysis & Discussion**

All the responses obtained from the respondents, via the 9 situations from the questionnaire, were observed individually. Namely, we counted how many times each of 9 situations was connected with a specific meaning of the imperative offered, and then how many times each of the situations was linked (if linked at all) with one of the provided modal verbs (which the respondents, as indicated in the questionnaire, considered to be adequate substitutes for the imperative forms in the sentences).

The results of the data analysis have shown that the respondents, in both the languages, understood, in the same way, the illocutionary force of the imperative, and connected the imperative forms, from almost all the dialogs, with the same meanings, in both the observed language samples. Each of the nine dialogues, which were the body of the instrument for data collection, except for the second and the third one, led to the same responses in both the groups of our corpus;

more precisely, the imperatives in the dialogues were associated with the same meanings in Serbian and in English. The imperative form from the first dialogue:

A: *The food is very tasty, compliments to the chef.*

B: *You're right, but it's somewhat insipid to my taste. **Pass** me the salt.*

was associated with the meaning of *request* by respondents in both English and Serbian. However, the verb in the imperative mood, from the second dialogue:

A: *I've drunk so much coffee today that I won't sleep a wink tonight.*

B: *If you experience any troubles with insomnia, **have** a cup of warm milk.*

was associated with the meaning of *recommendation* in the Serbian part of the corpus, and the meaning of the *advice*, in the English sample. The imperative form from the third dialogue:

A: *Hey, we're leaving for the seaside tomorrow!*

B: ***Drive** carefully, there are many careless drivers on the road during the summer.*

in the Serbian language sample was also connected with the meaning of *recommendation*, and in English with the meaning of *warning*. Here we can see the problem of differentiating very similar meanings: *advice*, *warning* and *recommendation*, and this is not surprising, since the differences between the meanings, are, actually, subtle ones. This was confirmed in the fifth dialogue as well:

A: *I lent some money to the new neighbour yesterday.*

B: ***Don't mess** with him, there's a rumour going around that his past is not so bright.*

where the respondents, in both the languages, hesitated between the meanings of *advice* and *warning*. While composing the questionnaire, the author saw each of the offered imperative forms as corresponding to one of the offered meanings only; anyhow, it should be noted that the author had in mind the possibility of mixing the three abovementioned meanings, because of the similarities they share. In this regard, following the results of the analysed data, from the respondents, native speakers of the two languages, the question arises about the necessity of potential grouping of some of the three, or even all three of these meanings, when describing the usage of the imperative (in the future).

Anyhow, as we have already noted before, the rest of the dialogues showed the same preferences by the respondents in the two languages, and thus, for the fourth dialogue, i.e. the imperative form placed there:

A: *Hey, bro, I've just drunk all your Coke.*

B: *Just **try** to do it one more time!*

respondents chose the meaning of *threat* to correspond to it. Then, with regard to the imperative used in the sixth dialogue:

A: *Imagine, my dear, the bastard has cheated on me, after so many years together!*

B: **Don't lose** your nerves, he'll soon get his, you know as they say: What goes around comes around.

the meaning of *comfort* was chosen to be the one appropriate for the used verb form. The seventh situation:

A: *I'm out of space for all my antiques but I don't have the heart to get rid of them.*

B: **Bring** some of them here; you know that we've got plenty of space.

and the verb *to bring* in the imperative mood was perceived as the bearer of the meaning of *permission*, both in English and in Serbian.

For the imperative in last but one dialogue-task in the questionnaire:

A: *Sorry for being rude to you.*

B: **Get out** of my sight immediately!

respondents connected the underlined imperative form with the meaning of *order*. Finally, the dialogue:

A: *You know that I don't like when you spend so much money on trinkets.*

B: *But, mummy, **give** me some money only this time.*

and the underlined imperative form was seen as the one with the meaning of *appeal*.

As we can see, native speakers of both the examined languages, actually, understood, in the same way, the illocutionary force of the verbs given in the dialogues, and, at the same time, the illocution of the offered meanings (recommendation, threat, request, comfort, advice, warning, permission, order, appeal), with the exception of some slight differences, mentioned earlier, regarding the usage, and illocutionary force of the three similar meanings/functions of the imperative, namely, the meanings of: recommendation, advice and warning.

The second part of the questionnaire, in which the task of the respondents was to replace the imperative form from the dialogues, with some of the available modal verbs, if possible, again, resulted in similar results in both the languages. Based on these results, we can conclude that the meaning of *request*, *permission* and *plea/appeal* were, in both the languages, identified with the modal verb *can*; then, similar and often confusing meanings, we mentioned earlier: *recommendation*, *advice* and *warning* were identified with the modal *should*, while the remaining three meanings of the imperative in the two languages brought some differences. First, we find the meaning of *threat*, which, in the part of the corpus in the English language, was not connected with any of the listed modals as frequently so that we could say that, in fact, it corresponds to any of the given modals' meaning; in the Serbian language, on the other hand, this meaning was related to the modal *can/be allowed to* (with negation). Next, the

meaning of *comfort*, in English, was associated with several modal verbs; moreover, the respondents showed, in the aggregate, indecision when choosing a modal that would characterize this meaning, while in the Serbian language sample, modal verb *should* was chosen to be the *representative* of this meaning. Finally, there is the meaning of *command*, whose illocutionary force, in English, to some extent, was identified with the force carried by the modal verb *must*, while the respondents who filled in the questionnaire in the Serbian language, gave the meaning no adequate replacement with any of the offered modal verbs. If we, once again, on the whole, look at the results of this part of the research, regarding modal verbs and the meanings of the imperative which correspond to the modals, minor differences should not be surprising, given the fact that the Serbian language has less organized system of modal verbs than the English language.

#### 4. Conclusion

As shown in the analysis of the data, there is a large number of similarities in the understanding and usage of the imperative in the Serbian and English language. Namely, in the two groups of respondents, one of which was filling in the questionnaire in English, and the other group of respondents the questionnaire in the Serbian language, the imperative was, in a very similar way, connected with the offered meanings, i.e. respondents showed that they understood the imperatives from the dialogues in a similar way. At the same time, the differences, in relation to decisions on the modal verbs which can, potentially, semantically adequately, replace the imperative forms, were slight. We can conclude that in the Serbian and English language, based on the analyzed data, the imperative mood carries the same illocutionary force, to be more precise — the meanings ascribed to it, for the most part, are identical in the two observed language samples, and the imperative forms used to express the given meanings can be adequately replaced with deontic sentences (sentences with modal verbs), without losing any part of the illocutionary force they bear.

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**Contact**

Marijana M. Prodanovic, University Singidunum  
32 Danijelova Street, Belgrade, Serbia  
mprodanovic@singidunum.ac.rs  
prodanovic316@hotmail.com

## Appendix 1

Dear Respondent,

Please read the following dialogues carefully and then fulfil the tasks below. Thank you! ☺

**I Match the underlined imperative with one of the following meanings (one meaning per one underlined imperative): RECOMMENDATION, THREAT, REQUEST, COMFORT, ADVICE, WARNING, PERMISSION, ORDER, APPEAL.**

1.

A: *The food is very tasty, compliments to the chef.*

B: *You're right, but it's somewhat insipid to my taste. Pass me the salt.*

2.

A: *I've drunk so much coffee today that I won't sleep a wink tonight.*

B: *If you experience any troubles with insomnia, have a cup of warm milk.*

3.

A: *Hey, we're leaving for the seaside tomorrow!*

B: *Drive carefully, there are many careless drivers on the road during the summer.*

4.

A: *Hey, bro, I've just drunk all your Coke.*

B: *Just try to do it one more time!*

5.

A: *I lent some money to the new neighbour yesterday.*

B: *Don't mess with him, there's a rumour going around that his past is not so bright.*

6.

A: *Imagine, my dear, the bastard has cheated on me, after so many years together!*

B: *Don't lose your nerves, he'll soon get his, you know as they say: What goes around comes around.*

7.

A: *I'm out of space for all my antiques but I don't have the heart to get rid of them.*

B: *Bring some of them here; you know that we've got plenty of space.*

8.

A: *Sorry for being rude to you.*

B: *Get out of my sight immediately!*

9.

A: *You know that I don't like when you spend so much money on trinkets.*

B: *But, mummy, give me some money only this time.*

II Now, choose one of the following verbs, which, according to your opinion, can be used instead of the underlined forms: CAN/COULD, MUST/HAVE TO, MAY/MIGHT, SHOULD/UGHT TO, WILL/WOULD (the verbs are not restricted to one underlined form only). However, if there are underlined forms that you do not find interchangeable with the abovementioned verbs, please state so.

E.g. Take the sun-protection cream to the beach. → Should (You should take the sun-protection cream to the beach.)