

Imperative Force in the English Modal System

Eric Swanson
ericsw@umich.edu
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Many English modals exhibit what has been called “imperative force”: “the major part of one’s purpose [in using them] is to lead the hearer to satisfy [a] want” (Stevenson, in “The Emotive Meaning of Ethical Terms”).

Getting clearer about modals’ imperative force will help us get clearer about the motivations for non-descriptivism about certain modals, and about the differences between strong and weak necessity modals.

1. Getting clearer about imperative force

NINAN 2005 holds that the strong modal ‘must’ is used to put its prejacent on a Portner-style To-Do list. On Ninan’s account, even if (1) is true it is pragmatically anomalous, because it is pragmatically anomalous to try to put ‘ φ ’ on a To-Do list while trying to make it common ground that $\neg\varphi$.

(1) #Sam must go to confession, but he’s not going to.

Ninan points out that (2) is fine. For this reason he holds that weak modals do not affect To-Do lists (20).

(2) Sam should go to confession, but he’s not going to.

But consider the following claims, which are also anomalous even if true:

(3) #Sam should/ought to go to confession, but it’s all the same to me whether he does.

(4) #Sam should/ought to go to confession, but if I were him I wouldn’t go.

I don’t think Portner-style To-Do lists have enough structure to help us explain the anomaly of (3) and (4).

A better explanation: a speaker who utters

(5) Sam should/ought to go to confession.

presents herself as endorsing a set of norms that gives Sam a reason to go to confession. We get pragmatic anomaly when the speaker then suggests that she is ambivalent about Sam’s going to confession (as in (3)), or that in Sam’s position she would not feel constrained by those norms (as in (4)).

Generalized to strong modals: in (1), the speaker presents herself as endorsing a set of norms that gives Sam conclusive reason to make it the case that φ , while trying to make it common ground that $\neg\varphi$.

The right level of theorizing gives a relatively unified explanation for (1), (3), and (4) being anomalous. The speaker endorses a set of norms, then says something that suggests that she does not endorse that set of norms.

We see similar phenomena with possibility modals:

(6) #Sam can’t miss confession, but it’s all the same to me whether he does.

(7) #Sam may not miss confession, but if I were him I wouldn’t go.

Call the feature uniting the ‘norm endorsing’ uses of these modals “imperative force.”

(NB: I don’t mean to suggest that it *closely* resembles the force of imperatives per se.)

Because not all strong and weak modals are used to endorse norms, not all strong and weak modals are used with imperative force.

Strong modal ('have to') used without the speaker's endorsing any norms:

(8) Sam has to go to confession on Sunday. Isn't that silly? He's going to skip it.

(8) doesn't present "the speaker as the person who gives the orders" (LEECH 1970, 228).

Compare:

(9) #Sam must go to confession on Sunday. Isn't that silly? He going to skip it. (LAKOFF 1972)

Weak modal ('is supposed to') used without the speaker's endorsing any norms:

(10) Sam is supposed to go to confession, but it's all the same to me whether he does.

(11) Sam is supposed to go to confession, but if I were him I wouldn't go.

Possibility modal ('is allowed to') used without the speaker's endorsing any norms:

(12) Sam isn't allowed to miss confession on Sunday. Isn't that silly? He's going to skip it.

Whether a given modal has imperative force is not a purely semantic matter, since some modals' imperative force varies (from use to use). Compare (8) to (one natural reading of) (13):

(13) #[Sam's parent giving instructions to Sam's babysitter.] Sam has to brush his teeth by 8, and have his lights out by 8:30. And he has to go to confession on Sunday. But he's not going to go.

Hypothesis: following LYONS 1977, some modals can be used 'objectively' and 'subjectively.' When a modal is used 'subjectively' the speaker presents herself as endorsing a system of norms that would justify the modalized claim; when a modal is used 'objectively' the speaker does not so present herself. 'Must,' 'should,' 'ought to,' and 'may' are most often used subjectively; 'is supposed to' and 'is allowed to' are most often used objectively. 'Have to' is variable: it is sometimes used subjectively, and sometimes objectively. When it is used subjectively, it patterns with 'must.' But when it is used objectively, it pulls apart from 'must,' just as 'is supposed to' pulls apart from 'should' and 'ought.'

2. The motivations for non-descriptivism

Many think that because of the imperative force of 'must,' 'should,' and 'ought,' we should give these words a non-descriptivist semantics.

But if a non-descriptivist semantics for a modal is doing the work in explaining why that modal exhibits imperativity, then that semantics threatens to predict that the modal *always* exhibits imperativity. But 'have to' (and 'supposed to' and 'allowed to') do not always have imperative force. So they shouldn't be given a non-descriptivist semantics.

Whatever account we give of the subjective uses of 'have to,' 'supposed to,' and 'allowed to,' we should give that account of 'must,' 'ought,' 'should,' 'may,' etc.

Suppose we can give a non-semantic explanation of the difference between 'subjective' and 'objective' uses of modals—not just in bare uses, but also in embedded cases, questions, and so on. Then perhaps the imperative force associated with some uses wouldn't give us motivation in the first place for tinkering with semantics. That is, perhaps the imperative force of modals doesn't put any pressure on the *semantics* that we give for them, even though (as a matter of convention) some modals tend to be used with imperative force, and some don't.

3. The semantics of strong and weak modals

VON FINTEL & IATRIDOU 2008: weak modals target the best worlds relative to a specially designated ordering source: ‘Should φ ’ is true iff all the best worlds relative to the designated ordering are φ -worlds.

Their aim is to formalize (and semanticize) Sloman’s characterization of weak modals:

It is worth comparing statements about what ought to happen or be done with statements about what is *obligatory*, *essential*, or what *must* happen or be done. Where the former kind of statement says (what is a necessary condition for) what is *best*, or *better* than all alternatives, the latter picks out the *only* candidate (or a necessary condition for it). For instance ‘If you want to get to London by noon, then you *ought to* go by train’ picks out the best means without excluding the possibility of others, whereas ‘If you want to get to London by noon then you *have to* (must, will be obliged to etc.) go by train’ implies that no other means exists. (SLOMAN 1970, 390–391).

Von Fintel and Iatridou’s account validates agglomeration: according to it, if ought φ and ought ψ , then ought $\varphi \wedge \psi$. But intuitively (14) and (15) can be true

(14) I should stay behind to help my mother.

(15) I should go ahead to join the front.

while (if I can’t both stay behind to help my mother and go ahead to join the front) (16) is false:

(16) I should stay behind to help my mother and go ahead to join the front.

VON FINTEL 2012 argues that this isn’t a problem.

Moral dilemmas can be talked about with conflicting strong necessity modals as well: “I have a dilemma. My tax return is due midnight tonight. So, I have to work on that. But, my review for L&P is also due tonight. So, I also have to work on that. But I can’t do both. So, I’m screwed, as happens far too often. What should I do?” So, we do not think that the solution will be found in the distinction between weak and strong necessity modals. (20)

But notice that if we replace the ‘have to’s with ‘must’s we get the much less natural:

“I have a dilemma. My tax return is due midnight tonight. So, I must work on that. But, my review for L&P is also due tonight. So, I also must work on that. But I can’t do both. So, I’m screwed, as happens far too often. What should I do?”

Diagnosis: the ‘have to’s in von Fintel’s passage are interpreted objectively, relative to distinct ordering sources. As such they don’t provide a case in which the strong necessity modals genuinely conflict. The ‘must’s in my passage are interpreted subjectively. As such they do provide a case of conflict, so the passage sounds strange.

What’s distinctive about weak modals is that *even when they are used subjectively* it can be fine to say ‘Ought φ and ought ψ ’ for contraries ‘ φ ’ and ‘ ψ ’. This is why it’s important that weak modals not validate agglomeration.

SWANSON 2011 holds that weak modals target ways of resolving incomparability: ‘Should φ ’ is true iff ‘Must φ ’ is true relative to a maximal subset of the relevant ordering each element of which is comparable to the others (cf. VAN FRAASSEN 1973). On this view a weak modal targets what *would* be obligatory on *some* way of resolving incomparabilities in the ordering source—some way of resolving relevant moral or practical dilemmas.

How does this account fare with Sloman’s characterization?

Sloman is probably tracking pragmatic facts about weak modals, not semantic facts.

- (17) ...we should give at least two month's leadtime, maybe three. The more the better.¹
- (18) The Golden Rule, the principle that savings should be equal to or more than the costs[,] will help ensure customers realise savings from the outset if desired.²
- (19) PTAs should send *at least* one member of the executive board to this training. But the more, the better!³

'Should' is used in these sentences to talk about a *minimal* standard.

I doubt that semanticized Slovan can explain why these sentences sound fine, but (20) is odd:

- (20) #It's best to give at least some money to charity. The more the better!

Toward a pragmatic account. 'Ought' and 'should' are usually used subjectively—with the speaker endorsing norms that give the addressee a reason to make true the prejacent—and when they are so used they generate an implicature that the speaker thinks it's worth indicating that she endorses such norms. If the speaker doesn't indicate much else about what norms she endorses, then it would be natural for the addressee to assume that the speaker thinks this aspect of the norms she endorses is more important to her than the other aspects are. (Why else would she have mentioned *it* in particular?) When the partition of possibilities is relatively coarse—as in the getting to London by noon example—it will follow that the speaker thinks the *best* way is by train.

In moral dilemma cases the speaker makes it clear that (roughly speaking) no one aspect of the norms 'wins out' over the others. So we don't see this implicature.

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¹http://theartofmexico.smugmug.com/TimHiggins/18x96-inch-wall-deco/18x96-inch-wall-decor/5216255_T93kbZ

²<http://thegwpf.org/uk-news/5576-green-deal-may-be-more-costly-than-promised-government-admits.html>

³<http://www.rockinghamcountyppta.org/files/Download/District\%20Training\%20Registration.pdf>