Modals in Imperatives: A view from Chinese

The issue: It has been observed that imperatives share many properties with modalized sentences (sentences with a deontic/priority modal element or under a bouletic attitude predicate) (Condoravdi and Lauer 2012, Grosz 2011, Han 1999, Isac 2015, Kaufmann 2012, Portner 2007):

(1)   Sit down!   = 'You should/must sit down!' or 'I want you to sit down'

There is a controversy, however, regarding where the close relationship is encoded in grammar. Portner (2007) and Zanuttini *et al.* (2012) maintain a minimal syntax-semantics view (or the non-modal approach), where the similarities between the two types are only apparent. Semantically, they propose that imperatives are addressee-oriented properties and modal sentences are propositions. Correspondingly, the syntactic structure is rather bare. An imperative clause is analyzed as a reduced *v*P dominated by a Jussive (Mood) phrase. On the other hand, Kaufmann (2012) and Isac (2015) hold a strong syntax-semantics position (or the modal approach). Despite technical differences, both Kaufmann and Isac argue that imperatives contain a priority modal projection, which occupies a CP-peripheral position that is higher than the regular root modals. Kaufmann further argues that the modal semantically triggers a set of presuppositions, which ensure that the modal is used in a performative way. In view of the controversy, this paper examines the two issues: (i) Is there a modal projection in imperatives, and (ii) if yes, what kind of modal is projected in imperatives?

New observations: We support the modal approach from data in the Chinese languages (especially Mandarin Chinese [MC] and Taiwanese Southern Min [TSM]). The first observation is that the priority modal can be overtly pronounced in imperatives in Chinese and is even obligatory in negative imperatives (or prohibitives):

(2)   a. (Yao)   guan men! [MC]   b. (Ai)   kuainn   meng!   [TSM]
          MOD   close door   MOD close   door
          '(Do) close the door!'   '(Do) close the door!'

(3)   a. Bu-yao/Bie   guan men   [MC]   b. M-ai/thang kuainn   meng!   [TSM]
          NEG-MOD   close door   NEG-MOD   close   door
          'Don't close the door!'   'Don't close the door!'

As seen in the data, imperatives contain a priority modal element (we illustrate in MC):

(4)   Ta   **yao** jiao shui/xie   lunwen/ chi   qiaokeli. [deontic/teleological/bouletic]
          he   MOD pay tax/write   thesis   eat   chocolate
          'He must pay his tax/needs to write the thesis (in order to graduate)/wants to eat chocolate.'

The second observation comes from the negative particles used in prohibitives, which provide evidence to Kaufmann's claim that the imperative contains a performative modal. TSM has a descriptive negation form *b-* and a directive one *m-* (names concealed 2022):

(5)   a. Tse tshai   **bo**   ho   chia.   b. Tse tshai **m**   ho   chia.
          this dish   NEG good eat   this dish NEG good eat
          'This dish is not tasty.' [descriptive]   'Do not taste this dish.' [directive]

In strict imperatives in TSM (the subject is restricted to the second person, and the speaker always carries a directive force), the negation form *m* is used (6). The *b*-forms can be found in directives, but close scrutiny shows that these are not genuine imperative because they allow for a third person subject and the speaker's directive force is not obligatory (7):

(6)   (Li) m-ai/m-thang khui meng! (# Tansi   gua ho   li   khui.)
          you NEG-MOD   open door   but   I   let   you   open
          'Do not open the door!' (#But I let you open it).

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(7) Li/I   be-sai   khui meng. (Tansi   gua ho   li/i   khui.)
      you/he NEG-MOD open door   but   I   let you/he open
   'You/he is not allowed to open the door (but I let you/him open it.)'

We also provide syntactic evidence for the claim that the performative modals in imperatives are projected higher than the regular deontic modals (data omitted due to the space limit).

Complications and implications: The imperative-and-declarative (IaD) sentences have posed problems to the strong modal analysis (Keshet and Medeiros 2019, Portner 2012, von Fintel and Iatridou 2017):

(8)   Eat this mushroom and you will be ill.
       ≠ 'You must eat this mushroom and you will be ill.'

Focusing on the very problem, K&M distinguish between two types of IaDs, based on the scope of the imperative operator:

(9)   Take the pill and you will feel better. –>   Please take the pill.   [SC IaD]
(10)   Eat this mushroom and you will be ill. –> Do not eat this mushroom!   [CC IaD]
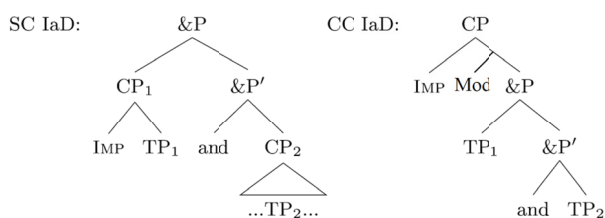
For the SC IaD (Speech-act conjunction IaD), K&M argue that the sentence involves a regular CP conjunction of two propositions with independent speech acts, and the imperative operator (and the hidden modal element) is restricted to the first conjunct. As for the CC IaD (Conditional Conjunction IaD), K&M argue that it is the whole sentence that is interpreted as a prohibitive, so the imperative operator takes scope over the whole conjunct. We agree with K&M in separating the two types of IaDs (see also Kaufmann 2012). In Chinese, the directive force can be clearly observed in SC IaDs with the performative negation *bu-yao* or *bie* 'NEG-MOD', but not in CC IaDs, which only allows a plain negation:

(11) Bu-yao/bie guan men, wo   yao   jinqü.   [SC IaD]
       NEG-MOD   close door I   will   enter   'Don't close the door, and I am going in.'
       Bu/*bu-yao   guan men, xiaotou hui jinqü. [CC IaD]
       NEG/NEG-MOD close door thief   will jinqü 'If you do not close the door, the thief…'

However, their analysis is not without problems. For example, the analysis wrongly predicts that the subject of the declarative clause in CC IaD can only be [2p] (given that the imperative operator in CP only offers a [2p]-feature):

(12) a. Make any false move, and I will shoot!
        b. *[CP Op$_{Imp: [2p]}$ [[TP ⋯], [and [TP I$_{[person:1]}$ T$_{[person:2]}$ will shoot]]]].

We propose that a proper treatment is to assume a subject-oriented volitional modal (such as **gan** 'dare', **xiang** 'want', and **neng** 'able'; see Portner 2009) in the CC IaD. Again, Chinese offers a clue because the modal can be overtly pronounced in imperatives:

(13) **Gan/xiang** chi   zhe   ge   mogu,   ni   hui   shengbing.
        dare/want   eat   this   CLF   mushroom you will   be.ill
        'If you dare/want to eat this mushroom, you will be ill.'

The distinction between SC and CC IaDs, then, lies in the syntactic positions of the (hidden) modal elements. The volitional modal in CC IaDs must remain in the TP-internal root modal position (see Hacquard 2006, 2010) because the raising of the low modal to the left peripheral position is blocked by the movement of the conditional operator in CC IaDs, which is consistent with the analysis of Main Clause Phenomena in Haegeman (2014).