Imperative in English Proverbs

Doc. Dr. Jelena Š. Novaković,

University of Banja Luka

PhD student Božana Tomić,

University of Belgrade

Abstract

Apart from personal pronouns which are by far the most used referring expressions in English and Serbian, reference can be established and maintained using demonstratives.Their function is to refer to the location or distance of a person or an object. The aim of this paper is to examine reference realised by demonstratives with special regard to the restrictions written discourse imposes on their usage. The texts we used for analysis are narrative stories written in the two languages.

Keywords: demonstratives, reference, restrictions, English, Serbian.

Introduction

In modern English, only three different grammatical moods are commonly recognized: indicative, subjunctive, and imperative (Quirk et al. 1985: 149).

Although the basic speech act associated with imperative clauses is commonly held to be that of expressing a command, the imperative is used more frequently in English for less mandatory purposes (Downing, Locke 2006: 205) such as giving advice or warning, or making a plea for an action to be performed. In other words, the imperative is used to show the speaker's attitude toward an unrealised action that is to be performed, if it will be performed at all.

Nevertheless, a number of imperative expressions have undergone change processes which turned them into discourse marker (Bergs, Heine 2010:112). The imperative of verb *look* in the example below does not express command for the addressee to actually look, but functions as an attention getter in a discourse marker sense:

I mean, it may be that. Look, we're gonna have to stop.

The imperative in modern English is formed with the base or plain form of the verb, i.e. it does not show any inflection as such. Inflected verbs in unmarked indicative sentences usually follow the subject whereas the verb in the imperative occurs in initial position.

While the indicative mood and its characteristic verbal inflections are associated with factual assertion, the imperative on the other hand is used to inflect the verb when making requests or demands. It is usually labelled as the marked mood which is used to express commands and other directive speech acts like order *Close the door*!, request *Save some for me*!, offer *Have a drink!,* warning *Mind your own business!*, instructions *Shake before use, and* disbelief: *Don't tell me you've done that*!

A special case of the imperative is the so-called prohibitive, i.e. the explicit command not to do something (van der Auwera & Lejeune 2005). In English, the prohibitive is very similar to the negated form of the indicative.

Some modals like *must* can be used performatively by the speaker imposing a directive. However, despite the strong compulsion expressed by *must* there is not the same degree of directness as would be conveyed by its imperative counterpart where the speaker requires immediate compliance (Collins 2009:35).

On imperative in proverbs

A lesser degree of directness is found in imperative used in idiomatic expression like proverbs and sayings. What tells it apart from the imperative used in everyday communication is the fact that in everyday communication there are two participants, the "commander"‒ the speaker and the "commandee " ‒ the hearer(s). In proverbs the commander is unknown and he is more like an indirect adviser whereas the commandee, or the receiver of the message, may be anyone.

Because of its nature imperative is closely associated with deontic modals. In fact it is often thought to be the strongest of the directives, one that emanates from someone in authority, which, therefore, does not expect non-compliance (Palmer 2001: 80). Having that in mind one would think that modal *must* may be generally used to replace it which is the case in a few analysed examples only (1). However, a great number of imperatives in proverbs may be paraphrased by modal *should* as in (4) and (6):

(1) *When in Rome, do as the Roman do*.

(2) *When a man is in a new place, country or situation he must adapt himself to new   customs.*

(3) *Don't count your chicken before they are hatched.*

(4) *You should not make* plans *that* depend *on something good* happening *before you* know *that it has* actually happened*.*

(5) *Don't cry before you are hurt.*

(6) *One shouldn't cry before one is hurt.*

Our intention here was to show some of the characteristics of the imperative used in proverbs. Almost all examples we analysed express the desire of the speaker to make someone, generally the listener, perform a certain action and they convey a wide range of imperative meanings such as caution (7), recommendation (8), request (9), advice (10) order (11), and so forth depending on the ocassion, context or tone:

   (7) *Look before you leap.*

   (8) *What you have, hold*.

   (9) *Save us from our friends*.

   (10) *Drive gently over the stones*.

   (11) *Do as I say, not as I do.*

There are proverbs in our corpus in which two verbs in imperative are coordinated by *and* as in (12), and there are proverbs in which this combination is made much interesting since the imperatives rhyme as in (13):

(12) *Divide and rule.*

(13) *Change the name and not the letter, change for worse and not the better*.

On the other side, there are imperative clauses joined by *and* or *or* and followed by a clause that have a conditional implication (Quirk 1985: 832). The illocutionary force of the construction varies and it may express offer in the following proverb:

(14) *Come live with me and you'll know me.*

The imperative sentence of this type may be paraphrased by *if-clause* (15) although the imperative occuring in a combination with if-sentences usually gives advice (16):

(15) *If you come to live with me, you will know me.*

(16) *If you can't beat them, join them.*

Despite the fact that the subject is not an obligatory constituent in imperatives in proverbs (17), it is intuitively clear that the meaning of a directive implies that the omitted subject is the 2nd person pronoun you (Quirk 1985: 828). However, there are proverbs in which the subject may occur as in (18):

(17) *Make hay while the sun shines.*

(18) *When you are in a hole, stop digging.*

In English, there are structures with the verb *let* that are considered a type of imperative sentences. The verb *let* is used for the proposals and orders if they are not addressed to the listener (or not only to one listener). Quirk et al. (1985: 148) point out that the "Let x be y" construction signals imperative or optative mood:

(19) *Let sleeping dogs lie.*

(20) *Live and let die.*

A great number of examples from our corpus show that negative imperative sentences are widely used in proverbs. It becomes clear that the imperative does not only urge the hearer to do something, but it can also urge the hearer not to do something. It is achieved by negative form of the imperative *do not/don't* + base form. The prohibiton of this type is common in English proverbs and may convey different meanings like prudence (21), and advice (22):

(21) *Don't put all your eggs in one basket.*

(22) *Don't teach your grandmother to suck eggs*.

But, the imperative in proverbs is not always negated by *do not*. It may also be negated in other ways including negative adverb *never* (23), determiner no (24) and negative pronoun nothing (25):

(23) *Never speak ill of the dead.*

(24) *See no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil.*

(25) Believe nothing of what you hear, and only half of what you see,

However, so-called postverbal negation occurs in proverbs. Unlike all the other ways of negation it expresses a greater degree of prohibition (26). In this pattern *not* is placed after the verb in imperative and it refers to the third person. The only possible paraphrase of the negative imperative of this type is realised by *let not anyone* (27):

(26) *Speak not of my debts unless you mean to pay them.*

(27) *Let not anyone speak of my debts unless he means to pay them.*

Conclusion

One of the characteristics of the imperative used in proverbs is that it expresses a lesser degree of directness and could mostly be replaced by modal should. The illocutinary force of positive imperative is advice in a good number of cases, and in a fewer number warning. The negative imperative shares the same characteristics. It does not usually convey the meaning of prohibition but frequently expresses the meaning of advice, and less frequently the meaning of warning.

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