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Imperatives in classroom language[2]

Abstract

The article is a comparison between imperatives in two different sources. One is the BYU-BNC of spoken classroom language and the other consists of imperatives used in the language of students during their pedagogical practice at primary school. In what concerns the form of the imperative, the former source for the research offers more possibilities for expressing inducement, whereas in the latter it is observed that interim teachers adhere to the most common type. However, attention is not only paid to the form. Speech act theory also finds its place in the paper. The imperatives in the classroom language encode directives such as commands, requests, instructions, etc. Despite the differences in the two corpora, some similarities are also recognized. On the one hand, they concern the verbs used in the imperative and on the other, the types of directives. The peculiarities give rise to some issues about language teaching and ways in which future teachers can improve their classroom language.

Keywords: spoken classroom language, imperatives

Introduction

Classroom language needs imperative structures in order for teachers to be able to give commands, instruct students, encourage them, etc. In addition to the most common structure involving the bare verb stem, the use of *let* is also a way of expressing inducement. According to Greembaum (2004) "first and third person imperatives are formed with *let"* (p. 33). As Downing and Locke (2006, p. 194) put it, *let's* is used to form "a 1st person plural imperative with the implicit Subject *we*". Some authors consider *let's* as an imperative auxiliary (Greenbaum, 2004, p. 33). There are also other structures that can convey incitement, e.g. second person pronoun and one of the modal verbs *can/must/will* in declaratives, and in interrogatives, etc. This paper focuses on the type generally regarded as the most common.

The typical and most frequent imperatives are the second person imperatives with no overt subject (Greenbaum, 2004, p. 32). It is argued that imperatives are finite. They are always the base form of the verb (Huddleston, 1984; Warner, 1992;

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Stefanowitsch, 2003); they are recognized as identical in form to the infinitives (Kessler, 1995), and have no ending for tense or number (Leech & Svatrvik, 1975).

There is no one-to-one correlation between sentence types and communicative uses (Greenbaum, 2004). But imperatives are generally associated with commands and requests. On the one hand, "a command is usually cited […] as imperative, but it is just as likely to be a modulated interrogative or declarative, as *Will you be quiet?, You must keep quiet!"* (Halliday, 2014, p. 195). On the other hand, requests can also be in the imperative (e.g. *Shut the door, please* in Quirk et al., 1985, p. 831) and "a semi-lexicalized unit such as *can you"* (Aijmer, 1996, p. 25) can be used as an indirect request.

As it could be argued that the variety of ways possible for expressing inducement do not make the most common type less interesting, the paper sets out to examine the imperatives. This might be considered a cross-cultural study where English classroom imperatives are viewed on the one hand as used by native speakers, and on the other, as used by foreigners. In this paper the latter are referred to as interim teachers – a shorter term applicable to the status of students in their final year fulfilling the role of a teacher during their internship.

Methodology of the research

As language is best seen in its use by native speakers, the first step to be taken is to examine it by means of the Brigham Young University-British National Corpora (BYU-BNC) which provide an enormous amount of language material properly divided into sections and subsections. Although the topic narrows the range, spoken classroom language also remains a large portion. For the purposes of this research only 20 verbs (*answer, be, close, come, do, draw, get, go, have, keep, listen, look, make, open, put, read, sit, tell, try, write*) have been selected. The reason for choosing these particular verbs lies in the present author's preferences due to the impressions of language used in class. Therefore, the choice might seem arbitrary. The examples are taken from different lessons, e.g. in Literature, Music, Mathematics, Word processing, French, etc. They constitute corpus 1 designated as C_1.

The label C_2 is applied to the second corpus which presents the examples used by future primary school teachers during their work in class as a part of their internship. They are all females aged 20+. All of them are Bulgarian. The students they teach during the internship are also Bulgarian. The recordings include 28 English lessons observed during the second school term in 2015 in the classes of 1st, 2nd, 3rd and 4th grade students at Stefan Karadzha Primary School. The audio has been transcribed in order to facilitate the selection of the appropriate structures. This process has been performed manually. Unfortunately, some of the interim teachers lacked confidence and the English language was not as often employed as it is generally supposed to be. Nevertheless, it gives some idea about the foreign language use in class. C_1 and C_2 are compared in terms of 1) form and 2) speech acts.

Imperatives in terms of form

This part concerns primarily affirmative imperatives and negative imperatives in classroom language. Both corpora present positive imperatives as a predominant part of the examples. *Have* (13.5% of all the verbs used in imperative in C_1), *put* (10.7%), *go* (10.2%), *try* (9.8%) and *look* (8.6%) are the most often used imperatives in C_1. Hunston and Francis (2000, p. 24) give the verb *have* as an example of a verb losing much of its meaning and the meaning is extended to the whole phrase, as it is the case with some of the examples in the corpus (*have a look, have a guess, have a go)*, as in examples (1)–(3).

(1) BYU-BNC_1333_FYA_S_Classroom: you happy with that? Yeah. Yeah. Okay. Just just have a quick look at it. In real life instead of squiggles on bits of

(2) BYU-BNC_885_FMG_S_Classroom: Very good the only the only there's only one letter wrong in that have a guess which one it was. Double T erm It was the

(3) BYU-BNC_596_FM5_S_Classroom: with which acid do you want to use? Hydrochloric's probably the simplest so have a go with that first because then you can see the pattern.

Try is partially delexicalized as in *try and think*, as in example (4).

(4) BYU-BNC_210_G61_S_Classroom: plotting Y against X. A very different graph. Mm. So (unclear). Try and think of what you do when you find D Y by D X.

Examples with *put, go* and *look* are given in (5)–(7). These verbs are the rest of the most common verbs in C_1 listed above with the percentage of use.

(5) BYU-BNC_595_JA8_S_Classroom: more. I know you're doing your French work sheet but turn round and put that down now. It's time to do this work. (speaking-french)

(6) BYU-BNC_719_JJS_S_Classroom: 've got it written in there. So we'll do the questions now. Go through them (pause) Question one. Question one. The noise Hugh heard

(7) BYU-BNC_17_F7R_S_Classroom: at the board please, shh, lips together, er (pause) thank you, look at the board, not this bit, that's not for you, this.

An interesting thing to mention is the occurrence of the verb *be* in imperative. It is rarely used in the passive (Quirk et al., 1985, p. 827). As it is mentioned in the linguistic literature, many stative predications can have a dynamic interpretation, e.g. *"Be glad that you escaped without injury"* (Quirk et al., 1985, pp. 827–828). Palmer (1994, p. 111) gives the example "Be persuaded by your friends" explaining that "there is some notion of agency, in the sense that the addressee is asked to make a decision to be persuaded". As regards this particular research C_1 supplies similar examples, e.g. (8), but C_2 does not.

(8) BYU-BNC_138_F7N_S_Classroom: a suggestion what would that be? A nou-- Yes come on Charlie be brave, a noun, yes, a something isn't it, a,

Although these Bulgarian future teachers of English are quite familiar with the *let's* structure, surprisingly C_2 lacks examples with it, whereas in C_1 there is a variety of structures used for expressing inducement including examples with *let*. All of the

twenty verbs in C_1 except for the verbs *answer, close, open, sit* and *tell* are used in *let*-structures, e.g. (9)–(11).

(9) BYU-BNC_1344_JSU_S_Classroom: you have difficulty catching them like you have difficulty catching foxes. Anyway let's get back to the poem. So we've discovered quite a lot about it all

(10) BYU-BNC_629_J91_S_Classroom: there. (unclear) That's a straight line. (pause) So, well let's go back to the physics. (pause) We've just been going on timing it for

(11) BYU-BNC_468_FLX_S_Classroom: acidic oxide, and the salt that it makes is calcium silicate. (pause) Let's have a look at the reactions. (pause) The most common ore used in the blast

The only structures of inducement in C_2 are the well-known widespread imperatives presented by a bare verb stem.

Sit down (19.4%), open (16.41%), stand up (14.92%), turn (13.43%), go (5.97%) and *line up (5.97%)* are the most often used imperatives in $C_{2.}$

(12) C_{2_2}: Good morning, students! Sit down!

(13) C_{2_34}: Open your Students' books at page 76.

(14) C_{2_12}: Are you ready for the English lesson? Stand up!

(15) C_{2_41}: Try to follow the commands I am going to tell you. OK? Now turn right.

(16) C_{2_39}: Go straight ahead. Turn right.

(17) C_{2_13}: Stand up, please! Line up!

Despite the differences between the two corpora, there are 7 common verbs for C_1 and C_2. Table 1 gives a breakdown of these verbs and the percentage of their use in each corpus. They are put in alphabetical order in the table.

Table 1. Percentage of the verbs in common (BYU-BNC spoken classroom language (C_1) and the verbs used by interim teachers (C_2)) in imperative clauses

No	verb	% of 20 verbs from the BYU-BNC_CI_I research (C1)	% of all the verbs used by interim teachers (C2)
1	go	10.18	5.97
2	listen	1.64	4.47
3	look	8.54	2.98
4	open	0,18	16.41
5	read	1.83	1.49
6	sit	1.2	19.4
7	write	6.07	1.49

Table 1 clearly shows that on the one hand, the least common verb for C_1, i.e. *open,* is one of the most common ones in C_2. An example from each of the two corpora with this verb is given in (18) and (19) respectively.

(18) BYU-BNC_8_JK5_S_Classroom: not understood what they're tr-- trying to explain, they say come on, open your eyes will you, it's there, it's in front of you:

(19) C_{2_53}: Open your students' books at page 72.

Whereas in C_1 the verb *sit* has one of the smallest percentages of use, in C_2 the same verb is the most frequent one. Such prevalence in C_2 might be due to the rules in class as classes usually start with this command preparing students for the beginning of the lesson and the beginning of work.

(20)BYU-BNC_3_F72_S_classroom: sound that you, not touching anybody! (pause) Sit down on your bottom and close your eyes please! Everybody else can do it except for you.

(21) C_{2_9}: Sit down, please!

Go in C_1 is used almost twice as often as *go* in C_2. Contrary to the observations concerning the verb *go*, the verb *listen* occurs even much rarer in C_1 as compared to C_2.

(22) BYU-BNC_6_F72_Classroom: Alright. I just wanted to make sure (unclear). Right so (claps-hands) everybody, listen please. Boys. Donald has still got his (pause) microphone here and he wants

(23) C_{2_31}: Listen and point to the text.

The verb *look* is much more often used in C_1, see (24)–(25). The verb *write* follows quite similar proportions, see (26)–(27).

(24) BYU-BNC_87_FMB_Classroom: 've s-- had some of this. Now can I explain this part over here look at this. Sh sh. Er right I've got this (unclear) contraption upside

(25) C_{2_63}: Look at page 65.

(26) BYU-BNC_265_JP4_S_Classroom: to write it out, how much have got there? Twenty five P, write it down. How much have you got? Two ten P s, and

(27) C_{2_27}: Write a new sentence in your notebook.

The verb with a similar amount of occurrences in both corpora is *read*, see (28)-(29). The small number of examples in C_1 might be explicable, but this fact seems strange in C_2 where the reading task is quite often set in class. Sometimes interim teachers are so much inclined to help the students understand the task that they prefer to use their mother tongue which lowers the percentage of this use.

(28) BYU-BNC_18_F7R_S_Classroom: okay you carry on, you argue, that's alright (pause) number five, read it and then somebody tell me what it means. Read it, number five

(29) C_{2_3}: Read then tick.

As Aikhenvald (2010) puts it "[t]he negative *don't* in English is often used as a lexical item, in the meaning of 'prohibition'" (p. 166). Negative imperatives constitute 4.6% of all the imperatives from C_1. The number of negative imperatives in C_2 is even smaller. It represents 1.5% of all the imperatives in the corpus.

(30) BYU-BNC_9_F7R_S_Classroom: the names? (pause) Yes, anybody else not sure, please don't write on your pencil case. Anybody else not sure? Okay, we've done

(31) C_{2_32}: Don't touch the monsters!

Several examples in C_1 draw the attention to another possibility of negation, e.g. (32).

(32) BYU-BNC_2_F72_S_Classroom: boy who I must have everybody sitting on their bottoms all alone please. And try not to touch anybody else during the story. Alright? (pause) Good. (pause)

Although the verb *try* is in affirmative, the clause is understood as an order to refrain from any moving during the story, i.e. it is a clear prohibition.

Imperatives in terms of speech acts

While the term imperative is generally restricted to clause type, the term directive covers a wide range of speech acts (Collins, 2006). Imperative sentences are not used solely to command (Peters, 1949, p. 536). Commanding is just one of the uses such as inviting, warning, pleading, suggesting, advising, instructing, permitting, requesting, meditating, expressing good wishes, expressing imprecation (Crystal, 1995, p. 219). But Downing and Locke (2006) observe that "the difference between commands and other directives… is… not clear-cut" (p. 205). Huddleston (1984) calls commands/orders, requests and instructions "[t]he central kinds of directive" (p. 133). Sadock and Zwicky (1985) make some distinctions pointing out that requests are for the benefit of the addresser, and in warnings it is vice versa, i.e. it is to the advantage of the addressee if the addressee acts in conformity with the warning. In instruction the completion of any task requires certain steps to be followed. However, it is the authority that matters in the case of commands and the person who gives commands relies on this.

Although Boyer (1987, p. 36) notes that negative commands are often considered separately, in his classification of imperative uses he lists commands and prohibitions as positive and negative commands. A similar approach is applied in this paper.

All the so called "central kinds of directives" are found both in C_1 and C_2.

Commands:

(33) BYU-BNC_4_F72_Classroom: we alright up to three. (unclear) Up to three, right. Listen. There's time just to squeeze in one more story if you'd like

(34) C_{2_6}: Listen to the text!

The examples in C_1 with *listen* and *look* often serve as attention-getters while the specificity of foreign language classes imposes the use of their literal meanings in C_2 as it is with the examples with *let* in C_1.

(35) BYU-BNC_26_FMC_S_Classroom: Yes. Yeah. Fifth word angry. No. (unclear) Let's listen to the complete piece once more. At which point you can complete any other

(36) BYU-BNC_207_GYP_S_Classroom: 's put some numbers in. Let's say we're doing, let's look at the one that I did. Which w-- erm twenty add one take away

Requests:

The use of *please* as a marker of politeness helps to identify the clause as a request.

(37) BYU-BNC_278_JAA_Classroom: don't you? (pause) Can I just erm, carry on working but just look this way a minute please. Have you seen have you seen this? Beautiful

(38) C_{2_6}: Open your student's books at page 53, please!

Words that describe different stages of an activity, such as *now, then, next, finally, first*, etc. help us to be more confident in identifying the clause as an instruction.

Instructions:

(39) BYU-BNC_288_JJR_Classroom: recording the actual words people use isn't difficult, it's quite straightforward really. Look at the diagram and then try the exercise. I want you to have a

(39) C_{2_1}: Now fill in the numbers in the colours you like.

These three types exhaust the types of directives in C_2 but in C_1 they are much more. There are also warnings (24.5%), pleas (0.6%), advice (6.5%) concessions/permissions (10.6%), suggestions/offers (19%).

Plea:

(40) BYU-BNC_48_JT2_Classroom: window of the Ark (laugh) Shh, shh, no, please, listen. He had made and sent out a raven which came and went until

Warning:

(41) BYU-BNC_157_FMR_S_Classroom: on it. Erm (pause) again practice would help. Before you draw it, look for what they're going to ask you. Because you might start from nought

Advice:

(42) BYU-BNC_226_GYX_Classroom: squared Y and Y. Erm (pause) what value, if these are (pause) always look at it X to Y. Right? Yeah. Those are the Xs

Concession/permission:

(43) BYU-BNC_224_GYR_S_Classroom: Law. Yeah, I can remember Ohm's Law. Okay write down Ohm's Law, and that's, when you, when you sort

Suggestions/offers:

(44) BYU-BNC_26_F7U_S_Classroom: (pause) So there's all those sorts of possibilities. (pause) Now, let's look at some examples and (pause) get you to name some of them as well.

Fig. 1 shows the use of different directives in the two corpora. Although the results from the summaries of the commands, requests, and especially instructions display a similar picture, it is obvious that the commands in C_1 are the most-frequently used ones from all of the examined types, whereas in C_2 the instructions are at the top of the frequency scale. In both corpora, requests are relatively small in amount, and commands are often used.

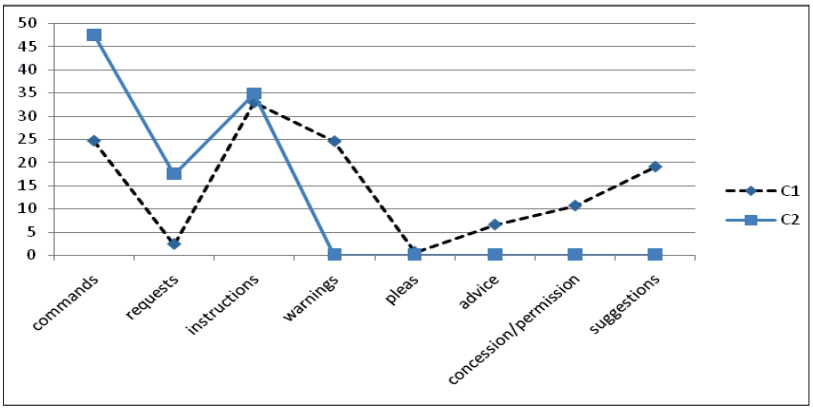


Figure 1. The use of some types of directives in BYU-BNC classroom language (C_1) and in the interim teachers' language in classes (C_2) in per cent.

Conclusion

This short comparison between the two corpora presents the variety of verbs used in classroom language. Table 1 gives such evidence. Although none of the verbs have completely equal values, the percentage of use with the verb *read* approaches equality. The use of *let*-structures in C_1 brings in some diversity in classroom language. The examples in C_2 are simpler and a bit rigid as compared to these in C_1. The significant difference in the percentage of use of some of the twenty verbs in the study might be explained by the difference between the lesson structure in the two countries that the two corpora represent in a way. In general, classes in Bulgarian schools follow lesson procedures that require the use of a set of particular verbs always present in classroom language.

Preparing students for their future work as teachers able to teach the foreign language but also use it as a means of instructing, commanding, etc. should conform with two important things among many others: 1) students (future teachers) need to be exposed to the influence of native speakers' use of classroom language and 2) different tasks should be included in seminars in order to enrich and consolidate the language for successful management in the classroom. By throwing light at the use of imperatives in BYU-BNC classroom language one step forward to 1) is an argument to be made. As what concerns 2), different approaches that fit the particular types of learners can be adopted.

There is another point to mention related to C_2 as a result of the observations in class. On the one hand, the unconscious use of their mother tongue and the lack of confidence in using the foreign language are what mainly deter the improvement of the interim teachers' language. On the other, it affects young students' language acquisition in the classroom.

As C_2 describes the language used during a small number of lessons at just one particular school, it would be a wrong step to make broad generalizations. Hopefully it might serve as a basis for further studies.

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