

# Past imperatives: counterfactuality and impoliteness

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ÖSTERREICHISCHE  
AKADEMIE DER  
WISSENSCHAFTEN

# Table of contents

- 1 Introduction to past imperatives
- 2 Main properties
- 3 How to classify it?
- 4 Formal ingredients
- 5 Outlook
- 6 Acknowledgments
- 7 Bibliography

# Imperatives are prospective

Vanilla imperative

(1) Open the window!

A past imperative?

Palmer (1986/2001: 138) “...there is [...] a construction that looks extremely like a past tense imperative”

Morphologically: three types of past imperatives

- **overt**, e.g. Syrian and Palestinian Arabic, Catalan Sign Language (Karawani and Quer, 2019)

Form: past + imperative

(2)      kunt                      2iStri                      sayyara jdiidi  
be. PST .2M buy. IMPER .2M car.F      new.F  
≈ 'You should have bought a new car.'

## Three types of past imperatives

- overt (Arabic, Catalan Sign Language)
- **root subjunctive** (-ish): Bulgarian (here), Greek (Oikonomou, 2016), Lat.Am.Spanish (Vallejo, 2017), Hungarian\* (É Kiss, 2011)

Form: Subjunctive+pluperfect

- (3)      Hubieras                      traído              el    libro!  
         have.2SG. PST.SUBJ bring. PP the book  
         ‘You should have brought the book!’    Spanish, Vallejo (2017): 114

# Retrospective imperatives

## Three types of past imperatives

- overt (Arabic, Catalan Sign Language)
- **root subjunctive** (-ish): Bulgarian (here), Greek (Oikonomou, 2016), Lat.Am.Spanish (Vallejo, 2017), Hungarian\* (É Kiss, 2011)

Form: Subjunctive+pluperfect

- (4)      Da            beše            donesal      knigata  
         SUBJ AUX. PST bring. PP book  
         ≈‘You should have brought the book’ [Bulgarian]

## Three types of past imperatives

- overt (Arabic, Catalan Sign Language)
- root subjunctive (Bulgarian, Greek, ...)
- **abstract** e.g. infinitival perfect in Spanish (Bosque, 1980)

Form: infinitive perfect

(5)    Haber        venido!  
         have. [INF] come. [PP]  
         ≈ 'You should have come.'



# Overview and goal

- overt (Arabic, Catalan Sign Language)
- root subjunctive (Bulgarian, Greek, (L.Am. Spanish), Hungarian)
- abstract (Spanish, Dutch)

## Questions:

1. What are its main properties?
2. How to classify it? (imperative or something else)
3. What are its formal ingredients?
4. Why is it so rare cross-linguistically?

Previous works: on individual, 'abstract'-type languages.

They don't aim to be cross-linguistically valid.

Only one cross-linguistic work to date: van Olmen (2018).

**Here:** derive cross-linguistic ingredients starting from the 'middle' type

# Table of contents

- 1 Introduction to past imperatives
- 2 Main properties**
- 3 How to classify it?
- 4 Formal ingredients
- 5 Outlook
- 6 Acknowledgments
- 7 Bibliography

## Naturally occurring example

- (6) Context: Rammstein discussion group, fan made video with pieces from different shows
- a. Person A: Who is the female singer?
  - b. B: Da        beše        složil        screenshot  
      [SUBJ] [AUX.] [PST] include. [PP] screenshot  
      ≈ 'You should have included a screenshot (We can't read minds.)' [Bulgarian]

Some corpus examples from Bulgarian (BgTenTen21, SketchEngine)

- (7) [you] **SUBJ had helped** the woman instead of asking her questions!
- (8) Your brain is the size of a chicken's! At least [you] **SUBJ had thought** about what makes people turn to alternative medicine...
- (9) Ex-[communists] have no right to comment! [pro] **SUBJ had done** something back then!

- You **should** have and **could** have done the thing  
Not felicitous when x is outside of the subject's **control**:

(10) #Da (ne) beše valjalo!  
SUBJ (neg) be.PST rain.PP  
≈#‘It should(n’t) have rained.’

(11) #Da ne beshe padal/umiral!  
SUBJ neg aux.PST fall.PP/die.PP  
≈#‘You shouldn’t have fallen/died.’

# Main properties

- Modality: you could and should have done the thing
- Counterfactuality ('CF'): you didn't do the thing

# Main properties

- Modality
- Counterfactuality
- Reprimand/impoliteness
  - It is evaluative and markedly negative (can't be polite or neutral)

# Main properties

- Modality
- Counterfactuality
- Impoliteness
- Non-declarative force
  - exclamative/emotive intonation
  - non-embeddable

Notably: even though embedded imperatives use subjunctive

(12) Toj kaza da složiš screenshot...  
he said SUBJ include.PRES.2SG screenshot  
'He told you to include a screenshot'

(13) Toj kaza \*{složi} / \*{da beše složil...}  
he said put.IMP SUBJ AUX.PST put.PP  
He said that you should have included a screenshot.



- Modality
- Counterfactuality
- Impoliteness
- Non-declarative force
- not felicitous out of the blue, it's a **reaction** to something (Spanish: Bosque, 1980, Biezma, 2011)

- Modality
- Counterfactuality
- Impoliteness
- Non-declarative force
- Reaction
- the current speaker was not relevant at the time of the event

- Modality
- Counterfactuality
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- Non-declarative force
- Reaction
- the current speaker was not relevant at the time of the event
- (dedicated construction, cf. Van Olmen, 2018)

# Table of contents

- 1 Introduction to past imperatives
- 2 Main properties
- 3 How to classify it?**
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- 6 Acknowledgments
- 7 Bibliography

# How to classify it?

Reproachatives relate to a constellation of constructions

- **imperatives**, cf. Arabic, but morphology is related **in all 3 types**

(14) No fumar  
not smoke.INF  
'No smoking'

(15) Ti da mŭlčiš!  
you SUBJ keep.quiet.PRES.2sg  
'You keep quiet!'

- directive; non-declarative; can be impolite;
- true imperative accounts on Spanish (Bosque, 1980; Vicente, 2013; Vallejo, 2017), Dutch (Mastop, 2005, 2011; Kaufmann, 2011); Catalan Sign Language (Karawani and Quer, 2019)

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However: conceptually hard to grasp + typologically unlikely (van Olmen, 2018); acknowledged by some accounts

# How to classify it?

Reproachatives relate to a constellation of constructions

- imperatives, cf. Arabic
- **optative** (Biezma, 2011 on Spanish) - exclamative, CF, 'desire'  
BUT: separate OPT morphology in all languages with past.imp  
+ **not interchangeable** with past.imp (in Spanish, Vicente, 2013)

(16) (#de) da beše složil screenshot...  
OPT SUBJ aux.PST put.PP screenshot  
'If only you had included a screenshot!'

(17) #(de) da beše spečelil ot lotariata  
OPT SUBJ aux.PST win.PP from lottery  
'If only you had won the lottery!'

it's not about the wish of the speaker; not inherently impolite; not restricted to ability cases; morphologically distinct, cross-linguistically common

# How to classify it?

Past imperatives relate to a constellation of constructions

- imperatives, cf. Arabic
- optative (Biezma, 2011)
- (insubordinated/fragment) **inverted CF antecedents** (Biezma, 2010)

(18)    Haber        salido        antes.  
         have.INF leave.PP before  
         ‘Had you left earlier, you would have arrived on time.’

BUT: not applicable cross-linguistically either way (e.g. English; or Spanish, Biezma, 2010: [16]; Vicente, 2013: 43); not impolite, declarative



# How to classify it?

Past imperatives relate to a constellation of constructions

- imperatives, cf. Arabic
- deontic modal
- optative (Biezma, 2011)
- (insubordinated/fragment) **inverted CF antecedents** (Biezma, 2010)

(19) Haber salido antes.  
have.INF leave.PP before  
'Had you left earlier, you would have arrived on time.'

Past.imp. - and imp - can be consequents (like imp):

(20) If you want to go to Harlem, take<sup>IMP</sup> the A train.

(21) If he wanted to get into so many topics,  
then da beše<sup>AUX.PST</sup> napisal<sup>WRITE.PP</sup> several books!  
[Bulgarian, natural]

# How to classify it?

Past imperatives relate to a constellation of constructions

- imperatives, cf. Arabic
- optative (Biezma, 2011)
- (insubordinated/fragment) inverted CF antecedents (Biezma, 2010)

(22) Haber salido antes.  
have.INF leave.PP before  
'Had you left earlier, you would have arrived on time.'

Past.imp. - and imp - can be consequents (like imp):

(23) Si quieres llegar a tiempo, coge<sup>IMP</sup> el metro!

(24) Si querías haber llegado a tiempo, haber cogido el metro!  
[Spanish] Vicente (2013): (86), (87)

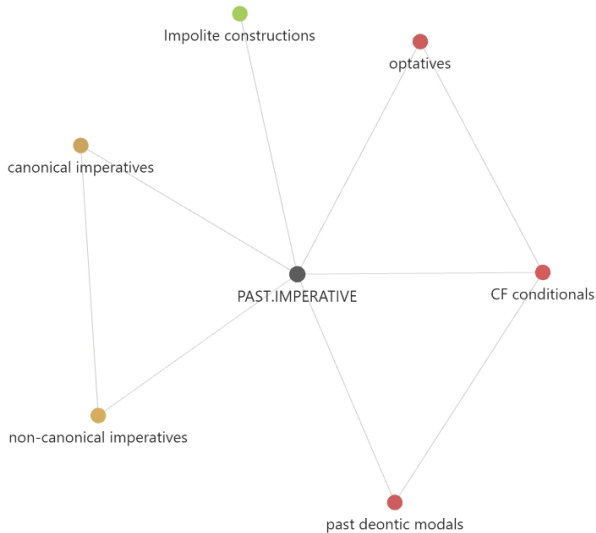
# How to classify it?

Past imperatives relate to a constellation of constructions

- imperatives, cf. Arabic
- optative/CF conditional (Biezma)
- **dedicated construction**, van Olmen (2018): REPROACHATIVE arising historically via analogy
  - other conventional impolite constructions (Jain, 2022; Van Olmen et al. 2023; Hu and Van Olmen, 2025), INSULTIVE speech act (Giomi and Oers, 2022)

(Not synchronically falsifiable, less cross-linguistic prediction)

# A constellation of constructions



# Table of contents

- 1 Introduction to past imperatives
- 2 Main properties
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- 4 Formal ingredients**
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- 6 Acknowledgments
- 7 Bibliography

Minimal formal ingredients:

- **prioritizing modality**
- **(real) past**
- **strong counterfactuality ('CF')**

- **prioritizing modality** (Portner, 2009): shared by imperatives, root subjunctives, and root infinitives (Oikonomou, 2016):
- **past tense**: scopes over root modals (Cinque, 1999; Hacquard, 2006), evaluation is shifted away from both *now* and *speaker*  
→ ‘what grounds the reproach is the addressee’s wish’ (Karawani and Quer, 2019)  
(here: the subject/agent/center’s decision)

Strong CF morphology is a necessary ingredient

- **Weak CF:** CF inference is cancelable in 'subjunctive' conditionals (Anderson, 1951; von Stechow and von Stechow, 2023)

(25) If Jones had taken arsenic, he would have shown exactly the symptoms that he is in fact showing. Therefore, we can conclude that he did take arsenic. (Anderson, 1951)

- **Strong CF:** in some languages, it is not cancelable (Nevins, 2002)
  - Palestinian Arabic (Karawani, 2014)
  - Bulgarian (Simeonova, 2023)
  - Greek (Iatridou, 2000: (ii))
  - Hungarian (pilot data collection; E. Georgieva, B. Gyuris, p.c.)
  - Spanish (Vallejo, 2017)



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  - Hungarian (pilot data collection; E. Georgieva, B. Gyuris, p.c.)
  - Spanish (Vallejo, 2017)

All have pst.imp - not an accident.

## Impoliteness as 'duh!'

- Biezma (2010; 2011): impoliteness via a 'duh' effect: the (now) false proposition was '**prominent**' in the common ground at the relevant past time when the addressee could have taken another route (**advised or world knowledge**); resolved in **pragmatics**

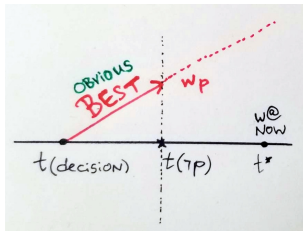
# Formal ingredients: you didn't do the obvious thing!

Impoliteness as 'duh' - for free through strong CF

Strong CF is a presupposition, i.e. shared knowledge (common ground)

Proposal: reproach is the combination of

- the **best** thing to do (modality) was in the common ground ('world knowledge' → **obviousness**/'duh')
- **strong CF**: you took the other route



You didn't do the obvious best thing when you could've

# Table of contents

- 1 Introduction to past imperatives
- 2 Main properties
- 3 How to classify it?
- 4 Formal ingredients
- 5 Outlook**
- 6 Acknowledgments
- 7 Bibliography

Previous accounts make wrong or no cross-ling predictions:

- if 'just' imperative, optative etc - should be much more common
- dedicated construction/historical approach - limited predictions

Here: strong CF combined with modality can:

- explain why it is seemingly rare (Van Olmen, 2018)
- help to find more languages, e.g. go through those in (Nevins, 2002)

# Table of contents

- 1 Introduction to past imperatives
- 2 Main properties
- 3 How to classify it?
- 4 Formal ingredients
- 5 Outlook
- 6 Acknowledgments**
- 7 Bibliography

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# Table of contents








- 1 Introduction to past imperatives
- 2 Main properties
- 3 How to classify it?
- 4 Formal ingredients
- 5 Outlook
- 6 Acknowledgments
- 7 Bibliography**







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# The case of Hungarian

Hungarian is so far the only ‘middle’ language that does not use overt subjunctive or imperative morphology, but a dedicated form of CF + past

- I argued that the necessary ingredients of past.imp are:  
(real) past + prioritizing modality + strong CF
- H has **strong CF** mood which is in complementary distribution with the subjunctive
- H is the only past.imp language that does not have a ‘fake past’ based CF, i.e. past is always ‘real’
- H does not have perfect, only simple past
- H imperative/subjunctive form does not combine with past tense, i.e. there is no morphology
- the **past strong CF** marked ‘past.imp’ expression in H shares morpho-syntactic properties with **imperatives**
- prioritizing modality is often covert cross-linguistically (Grosz, 2012, Oikonomou, 2016 a.m.o.)