

## A uniform analysis of conditional imperatives

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Conditional imperatives (conditionals with imperative consequents, henceforth CIs) present an interesting test case for theories of imperatives. We critically discuss a recent proposal about CIs (Schwager, 2006) which addresses a number of questions unique to CIs in an attempt to integrate their analysis into a comprehensive general theory of imperatives. We point out a number of weaknesses in the proposal which, however, can be overcome by refining or removing certain problematic assumptions. The resulting account is an improvement in terms of both coverage and simplicity.

*Imperatives.* We start from the following pair of assumptions from Schwager (2005, 2006).

- (1) a. Imperatives are modal expressions involving an operator IMP whose modal base (MB) is the common ground (CG) and whose ordering source (OS) is bouletic, deontic or teleological, inducing a preference ranking whose exact interpretation (wishes, commands, advice, etc.) is contextually determined.
- b. The speaker is an epistemic authority on both MB and OS.

We argue that both need to be revisited in order to give an adequate account of CIs.

*Conditionals.* We adopt the common assumption that conditionals are modal constructions: A sentence ‘If A, (M) C’ involves an overt or covert operator M whose MB is restricted by the antecedent A and whose nuclear scope is the consequent C. When M is covert, it has a default epistemic or circumstantial MB and the modal force of (human) necessity. We refer to this default modal operator as  $M_{def}$ . This analysis allows for two construals of conditionals ‘If A,  $M^*$  C’ with an overt modal operator  $M^*$ :

- (2) a. ‘If A,  $M^*$  C’ *overt conditional operator (OCO)*
- b. ‘If A,  $M_{def}$  [ $M^*$  C]’ *covert conditional operator (CCO)*

In (2a),  $M^*$  is the operator whose MB is restricted by A, while in (2b),  $M^*$  is nested in the nuclear scope of the the default modal operator.

*Conditional Imperatives.* Following the modal analysis of imperatives and treating IMP as an “overt” modal operator, CIs are of the form ‘If A, IMP C’. According to (2), this allows for both OCO (‘If A, IMP C’) and CCO (‘If A,  $M_{def}$  [IMP C]’) construals. Schwager argues that (3a) requires a CCO analysis while (3b) requires an OCO analysis.

- (3) a. If jaywalking is illegal, don’t do it.
- b. Don’t get lost. But if you do get lost, call me.

We show that neither claim stands up to scrutiny, as both rest on implausible and unnecessary assumptions. We develop our proposal in the course of the argument.

*Problem 1: How specific are global preferences?* (3a) is true in a context in which the speaker conveys a general preference for (traffic) law-obedience, but is unsure about the laws and the addressee’s dispositions. Schwager claims that in this situation OCO wrongly predicts (3a) to imply that jaywalking is illegal. According to OCO, (3a) is true at a world  $w$  iff among the worlds in  $CG_w$  at which jaywalking is illegal, those ranked best by  $OS_w$  are such that the addressee does not jaywalk. Schwager attempts to capture the global preference for law-obedience by stipulating that for all  $w$ ,  $OS_w = \{\text{you obey } w\text{'s laws}\}$ . But then, if jaywalking is not illegal at  $w$ , the ranking between any two worlds does not depend on the addressee’s (non-)jaywalking there. Hence the sentence is false at  $w$  if there are antecedent-worlds in CG at which the addressee jaywalks.

*Solution 1: Global preferences inform, but aren’t, local ones.* Schwager’s argument rests on the assumption that  $OS_w$  ranks worlds  $u, v$  according to the laws *at*  $w$ , rather than the local laws at  $u, v$ . Assuming instead that for all  $w$ ,  $OS_w = \{\{v \mid \text{you obey } v\text{'s laws}\}\}$ , the problem is avoided and a plausible OCO analysis for (3a) becomes available.

Notice that this solution no longer requires that at any  $w$ ,  $OS_w$  induce a preference for or against jaywalking *per se*; rather, it imposes a “higher goal” (law-obedience) which may call for different courses of action at different worlds. Thus the bouletic OS relevant for a given CI does not always fix an attitude toward the imperative’s propositional content. This move offers a solution to problems affecting other CIs, too.

*Problem 2: How global are specific preferences?* The CI in (3b) is intuitively true if calling is generally dispreferred but a good last-resort strategy. Schwager claims that CCO does not capture this: Since the MB of the embedded IMP is not restricted by the antecedent, the CI implies that among the worlds in  $CG_w$  at which the addressee is lost, those are ranked best by the OS of the covert  $M_{def}$  at which calling is a global (unconditional) preference. But this is at odds with the first sentence in (3b), which asserts a global preference for not getting lost and thus, in our context, against calling. Schwager seeks to remedy this by stipulating that the restriction imposed by the antecedent on the MB of  $M_{def}$  is somehow copied to or inherited by IMP, so that, at worlds at which the addressee is (not) lost, the MB of IMP comprises only worlds at which he is likewise (not) lost. Similar mechanisms have been proposed for conditionals with non-epistemic overt operators before (e.g., Frank 1996). But the idea is counter-intuitive under the bouletic construal of IMP as it implies that the speaker *at utterance time* has different preferences at different epistemic alternatives, i.e., is uncertain about his/her preferences.

*Solution 2: One cannot choose the impossible.* Our alternative to Schwager’s solution starts with a similar assumption as before. We argue that the bouletic background of (3b) is a tacit “higher goal” – say for concreteness, that the speaker and the addressee to meet – which depending on the circumstances calls for different courses of action. In addition, however, the circumstances determine which courses of action are in fact available. We incorporate this latter element into the theory as follows: (i) It is a general (Searlean “preparatory”) condition on the felicitous use of imperatives that the addressee be in a position to make the propositional content true. (ii) The speaker knows, or presumes to know, what options the addressee has in case the antecedent is true. Formally: At each world  $w$  and time  $t$ , the MB of IMP is restricted to the *metaphysical alternatives* (Condoravdi, 2002) of  $w$  at  $t$ ; and the speaker’s authority (1b) extends to knowledge of what those metaphysical alternatives are. To make sense of this, we re-cast the authority condition as a speaker presupposition rather than a semantic presupposition as in (1b). Now, the restriction to metaphysical alternatives is well motivated and removes Schwager’s case against CCO.

Thus *pace* Schwager, neither (3a) nor (3b) settle the question of OCO vs. CCO. We note, however, that OCO is generally problematic for conditionals with non-epistemic overt modals. It is highly stipulative; moreover, it wrongly implies that sentences of the form ‘If  $A$ ,  $Must_{deont} A$ ’ are tautological (Zvolenszky 2002) and other undesirable effects (cf. Frank 1996). For these reasons, and having demonstrated the viability of CCO, we conclude that CCO is preferable.

*The future.* (3a) and (3b) are most naturally interpreted as “non-predictive” and “predictive” conditionals, respectively, in Kaufmann’s (2005) terms (according as the antecedent is “presumed decided” at speech time). We end by showing that our analysis easily extends to a temporal framework by adopting Kaufmann’s account, extending the MB and the evaluation times of the constituents into the future for predictive conditionals.

**Selected References:** Frank (1996) *Context dependence in modal constructions*. PhD thesis, Schwager (2006) Conditionalized Imperatives. *Proceedings of SALT 16*. Zvolenszky (2002) Is a possible worlds analysis of modality possible? *Proceedings of SALT 12*.