

Imperatives and grades of modality

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A common strategy for exploring the semantics of imperatives, and in particular the commitment states or preference states which imperatives help create, has been to investigate the relationships between imperative and modal sentences in discourse (e.g., Lewis 1979, Portner 2007, Kaufmann 2011, Charlow 2011, Starr 2012, Aloni and Ciardelli 2011). This strategy has not, however, taken account of much of the structure of the modal domain; specifically, it has not used the fact that modal expressions are gradable (Portner 2009, Yalcin 2010, Lassiter 2011).

Many modal expressions, across all subtypes of modality, are gradable – sometimes generally, sometimes in particular contexts. An examination of the contexts in which deontic elements like legal, illegal, correct, and to code are gradable reveals what features those contexts have which allow for the definition of deontic scales. Roughly speaking, we find that deontic gradability can occur when the “rules” which underlie the truth conditions for deontic expressions (the conversational backgrounds, in Kratzer’s terms) can be differentiated in terms of the following: (a) their rank within the system of rules, (b) the level of commitment towards them in the context of use, and (c) the speaker’s degree of certainty concerning their applicability.

In this setting, we can better explain variation in the force of imperatives (and performative modal sentences) in terms of the way they contribute to the creation of deontic scale structures.