

Imperatives and directive clauses in German

The directive clause is one of the traditional sentence types handed down from the grammaticography of ancient Greek and Latin (cf. Duden 2016, pp. 899–905). The imperative is a verb form considered typical of directive clauses. The summarized article picks up on observations in recent literature that indicate an increasing uneasiness with both categories (Donhauser 1986; Duden 2022, pp. 111–113; Platzack/Rosengren 1994; Klein 2006; pp. 249–251).

A sentence, as it is understood in traditional grammar, is a linguistic unit which contains a “finite” verb form (marked for tense and mood) and a subject demanding agreement in person and number. Directive clauses are mostly defined from a functional point of view: as sentences used for directive speech acts (in a very broad sense) (cf. Wrátil 2013, p. 124). From a formal perspective, it might be tempting to conflate them with imperative phrases. It is not clear, however, that imperative phrases have the grammatical form of sentences. Typically, they do not have a subject; also, it is debatable whether imperatives are “finite” verb forms. If imperative phrases are not sentences, they should not be assigned to a sentence type. What does this imply for the category of directive clauses?

As a first step, the paper investigates the status of German imperative forms within the system of verb inflection. A main distinction is drawn between A(spect)-forms, traditionally called “infinite”, and T(ense)-M(ood)-forms, traditionally called “finite”. The morphology of both classes is described according to standard literature (cf. Bech 1983 [1955/1957]; Richter 1982; Wiese 1994; Bredel/Lohnstein 2001). Within “finite” forms, those of the “third” person singular are shown to be the simplest. In syntactic terms, differently from all other personal forms, they do not require a subject.

Imperatives are traditionally categorized as mood forms of the “second” person; a distinction is made between the “imperative singular” (*nimm, wasch(-e), atm(-e)*) and the “imperative plural” (*nehm-t, wasch(-e)t, atm-et*). Some authors also classify the polite forms of the “third” person plural (*nehm-en, wasch-en, atm-en Sie*) as imperatives, as well as the adhortative forms of the “first” person plural (*nehm-en, wasch-en, atm-en wir*).

Only “singular imperatives” of verbs like *nehmen, geben* or *lesen*, whose stem vowel alternates between *e* and *i* in the present tense forms, are used exclusively with an imperative function: *nimm, gib, lies*, etc. All “plural imperatives” are homonymous with indicative and/or subjunctive forms. “Singular imperatives” of verbs without alternation of the present tense stem vowel (*hol(-e), geh(-e), bring(-e)*, etc.) are homonymous with forms of the “third” person singular present subjunctive. With many verbs, the schwa ending of this form can be optionally elided.

The paper recognizes only forms of the type *nimm, gib, lies* as true imperatives, including also morphologically parallel forms of verbs without alternation of the present tense stem vowel. All other forms traditionally classified as “imperatives” are grouped together with homonymous indicative or subjunctive forms.

Imperative forms consist of the simplest variant of the verb stem, without an ending. As their morphological composition does not follow the building rules for “finite” or “infinite” forms, they are described as grammatically featureless, “non-finite” forms. Their meaning is no more than the lexical meaning of the verb stem. As they are unmarked for tense and mood, imperative phrases cannot encode propositions capable of bearing truth values. They must always be interpreted against volitional backgrounds. Depending on the context of interaction, they allow a wide range of interpretations, e. g., desire, permission, demand, etc. (cf. Lohnstein 2000, pp. 64–66, 117–119, 2019, p. 40 and elsewhere).

The homonymy between traditional “singular imperatives” and “finite” forms of the “third” person singular present subjunctive, observable in verbs without alternation of the present tense stem vowel (*hol-e*, *geh-e*, *bring-e*, etc.), enables reanalysis of imperatives as subjunctive forms. “Finite” forms have the advantage of being able to encode grammatical meaning beyond the lexical meaning of the verb stem. They can be understood as explicit means of indicating the intended speech act. This can possibly explain why imperatives tend to be replaced in present day German by “third” person singular present subjunctive forms, even if they are not homonymous, e. g. *nehm(-e)*, *geb(-e)*, *les(-e)* instead of *nimm*, *gib*, *lies*. Syntactically, this replacement is unproblematic because neither the imperative nor the “third” person singular requires an explicit subject.

The article suggests a grammatical re-categorization of phrase types used for directive speech acts. Directive clauses, in the traditional sense of the term, exhibit a variety of verb forms and different properties of subject selection. Only some of these expressions have the grammatical form of sentences.

Clauses with a directive function containing the forms of the “third” person plural for polite treatment (e. g., *gehen Sie*) or the adhortative forms of the “first” person plural (e. g., *gehen wir*) can be counted as optative clauses. They require an explicit subject. Their verb forms can be analysed as present indicative or subjunctive forms (e. g., *seien Sie bitte vorsichtig*). Person and number agreement between the subject and the “finite” verb form is obligatory:

- (1) *Genießen Sie den Abend!*
- (2) *Vermeiden wir Streit!*

The same holds for clauses of the type exemplified in (3). Their subject is a quantifier such as *jemand* or *einer*. Their verb form can be interpreted as “third” person singular present subjunctive. Person and number agreement is obligatory. The schwa ending of the verb form, indicating subjunctive mood, can be retained (*bring-e*) or, optionally, elided:

- (3) *Bring doch mal jemand den Müll runter!*

Imperative phrases, as in (4) and (5), do not have the grammatical form of sentences, and will, therefore, not be assigned to a sentence type. The imperative, as a “non-finite” verb form (consisting of the simplest variant of the verb stem, without an ending), does not have a grammatical subject. Optionally, a “second” person singular pronoun can be included as a “thematic subject”, but a person and number agreement will not be established. The “thematic subject” can also be a third-person quantifier, such as *jeder* in (5):

- (4) *Ruf (DU) bitte den Arzt.*
- (5) *Jetzt nimm sich mal jeder ein Stück Brot.*

Only two types of phrases remain as directive clauses. Both of them have a “finite” verb form. Each one shows particular properties in terms of subject selection and subject-verb agreement.

For Type 1, the verb form is the “third” person singular present subjunctive, with the corresponding variant of the stem morpheme (*sei*), the schwa ending typical of subjunctive forms (*atm-e*, *rechn-e*, etc.), or even both properties (*wasch-e*, *wiss-e*, etc.). The “second” person singular pronoun *du* (typically stressed) can appear as a “thematic subject”. No person and number agreement is established:

(6) *Sei froh!*

(7) *Atm-e (DU) mal durch!*

(8) *Wasch(-e) dir bitte die Hände.*

For Type 2, the verb form is the “second” person plural present indicative or subjunctive. The subject is the pronoun *ihr*; person and number agreement is established. Although generally obligatory, the subject pronoun can remain implicit in this clause type when there is no contrastive intention:

(9) *Macht (IHR) mal PLATZ da!*

(10) *Ihr Kinderlein komm-e-t.*

Due to the described properties regarding subject selection and subject-verb agreement, the re-categorized directive clause constitutes a “grey area” between sentences and non-sentences.

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