

Imperative in English Proverbs

Jelena Š. Novaković^{1*}, Božana Tomić²

¹Univerzitet u Banja Luci, Bosnia and Herzegovina; ²University of Belgrad, Serbia

*jelena.sajinovic@gmail.com

Submitted: 2025-04-28 · Accepted: 2025-07-28 · Published: 2025-08-28

DOI: 10.26417/0mwhec26

Abstract

This paper investigates the syntactic structures, semantic properties, and pragmatic functions of the imperative mood as utilized within English proverbial discourse. While the basic speech act associated with imperative clauses is traditionally understood as the issuance of a command, its application in proverbs demonstrates a significant softening of illocutionary force, shifting toward advice, caution, and universal moral instruction. By examining a wide corpus of English proverbs, this study analyzes how the imperative mood intersects with deontic modality and Politeness Theory. We categorize the structural typologies of proverbial imperatives—including bare imperatives, explicitly subjected imperatives, coordinated conditional imperatives, and exhortative let-constructions. Furthermore, the paper provides a diachronic analysis of negation patterns, contrasting modern dosupport prohibitions with archaic post-verbal negation preserved in proverbial lore. Ultimately, we argue that the imperative in proverbs mitigates face-threatening acts by displacing the authority of the command from the immediate speaker to the collective wisdom of the culture.

Keywords: imperative mood; paremiology; English proverbs; pragmatics; illocutionary force; deontic modality; syntax; prohibition

Introduction

In the grammatical architecture of modern English, three primary moods are generally recognized: the indicative, the subjunctive, and the imperative (Quirk et al., 1985; Biber et al., 1999). The indicative mood, characterized by characteristic verbal inflections and explicit subjects, is heavily associated with factual assertion and declarative statements. The subjunctive, increasingly marginalized in contemporary English, deals with the hypothetical, the counterfactual, and the mandated. The

imperative, however, occupies a unique pragmatic space. It is the mood of direct address, utilized primarily to inflect the verb when a speaker is making requests, issuing demands, or offering directives.

Although the basic speech act historically and structurally associated with imperative clauses is that of expressing a direct command, modern linguistics recognizes that the imperative is utilized far more frequently for less mandatory, highly nuanced purposes (Downing & Locke, 2006). In everyday discourse, the imperative serves a wide spectrum of directive functions: giving advice, issuing warnings, making pleas, or offering invitations. In essence, the imperative is a grammatical mechanism used to manifest the speaker's attitude toward an unrealized action that the speaker desires to be performed by the addressee (Palmer, 2001).

Furthermore, a number of imperative expressions have undergone grammaticalization and pragmaticalization processes, transforming them into discourse markers (Hopper & Traugott, 2003; Bergs & Heine, 2010). For example, the imperative of the verb *look* in conversational English often no longer expresses a physical command for the addressee to direct their vision. Instead, it functions as an attention-getter or a conversational pivot, as seen in the utterance: "*Look, we're going to have to stop.*"

Syntactically, the imperative in modern English is formed utilizing the base or plain form of the verb, lacking tense and aspect inflections. While inflected verbs in unmarked indicative sentences strictly follow the subject, the verb in an imperative clause typically occupies the absolute initial position, frequently with a covert (understood) subject. It is universally classified as a marked mood, utilized to express a range of directive speech acts:

- **Order:** *Close the door!*
- **Request:** *Save some for me, please.*
- **Offer:** *Have a drink!*
- **Warning:** *Mind the gap.*
- **Instruction:** *Shake well before use.*
- **Disbelief/Challenge:** *Don't tell me you've done that!*

A highly specialized morphological and semantic realization of the imperative is the prohibitive, defined as an explicit command *not* to perform a specific action (van der Auwera & Lejeune, 2005). In English, the prohibitive bears strong morphological resemblance to the negated form of the indicative, utilizing *do*-support (e.g., *Do not walk on the grass*).

While deontic modal verbs such as *must* or *shall* can be utilized performatively by a speaker to impose a directive, they operate differently from the true imperative. Despite the intense compulsion expressed by *must*, it lacks the unmediated directness conveyed by its bare imperative counterpart, wherein the speaker requires immediate, face-to-face compliance (Collins, 2009; Depraetere & Reed, 2006).

However, this paradigm of immediate compliance is profoundly disrupted when the imperative is transposed into the genre of traditional proverbs. This paper explores the syntactic and pragmatic behaviors of the imperative mood within English proverbs, revealing how traditional paremiological texts manipulate grammatical mood to deliver universal wisdom.

Theoretical Framework: Paremiology and Pragmatics

To understand the function of the imperative in proverbs, one must first understand the nature of the proverb itself. Paremiology, the linguistic and anthropological study of proverbs, defines the proverb as a short, generally known sentence of the folk that contains wisdom, truth, morals, and traditional views in a metaphorical, fixed, and memorizable form (Mieder, 2004).

Proverbs are inherently generic and universal. They are deployed to categorize specific, isolated daily events under the umbrella of collective human experience (Norrick, 1985). This creates a fascinating pragmatic paradox when proverbs utilize the imperative mood.

The Asymmetry of Authority

In standard conversational imperatives, there are two distinct, immediate participants: the "commander" (the speaker) and the "commandee" (the hearer). The power dynamic is localized to that specific interaction. In proverbs, however, this dynamic is abstracted. The true "commander" is unknown—it is not the current speaker, but rather the collective voice of cultural ancestry. The speaker merely borrows this ancestral voice to act as an indirect adviser. Correspondingly, the "commandee" is not solely the immediate listener, but a universal *anyone* who finds themselves in the situation described by the proverb.

Mitigation of Face-Threatening Acts

According to Brown and Levinson's (1987) Politeness Theory, issuing a direct command is a Face-Threatening Act (FTA). Telling someone what to do infringes upon their negative face—their desire for autonomy and freedom from imposition. Consequently, direct imperatives like "*Stop complaining*" are often perceived as rude.

Proverbs provide an ingenious linguistic loophole. By utilizing a fixed imperative proverb—such as "*Don't cry over spilled milk*"—the speaker mitigates the face threat. The speaker removes personal responsibility for the command, projecting the

directive force onto the culture itself. It is no longer the speaker ordering the hearer; it is "traditional wisdom" advising them. Because of its abstracted nature, the proverbial imperative is closely associated with deontic modality but stripped of its immediate interpersonal aggression.

Deontic Modality Paraphrasing

Because it acts as universal advice rather than a strict military order, the imperative in a proverb can rarely be paraphrased accurately with the modal *must*. While *must* implies absolute obligation, proverbs operate in the realm of strong recommendation. Therefore, a great number of proverbial imperatives can be accurately paraphrased utilizing the modal *should* or *ought to*.

Consider the following examples:

- (1) *When in Rome, do as the Romans do.* Paraphrase: When a person is in a new situation, they **should** adapt themselves to the local customs.
- (2) *Don't count your chickens before they are hatched.* Paraphrase: You **should not** make plans that depend on a favorable outcome before you know that it has actually happened.
- (3) *Don't cry before you are hurt.* Paraphrase: One **should not** express distress before an actual injury or failure has occurred.

As demonstrated, replacing the imperative with *must* yields a semantically clunky sentence that violates the advisory nature of the proverb. *Should* perfectly captures the deontic recommendation intended by the folklore.

Syntactic Typology of Proverbial Imperatives

An analysis of English paremiological corpora—such as the *Oxford Dictionary of Proverbs* (2002)—reveals that the imperative is not a monolithic structure. Proverbs utilize a variety of syntactic frames to deliver their directives.

The Bare Imperative

The most common form is the base imperative, where the verb initiates the clause without a subject. These proverbs rely heavily on metaphor and require the listener to map the literal instruction onto their current real-world dilemma.

- (4) *Look before you leap.* (5) *Strike while the iron is hot.* (6) *Let the buyer beware.*

These bare imperatives convey a wide range of illocutionary forces, fundamentally governed by Searle's (1976) classification of speech acts. Depending on the context, a bare imperative proverb can serve as:

- **Caution:** *Look before you leap.* (Warns of potential danger).
- **Recommendation:** *What you have, hold.* (Advises preservation of assets).

- **Plea:** *Save us from our friends.* (Expresses a desire for protection from unexpected sources).
- **Instruction/Advice:** *Drive gently over the stones.* (Advises care in difficult situations).

Imperatives with Explicit Subjects

Standard imperatives feature a covert *you* subject. Quirk et al. (1985) note that while the subject is not an obligatory constituent in imperative sentences, it is intuitively understood. However, for emphatic purposes, proverbs occasionally feature an explicit subject. This serves to ground the universal advice in a specific narrative framing.

(7) *When **you** are in a hole, stop digging.* (8) *Physician, heal **thyself**.*

The inclusion of archaic pronouns (such as *thyself* or *thou*) serves a dual purpose: it maintains the historical authenticity of the proverb, elevating its register, while simultaneously emphasizing the individual responsibility of the listener.

Coordinated Imperatives (the *and* / *or* Nexus)

A fascinating syntactic feature frequently found in proverbs is the coordination of two imperative verbs using the conjunctions *and* or *or*. This coordination can serve a purely additive function, but more frequently, it creates a cause-and-effect relationship.

Additive coordination often utilizes rhythm and rhyme to enhance the mnemonic quality of the proverb, a key requirement for oral transmission:

(9) *Divide and rule.* (10) *Change the name and not the letter, change for worse and not the better.* (11) *Forgive and forget.*

Conversely, when an imperative clause is joined by *and* or *or* and followed by a declarative clause, it generates a conditional implication, often referred to as a "pseudo-imperative" (Quirk et al., 1985; Takahashi, 2012). In these structures, the imperative does not function as a command at all; rather, it functions as the protasis (the *if*-clause) of a conditional sentence.

(12) *Come live with me and you'll know me.* Paraphrase: **If** you come to live with me, you will know me.

(13) *Give him an inch and he will take a mile.* Paraphrase: **If** you give him a small concession, he will take advantage of you.

(14) *If you can't beat them, join them.* (Here, the conditional is explicit, followed by the imperative consequence).

The Exhortative *Let* Construction

In English, structures beginning with the verb *let* followed by an object and a bare infinitive are considered a distinct subset of the imperative paradigm. These are often categorized as exhortatives or optatives. The verb *let* is utilized for proposals, permissions, and generalized orders when the command is not directly addressed to the second-person listener, or when it encompasses a third-party entity (Quirk et al., 1985).

In proverbial discourse, *let* constructions frequently express a policy of noninterference or a fatalistic acceptance of circumstances:

- (15) *Let sleeping dogs lie.* (Do not instigate trouble). (16) *Live and let live.* (Tolerate the behaviors of others). (17) *Let the chips fall where they may.* (Allow events to unfold without trying to control the outcome).

In these examples, the imperative force is directed not just at the listener, but at the universe at large, requesting a state of permissible existence.

Negation and Prohibition in Proverbial Discourse

Negative imperative sentences—prohibitives—form a massive portion of the paremiological corpus. The didactic nature of human society dictates that it is often more crucial to teach individuals what *not* to do than what to do. Consequently, proverbs are rich in negative constructions.

Do-Support Negation

In contemporary English, the standard method for negating an imperative is the insertion of the auxiliary *do* coupled with the negator *not* (frequently contracted to *don't*). This structure immediately preceding the base verb is widely represented in modern proverbs. These prohibitives generally convey prudence, advising the listener against foolish behavior.

- (18) *Don't put all your eggs in one basket.* (19) *Don't teach your grandmother to suck eggs.* (20) *Don't look a gift horse in the mouth.*

Lexical Negation (*Never, No, Nothing*)

The imperative in proverbs is not exclusively negated by *do not*. To achieve a higher degree of rhetorical emphasis and absolute universality, proverbs frequently utilize negative adverbs and determiners. The use of *never* completely removes temporal boundaries, implying that the prohibition is valid for all eternity, unyielding to circumstance.

- (21) *Never speak ill of the dead.* (22) *Never judge a book by its cover.*

Furthermore, negation can be transferred from the verb to the object using the determiner *no* or the negative pronoun *nothing*. This creates a stark, absolute imagery that enhances the proverb's memorability:

(23) *See no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil.* (24) *Believe nothing of what you hear, and only half of what you see.*

Archaic Post-Verbal Negation

Because proverbs are linguistic fossils, preserving the syntax of earlier stages of the English language (Old and Middle English, as well as Early Modern English), they occasionally feature post-verbal negation. Prior to the full grammaticalization of *do*-support in the 16th and 17th centuries, English verbs were negated simply by placing *not* after the main verb.

This archaic pattern survives exclusively in fixed idioms, religious texts, and proverbs. Unlike standard *do*-support negation, post-verbal negation carries a remarkably elevated, almost biblical tone, expressing a much stricter degree of prohibition.

(25) *Speak not of my debts unless you mean to pay them.* (26) *Judge not, that ye be not judged.* (27) *Waste not, want not.*

The pragmatic effect of post-verbal negation is significant. It distances the utterance from colloquial, everyday speech, explicitly marking the sentence as a piece of ancient, indisputable wisdom. The semantic weight of "*Waste not, want not*" is arguably heavier than if one were to say, "*Don't waste things, and you won't lack them.*"

Discussion: The Semantic Fluidity of the Proverbial Imperative

Our corpus analysis demonstrates that the structural rigidity of the imperative mood is beautifully counterbalanced by its semantic fluidity when applied to paremiology. The imperative ceases to be a tool of unilateral dominance and becomes a vehicle for communal survival.

When examining the corpus, it is evident that a speaker employing a proverbial imperative rarely expects the literal execution of the verb. If someone says "*Don't count your chickens before they hatch,*" they are not issuing a command regarding poultry farming. The imperative operates entirely on a metaphorical plane. The cognitive processing required by the listener is two-fold: first, they must decode the metaphor; second, they must apply the underlying deontic principle (the *should/should not*) to their immediate, real-world context.

This cognitive mapping is what gives proverbial imperatives their enduring power. They are less offensive than direct commands because they require the listener to actively participate in the deduction of the advice. By wrapping a directive in an

agricultural or historical metaphor, the speaker allows the listener to save face, making the "command" feel like a shared realization rather than a unilateral order.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the imperative mood in English proverbs constitutes a unique pragmatic and syntactic phenomenon. While it utilizes the base grammatical forms of direct commands, its functional application diverges significantly from standard conversational imperatives.

The primary characteristic of the proverbial imperative is its mitigation of directness. By projecting authority onto traditional wisdom, speakers bypass the facethreatening nature of direct orders. Consequently, the illocutionary force of the positive imperative in proverbs is predominantly that of advice, recommendation, or caution, readily paraphraseable by the modal *should*.

Similarly, the negative imperative—whether realized through modern *do*-support, absolute lexical negators like *never*, or archaic post-verbal syntax—seldom functions as a harsh, legally binding prohibition. Instead, it serves to guide behavior through cautionary wisdom. By preserving archaic syntactic structures and relying heavily on metaphorical abstraction, the imperative in English proverbs remains one of the most culturally vital and pragmatically sophisticated tools in the English language.

References

- [1] Bergs, A., & Heine, L. (2010). Mood in English. In B. Rothstein & R. Thieroff (Eds.), *Mood in the Languages of Europe* (pp. 103-116). John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- [2] Biber, D., Johansson, S., Leech, G., Conrad, S., & Finegan, E. (1999). *Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English*. Longman.
- [3] Brown, P., & Levinson, S. C. (1987). *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage*. Cambridge University Press.
- [4] Collins, P. (2009). *Modals and Quasi-modals in English*. Rodopi.
- [5] Davies, E. (1986). *The English Imperative*. Croom Helm.
- [6] Depraetere, I., & Reed, S. (2006). Mood and modality in English. In B. Aarts & A. McMahon (Eds.), *The Handbook of English Linguistics* (pp. 269-290). Blackwell.
- [7] Downing, A., & Locke, P. (2006). *English Grammar: A University Course* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- [8] Hopper, P. J., & Traugott, E. C. (2003). *Grammaticalization* (2nd ed.). Cambridge University Press.
- [9] Huddleston, R., & Pullum, G. K. (2002). *The Cambridge Grammar of the English Language*. Cambridge University Press.
- [10] Mieder, W. (2004). *Proverbs: A Handbook*. Greenwood Press.
- [11] Norrick, N. R. (1985). *How Proverbs Mean: Semantic Studies in English Proverbs*. Mouton.

- [12] Palmer, F. R. (2001). *Mood and Modality* (2nd ed.). Cambridge University Press.
- [13] Quirk, R., Greenbaum, S., Leech, G., & Svartvik, J. (1985). *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language*. Longman Group Limited.
- [14] Searle, J. R. (1976). A classification of illocutionary acts. *Language in Society*, 5(1), 1-23.
- [15] Takahashi, H. (2012). *A Cognitive Linguistic Analysis of the English Imperative*. John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- [16] van der Auwera, J., & Lejeune, L. (2005). The prohibitive. In M. Haspelmath, M. S. Dryer, D. Gil, & B. Comrie (Eds.), *The World Atlas of Language Structures* (pp. 290– 293). Oxford University Press.
- [17] *Cambridge International Dictionary of Idioms*. (1998). Cambridge University Press.
- [18] *The Oxford Dictionary of Proverbs*. (2002). Oxford University Press.
- [19] *McGraw-Hill's Dictionary of American Idioms and Phrasal Verbs*. (2005). McGraw-Hill.
-