

# DIRECTIVES BACKED BY THREATS

Daniel W. Harris & Rachel McKinney

MIT Work in Progress Seminar · April 28, 2016

## 1 Some Theses

- The category of commands, as used in both pragmatics and social/political philosophy, masks a theoretically important distinction between:
  - Authority-backed directives.
  - Threat-backed directives.
- This is contrary to most usual accounts of commands, on which they are all thought to be backed by the speaker's authority.

## 2 Some Explananda

### Commands

1. Step out of the car!  
(Uttered by a police officer to a driver who seems drunk.)
2. Stay until the report is finished.  
(Uttered by a manager to a junior employee.)
3. No smoking!  
(A sign put in a home by the owner.)

### Requests

4. Stay until the report is finished.  
(Uttered by an employee to their manager.)
5. Give me a hand with this.  
(Uttered to a friend, who is helping the speaker move.)

### Advice

6. Stay until the report is finished.  
(Uttered by me to my wife, when there is a risk that she will be fired if she leaves the office.)
7. Take the number 8 bus.  
(Uttered in the course of giving directions.)

## 2.1 Semantic and Pragmatic Assumptions

### Illocutionary Underspecification

- Commands, requests, and advice can all be literally and directly performed with imperative sentences (e.g., 1–7).
- The same imperative can be used to perform different kinds of acts on different occasions (e.g., 2, 4, 6).

### The Directive Genus

- What commands, requests, and advice have in common is that they are species within the directive genus. (Other members: dares, inducements, etc.)
- Directive acts have a common aim: getting the addressee to do something (i.e., to comply with the directive).
- Semantic theories of imperative clauses capture this similarity in different ways.
  - Portner (2004): imperatives denote actions; directives propose adding these actions to the addressee's To-Do List.
  - Kaufmann (2012): imperatives are modals that can only be used performatively; directives update contextually-specified deontic ordering sources.

- Charlow (2014) and Harris (2014; MS): imperatives denote properties of planning states; directives are proposals to update the addressee's planning state with this property.
- Murray and Starr (MS); Starr (MS, 2010): imperatives denote context-change potentials that update contextual preference states; directives are proposals to update mutual preferences about
- None of these semantic theories settle the issues we're interested in here.

#### Pretheoretic Differences between Commands, Requests, and Advice

##### PRAGMATIC PROFILES:

Each kind of act plays a different role in conversation, and functions to give H different reasons/motivations to act.

- The motivational force of advice springs from a reason that already exists, and that is being pointed out or hinted at by the speaker.
- The motivational force of a request springs from the speaker's desires. They are paradigmatically cooperative.
- Motivational force of a command comes from some other, less cooperative place. We're trying to pin down which one.

##### NORMATIVE PROFILES:

Commands, requests, and advice have different normative properties.

- There are many contexts in which it is permissible to request or advise but not command.
- All three can sometimes give rise to obligations, but seemingly different kinds, in different ways, and with different strengths and defeasibility conditions.

##### SOCIAL/INSTITUTIONAL PROFILES:

Whether a directive is a request, a command, or advice seems to have something to do with the relative social positions/roles/relations of S and H.

- For example, we tend to interpret 2 as a command and 4 as a request because 2 is uttered by a boss and 4 is uttered by a subordinate.

#### Linguistic Differences

There are some pretty good linguistic tests to distinguish commands, requests, and advice:

- If you can add 'please' to an utterance of an imperative without sounding disingenuous or infelicitous, it is a request. (Sometimes adding please can be a way of disambiguating a request.)
- Acts of commanding and advising can have 'or else' clauses appended.
- In general, the utterance has the force of a command iff the 'or-else' clause is about an eventuality that is at S's discretion.
  - E.g.: 'Step out of the car (or else I'll place you under arrest)' sounds like a command. (S is creating a reason to comply.)
  - E.g.: 'Step out of the car (or else that cop is going to arrest you)' sounds like advice. (S is pointing out a reason to comply.)
- Cancelability: something that sounds like one kind of directive can often be turned into another kind through clarification. E.g.: 'Do your homework; you don't have to, but it would be good for you.'

### 3 Some Questions

- (Q1) In virtue of what does a speech act count as a command?
- (Q2) What is the difference between commanding (e.g. 1–3), requesting (e.g. 4–6), and advising (e.g. 7–8)?
- (Q3) What explains the different pragmatic profiles of requests, commands, advice?
- (Q4) What explains the different normative profiles of requests, commands, advice?
- (Q5) What explains the connection between commanding and social positions/roles/relations?

### 4 Some Methodological Points

- Contrary to (e.g.) Austin, intuitions about ordinary uses of 'command', 'request', etc., can only get us so far.
- We need to find roles for these notions to play in explanatory theories, and then see which notions best play those roles.
  - e.g. pragmatics: which speech-act categories must we posit in order to explain how people communicate?

- e.g. social/political philosophy: should we obey unjustified but authoritative directives? If so, why? Should we obey justified but unauthoritative directives? If so, why? What’s the deal with command-like acts “from below” (e.g. from a striking union).

## 5 Authority Theories

### 5.1 Intuitive Picture

- Answers to Q1–Q2: what makes  $\alpha$  a command is that, unlike requests and advice, it is backed by S’s authority over H.
- Answer to Q3: Authority (somehow) explains the unique pragmatic profile (i.e., motivational power) of commands.
- Answer to Q4: Authority (somehow) explains the unique normative profile of commands.
- Answer to Q5: Authority explains the connection between commanding and social/institutional profile.

### 5.2 What is Authority?

- Capacity to command is usually taken to be a function of S’s social/institutional role.
- This role grants S special rights, including the right to create obligations by issuing certain commands.
- Call this ‘legitimate authority’ (Raz, 1986) or ‘*de jure* authority’.
- Distinguish it from *de facto* authority, which is just the in-practice ability to get people to comply (Hobbes, 1651; Raz, 1986).

### 5.3 Three Versions

#### Actual Authority

(AA) The fact that a directive to  $\phi$  is a command is partially grounded in the fact that S actually has authority to command H to  $\phi$  (Austin, 1962; Raz, 1986; Searle, 1969)

Main benefit of (AA):

- Seems necessary to explain the normative profile of commands—how they create obligations.

Problems with (AA):

- Not necessary to explain the pragmatic profile of commands: if S and H (mutually) believe that S has authority over H, then it doesn’t matter, for pragmatic purposes, whether S actually does have it.
  - E.g., King has revoked S’s position as colonial governor, effective last week, but word hasn’t reached the colony yet.
  - E.g., Police command H to turn off camera; H doesn’t know that police lack authority to do so.
- Not sufficient to explain the pragmatic profile of commands: if S and H are not (mutually) aware of S’s authority, then S’s acts won’t function like commands.
  - E.g., King has appointed S colonial governor, but word hasn’t reached the colonies yet. S’s directives don’t work like commands.
  - E.g., Plain-clothes police attempts to command H without showing badge.
- Doesn’t distinguish commands from requests and advice, both of which can sometimes be performed by people in positions of authority over hearer.
  - E.g., My boss says ‘give me a hand with this please’, and clarifies: ‘you don’t have to, but I would appreciate it’.

#### Mutually Believed Authority

(MBA) The fact that a directive to  $\phi$  is a command is partially grounded in the fact that S and H mutually believe that S has authority to command H to  $\phi$ . (Langton, 2017; Maitra, 2012)

Benefits of (MBA):

- (MBA) does a better job of explaining the pragmatic profile of commands.

Problems with (MBA):

- (MBA) on its own can’t explain the normative profile of commands.
- (MBA) still can’t distinguish commands from requests and advice: my boss can request that I  $\phi$  even if he and I mutually believe that he has authority to command me to  $\phi$ .

## Intended Authority

(IA) The fact that a directive to  $\phi$  is a command is partially grounded in the fact that (i) S believes that S has authority to command H to  $\phi$ , and (ii) S intends this authority to give H a reason for  $\phi$ ing. (Bach and Harnish, 1979; Schiffer, 1972)

Benefits of (IA):

- (IA) captures the difference between commands and requests.

Problems with (IA) on its own:

- On its own, (IA) can't explain the normative profile of commands.

All Three?

To answer (Q1–Q5), it seems that authority views need some combination: (AA)+(MBA)+(IA). Maybe they could get by with just (AA)+(IA).

## 6 Problems for Authority Theories

Commands without Authority

8. Get in the bathroom and keep your mouth shut!  
(Uttered by a home invader with a gun.)
  9. Turn off your camera!  
(Addressed by police to protestors.)
- These intuitively *seem* more like commands than like requests or advice.
  - They have pragmatic profiles more like commands than requests or advice.
  - Neither could felicitously include 'please'.
  - Both could be felicitously followed by an 'or-else' clause about some eventuality at the speaker's discretion.
  - The motivating force of both derives from S's position/role/relation of power over H, in some sense.
  - But in both cases, S lacks any sort of *de jure* authority to command H.

So: some acts seem to have command-like pragmatic profiles without meeting the authority conditions.

Commands with Authority but no Motivating Force

10. Make sure to complete your annual workplace safety quiz!  
(Sent in an email by H's employer. It is mutual knowledge that this is sent out because of an obscure state law, that failure to comply will have no consequences, and that nobody is really paying attention to whether anyone complies.)
- Here, my employer has authority over me, we mutually believe this, and they intend this to be my reason for complying (AA)+(MBA)+(IA).
  - But this act does not provide me with the reasons/motivations characteristic of a command. (cf. Kukla (2014))

So: some acts that meet the authority conditions don't have command-like pragmatic profiles.

### 6.1 De Facto Authority?

Maybe what matters isn't *de jure* authority, but *de facto* authority—i.e., S's practical ability to get H to comply? (Langton, 2017; Maitra, 2012; Searle, 1975)

...an armed robber in virtue of his possession of a gun may order as opposed to, e.g., request, entreat, or implore victims to raise their hands. But his status here does not derive from a position within an institution but from his possession of a weapon. (Searle, 1975, 144)

There is a terrible traffic accident on a highway. Some of the cars involved end up skewed across the road, blocking most traffic in either direction. There remains one open narrow lane. Emergency personnel are on their way, but will take some time to arrive. Realizing that something must be done, one driver, Agnes, get out of her car and begins to direct traffic. She clears some space around the accident, lets through a few cars in one direction, and then a few more in the other direction. The other drivers follow her instructions. Alternating in this manner, traffic begins to move through the accident site. (Maitra, 2012, 106)

- This allows (8–9) to be commands despite lacking *de jure* authority.
- And (10) is not a command (or not a felicitous one), because although S has *de jure* authority, they lack *de facto* authority.

But this idea has some problems:

- It fails to explain how something can be a command even if it is not obeyed (in which case S does not have *de facto* authority after all).
  - E.g., Commanding officer disobeyed by soldiers.
- This proposal collapses the distinction between commands, requests, and advice: requests and advice often give S the *de facto* ability to get H to comply.

## 7 Threat-Backed Directives

Theories of commands have ignored a theoretically important distinction between

- *Authority-backed directives* are backed by an appeal to legitimate, institutional authority.
- *Threat-backed directives* are backed by a conditional threat to harm H unless H complies.

### A Bit More Detail

- Acts of commanding H to  $\phi$ , requesting for H to  $\phi$ , and advising H to  $\phi$  all involve two speech acts.
  - A directly performed act of *directing* H to  $\phi$ .
  - A second, indirect speech act that *backs* the directive by giving H a reason to comply with it.
- Species within the directive genus are distinguished by the kinds of indirect speech acts that back them:
  - Requesting for H to  $\phi$  is backed by an indirect act of expressing one's desire for H to  $\phi$ .
  - Advising H to  $\phi$  is backed by an indirect expression of the belief that it would be in H's interest to  $\phi$ .
  - Authority-backed directives: H to  $\phi$  is backed by an indirect appeal to S's legitimately granted authority over H.
  - Threat-backed directives: H to  $\phi$  is backed by an indirect conditional threat to harm H in some way unless H  $\phi$ 's.
- These indirect backing acts are intended to provide hearers with different kinds of reasons for doing what the speaker is directing them to do.

Note that authority-backed and threat-backed directives are, in practice, closely related:

- If S is in a position of authority over H, then S is almost always in a position to credibly threaten H (but not always).
- In practice, authority-backed directives that fail tend to be followed by threat-backed directives.
  - E.g., imagine a cop who begins with an appeal to authority, but proceeds to use a threat.
  - Adding a discretionary 'or-else' clause disambiguates to threat-backed directive. (It makes the threat explicit.)

### Answers to Questions

- Answer to Q3: Pragmatic profiles of different directives is explained by the different reasons given by their indirect backing speech acts.
- Answer to Q4: Normative profile of commands is explained by the unique normative properties of threats. Commands are often impermissible because threats are often impermissible.
- Answer to Q5: Commands often go with positions of authority because people in positions of authority are often in a position to credibly threaten. (But there are exceptions.)

Questions that we don't [know/agree about] how to answer:

- Should we use 'commands' for authority-backed directives, threat-backed directives, or both? A tough verbal issue, but we can't decide.
- Given the category of threat-backed directives, do we even *need* the category of authority-backed directives?
  - Maybe apparent examples of authority-backed directives are really just backed by more implicit threats?
  - On this view, what makes some directives "legitimate" is just that it would be legitimate for S to carry out the implied threat.

## Appendix: Our Preferred, Gricean-Intentionalist Implementation

Central claims (Bach and Harnish, 1979; Grice, 1957, 1968, 1969; Schiffer, 1972; Strawson, 1964):

- To perform a speech act is to mean something by an utterance.
- To mean something by an utterance is to produce it with a meaning intention ('m-intention').
- Different kinds of speech acts are defined in terms of different kinds of m-intentions.

This could work with various definitions of m-intentions, but let's just use Grice's (1969) version:

### M-Intentions

The fact that  $U$  meant something by uttering  $x$  is grounded in the fact that, for some addressee  $A$ ,  $U$  uttered  $x$  intending

- (i)  $A$  to produce a particular response  $r$ ;
- (ii)  $A$  to think (recognize) that  $U$  intends (i); and
- (iii)  $A$  to fulfill (i) on the basis of his fulfillment of (ii).

The variable  $r$  here stands in for a specification of the *m-intended effect*. Intentionalism explicates speech acts in terms of their characteristic m-intended effects.

### 7.1 Indirect Speech Acts

Rough idea: an indirect speech act is one that  $S$  intends  $H$  to understand partly as a result of understanding some direct speech act.

Example: Indirectly Directing  $H$  to  $\psi$  by asking whether  $H$  can  $\psi$

The fact that  $S$  directed  $H$  to  $\psi$  by asking whether  $H$  can  $\psi$  in uttering  $x$  is grounded in the fact that  $S$  produced an utterance intending:

- (1) (DIRECTIVE)
  - (i)  $H$  to form an intention to say whether  $\psi$ ;
  - (ii)  $H$  to recognize  $S$  intends (1i);
  - (iii)  $H$  to fulfill (1i) on the basis of his fulfillment of (1ii);

- (2) (CONDITIONAL THREAT)
  - (i)  $H$  to form an intention to  $\psi$ ;
  - (ii)  $H$  to recognize  $S$  intends (2i);
  - (iii)  $H$  to fulfill (2i) on the basis of his fulfillment of (2ii); and
- (3) (INDIRECTNESS CONDITION)  
 $H$  to recognize  $S$  intends (2i) partly on the basis of his recognition of  $S$ 's intention (1i);

### 7.2 Threats and Conditional Threats

#### Unconditionally Threatening

The fact that  $S$  threatened to  $\phi$  in addressing  $H$  is grounded in the fact that  $S$  produced an utterance intending:

- (i)  $H$  to believe that  $S$  intends to harm  $H$  by  $\phi$ ing;
- (ii)  $A$  to think (recognize) that  $U$  intends (i); and
- (iii)  $A$  to fulfill (i) on the basis of his fulfillment of (i).

#### Conditionally Threatening

The fact that  $S$  conditionally threatened to  $\phi$  unless  $p$  in addressing  $H$  is grounded in the fact that  $S$  produced an utterance intending:

- (i)  $H$  to believe that  $S$  intends: to harm  $H$  by  $\phi$ ing unless  $p$ ;
- (ii)  $A$  to think (recognize) that  $U$  intends (i); and
- (iii)  $A$  to fulfill (i) on the basis of his fulfillment of (i).

### 7.3 Commands vs. Requests vs. Advice

#### Commanding

The fact that  $S$  commanded  $H$  to  $\psi$  is grounded in the fact that  $S$  produced an utterance intending

- (1) (DIRECTIVE)
  - (i)  $H$  to form an intention to  $\psi$ ;
  - (ii)  $H$  to recognize  $S$  intends (1i);

(iii) *H* to fulfill (1i) on the basis of his fulfillment of (1ii);

(2) (CONDITIONAL THREAT)

(i) *H* to form a belief that *S* has a conditional intention to harm *H* in some way unless *H*  $\phi$ s;

(ii) *H* to recognize *S* intends (2i);

(iii) *H* to fulfill (2i) on the basis of his fulfillment of (2ii); and

(3) (INDIRECTNESS CONDITION)

*H* to recognize *S* intends (2i) partly on the basis of his recognition of *S*'s intention (1i);

(4) (SUPPORTING-REASON CONDITION)

*H* to fulfill (1i) on the basis of his fulfillment of (2i).

#### Requesting

The fact that *S* requested for *H* to  $\psi$  is grounded in the fact that *S* produced an utterance intending

(1) (DIRECTIVE)

(i) *H* to form an intention to  $\psi$ ;

(ii) *H* to recognize *S* intends (1i);

(iii) *H* to fulfill (1i) on the basis of his fulfillment of (1ii);

(2) (EXPRESSION OF DESIRE)

(i) *H* to form a belief that *S* wants *H* to  $\psi$ ;

(ii) *H* to recognize *S* intends (2i);

(iii) *H* to fulfill (2i) on the basis of his fulfillment of (2ii); and

(3) (INDIRECTNESS CONDITION)

*H* to recognize *S* intends (2i) partly on the basis of his recognition of *S*'s intention (1i);

(4) (SUPPORTING-REASON CONDITION)

*H* to fulfill (1i) on the basis of his fulfillment of (2i).

#### Advising

The fact that *S* advised *H* to  $\psi$  is grounded in the fact that *S* produced an utterance intending

(1) (DIRECTIVE)

(i) *H* to form an intention to  $\psi$ ;

(ii) *H* to recognize *S* intends (1i);

(iii) *H* to fulfill (1i) on the basis of his fulfillment of (1ii);

(2) (EXPRESSION OF DESIRE)

(i) *H* to form a belief that *S* believes that it is in *H*'s interest to  $\psi$ ;

(ii) *H* to recognize *S* intends (2i);

(iii) *H* to fulfill (2i) on the basis of his fulfillment of (2ii); and

(3) (INDIRECTNESS CONDITION)

*H* to recognize *S* intends (2i) partly on the basis of his recognition of *S*'s intention (1i);

(4) (SUPPORTING-REASON CONDITION)

*H* to fulfill (1i) on the basis of his fulfillment of (2i).

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