

# Expressivism for Imperatives and *Ought*

Nate Charlow

Arché Semantics Group  
8 July 2010

## Conventional Meaning as Use (CMAU)

*The subject matter of the correct theory of meaning for a fragment  $\mathcal{L}$  is an account of how competent speakers of  $\mathcal{L}$  conventionally use sentences of  $\mathcal{L}$  in communication.*

I'm not interested in adjudicating between **speech-act expressivism** (on which meaning is fundamentally a matter of conventional communicative function [Hare, Stevenson]) and **psychological expressivism** (on which meaning is fundamentally a matter of the mental-state conventionally expressed [Gibbard]).

The central idea is conventionality: the expressivist's posited relation between language and use must be *conventionalized*.

- ▶ One way of cashing that out: an expression's use must supervene directly on its lexical properties (or, if you like, be determined by its lexical properties together with “law-like” statements connecting such properties to facts about use).
- ▶ Conventionally encoded linguistic facts are to be contrasted with, e.g., Quantity Implicatures, which paradigmatically (i) depend on facts about the context of utterance, (ii) are defeasible or cancellable.

## Practicality

*The conventional use of normative language is practical, while the conventional use of descriptive language is representational.*

The representational/practical distinction is usually made out in terms of *direction of fit* (thetic/telic; world-to-mind/mind-to-world).

Note that there is no type of language that comes marked as normative (normative clauses are usually declarative, have no distinctive syntax, etc.), nor need the expressivist claim that there is.

Error Theory and Expressivism are the two paradigmatic forms of **Anti-Realism** about normativity. Realism is defined as the affirmation of:

### Normative content as propositional

*The content, or meaning, of a normative sentence or claim can be faithfully rendered or represented with a proposition.*

### Accuracy

*The content of (at least some) normative sentences is true.*

Error Theory denies Accuracy.

Expressivists, in light of their commitment to CMAU and Practicality, are committed to denying propositionalism (**Non-Propositionalism**). Early noncognitivists (Hare, Stevenson, Ayer) denied Accuracy, but contemporary ones (Blackburn, Gibbard) typically don't.

The **Frege-Geach Problem**: if expressing  $\alpha$  is part of  $O\phi$ 's meaning,  $O\phi$  should express  $\alpha$  in any environment in which it occurs. This is a plausible consequence of:

- ▶ A methodological commitment to compositionality.
- ▶ The expressivist's commitment to the conventionalization of use.

But embedding  $O\phi$  in the antecedent of a conditional ( $\Gamma$  (if  $O\phi$ ) ( $\psi$ )  $\Upsilon$ ), or under negation ( $\Gamma \neg O\phi \Upsilon$ ), seems to cancel its expression of  $\alpha$ .

- (1) *If you shouldn't murder, you shouldn't mass murder.*
- (2) *It's false that you shouldn't murder.*

**Standard reply:** deny that (i) embedded occurrences do not express  $\alpha$ , (ii) expression of  $\alpha$  by an embedded clause projects to the whole clause.

Instead, develop a compositional method of computing the attitude (speech act) expressed by complex constructions, as a function of the attitudes expressed by their constituents.

- ▶ Schroeder attributes the idea to Hare. Gibbard (*Wise Choices*) usually gets the credit for actually succeeding in doing this for attitudes. (We can talk about Gibbard's view, if it interests you.)
- ▶ Dynamic Semantics has done this for speech acts (although, alas, they aren't credited with this in the meta-ethical discussion).

$$\llbracket \wedge \rrbracket = \lambda\pi\lambda\pi'\lambda\sigma(\sigma\pi\pi'), \llbracket \neg \rrbracket = \lambda\pi\lambda\sigma(\sigma - \sigma\pi)$$

**Newfangled reply:** recent work in linguistics does actually suggest that clause types (declarative, interrogative, imperative...) *conventionally* encode something like illocutionary force or discourse function. [See esp. Portner 2004]

The **Negation Problem**: compositionality is not sufficient. A theory of  $O\phi$ 's meaning should explain why  $O\phi$  and  $\neg O\phi$  are *inconsistent* (and, more generally, why normative sentences have the logical and semantic properties that they have).

Presumably, since meaning for an expressivist is a matter of use, this explanation needs to appeal to properties of the attitudes expressed.

Two possibilities [Schroeder 2008]:

- ▶ **Inconsistency-transmitting** (I-T) attitudes. (i)  $O\phi$  and  $\neg O\phi$  express  $\alpha$  toward classically inconsistent contents, (ii)  $\alpha$  is I-T ( $=_{df}$  bearing  $\alpha$  toward inconsistent contents is inconsistent).
  - ▶ Problem. Suppose  $O\phi$  expresses  $\alpha(\phi)$  and  $O\neg\phi$  expresses  $\alpha(\neg\phi)$ . Then  $\neg O\phi$  expresses  $\alpha(\psi)$ , for some  $\psi$  such that  $\phi, \psi \models \perp$ , and  $\neg O\neg\phi$  expresses  $\alpha(\chi)$ , for some  $\chi$  such that  $\neg\phi, \chi \models \perp$ . But then  $\psi, \chi \models \perp$ . But then, since  $\alpha$  is I-T,  $\neg O\phi$  and  $\neg O\neg\phi$  are inconsistent. Disaster!
- ▶ **Brute inconsistency**. (i)  $O\phi$  expresses  $\alpha(\phi)$ ,  $\neg O\phi$  expresses  $\beta(\phi)$  (where  $\alpha$  and  $\beta$  are distinct attitude-types), (ii) we help ourselves to rational norms that proscribe holding  $\alpha(\phi)$  and  $\beta(\phi)$  in conjunction. But this leaves the inconsistency unexplained.
  - ▶ This is the option that expressivists generally opt for.

So, that's the problem. I confess: I don't think the expressivist has any sort of problem here at all.

Plan: show how a plausible view about the meaning of imperatives, together with a Schroeder-style argument, generate a negation "problem" for imperatives.

Imperatives are clauses of the form  $!\phi$  (e.g., *shut the window*).

**Imperative meaning as use.** On Portner's [2007] influential account:

*The performative aspect of [the] meaning [of an imperative  $!\phi$ ], modeled as the addition of its prejacent  $[\phi]$  to the To-Do List, [explains] everything that needs to be explained about its meaning.*

The meaning of an imperative, in other words, is primarily a matter of its **conventional discourse function**, its characteristic force (for Portner, the introduction of new obligations on the addressee, via addition to the addressee's To-Do List). In other words, Portner endorses an imperatival analogue of CMAU!

- ▶ Uncontroversially, imperatival analogues of Practicality and Non-Propositionalism are satisfied. So we have a recognizably expressivist theory of imperative meaning.

Any satisfactory account of imperative meaning must explain the inconsistency of  $!\phi$  with a contrary permission-grant  $j\neg\phi$  (*you may leave the window open*).

For the expressivist about imperative meaning, the explanation seemingly must appeal to properties of imperative and permissive speech acts.

- ▶ Inconsistency-transmitting speech acts.  $!\phi$  and  $j\neg\phi$  express the same force, toward inconsistent contents. But then  $j\neg\phi$  and  $j\phi$  will be predicted inconsistent.
- ▶ Brutely inconsistent speech acts. We help ourselves to rational norms that proscribe simultaneously commanding  $\phi$  and permitting  $\neg\phi$ . But this leaves the inconsistency unexplained.

In each case, we have a clear semantic judgment:

- ▶  $\{O\phi, \neg O\phi\}$  is inconsistent
- ▶  $\{!\phi, i\neg\phi\}$  is inconsistent

Nonfactualism commits the expressivist about  $O\phi$  to giving a non-standard vindication of the first of these judgments. But that is tough! So: a point against expressivism about normative discourse.

Nonfactualism commits the expressivist about  $!\phi$  to giving a non-standard vindication of the second of these judgments. But that is tough! So: a point against expressivism about imperative discourse. ????

Some initial comfort for the expressivist.

- ▶ There is a *strong* suspicion that something has gone wrong here.
- ▶ Something close to Portner's expressivism about imperatives is the dominant linguistic view.

We'll try to diagnose what exactly is causing the trouble.

**The Semantics/Force Interface:** it is *fairly* uncontroversial that a sentence's conventional use supervenes on its semantic value. A specific version of this idea, due to Portner [2004], claims that use supervenes on *semantic type*.

*[A]toms of morphosyntax contribute to meaning in a compositional way, [although] force is not one of the aspects of meaning they contribute... [F]orce is determined only indirectly, on the basis of these meanings.*

- ▶ If  $\llbracket \phi \rrbracket$  is a proposition  $p$ ,  $\phi$  can be used to assert  $p$
- ▶ If  $\llbracket \phi \rrbracket$  is a partition  $\{p, \bar{p}\}$ ,  $\phi$  can be used to query whether or not  $p$  [Groenendijk and Stokhof 1984]
- ▶ If  $\llbracket \phi \rrbracket$  is  $[??]$ ,  $\phi$  can be used to command/permit that  $p$

Portner [2004, 2007] says fill in [??] with an *addressee-restricted property*. For a variety of reasons (having to do with conditional imperatives [Charlow 2010a] and the dynamics of permission), I do not think this is workable. And it isn't clear how it is supposed to explain why  $\{! \phi, \text{;} \neg \phi\}$  is inconsistent.

**Propositionalism?** One influential treatment of the semantics of imperatives bites the bullet and assigns them modalized logical forms (i.e.,  $! := \Box$  and  $;\ := \Diamond$ ). [Schwager 2006, Han 1999]

- ▶ This explains why  $\{! \phi, \text{;} \neg \phi\}$  is inconsistent, since  $\Box \phi, \Diamond \neg \phi \models \perp$
- ▶ But it runs into difficulties when combined with the above view of the Semantics/Force Interface. Specifically, if  $! \phi$  means that  $\phi$  is required, it is unclear why it cannot be used to *assert that*  $\phi$  is required. [For further discussion, see Charlow 2010a.]

Instead, I suggest a proposal along the following lines [note that this treatment introduces a lot of complexities, which I'm suppressing here]:

## Modaloid Semantics

- ▶  $!\phi$  does not mean that  $\phi$  is required, nor does  $¡\phi$  mean that  $\phi$  is permitted
- ▶ Nevertheless, give  $!$  and  $¡$  a modal semantics. The rough idea:
  - ▶  $!\phi$  is **in force** iff  $\Box\phi$  is true
  - ▶  $¡\phi$  is **in force** iff  $\Diamond\phi$  is true
- ▶ Because  $!\phi$  does not have a truth value, it does not express a proposition. Because it does not express a proposition, it cannot be used to perform an assertion.

The notion that the extension of an imperative is an in-force value (rather than a truth value) is an old one. [Lemmon 1965, Segerberg 1990]

Formally:

- ▶  $W$  is the universe
- ▶ If  $w \in W$ , the To-Do List at  $w$ ,  $T(w) \subseteq 2^W$
- ▶  $T(w)$  induces a partial order  $\preceq_{T(w)}$  on  $W$ :

$$u \preceq_{T(w)} v \Leftrightarrow \{p \in T(w) : v \in p\} \subseteq \{p \in T(w) : u \in p\}$$

Semantics for  $\Box$  [Kratzer 1981]:

$$\llbracket \Box \phi \rrbracket^{T,w} = \text{true} \Leftrightarrow \{u : \forall v (v \preceq_{T(w)} u \Rightarrow u \preceq_{T(w)} v)\} \subseteq \llbracket \phi \rrbracket^T$$

Semantics for  $!, j$ :

$$\llbracket !\phi \rrbracket = \lambda T \lambda w \left( \begin{array}{l} \checkmark \text{ if } \llbracket \Box \phi \rrbracket^{T,w} = \text{true} \\ \emptyset \text{ otherwise} \end{array} \right)$$

$$\llbracket j\phi \rrbracket = \lambda T \lambda w \left( \begin{array}{l} \checkmark \text{ if } \llbracket \Diamond \phi \rrbracket^{T,w} = \text{true} \\ \emptyset \text{ otherwise} \end{array} \right)$$

The **content of an imperative**  $!\phi$  is a function from **To-Do List-world pairs** to  $\{\checkmark, \emptyset\}$ , equivalently  $\{\langle T, w \rangle : \llbracket !\phi \rrbracket^{T,w} = \checkmark\}$

The **content of a modal sentence**  $\Box\phi$  is determined with respect to a fixed To-Do List  $T$ : it is the set of worlds  $w$  such that all the  $T(w)$ -best worlds satisfy  $\phi$ . Modal content is, in other words, is essentially a claim about what requirements “follow” from a given set of commitments.

- ▶ Equivalently, given some  $T$ , we can think of modal content as follows:  $\llbracket \Box\phi \rrbracket^T = \{i \subseteq W : \forall w \in i : \llbracket \Box\phi \rrbracket^{T,w} = \text{true}\}$  (i.e., just the set of all bodies of information that entail  $\Box\phi$ ).
- ▶ We can recover the ordinary content by taking  $\bigcup \llbracket \Box\phi \rrbracket^T$

Each type of content can be seen to characterize a **constraint on an information state** [as in Swanson 2008, Yalcin 2007].

Let  $\sigma = \langle i, T \rangle$  be an information state (with  $i$  the information-tracking parameter,  $T$  the action-guiding parameter). We define a relation  $\Vdash$  between information states and sentences (meant to capture when an information state **accepts** a sentence).

- ▶  $\langle i, T \rangle \Vdash \Box\phi$  iff  $i \in \llbracket \Box\phi \rrbracket^T$
- ▶  $\langle i, T \rangle \Vdash !\phi$  iff  $\forall w : \langle T, w \rangle \in \llbracket !\phi \rrbracket$

The semantic content of the sentence determines a set of information states satisfying some property: the property of accepting the sentence.

The **update potential** of a sentence  $\psi$  (notation:  $[\psi]$ ) outputs *information states that accept that sentence*: for all  $\psi$ ,  $\sigma[\psi] \Vdash \psi$ .

- ▶ For  $\Box\phi$  (and declaratives generally), this means updating  $i$ . So,  $\Box\phi$  has *assertoric* force.
- ▶ For  $!\phi$  (and  $i\phi$ ), this means updating  $T$ . So,  $!\phi$  has *directive* force. [See Charlow 2010a for specifics here.]

This account endorses a tight connection between the semantic content of imperatives and their conventional use: use, indeed, is a **function of semantic type**.

- ▶ Imperatives are assigned a non-representational, action-guiding use.
- ▶ Imperatives are assigned a non-propositional semantic value.
- ▶ So, this view has a plausible claim to the label ‘expressivist’.

Nevertheless, it **solves the imperative negation problem**. Suppose  $\llbracket !\phi \rrbracket^{T,w} = \llbracket !\neg\phi \rrbracket^{T,w} = \checkmark$ . Then  $\llbracket \Box\phi \rrbracket^{T,w} = \llbracket \Diamond\neg\phi \rrbracket^{T,w} = \text{true}$ .  $\perp$

- ▶ What explains the inconsistency of  $\{!\phi, !\neg\phi\}$  is the semantics: supposing that  $!\phi$  and  $!\neg\phi$  are in force generates a *contradiction in the metalanguage*, via precisely the same mechanism that supposing that  $\Box\phi$  and  $\Diamond\neg\phi$  are true generates a contradiction in the metalanguage.

The natural suggestion is for the expressivist about 'ought' to give a modaloid semantics for 'ought'.

Interestingly, Gibbard's [2003] account is such account: on Gibbard's semantics, the content of a normative sentence (indeed, any sentence whatsoever) is a set of [Hyperplan-world pairs](#) (hereafter, a [Gibbard Content](#)).

But Gibbard's view has problems: Gibbard Contents are intended as a representation of an explanatorily more fundamental psychological reality, chosen only for (i) their formal well-behaved-ness and (ii) their ability to roughly approximate the semantically interesting properties of that more fundamental reality:

*One way to think of fact-plan content is to mimic truth functions and quantification... These [recursive mental] operations—combining, ruling out, generalizing—mimic standard logical operations on statements: conjunction, negation, and universal generalization. [2003, p. 54]*

The explanatory status of the formalism is *derivative*: semantic *explananda* are ultimately explained by characteristics of *representans*, rather than of *representandum*. This commitment saddles Gibbard's account with the negation problem.

How, then, does our account differ from Gibbard's? Consider the following four questions (about a normative sentence  $\phi$ ).

- ▶ **Q1.** Does  $\phi$  have a proposition as its *semantic value*?
- ▶ **Q2.** Are propositions *enlisted to do logical or semantic work* (explaining inconsistency,  $\phi$ 's behavior under embedding, etc.)?
- ▶ **Q3.** Does  $\phi$ 's semantic value *exhaust its meaning*? Should  $\phi$ 's meaning be *identified* with its semantic value?
- ▶ **Q4.** Does  $\phi$ 's meaning *supervene* on its semantic value? Are there no facts about  $\phi$ 's meaning which are not determined or explained by its semantic value?

	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4
Gibbard	N	N	Y	Y
Me	N	Y	N	Y

The debate between expressivists and their critics has been effectively structured around the (unarticulated) presupposition that a theory's answers to Q1 and Q2 cannot differ (likewise for its answers to Q3 and Q4). This presupposition is, as far as I can tell, indefensible.

- ▶ The expressivist is committed to denying Q1, but I don't see that she is committed to denying Q2. Nothing, moreover, about answering 'yes' to Q2 commits the expressivist to thinking that normative language is meaningful or contentful along the propositional dimension.
- ▶ Nor is the expressivist committed to the very strong relationship between meaning and semantics involved in a 'yes' answer to Q3. Use (meaning) might be a deliverance of semantic value, without reducing to it (indeed, without even being written expressly into it).
- ▶ The key to an expressivism which solves the negation problem, then, is to realize that a use theory of meaning (together with the notion that the use of normative language is non-representational) doesn't require a theory of inconsistency stated in terms of the properties of non-representational attitudes or speech-acts.

## The Big Picture:

- ▶ In our framework, this way of developing expressivism imbues it with a distinctive **empirical content**: whether the envisioned semantic type is appropriate (i.e., whether there is any normative language at all, in the sense of the expressivist) depends on what the conventional use of normative language actually is.
- ▶ Contra Schroeder, a fully explicit, theoretically satisfactory, expressivist theory of meaning is possible. [One that is fairly semantically conservative, i.e., does not take the content of a normative claim to be an attitude.]
- ▶ Whether it's true is another matter—a largely empirical matter, if the account here is on track.
- ▶ **Advertisement**: there are empirical complications that arise with assimilating the discourse function of normative declaratives to that of imperatives. For discussion of these, see my [2009, 2010b].

Thank you!

## References

1. Charlow, N. 2009. The Varieties of Expressivism. Ms.
2. Charlow, N. 2010a. Restricting and Embedding Imperatives. In M. Aloni & K. Schulz (eds.) *Proceedings of the Seventeenth Amsterdam Colloquium*.
3. Charlow, N. 2010b. On the Linguistic Basis for Noncognitivism. Ms.
4. Gibbard, A. 2003. *Thinking How to Live*. Cambridge: Harvard UP.
5. Groenendijk, J. & Stokhof, M. 1984. *Studies on the semantics of questions...* Ph.D. Diss. ILLC.
6. Han, C. 1999. The structure and interpretation of imperatives. Ph.D. Diss., University of Pennsylvania.
7. Kratzer, A. 1981. The notional category of modality. In H. Eikmeyer & H. Rieser (eds.) *Words, Worlds, and Contexts*, 38–74. Berlin: De Gruyter.
8. Lemmon, E. 1965. Deontic logic and the logic of imperatives. *Logique et Analyse* 8: 39–71.
9. Portner, P. 2004. The semantics of imperatives within a theory of clause types. *Proceedings of SALT 14*.
10. Portner, P. 2007. Imperatives and modals. *Nat Lang Semantics* 15: 351–83.
11. Schroeder, M. 2008. *Being For*. Oxford: Oxford UP.
12. Schwager, M. 2006. Conditionalized imperatives. *Proceedings of SALT 16*.
13. Segerberg, K. 1990. Validity and Satisfaction in Imperative Logic. *Notre Dame J Formal Logic* 31: 203–21.
14. Swanson, E. 2008. Constraint semantics and its application to conditionals. Talk Delivered at First Formal Epistemology Festival, Konstanz.
15. Yalcin, S. 2007. Epistemic modals. *Mind* 116: 983–1026.