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“And fare now wel ...”: Functions of Imperatives in Middle English Verbal Interaction

Ursula Lenker

1. Imperative: A Command Form?

Mood – in particular the development of modal auxiliaries – has been one of the most buzzing research areas in historical linguistics in the last decades. Yet, although categorised as a mood since classical antiquity (along with the indicative and the subjunctive), the English inflectional imperative and its functions have barely been studied.¹ Also cross-linguistically, the imperative mood has until recently only been paid scant attention (cf. Donhauser 1986: 13–14, Van der Wurff 2007: 2). This marked disregard may be grounded in the term’s transparent etymology from Latin *imperare* ‘to command’ so that “one might think that there is an obvious answer of what imperatives mean” (Fintel and Iatridou 2017: 288). Simplistically, the imperative is considered the ‘command form’ and thus, pragmatically, a directive speech act (specifically an order or a request).

From Ælfric’s term *bebeodendlic* ‘command (mood)’ to today’s pragmatics, the use of the imperative mood has accordingly been characterised as “an attempt [...] by the speaker to get the hearer to do something” (Searle 1976: 11). The role relationship between speaker and addressee hence appears to be clear: Presupposing a “power (authority) gradient” between speaker and hearer (Givón 1989: 145), imperatives are seen to serve a speaker’s desire to control others and to impose obligations on an addressee, i.e., to mark a forceful attempt by a speaker to get an addressee to bring about a state of affairs which is in the interest of the speaker (cf. Jary and Kissine 2014: 121 or Takahashi 2012: 85). Prototypical examples of this use are given in almost all grammars and textbooks, e.g., *Make your bed at once* or *Don’t touch* (Quirk et al. 1985: 11.29), *Get off the table* or *Don’t you dare talk to me like that, Clare, I’ve had enough* (Biber et al. 2021: 221).

Yet, when considering the Middle English imperative in the title of this chapter (from Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde*; Book IV, l. 658), we clearly see that such a view of the imperative cannot be the full story: *fare now wel* [‘fare now well’] does not allow an interpretation as a ‘command’, but attests to a use in good wishes, as in PDE *Enjoy your meal* or *Have a good time*. In another attestation of *fare well*, we even find two more instances of Middle English imperatives beyond its ‘command use’:

¹ Only some particular forms feature as side issues of grammaticalization processes, such as *do* in negative imperatives or the development of hortative forms such as OE *uton* ‘let us’ or PDE *let’s* (Hopper and Traugott 2003: 10–13; Van Bergen 2013; cf. also Kaita’s contribution to this volume).

- (1) **Far-wel**, and **thenk** I wol thy thank deserve; / **Have** here **my trouthe**, and that thou shalt wel here. (*Troilus and Criseyde*, Book I, ll. 1060–1061; Pandarus to Troilus)

[‘Fare well, and think that I will be deserving of your thanks, have here my pledge, and you will hear well about that.’]²

Obviously, the pledge in the phrase *have my trouthe* [‘have my pledge / word’] does not correspond to an interpretation of the imperative which implies a forceful attempt by a speaker to bring about a state of affairs by imposing obligations on the addressee. Also, the imperative of *thenken* ‘to think’, a verb of cognition, does not show a ‘command use’ but is comparable to interjections such as PDE *Come on!* or discourse particles such as PDE *Look, Listen* or *Mind you* (for all of these and various other functions, cf. Quirk et al. 1985: 831–832).

As could be shown by a number of recent studies on the imperative, these ‘other’, non-directive functions are by no means exceptional. Corpus research investigating imperatives in spoken face-to-face interaction across many languages has in fact revealed that what is at issue most frequently is not obligation, but ‘hearer-desirability’ or ‘hearer-benefit’, i.e., a result desirable from the point of the hearer rather than that of the speaker (see Section 3.2).

The present pilot study aims at comparing some of these recent findings on today’s use of the imperative with data from Middle English, in order to see whether the claims are also valid diachronically. Due to the restricted nature of material from earlier stages of English – the well-known “bad data problem” (cf. Jucker and Taavitsainen 2013: Chapter 2; Labov 1994) – a full semantic and pragmatic comparison to present-day face-to-face interaction is clearly not possible. However, Hans Sauer (2009, 2012) could show in his articles on interjections (one of the results of lexicalised imperatives; cf. Sauer 2012: 164) that our Old and Middle English material still allows a distinct understanding of the pragmatic functions of particular forms and constructions in early English.

After a brief introduction into the morpho-syntax of imperatives (Section 2), Section 3 will summarise research on the main functions of imperatives, with a focus on most recent findings concerning its uses in today’s face-to-face interaction (Section 3.2). Section 4 will then present the results of a pilot study on the uses of the imperative in selected Middle English texts by Geoffrey Chaucer. In order to allow for a comparison with today’s spoken and fictional face-to-face interaction, the imperatives chosen for this pilot study are from the fictional dialogues in the frame narratives of the *Canterbury Tales* and in *Troilus and Criseyde* (Books I and II).³

² All quotes from Chaucer are cited from the *Riverside Chaucer* (Benson 2008). All translations are mine. Translations are only given for those examples which are hard to comprehend in Present-Day English. Generally, the quotes are from direct speech; quotation marks are only printed in cases of intermittent material, such as *inquit*-formulae (e.g., (4b)).

³ Even in Present-Day English, there is a difference in the frequency of overt subjects and politeness signals (such as *please*) between the registers CONVERSATION and FICTION. Biber et al. (2021: 222)

2. Imperatives: Morpho-Syntax

The morphological inventory for marking the second person imperative⁴ is very restricted in Present-Day English (cf. Biber et al. 2021: 220–223, König 2020). There is an absence of tense contrast: the imperative only has a present tense (cf. also (6) from *Ælfric’s Grammar*).

As concerns inflection and position, the base form of the verb is used in Present-Day English; this is placed in initial position (cf. examples (2)–(4) from Biber et al. 2021: 220–223):

- (2) a. **Get off** the table.
b. **Pass** me my drink please.

In contrast to the obligatory subjects in all other Present-Day English clause types, the subject slot is generally empty in imperative clauses. The optional subject may be realised by a personal pronoun (e.g., *you* in (3a)) or a vocative (e.g., *Melissa* in (3b)):⁵

- (3) a. **You** go home and go to sleep.
b. **Melissa**, take those things away.

In negatives (4a) and emphatic declaratives (4b), *do*-support is used in Present-Day English.

- (4) a. **Don’t** you **dare** talk to me like that, Clare, I’ve had enough.
b. “Please **do** come over,” she invited.

While the restriction to present tense, the initial position of the verb, and the optionality of the subject have been attested since Old English, *do*-support is a more recent feature (since Early Modern English, as in all functions of *do*-support in English).

find that these are “[s]urprisingly [...] slightly more common in FICTION than in CONVERSATION (c. every sixth imperative clause in conversation v. every fourth imperative clause in fiction)”.

⁴ The imperative of the first person, which will not be dealt with in any detail in this article, is commonly a hortative. It is realised by the subjunctive or by special verb phrases such as OE *uton* / ME *ute* + infinitive, which has been replaced by *let us* / *let’s* since Middle English. For details, see Van Bergen (2013). For examples of hortative *let us*, cf. *Now let us [let’s] stynte of Custance but a throwe / And speke [SUBJUNCTIVE] we of the Romayn Emperour [...]* (“Man of Law’s Tale”, *Canterbury Tales*, II. 953–954) and examples (18a) and (38).

⁵ I have not been able to find any concrete numbers on overt subjects in corpus studies. Biber et al. (2021: 222) combine specification of the addressee (3b, 4a) and the use of softening devices (such as *please* in 2b) and say that these two features are “generally rare with imperatives; less than 20% of all imperatives in conversation and fiction have such features”; in these comparatively rare cases, overt second-person subject *you* and a final vocative are most common. But see also n. 3 on the higher frequency of these features in FICTION than CONVERSATION.

Formally, Old English in particular has a clearer contrast between the moods, with the imperative showing different inflectional endings in their singular and plural forms (i.e., it is not the base form of the verb that is used).

	Singular	Plural	
Old English			
weak verbs	-e / -a	-aþ	-(i)(g)aþ
strong verbs	∅	-aþ	
Middle English		South, Midlands	North
weak verbs	-e	-eth	-es
strong verbs	∅	-eth	-es
Present-Day English	∅	∅	

Table 1: Inflectional imperative endings in Old and Middle English

This distinction is not as clear-cut as presented in this paradigm, since there is much scribal variation in different manuscripts of Chaucerian texts.⁶ A further, more systematic variation in Middle English morpho-syntax lies in the fact that the plural form of the imperative can also be used for the polite address to one individual (the character Wife of Bath in (5)):

- (5) “Dame, I wolde praye yow [2nd PL], “if your [2nd PL] wyl it were,” / Seyde this Pardoner, “as ye [2nd PL] began / **Telle** [IMP SG] forþ your tale, **spareth** [IMP PL] for no man, / And **teche** [IMP SG] us yonge men of youre [2nd PL] praktike.” (“Wife of Bath’s Prologue”, *Canterbury Tales*, III. 185–187; Pardoner to Wife of Bath)

[“Lady, I pray you, if it were your will”, said this pardoner, “Tell forth your tale, spare no one, and teach us young men of your technique”.]

The option to choose between the singular and the plural forms allows Middle English speakers to mark positive politeness by selecting the referential, polite forms (personal pronouns *ye, your, you* and verbal ending *-eth*), an option that is no longer available to speakers of Present-Day English.⁷ In (5), we have, of course, many more explicit politeness signals mitigating the arguably face-threatening character of the directive,

⁶ In Chaucer’s three imperative forms (i.e., *-e* and \emptyset in the singular, and *-eth* in the plural), strong verbs often take the stem-form (i.e., \emptyset), not only in the imperative singular, but also in the imperative plural; in other cases, a final *-e* is not an inflectional ending, but seems to denote that the stem vowel is long and might also reflect metrical decisions (cf. Kerkof 1982: §92, Kittredge 1969: §115–118).

⁷ The terms ‘positive / negative politeness / face’ are here used in the sense of Brown and Levinson’s face wants, where ‘positive face’ refers to “the positive consistent self-image [...] (crucially including the desire that this self-image be appreciated and approved of) claimed by interactants”. ‘Negative face’, by contrast, refers to “the want of every ‘competent adult member’ that his actions be unimpeded by others”, i.e., “the freedom of action and freedom from imposition” (1987: 61 *passim*).

with the honorific *Dame*, the phrase *I wolde praye yow* ‘I would like to ask you / please’, and the explicit signal of ‘hearer-’ rather than ‘speaker-desirability’ in *if your wyl it were* (see Section 3.2.1).

3. Functions of Imperatives: Command – Hearer-Desirability

3.1 Functions of the Imperative in Old and Middle English: Metalinguistic Sources

As in most of the later grammar and textbook accounts, the imperative is presented as the ‘command mood’ in the meta-linguistic sources on Old and Middle English. In *Ælfric’s Grammar*, it is named *bebeodendlic* ‘the command-ing-ly [mood]’ (a derivation from the present participial verbal base of *be-beodan* ‘to command’ plus adjectival *-lic* ‘-ly (adj.)’; *DOE*, s.v. *be-bēodenlic*). Accordingly, its function is characterised as follows:

- (6) þæt oðer MODVVS ys IMPERATIVVS, þæt ys, bebeodendlic: mid þam gemete we hatað oðre menn don sum ðing <oððe><sum><ðing> þrowian. *lege* ræd ðu; [...]; *flagella istum puerum* beswing ðis cild; [...] þis gemet sprecð forðwerd and næfð nanne *PRAETERITVM*, forþan ðe nan man ne hæst don, þæt ðe gedon byð. He sprecð to oðrum and na to him sylfum; forþan ðe gehwa hæst oðerne, na hyne sylfne. (Zupitza 1880 [2001]: 125, 1–5)

[‘That second mood is (the) imperative, that is, the commanding-ly (form): with this mood we command other men / humans to do some thing or to suffer something. *lege* read (thou) [...] *flagella istum puerum* flog this child [...]. This mood speaks prospectively (onwards in time) and does not have any past tense form, because no one orders to be done what has been done. He speaks to others and not to himself; therefore he orders the other not himself.’]

Ælfric here highlights basically the same features we have seen in Present-Day English metalinguistic sources. The imperative is characterised as the ‘command mood’, specifying that, because of this, it a) cannot have any other tense than the present tense and b) is second person in its form, addressing someone else. While the imperative “*lege* ræd ðu” [‘read thou’] is one of the standard examples (*Read this book!*; Fintel and Iatridou 2017: 288), “*flagella istum puerum* beswing ðis cild” [‘flog this child’] is rather upsetting today (but see also (19)).

In the various *Middle English Grammatical Texts* collected by Thomson (1984), the ‘command-function’ of the imperative mood is again the only function presented by the verbs *bidden* and *commanden*⁸ (with very little variation, as including *preyen* in “Accedence Text C” (7c)):

⁸ Cf. *MED*, s.vv. *bidden* v. ‘1. To demand, prescribe, or order (sth.)’, *commaunden* v. ‘To command, order, demand, prescribe, or request (sth.)’ and *preien* v. ‘1(a) To ask earnestly, make a plea or request ...’ [...] 3 (a) To make petition to a deity, saint, etc.; say a prayer; 3b. To pray’.

- (7) a. How knos þu þe imperatiue mod? For he byddus or comawyndys. (Thomson 1984: 4; “Accedence Text A”)
b. How know 3e imperatyf mode? For hit biddithe or commandyth. (Thomson 1984: 13, 59; “Accedence Texts B and K”)
c. Qwerby knowyst imperatyf mood? For hit preyith, byddyth, or comawndyth. (Thomson 1984: 25; “Accedence Text C”)

In the descriptions of the moods, the Middle English grammars commonly do neither give Latin nor English examples, with the exception of “Accedence Text D”, which illustrates the ‘command use’ by English *go hens* and Latin *vade hinc* [‘go hence’]:

- (8) How knowyst imperatyf moode? That at byddyth or commaundeth, as ‘Go hens’, *Vade hinc*. (Thomson 1984: 38; “Accedence Text D”)

Interestingly, however, further examples of imperatives are attested in passages illustrating the use of the vocative (English *Willyam*, Latin *Willelme*):

- (9) How by a vocatyf case? As ‘Willyam come hydere and have a peny’, *Willelme venias huc et habebis denarium* (Thomson 1984: 178; “Text EE”)

This example is particularly interesting, since *come hydere* clearly reflects the same use as *go hens* in (8), while *have a penny* (9) does not as easily correspond with the prototypical features of a ‘command’ form (as it also attested by the Latin forms, which are not imperatives).⁹ Semantically, it posits quite a contrast to Ælfric’s ‘flog this child’ (6) as concerns ‘hearer-desirability’, a function of the imperative that has been revealed in recent studies (see Section 3.2.1).

3.2 Functions of the Imperative in Today’s Face-to-Face Interaction

Since about a decade ago, studies on the imperative have seen an upsurge of interest in linguistics (cf. the monographs and collected volumes by Aikhenvald 2012, Jary and Kissine 2014, Sorjonen, Raevaara, and Couper-Kuhlen 2017, Van Olmen and Heinold 2017, and Takahashi 2012). A particular focus of these recent studies lies on the functions of the imperative in spoken face-to-face interaction, which has been described as “its natural habitat” (Auer 2017: 411). While no one would probably ever have doubted that imperatives are much more frequent in spoken conversation,¹⁰ these recent studies take pains to differentiate various functions of the imperative (which for

⁹ Latin has a subjunctive (*venias*; 2nd person singular present subjunctive active) and a future form (*habebis*; 2nd person singular future I indicative active). The English forms are certainly not indicative (cf. *comest*, *hauest*). They can also not be present subjunctive forms because these sentences illustrate the vocative so that the obligatory subject of the subjunctive clause would be missing. For subjunctives, we would also expect a different word order (see the example in footnote 4).

¹⁰ For Present-Day English, Biber et al. (2021: 222; Table 3.25) find 11,000 instances (per million words) in CONVERSATION against 2,000 in FICTION and 1,000 each in NEWS and ACADEMIC PROSE.

Present-Day English needs some manual and qualitative work because the imperative appears in the verb’s base form; see Section 2).

3.2.1 Functions of the Imperative: Hearer- rather than Speaker-Desirability

In one of the earliest corpus studies on the English imperative I am aware of, Stefanowitsch and Gries (2003: 231–234) approach imperatives in the British component of the *International Corpus of English (ICE-GB)* in a collocation analysis, i.e., they calculate which verbs are strongly attracted or repelled by the imperative (on methodological details, see Stefanowitsch and Gries 2003: 213–220). Their Table 12 lists 15 verbs which are “most strongly attracted to the imperative construction” (in decreasing collocation strength; 2003: 232):

let, see, look, listen, worry, fold, remember, check, process, try, hang on, tell, note, add, keep

In their discussion of this list, the authors highlight that their findings run counter to the common perception of the imperative as a ‘command form’, for which

we might [...] minimally expect a prevalence of verbs encoding actions that yield results desirable from the point of someone else, i.e. the speaker; note that the verb most frequently used in the pragmatics literature to exemplify the imperative is *pass* (as in *Pass the salt!*). In addition, we might expect some reflex of the authority or obligation aspect of the imperative. The data, however, tell a different story (Stefanowitsch and Gries 2003: 232).

As concerns the semantic types of verbs, four of the verbs (*see, worry, remember* and *note*) are “clearly not action verbs in any sense”. Moreover, the authors point out that “many of the action verbs that do occur are atypical in that they do not yield tangible results (*look, listen, hang on, check, try, keep*)”. Result-yielding action verbs – i.e., those cited most often by grammars – occur but “they are not nearly as dominant as might be expected (making up only a third of the top fifteen collexemes)” (all direct quotes from Stefanowitsch and Gries 2003: 232).

With regard to the functions of the imperatives, the authors focus on the “desirability of the requested action” and find that even “a cursory glance at Table 12 suggests that what is at issue is a result desirable from the point of the hearer rather than the speaker” (2003: 232–233). This ‘hearer-desirability’ is not only illustrated by first-placed *let*, but, for instance, also by typical uses of the imperatives of *see, listen* and *remember*:

- (10) a. Just try it and **see** what happens (*ICE s1b-002 064*)
b. **See** also the section below on ‘Students from abroad’ (*ICE w2d-003 049*)
- (11) **Remember** that alcohol affects your judgment of both people and situations (*ICE w2d-009 081*)

In all of these examples, the actions requested in the imperative clause are “(portrayed as being) beneficial to the hearer rather than the speaker: the examples convey a sense of suggesting or advising rather than commanding or requesting [...]” (Stefanowitsch and Gries 2003: 233). For this, fifth-ranked *worry* is a particularly good example because it occurs exclusively in the phrase *Don't worry*.

This aspect of ‘hearer’- rather than ‘speaker-desirability’ is even more dominant in studies restricting their corpus to face-to-face interaction (whereas *ICE-GB* also includes written registers). In his doctoral thesis, De Clerck (2006), for example, finds that imperatives are primarily used to instruct someone on the steps needed to complete a task or solve a problem, to exhort them to do something that is to their benefit, to give advice and to make suggestions and recommendations (cf. De Clerck 2006: 472).¹¹

3.2.2 Functions of the Imperative: Discourse Organisation

In addition to ‘hearer-desirability’, many of the verbs attracted to the imperative can be described as having an “attention-directing” or “discourse-organisational function” (Stefanowitsch and Gries 2003: 233–234; cf. *look, listen, check, note, hang on* of the verb list and *see* in (10b)). This discourse function of imperatives also yields established discourse markers, such as PDE *Look, See, Listen, Hear Hear, Come on* or *Mind you*.

Such a functional interface between imperatives and discourse organisers is also highlighted by Biber et al. (2021: 3.13.4.1), who find that imperative clauses are often used to regulate the conversational interchange between speaker and addressee:¹²

(12) **Wait a minute**, did you have a good day today?

(13) **Hold on**, continued Jennings, quieting the dissenters.

3.2.3 Functions of the Imperative: The Language of Immediate Action

Examining material from Present-Day German, Auer (2017) more generally finds that imperatives are not only used in a discourse-organising function, but are

prototypically used for prompting (or stopping [...]) an immediate action in a tight and well-defined temporal framework, which at the same time is not only to the benefit of the speaker (alone), but either to that of the recipient or to both participants (Auer 2017: 414).

¹¹ The recommendation and advice functions as well as the “good wishes” functions have, of course, been noticed by earlier grammars, but there have not been any specific attempts at systematizing them (cf., e.g., Quirk et al. 1985: 831–832).

¹² This function is also widely attested beyond face-to-face interaction, and prominent in written texts of the register ACADEMIC PROSE, where *note that, see also, [...] for [...] consult* are used to guide readers in interpreting the text (Biber et al. 2021: 3.13.4.1).

The actions requested in the imperative may be characterised as being beneficial to the hearer rather than the speaker; most often, the requested actions serve to support the future cooperation and interaction between speaker and hearer. This characterization of the imperative adds the perspective of the imperative as the ‘language of immediate action’, but otherwise basically replicates the functions of ‘hearer-desirability’ and ‘discourse-organisation’ (see Sections 3.2.1–3.2.2).

4. Functions of the Imperative in Middle English Dialogues

4.1 Pilot Study: Imperatives in Fictional Dialogues in *Troilus and Criseyde* (Books I and II) and the Frame Narratives of the *Canterbury Tales*

The following pilot study will examine the functions of imperatives in Middle English interactive language, with a particular focus on the prototypical imperative uses found for today’s face-to-face interaction, i.e., hearer- rather than speaker-desirability and discourse organisation, both in a context of immediate action (see Sections 3.2.1–3.2.3). The corpus texts selected with these aims and the “bad-data-caveat” (see Section 1) in mind are from two late Middle English texts by Chaucer, namely the fictional dialogues in Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde* (Books I and II; henceforth *T&C*) and the dialogues between the pilgrims in the frame narratives of the *Canterbury Tales* (henceforth *CT*).¹³ Both of them are well-known for their numerous passages of fictional lively interaction so that even this small number of corpus texts has yielded the quite substantial number of 324 imperatives:

- 203 imperatives from *Troilus and Criseyde* (Books I and II), and
- 121 imperatives from dialogues of the frame narratives of the *Canterbury Tales*.

4.2 Verb Types

Table 2 lists the verb types attested in imperative mood in these texts (in order of decreasing tokens), among them different types of ‘activity verbs’ we would expect to be most frequent following the traditional accounts of grammars (see Section 3.2.1).

¹³ The “Wife of Bath’s Prologue” is excluded because it is mostly a monologic treatise rather than interactive fictional dialogue.

Verb Type	More than 4 tokens	Up to 4 tokens	Tokens TTR
Activity Verbs			
Verbs of Communication	tellen (21+29), herknen (7+10), seyen (7+6), speken (3+3)	holden clos thy mouth (1), holden pees (2), prechen (2+1), preyen (4) , stynten clappe (1), writen (1)	98 (TTR 0.10)
General Activity Verbs	don (5+1) + don wey (4)	avysen 'examine' (1+1), awaken (3+1), ben diligent (1) / free (1) / diligent (1) / no taryinge (1) , ben fructuous (1), beeten 'beat' (1), biblotten 'to make blots on' (1), biden 'wait for' (1), breken (2), bringen (2+1), cacchen (1), casten (2), chesen (1), complaynen (1) , drawen (cut) (2), eschewen (2), hidden (3), holden (3) , holden (up) (2), leyen hond (1), lesen time (1), letten not 'don't hesitate' (1), perserveren (1), rehercen (1) , slen (1), shewen (1+2), stinten (1) , studien (1), taken (1+1) , tarien time (1), washen (1), wreken (1)	62 (TTR 0.51)
	activity verb <i>lat</i> (10+3)	lat be (9+2) lat gon (1+1)	13
(Non-) Motion Verbs	comen (6+4), abiden 'remain' (3+3), faren (5)	dwellen (1), fleen 'flee' (1), gon (4), hasten (1+1), jompren (1), leyen (3), riden (1+2), (a)risen (3), standan (1), taken leve (1)	41 (TTR 0,31)
Interactional Activity Verbs	helpen (6+3)	acquiten 'to give in return' (1+1), assuren 'promise' (1), blamen (1), bidden (3), disblamen (1) , don (causative) (1), forgiven (1), geven (2), granten mercy (1), guiden (1+1), haven (1), haven trouthe (2), haven reward (1) , putten out of blame (1), refusen (3), taken 'take example / advice' (3+1)	36 (TTR 0.50)
	interactional <i>lat</i> (16+4)	lat me / hir / him / X (not) ~ [be (1+1), departe (1), don (1), dwelle (1), gon (1), have (1), liven (2), slepe (2), se (1+1), seye (1), sterve (1), have (1), telle (2); alone (2)]	20

Verbs of Emotion – Perception – Cognition			
Verbs of Emotion / Attitude		deliten (1), ben blithe (1+1), ben glad (1), ben of good cheere (1), ben trewe (1), ben (not) wrooth (1), bileven (1), doubten (1), gladen (2), hopen (1), loven (1), put not impossible (1), taken for good (1), taken in disdeyn (1+1), trusten (1+1)	19 (TTR 0.78)
Verbs of Perception / Sensation	looken (8+2), seen (3+4)	ben war (1+1)	19 (TTR 0.16)
Verbs of Cognition	thinken (9+1)	remembren (1), taken heed (1) / taken kepe (2), understonden (1), witen (1)	16 (TTR 0.37)

Table 2: Verb types (in bold for *Troilus and Criseyde*, Books I and II, and in regular script for the frame narratives in the *Canterbury Tales*)

The token counts in Table 2 refer to all instances of imperatives in the corpus texts. Even though it is not a collocation analysis as the one conducted by Stefanowitsch and Gries (2003; see Section 3.2.1), the results are still comparable.

First, we see that imperatives are not only attested for different kinds of activity verbs, but also in quite large numbers for verbs of emotion / attitude (cf. *loven* (14), *gladden* (15)), perception / sensation and cognition (*thenken* (15), *understonden* (16); on *think* as a discourse particle, see Section 4.4):

(14) Be what she be, and **love** her as thee please! (*T&C*, Book I, l. 679; Pandarus to Troilus)
[‘Whoever she may be, love her as / if it pleases you!’]

(15) And also **think**, and therwith **glade** thee, / That sith thy lady vertuous is al, / So folweth it that ther is som pitee. (*T&C*, Book I, ll. 897–899; Pandarus to Troilus)
[‘And think too, and cheer yourself up with it that since your lady is altogether virtuous, then it follows that there will be some pity.’]

(16) Now **understond**, [...] (*T&C*, Book II, l. 358; Pandarus to Criseyde)

Among the activity verbs, we not only find attestations of the sub-classes we would expect to be most frequent because they “yield tangible results desired by the speaker” (see Section 3.2.1) – i.e., the classes of ‘general activity verbs’, ‘motion verbs’ and most of the ‘communication verbs’ – but also a large number of ‘interactional activity verbs’, whose semantics explicitly require speaker-hearer interaction:

(17) “Ywis, myn uncle,” quod she, “**grant mercy** [...]” (*T&C*, Book II, l. 239; Criseyde to Pandarus)

Among these ‘interactional activity verbs’ is also *have* in both concrete and abstract sense, as in *have a penny* (9) or *have trouthe* ‘have my word / pledge’ (1). In all of these cases, it is the hearer (rather than the speaker) who benefits from the verbal activity in some way.

Interesting uses in this respect are the altogether 33 instances of second person *lat* ‘let’, the most frequent verb in Present-Day English,¹⁴ which may have a genuine activity reading (18a) or an interactional activity reading (two instances in (18b); cf. also (20)):

(18) a. **Lat be** thy weping and thi drerinesse, / And lat us lissen wo with
other speche. (*T&C*, Book I, ll. 701–702; Pandarus to Troilus)

[‘Let be your weeping and your gloom and let us lessen your grief by talking about something else.’]

b–c. “In compaignye we wol have no debaat. / Telleth youre tale, and **lat** the somonour **be**.”
/ “Nay,” quod the Somonour, “**lat hym seye to me** / What so hym list”. (“Friar’s
Prologue”, *CT*, III.24–27)

[“In our company we will have no debate. Tell your tale and let the summoner be.” “No,”
said the summoner, “let him say to me what pleases him”.’]

These examples show that the specific function of each imperative needs detailed contextualised interpretations. So it is certainly not possible to give a full and detailed semantic and pragmatic account of all of the uses of the Middle English imperatives here (even though the present corpus is rather limited). Instead, Sections 4.3 to 5 will summarise the main findings on the uses of Middle English imperatives with a focus on the key functions detailed in Sections 3.2.1–3.2.3.

4.3 Imperatives: Command Forms?

First of all, we see that also Middle English imperatives are very rarely used in an explicit ‘command function’. Interestingly, unambiguous corpus examples are almost exclusively attested in quotes used by one of the interlocutors. See the imperatives *sle*, *brek* and *wrek* in the host’s rather misogynistic depiction of his wife in the “Monk’s Prologue”:

¹⁴ *Let* ranks first on Stefanowitsch and Gries’s list, who, however, also include first person *let’s* (cf. *lat us* in (18a) and (38), which are excluded here; see footnote 4). Also, the two corpora – my selection and *ICE-GB* – are not fully comparable, since *ICE-GB* comprises diverse kinds of spoken and written registers and not only (fictional) conversation (which is probably one of the reasons why *tellen* is the most frequent verb in my corpus).

- (19) a. “I hadde levere than a barel ale / That Goodelief my wyf hadde herd this tale! / For she nys nothyng of swich pacience / As was this Melibeus wyf Prudence. / By Goddes bones, when I bete my knaves / She bryngeth me forth the grete clobbed staves, / And crieth, ‘**Slee** the dogges, everichoon, And **brek** hem, bothe bak and every boon’ [...]”
b. “Whan she comth hoom she rampeth in my face / And crieth, ‘False coward, **wrek** thy wyf!’” (“Monk’s Prologue”, *CT*, V.5–12, 16–17; Goodlief to servants; quoted by her husband, the host, to pilgrims)

[‘I’d rather than a barrel of good ale, that my wife Goodlief would have heard this tale! / She has not such patience, / as Prudence, the wife of Melibee. / By God, when I beat my knaves, / she fetches forth the stoutest gnarly staves / and cries: “Slay the dogs, everyone! / And break both their backs and every bone!” [...] When she comes home, she ramps right in my face and cries “False coward, avenge your wife!”’]

Unambiguous cases of a ‘command use’ are not found at all in the *Troilus and Criseyde* corpus (on mitigated directives, see pp. 126–127), and are also extremely infrequent in my *Canterbury Tales* corpus: (19)–(22) are all of the clear examples I could find.

- (20) The Reve answerde and seyde, “**Stynt** thy clappe! **Lat be** thy lewed dronken harlotrye!” (“Miller’s Prologue”; *CT*, I.36–37; Reeve to Miller)

[‘The reeve answered and said: “Oh, shut your [2nd SG] mouth, Let be your [2nd SG] ignorant drunken ribaldry!”’]

- (21) **Hoold cloos** thy mouth, man, by thy fader kyn, / The devel of helle sette his foot therin. (“Manciple’s Prologue”, *CT*, IX.37–38; Manciple to Cook)

[‘Close your [2nd SG] mouth, man, by your [2nd SG] father’s kin; / May the devil of hell set his foot therein!’]

- (22) **Hoold thou thy pees**, and **spek no wordes mo**, / For if thou do, thou shalt it deere abyde. (“Canon Yeoman’s Prologue”, *CT*, VIII.140; Canon to Yeoman)

[‘You [2nd SG] hold your [2nd SG] peace and do not speak any more words, / Because if you [2nd SG] do you [2nd SG] will have to pay for it dearly.’]

Such instances are examples of the impolite “bald on record” imperatives frequently discussed in research literature (Brown and Levinson 1987: 60). They are very rare, though. In the interactive fictional dialogues, they are only attested in contexts of highly agitated, very rude address to characters from the lower strata of society (cf. the second person singular forms *thy*, *thou* and phrases such as *false coward* (19b), *thy lewed dronken harlotrye* (20) or *devel of helle* (21)). In (22), an explicit warning *For if thou do, thou shalt it deere abyde* is added.

A special kind of speaker-desired requests is found with the verb *helpen* in a few instances of prayers (23) – already mentioned by Ælfric and the Middle English grammars as a special case of ‘command’ – or in (24), where the addressee Pandarus complies in promising to help.

(23) Now **help**, thow meeke and blisful faire mayde (“Second Nun’s Prologue”, *CT*, VIII.57; Second Nun to Mary)

(24) “**Help** now,” quod he. “Yis, by my trouthe, I shal.” (*T&C*, Book I, l. 1054; Troilus and Pandarus)

4.4 Imperatives: The Language of Immediate Action and Discourse Organisation

While the spirit of immediacy can be sensed in all of the examples given above, this function of the imperative as the ‘language of immediate action’ is recurrently made explicit by temporal adverbials, in particular *now* (title, 16, 23, 24, 25, 26, 30, 31), but also *anon* ‘immediately’ (29) or other time adverbials (27):

(25) **Now telleth on**, sir Monk, [...] (“Miller’s Prologue”, *CT*, I.10; Host to Miller)

(26) **Go now**, farwel! (*T&C*, Book II, l. 1523; Pandarus to Troilus)

(27) **Hoold up** youre hond, **withouten moore speche** (“General Prologue”, *CT*, I.785; Host to Pilgrims)

In many of these examples, this immediacy links up with discourse organisation, attested by the phrases *tell / telleth / say on/forth* (5, 25, 28, 31) or *come of/forth* (31, 32). While the quantitative dominance of ‘verbs of communication’ in Table 2 is also grounded in the selection of corpus texts, in particular the tale-telling competition central to the frame of the *Canterbury Tales*, it is noteworthy that *tellen* is also by far the most frequent verb in *Troilus and Criseyde* (21 instances; for polyfunctional *lat*, see pp. 134–135). This dominance is also reflected in the very low type-token-ratio of the verbs of communication, which reflects the frequency of *tellen*, *herknen* and *seyen* (0.10; see Table 2).¹⁵

(28) **Tel forth** youre tale, my leeve maister deere. (“Friar’s Prologue”, *CT* III.36; Host to Friar)

(29) “Sir Man of Lawe,” quod he, “so have ye blis, **Telle** us a tale **anon** [...]” (“Man of Law’s Prologue”, *CT*, II.33–34)

(30) **Now herkneth**, if yow liketh for to here. (“Monk’s Prologue”, *CT*, V.95)

This use of the imperative becomes most obvious in the dynamics of face-to-face interaction in full dialogues. See (31), where Criseyde begs Pandarus for information and help, which is immediately given:

¹⁵ On the aspects of ‘negative politeness’ in all of these quotes, see pp. 137–138.

- (31) [Criseyde] “**Now**, my good eem, for goddes love, I preye,” / Quod she, “**com of**, and **tel me** what it is; / For bothe I am agast what ye wol seye, / And eek me longeth it to wite, y-wis. / For whether it be wel or be amis, / **Say on**, lat me not in this fere dwelle”. [Pandarus] “So wol I doon; **now herkneth**, I shal telle [...]”. (*T&C*, Book II, ll. 309–316; Criseyde and Pandarus)

[‘[Criseyde] “Now, my dear uncle, for the love of God, I beg you,” she said, “come on / hurry up and tell me what it is. For I am both afraid of what you are going to say but still I wish to know it, for sure. For whether it is for better or worth, tell me right away – don’t let me remain in this state of fright”. [Pandarus] “So I will. Now listen, I will tell you”.’]

The discourse qualities of imperatives become even more obvious with the imperatives such as *come of* or *thenk*, when used as discourse markers with attention-directing or discourse-organisational function.

- (32) Fy on the devel! **Thenk** which oon he is, / And in what plyt he lyth; **com of anoon**; / **Thenk** al swich taried tyd, but lost it nis! [...] **come of now**, if ye conne; [...]. (*T&C*, Book II, ll. 1737–1743; Pandarus to Criseyde)

[‘Fie on the devil! Think which one he is, and what state he is in. Come on now. Think how time so delayed is only wasted. [...] Come on now, if you can.’]

This discourse marker use is particularly frequent with *thenk* (see (1), (15), and the two instances in (32)) but is also attested for *look* and *see*. While these verbs are classified as verbs of perception / sensation and cognition in Table 2, they have obviously lost their original verbal meanings. In (33) and (34), for instance, *look* is not used as a perception verb ‘to take a look at’; in both cases, it is followed by a *that*-clause signaling the expected activity:

- (33) Now **telle on**, Roger, **looke** that it be good, [...] (“Cook’s Prologue”, *CT*, l.21)

- (34) **Com forth** with me, And **loke** that ye thonke humbly / Hem alle three, [...] (*T&C*, Book II, l. 1718; Pandarus to Criseyde)

[‘Come along with me, and see that you / remember to / mind you thank all three of them humbly’.]

4.5 Hearer- rather than Speaker-Desirability

It will not have gone unnoticed that the hearer-wants of being left unimpeded are acknowledged by the speaker in many of the imperatives: Apart from the very rude examples in (19–22), most imperative clauses contain one or more features of ‘positive’ as well as of ‘negative politeness’ (for the definitions, see footnote 7). Among the features of ‘positive politeness’ are the use of the polite address form (2nd person plural for addressing an individual; see Section 2) and – often additionally – honorifics, such as *Sir* (25, 29), *Dame* (5), *myn uncle* (17), *freend* (44) or *my levee maister deere* (28).

Even more striking are the features of negative politeness attested in face-saving phrases such as “[Now herkneth], **if yow liketh for to here**” (30). This discourse-management acknowledging and specifying the hearer-wants becomes particularly obvious in many instances of the prototypical activity verb *do*, which is regularly used in the construction *do as thee / yow liste* [‘do whatever thou / you like’]:

(35) To that Pandare answerde, “**If thee lest, Do** that I seye, and lat me therwith goon” (*T&C*, Book II, l. 1052; Pandarus to Troilus)

(36) “Why, freend,” quod he, “**now do right as the leste**” (*T&C*, Book I, l. 1029; Pandarus to Troilus)

(37) “I vouche sauf,” quod he, “**do what yow liste**” (*T&C*, Book II, l. 1183; Pandarus to Criseyde)

These examples moreover show that Middle English imperatives are indeed – as found by Auer for Present-Day German verbal interaction – used for “prompting or stopping immediate action in an immediate temporal framework” and that this immediate action is mostly “not to the benefit of the speaker (alone), but to that of the addressee or to both participants” (cf. Auer 2017: 414 and Section 3.2.3). This benefit to all participants applies, for instance, to all of the cases in the *Canterbury Tales* in which the order of telling tales is negotiated between the Host and the story-telling pilgrim characters. It also becomes evident in the cases when a first person imperative *lat us* with positively connotated verbs (*daunce, to May don observaunce*) follows other imperatives.

(38) **Do wey** your book, **rys up**, and lat us daunce, / And lat us don to May som observaunce. (*T&C*, Book II, l. 111; Pandarus to Criseyde)

[‘Put away your book – get up, and let us dance and let us honour the month of May.’]

‘Hearer-desirability’ is obvious in the cases such as *have a penny* (9) or *have here my trouthe* (1) or good wishes (see title and 43, 44). Yet, it also applies to imperatives giving pieces of advice / recommendations to the addressee (its most frequent function in Present-Day English interaction; see De Clerck 2006 and pp. 129–130).

(39) For-thy **ensample taketh** of this man, / Ye wyse, proude, and worthy folkes [...] (*T&C*, Book I, l. 232; Narrator to Audience)

[‘Therefore take this man as an example, you wise, proud and noble people [...].’]

(40) And sin ye woot that myn entente is clene, / **Tak hede** ther-of, / for I non yvel mene. (*T&C*, Book II, l. 581; Pandarus to Criseyde)

[‘And since you know my intentions are innocent, give this some thought because I do not mean evil.’]

(41) And therefore, er that age thee devoure, **Go love**, [...] (*T&C*, Book II, l. 396)

[‘And therefore, before age will devour you, go and love, [...].’]

Commonly, such pieces of advice are implicitly or explicitly asked for by the addressee of the imperative and are as such clear examples of the fact that the requested actions also serve to support the future cooperation and interaction between speaker and hearer (cf. the dialogue above between Criseyde and Pandarus in (31)). As in De Clerck’s material (2006; see Section 3.2.1), also the Middle English imperatives are – very similar to cooking recipes, which also in Middle English use the imperative¹⁶ – used to instruct someone on the various steps needed to complete a task or solve a problem; cf. the sequence of imperatives in Pandarus’ step-by-step instructions for Criseyde, who then happily accepts (cf. *go we, arm and arm inward with him she wente*):

(42) [‘Pandarus] “**Com**, nece myn; my lady quene Eleyne, / **Abydeth** yow, and eek my lordes tweyne. / **Rys, take** with yow your nece Antigone, / Or whom yow list, or no fors, hardily; / The lesse prees, the bet; **com forth** with me, / And **loke** that ye thonke humbly / Hem alle three, and, whan ye may goodly / Your tyme se, **taketh** of hem **your leve**, / Lest we to longe his restes him bireve.” [...] Quod tho Criseyde, “Go we, uncle dere”. And arm in arm inward with him she wente, [...]. (*T&C*, Book II, ll. 1714–1724; Pandarus to Criseyde)

[‘[Pandarus] “Come, my niece! My lady, Queen Helen, is waiting for you, and also my two lords. Get up! Take your niece Antigone with you, or whoever you please; it does not matter at all. The fewer, the better. Come along with me and remember to thank all three of them humbly, and when you see that it is a good moment, take leave of them, in case we deprive him of his rest too long. [...] [Criseyde] Criseyde then said, “Let’s go, dear uncle”. And she went inwards with him, arm in arm.’]

5. Conclusion and Farewell

The imperatives attested in my corpus texts of Middle English fictional dialogue indeed show very similar functions to those used in today’s face-to-face interaction: They are – in contrast to what we expect from grammar – only rarely used in a ‘command function’, but rather support the (discourse) interaction of speaker and hearer in an immediate temporal frame. Very often the action requested in the imperative is not an obligation by the speaker, but an action beneficial to the addressee.

In view of the title of this volume, it is well worth investigating the uses of the imperative of Middle English *faren* in this perspective. In addition to the instances quoted above in the title and in (2), its use attests to the ‘language of immediacy’ and to ‘hearer-desirability’.

¹⁶ “**Take** flour of rys, and **drawe** hit thurgh a straynour with wyne, and **putte** hit in the same pot with saffron, and **travaille** hit wel” (Cookery Recipes in British Library, Arundel 334; from *MED*, s.v. *travaille* 6a).

(43) “Do now as I shal seye, and **fare a-right**” (*T&C*, Book II, l. 999; Pandarus to Troilus)

In all of its attestations, the imperative *fare well* and *fare aright* are not directives, but ‘good wishes’:

(44) “Freend so dere, **Now fare aright**, [...]” (*T&C*, Book I, l. 878; Pandarus to Troilus)

It is with an extremely sad note that we have to accept that these good wishes – about a year after the birthday colloquium for Hans Sauer – have now turned into a final “And fare now wel ...”.

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