

Melioratives in Dutch and German

Crosslinguistic variation in a minor sentence type

Erlinde Meertens Sven Lauer
University of Konstanz

Workshop on non canonical imperatives

Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin

May 25 – 26, 2018

What are melioratives?

Melioratives

Melioratives are **forms with an imperative-like function** that are formed with a version of the adverb *better*.

- | | |
|--|----------------|
| (1) Better go home. | <i>English</i> |
| (2) Kalitera fige.
Better leave-IMP. | <i>Greek</i> |
| (3) Geh besser nach Hause.
Go-IMP better to home. | <i>German</i> |
| (4) Beter ga je naar huis.
Better go you to home. | <i>Dutch</i> |

What are melioratives?

Melioratives

Melioratives are forms with an imperative-like function that are formed with a version of the adverb *better*.

- **Note:** “Melorative” is a **descriptive** term.
- Using it does not imply that melioratives form a natural class cross-linguistically.
- In fact, we will argue that melioratives, despite superficial similarities, work quite differently in even very closely related languages.

Analyzing melioratives

Three questions

- 1 What does 'imperative-like' amount to?
 - How are the forces of imperatives and melioratives alike?
 - How do the forces imperatives and melioratives differ?
- 2 How does the force of melioratives arise from their morphosyntactic make-up?
 - Are melioratives their own sentence type?
 - Or does their force arise from an interaction of the contribution of *better* and its host clause of another type?
- 3 How can the cross-linguistic variation in melioratives be accounted for?

Plot

Main aims today

- Describe melioratives in German and Dutch in some detail.
- Show that they behave quite differently.
- Give a rough indication of how the two sentence types can be analyzed.

Melioratives in Dutch and German

German

Morphosyntactic make-up

In German, melioratives are formed with either a **declarative** (indicative) or a **imperative** root clause, plus *better* in an adverb or particle position:

- (5) Geh besser nach Hause.
 Go-IMP better to home.
- (6) Du gehst besser nach Hause.
 You go-IND better to home.

The uses of imperatives

Crosslinguistically, imperatives have a wide range of uses (Schmerling 1982, Schwager 2006, Kaufmann 2012):

- | | | |
|--------|------------------------------------|---------------|
| (7) a. | Stand at attention! | (COMMAND) |
| b. | Don't touch the hot plate! | (WARNING) |
| c. | Hand me the salt, please. | (REQUEST) |
| d. | Take these pills for a week. | (ADVICE) |
| e. | Please, lend me the money! | (PLEA) |
| f. | Get well soon! | (WELL-WISH) |
| g. | Drop dead! | (CURSE) |
| h. | Please, don't rain! | (ABSENT WISH) |
| i. | Okay, go out and play. | (PERMISSION) |
| j. | Okay then, sue me, if you have to. | (CONCESSION) |
| k. | Have a cookie(, if you like). | (OFFER) |

German

Uses of German declarative melioratives

German melioratives have **a subset of the uses of imperatives**.

- (8) a. Du räumst besser dein Zimmer auf. (COMMAND)
 b. Du fasst besser die heiße Platte nicht an. (WARNING)
 c. #Du gibst mir besser das Salz(, bitte). (REQUEST)
 d. #Du leihst mir besser das Geld, bitte! (PLEA)
 e. Sie nehmen besser diese Pillen. (ADVICE)
 f. Sie nehmen besser den A-Zug. (DISINTERESTED ADVICE)
 g. #Du wirst besser bald gesund. (WELL-WISH)
 h. #Du stirbst (doch) besser. (CURSE)
 i. #Es regnet besser nicht. (WISH)
 j. #Okay, du gehst besser raus und spielst.
 (PERMISSION/ACQUIESCENCE)
 k. #Okay du verklagst mich besser, wenn du musst. (CONCESSION)
 l. #Du nimmst besser Platz, wenn du willst. (OFFER)

German

Uses of German imperative melioratives

German melioratives have **a subset of the uses of imperatives**.

- (9) a. Räum besser dein Zimmer auf! (COMMAND)
 b. Fass besser die heiße Platte nicht an! (WARNING)
 c. #Gib mir besser das Salz bitte. (REQUEST)
 d. #Bitte, leih mir besser das Geld! (PLEA)
 e. Nehmen Sie besser diese Pillen. (ADVICE)
 f. Nehmen sie besser den A-Zug. (DISINTERESTED ADVICE)
 g. #Werd besser bald wieder gesund! (WELL-WISH)
 h. #Stirb (doch) besser! (CURSE)
 i. #Bitte, regne besser nicht! (ABSENT WISH)
 j. #Okay, geh besser raus und spiele. (PERMISSION)
 k. #Okay verklag mich doch besser, wenn du musst. (CONCESSION)
 l. #Nimm besser Platz, wenn du willst. (OFFER)

German

Uses of German declarative melioratives

German melioratives have **a subset of the uses of imperatives**.

- They can be used for some DIRECTIVES.
 - They can be used as ORDERS and WARNINGS.
 - They cannot be used as REQUESTS and PLEAS
- They can be used for giving ADVICE.
 - Both interested and disinterested.
- They are not suited to wish-type uses.
- They cannot be used to PERMIT, ACQUIESCE or INVITE.

The 'if you know what is good for you' effect

- German melioratives display a peculiar effect when used as commands.
- They imply **a threat of dire consequences** if the command is not obeyed.

(10) Du räumst besser dein Zimmer auf, bevor ich heimkomme.
 You clean better your room up, before I come home.
 'You better clean up your room before I come home. (Or else ...)'

(11) Räum besser dein Zimmer auf, bevor ich heimkomme.
 Clean better your room up, before I come home.
 'You better clean up your room before I come home. (Or else ...)'

cf. English 2nd-person-desiderative commands:

(12) You (really) want to clean up your room before I come home.

The 'if you know what is good for you' effect

- The effect is absent with other uses, such as *ADVICE*.

(13) Nehmen Sie besser den A-Zug.
 Take you better the A train.

(14) Sie nehmen besser den A-Zug.
 You take better the A train.

cf. English 2nd-person-desiderative advice:

(15) You want to take the A train.

Are German melioratives comparative?

It appears so.

- Oikonomou (2016) reports that Greek melioratives allow for *para* ('than') clauses.
- The same is true for both types of German melioratives (regardless of use):

(16) Geh besser nach Hause **als zur Arbeit**.
 Go-IMP better to home than to work.

(17) Sie nehmen besser den A-Zug **als den B-Zug**.
 You take better the A train than the B train.

Melioratives and at-issue-ness

- Both the prejacent of *besser* and the ‘meliorative implication’ are **potentially at-issue**.
 - In the sense that they can be confirmed with *yes* and denied with *no*.

- (18) Du gehst besser nach Hause.
 You go better to home.
- a. Ja, das mache ich.
 Yes, that do I.
- b. Ja, das ist (wohl) besser.
 Yes, that is WOHL better.

German melioratives

Summary

In German:

- Melioratives are formed with a declarative or imperative root clause plus *besser*.
- Melioratives have a subset of the uses of imperatives.
 - Commands and warnings (but not other directives).
 - Advice (both interested and disinterested).
 - No permission, invitation or wish-type uses.
- Have an 'or else ...' implication with commands (but not with other uses).
- Are apparently comparative (allow for *dann* ('then')-clauses).
- Both prejaacent and meliorative implication are potentially at-issue.

Dutch

Morphosyntactic make-up

- In Dutch, melioratives are formed with an initial *beter* and a bare/imperative form of the verb.
- An obligatory subject follows the verb.

(19) *Beter ga je naar huis.*
 Better go you to home
 'Better go home.'

Note that melioratives are restricted to the colloquial speech of young speakers.

Dutch

Uses of Dutch melioratives

Dutch melioratives have a different **a subset of the uses of imperatives** than their German counterparts.

- | | | |
|---------|--|------------------------|
| (20) a. | Beter ruim je je kamer op! | (COMMAND) |
| b. | Beter raak je dat hete bord niet aan! | (WARNING) |
| c. | #Beter geef je me het zout. | (REQUEST) |
| d. | #Beter leen je me geld, alsjeblijft. | (PLEA) |
| e. | Beter neem je deze medicijnen. | (ADVICE) |
| f. | #Beter neem je de A-trein. | (DISINTERESTED ADVICE) |
| g. | Beter wordt je snel weer gezond! | (WELL-WISH) |
| h. | Beter val je dood! | (CURSE) |
| i. | Beter regent het niet! | (ABSENT WISH) |
| j. | #Ok, beter ga je naar buiten om te spelen. | (PERMISSION) |
| k. | #Ok, beter klaag je me aan als het moet. | (CONCESSION) |
| l. | #Beter neem je plaats. | (OFFER) |

Dutch

Uses of Dutch declarative melioratives

Dutch melioratives have a subset of the uses of imperatives.

- They can be used for some DIRECTIVES.
 - They can be used as ORDERS and WARNINGS.
 - They cannot be used as REQUESTS and PLEAS
- They can be used for giving ADVICE.
 - Only interested.
- They can be used for wish-type uses.
- They cannot be used to PERMIT or INVITE.

The 'if you know what is good for you' effect

- Like in German, melioratives in Dutch display the 'if you know what's good for you' effect.

(21) Beter ruim je je kamer op, voordat ik thuiskom.
Better clean you your room up, before I come home
'You better clean up your room before I come home. (Or else ...)'

The 'if you know what is good for you' effect

- Like in German, melioratives in Dutch display the 'if you know what's good for you' effect.
- Other than in German, the effect is present in all uses of Dutch melioratives, e.g. wish-like uses or advice.

(22) a. Beter is hij lang. (ADRESSEE-LESS WISH)
 Better is he tall.
 'He better be tall. (Or else...)'

(23) a. Beter neem je die medicijnen.
 Better take you that meds.
 'Better take your meds. (Or else...)'

cf. English 2nd person-desiderative commands:

(24) You (really) want to take your meds.

Are Dutch melioratives comparative?

- For none of the uses, Dutch melioratives can be followed up by a *dan* ('than') clause.

(25) Beter ga je naar huis # dan naar werk.
Better go you to home than to work.

Dutch melioratives and at-issue-ness

- Other than in German, the 'meliorative implication' cannot be **at issue**.
- The prejacent of *besser* however can be **at issue**.

- (26) *Beter ga je naar huis.*
 Better go you to home.
- a. *Ja, dat doe ik.*
 Yes, that do I.
- b. *#Ja, dat ist beter.*
 Yes, that is better.

Dutch melioratives and at-issue-ness

- Other than in German, the 'meliorative implication' cannot be **at issue**.
- The prejacent of *besser* however can be **at issue**.

- (27) *Beter ga je naar huis.*
 Better go you to home.
- a. *Nee, dat doe ik niet.*
 No, that do I not.
- b. *?Nee, dat is niet beter.*
 No, that is not better.

Dutch melioratives

Summary

- Melioratives are formed with an initial *beter* and an imperative or bare form of the verb.
- Melioratives have a subset of the uses of imperatives.
 - Commands and warnings
 - Advice (but only interested)
 - Wish-type uses
 - No permissions or invitations
- Come with an 'or else...' implication with all uses
- Are not comparative
- The prejacent is potentially at issue, but the meliorative implication cannot be.

Towards an analysis

Towards an analysis

Goals

An analysis should account for

- The usage of melioratives in both Dutch and German
- The observation that in German, but not in Dutch, melioratives can be followed by a 'als' (*than*) clause
- The 'or else' effect in Dutch and German

Towards an analysis

German

Ingredients:

- Melioratives are genuine declaratives or imperatives.
 - i.e., there is **no separate sentence type** 'meliorative'.
- *besser* makes a separate contribution.
 - cf. modal particles like *ja*, *wohl*, *denn*, ...
- The behavior of melioratives arises from the interaction of the contribution of the host clause and the contribution of *better*.

Assumptions about declaratives and imperatives

Starting point: C&L-style view of declaratives/imperatives

As a background, we assume the view of declaratives and imperatives of Condoravdi and Lauer (2012), Lauer (2013):

- **Declaratives** create **doxastic** commitments to their at-issue content p .
 - i.e. 'commitments to treat p as true'.
- **Imperatives** create **preferential** commitments to their at-issue content p .
 - i.e. 'commitment to treat p as desirable'.

Assumptions about declaratives and imperatives

Departure from C&L: Commitment as default

Inspired by Faller (ms.), we assume (for today):

- In general, declaratives only 'PRESENT' their at-issue content, making it at issue.
 - e.g. 'put *p* on the Table' (à la Farkas and Bruce 2010).
 - e.g. 'introduce a propositional discourse referent'.
- They create a doxastic commitment only by (conventional) default.
 - This default can be defeated by other elements in the sentence (such as meliorative *besser*).
- For the sake of uniformity, we also assume that imperatives create preferential commitments only by default.
 - However, as we will see, the preferential commitment is not defeated by meliorative *besser*.

The contribution of *besser*

Basics

- We largely follow Oikonomou (2016)'s analysis of Greek (meliorative) *kalitera*.
- *besser* takes two propositional arguments, and conveys that the first is a better comparative possibility than the second (à la Kratzer 2012).
 - The first argument is the at-issue content of *besser*'s host clause.
 - The second is either supplied by a *dann*-clause or recovered from context.

$$(28) \llbracket \textit{besser}(p)(q) \rrbracket^{f,g} = \\ \lambda w . \neg \exists u : u \in \max_{g(w)} f(w) \wedge q(u) = 1 \wedge p(u) = 0 \\ \wedge \exists v : v \in \max_{g(w)} f(w) \wedge p(v) = 1 \wedge q(v) = 0 \wedge u <_{g(w)} v$$

roughly: 'For every q -and- $\neg p$ world u compatible with $f(w)$, there is a $g(w)$ -ideal p -and- $\neg q$ that is strictly $g(w)$ -better than u

The contribution of *besser*

Details

- We follow Oikonomou (2016) in assuming that f must be a **speaker-doxastic modal base**.
- But we assume that g is required to be constituted by the **addressee's** (not the speaker's) **self-motivated effective preferences**.
 - Self-motivated effective preferences (Condoravdi and Lauer (2017)):
Those action-relevant preferences that the agent has because of his own desires/inclinations/etc.
- We assume that *besser* further imposes a *diversity condition* on its modal base with respect to its first argument.
 - Implemented as a presupposition that there are both p and not- p worlds in $f(w)$.

An example

(29) Nehmen Sie besser den A-Zug (als den B-Zug).
 Take you better the A train (than the B train)

- PRESENTS the proposition that the addressee takes the A train.
- **Default:** Doxastic commitment to that proposition.
- **Contribution of *besser*:**
 According to the addressee's self-motivated effective preferences, taking the A train is better than taking the B train.
- **Presupposition of *besser*:**
 Both taking the A train and not taking the A train are doxastically possible for the speaker.
 - Cancels the default-commitment.

Restriction of uses

- It is unsurprising that German melioratives are suited for *ADVICE*.
 - Given that they express a comparatison according to the addressee's preferences.
- Likewise, it is unsurprising that German melioratives are not suited for *REQUESTS* and *PLEAS* and *WISHES*.
 - Those are about the speaker's preferences, and usually used in context where the addressee has no such preference.
- Likewise (arguably) it is unsurprising that German melioratives are not suited to *PERMIT* and *INVITE*.
 - In some way or other, these uses are about compatibility with the speaker's preferences.

The 'if you know what is good for you' effect

- We assume that in reaction standard command uses (of, e.g., imperatives), if the addressee takes on a preference for what is commanded, this preference is **not self-motivated**.
- With a meliorative command, the speaker tells the addressee **that it is better in light of the addressee's self-motivated preferences** to fulfill the command.
 - This means that there must be addressee-undesirable negative consequences of not acting on the command.
 - If we are not in a interested-advice context (e.g., 'doctor's orders'), this naturally gives rise to the 'or else ...' implication.

Towards an analysis

Dutch

Ingredients:

- *Beter* has no comparative semantics (anymore)
- Instead, *beter* is a marker of a minor sentence type
- We model the meliorative implication using Eckardt's (2011) [!] operator

Towards an analysis - Dutch

Eckardt (2011)

- Eckardt (2011) proposes that the underlying semantic structure of imperatives is an exhaustive description of the future worlds in which the imperative is true, or the worlds in which a specific alternative, as determined by the context, is true.
- Such a specific alternative is described in a declarative sentence and can be coordinated with the imperative by a conjunction or a disjunction.

- (30) a. Clean your room and I'll take you to the movies.
b. Clean your room or you're not gonna get dessert tonight.

Towards an analysis - Dutch

Eckardt (2011)

- Eckardt argues that the semantics of IoD constructions is encoded in an operator [!]
- We do not follow this analysis for plain imperatives, but we argue that a version of Eckardts [!] operator determines the force of Dutch melioratives

Towards an analysis - Dutch

Eckardt (2011)

The [!] Operator (Eckardt 2011)

■ Syntax:

- obligatory argument: finite sentence in imperative mood S_{imp}
- optional argument: *or*-phrase with *or*-P \rightarrow '*or*' S_{decl}

■ Semantics:

$$\lambda p \lambda q \forall w [\text{FUTURE}(w_{0'}, w) \wedge \text{CIRC}(w_{0'}, w) \rightarrow p(w) \vee q(w)]$$

- Presupposition: the speaker believes that the addressee taking a choice in all life future options

$$\lambda w. \text{Future}(w_{0'}, w) \wedge \text{Circ}(w_{0'}, w)$$

prefers *p*-worlds to *q*-worlds

Towards an analysis - Dutch

[Back to our data](#)

(31) Beter ga je naar huis

- [!] takes as its first argument $S_{meliorative}$
 $\lambda w[\text{GO-HOME}(A, w)]$
- The speaker presupposes that the addressee prefers GO-HOME-worlds to q -worlds
- q -worlds can either be **explicit** or-phrases, or **implicit** and determined by the context (for example: *I will be angry*)
- The overall proposition conveyed is:
 $\forall w[\text{FUTURE}(w_0', w) \wedge \text{CIRC}(w_0', w) \rightarrow$
 $[\text{GO-HOME}(A, w)] \vee \text{ANGRY}(w)]$

Towards an analysis - Dutch

Predictions

Our account makes sense of the following observations:

- *Beter* is not comparative and cannot be followed by *dan*-clauses
- The preference of the addressee is presupposed, and thus not at issue by default
- This presupposition signals a 'threat of dire consequences' (the 'if you know what's good for you' effect)
- Melioratives are not suited for uses that focus on the speakers preferences (REQUESTS, PLEAS, OFFERS)

Towards an analysis - Dutch

Things we don't understand about Dutch melioratives

- Why can they be used for WISHES and CURSES?
- Why can't they be used for disinterested advice?

The role of speaker endorsement

- For German **imperative** melioratives, we actually predict a preferential speaker commitment.
- That is a good thing:

(32) Geh besser nach Hause. # Aber ich will das nicht.
 Go better to home. But I want that not.

But:

(33) Du gehst besser nach Hause. # Aber ich will das nicht.
 You go better to home. But I want that not.

And:

(34) Beter ga je naar huis. # Maar ik wil dat niet.
 Better go you to home. But I want that not.

The role of speaker endorsement

- For German **imperative** melioratives, we actually predict a preferential speaker commitment.
- That is a good thing, because it predicts speaker endorsement.
- **But:** All melioratives in German and Dutch seem to imply speaker endorsement.
- We don't predict this at present.
 - But maybe fine-tuning the ordering source restriction, or adding additional presuppositions (à la Kaufmann 2012) could go some way to address this.

Some inconvenient data

Due to an anonymous reviewer

- (35) Meine Bitte ans Arbeitsamt: Gebt doch bitte
 My request to the employment office: Give DOCH please
 besser diesem jungen gesunden Mann einen Ausbildungsplatz,
 better this young healthy man a training position,
 als ...
 than ...
- (36) Zeigen Sie uns bitte besser nicht die nicht gelungen
 Show you us please better not the not successful
 Beispiele, ...
 examples, ...

Wrapping up

- The behavior of melioratives in German and Dutch is surprisingly subtle and complex.
- Even sentence types that look superficially very similar at first glance (in closely related languages), can differ quite a lot in the details, requiring quite different analysis.
- We have sketched a first approach to melioratives in the two languages, but various open questions remain.

Acknowledgements

- We'd like to thank Cleo Condoravdi and Kajsa Djarv for helpful comments and discussion.
- The work reported here was supported by two DFG grants: FOR 2111 (Research Unit *Questions at the Interfaces*, Erlinde Meertens) and LA 3880/1 (Emmy Noether Project *What is it to ask a question?*, Sven Lauer). This support is gratefully acknowledged.

A bonus puzzle

German melioratives are compatible with weak necessity modals:

- (37) Du solltest besser nach Hause gehen.
 You should better to home go.
 'You should go home / You better go home.'

- The effect is a 'harmonizing'/'modal concord' reading.
- In Dutch, the same is possible with a **possibility modal!**

- (38) Je kan beter naar huis gaan.
 You can better to home go.
 'You should go home / You better go home.'

- Condoravdi, C. and Lauer, S.: 2012, Imperatives: Meaning and illocutionary force, in C. Piñón (ed.), *Empirical Issues in Syntax and Semantics 9*, pp. 37–58.
- Condoravdi, C. and Lauer, S.: 2017, Conditional imperatives and endorsement, *Proceedings of NELS 47*.
- Faller, M.: ms., The discourse commitments of illocutionary reportatives. Manuscript, University of Manchester.
- Farkas, D. F. and Bruce, K. B.: 2010, On Reacting to Assertions and Polar Questions, *Journal of Semantics* **27**(1), 81–118.
- Kaufmann, M.: 2012, *Interpreting Imperatives*, Springer, Dordrecht/New York.
- Kratzer, A.: 2012, *Modals and Conditionals: New and Revised Perspectives*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Lauer, S.: 2013, *Towards a dynamic pragmatics*, PhD thesis, Stanford University.
- Oikonomou, D.: 2016, *Covert modals in root contexts*, PhD thesis, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, MA.

Schmerling, S.: 1982, How imperatives are special and how they aren't, in R. Schneider, K. Tuite and R. Chametzky (eds), *Papers from the Parasession on Nondeclaratives: Chicago Linguistic Society*, Chicago, IL, pp. 202–218.

Schwager, M.: 2006, *Interpreting Imperatives*, PhD thesis, Johann Wolfgang Goethe-Universität, Frankfurt am Main.