



Borderland Semantics of the Imperative. (The case of the Belarusian language in comparison to English)¹

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ABSTRACT:

This paper is dedicated to the study of the imperative and other directive strategies in Belarusian. The experiment was designed to find out how native speakers evaluate various directive strategies and how their syntactic structures are connected with the imperative meaning. Respondents participating in the study rated five sentence-stimuli on a scale from 1 to 5 as the most commanding and least polite (rating 1) to the least commanding and the most polite (rating 5). The sentences present five different directive strategies: the performative verb *zahadvac* 'to order'; the optative verb *xacec* 'to want'; the infinitive of the notional verb; the imperative form of the notional verb; the notional verb in the future tense form. The experiment showed that the imperative form proper received the lowest mark on the scale compared to other directive strategies, testifying to the fact that native speakers perceive other forms as more commanding. The nonfinite form, the future tense as well as sentences with a performative verb explicitly expressing imperative meaning are among the most popular strategies named by the respondents. The military discourse and the discourse of orders and commands which presupposes a strict hierarchal structure, employs the infinitive in Belarusian, while in English the imperative is used in such cases and thus is perceived by the speaker as a very strong directive strategy.

KEYWORDS:

command, directive strategies, imperative form and semantics, non-canonical imperatives.

1. INTRODUCTION

A fairly large body of literature dealing with the topic of the imperative is available today. Nevertheless, one of the most important tasks is still to establish the semantics and categorical situation of the imperative, and to identify a variety of meanings and forms that are involved in the zone of the imperative. The aim of this paper is to define how the imperative form is perceived by the native speakers of Belarusian in contrast with other strategies which can convey the commanding semantics and to propose the possible assumptions as to why some strategies are perceived by native speakers as more directive and some are perceived as less directive. The scope of the study is a pilot experiment which includes the reactions of 37 respondents to five stimulus sentences.

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2. DEFINING THE IMPERATIVE

The literature dealing with the imperative displays some terminological inconsistencies. E. König and P. Siemund use the term imperative only for those speech acts where the appeal is directed towards the 2nd person, using for other cases terms such as *hortative*, *optative*, *debitive*, etc. (König & Siemund, 2007, p. 313). The problematic point here is that these terms are generally used only when speaking of languages where there is a separate morphological marking of the relevant locutive power. At the same time, V. Xrakovskij notes that there are classical and peripheral forms of the imperative and that it is necessary to distinguish between an ideal imperative paradigm and an imperative paradigm in a particular language (Xrakovskij, 2001, p. 1037).

When dividing imperatives into canonical (central or nuclear) and non-canonical (peripheral), researchers rely on the form, i.e. the 2nd person is accepted as a prototypical form of the imperative. As J. Kuryłowicz noted, “the status of the second person of the imperative differs from that of the rest of its paradigm (if there is one). It is in fact the second person singular that is fundamental in the imperative” (Kuryłowicz, 1964, p. 137). Other forms are treated as marginal or peripheral, although they are included in the basic paradigm (as it can be seen in the Belarusian grammar), but some researchers deny their status of the imperative: “what are traditionally described as first-person and third-persons imperatives, however, in the Indo-European languages at least, are not true imperative [...]” (Lyons, 1977, p. 747). At the same time, this division is not universal for all languages of the world. Imperative forms, as well as the peculiarities of their functions and usage, are culturally and socially determined.

Despite the fact that the imperative is considered to be universal (the form for transferring the relevant meaning is found in all languages with few exceptions), it creates certain difficulties in typological studies, since each language has its own repertoire of forms and meanings that correlate with the imperative, and which is often asymmetric in comparison with the set in another language. Imperative forms are used in Belarusian and English to transfer the meaning of different speech acts such as order, request, recommendation, etc. Compare, the English and Belarusian examples, the English ones were taken from (Aikhenvald, 2010, p. 198):

English	Belarusian
<i>Wait until the price is right!</i> — advice	<i>Sjadajce, kali laska</i> (In English: ‘Sit down, please’) — invitation
<i>Feel free to call if you like</i> — invitation	<i>Raspišycesja tut</i> (In English: ‘Put your signature here’) — request
<i>Yes, go ahead</i> — permission	<i>Žyvice bahata</i> (In English: ‘Live in prosperity’) — wish

Meanwhile in Tuyuca (an Eastern Tucanoan language spoken in Brazil and Colombia) three different suffixes are added to the verb in order to express the meaning of invitation, permission or warning (*ibid.*, 2010, p. 201). What is expressed grammatically in some languages, can be semantic in nature in others. At the same time, even



in those languages where there is no special grammatical marker to distinguish directives, native speakers identify them as separate speech acts.

In the following examples, the verbs have the same (imperative) mood, while the narrative comments show that these speech acts are perceived differently, i.e. as a reminder, agreement, advice:

- (1) **Ne xadzi basanož** — *ty ž kašljaeš*, — *stroha nahadvae mama*. (In English: “Do not walk barefoot — you are coughing”, the mother reminds strictly).
- (2) *Aj, ne xadzi*, — *axvotna pahadzišsja palicaj*. (In English: “Well, do not go”, the policeman agreed willingly).
- (3) *Dyk tuzajsja! Pišy, xadzi — ne spi ũ šapku!* — *zlosna raiü jamu Karpjuk*. (In English: “Do something! Write, do the agents — think fast”, Karpjuk angrily advised him).

According to van der Auwera et al, imperatives are said to “have to do with the expression of a wish of the speaker about a future state of affairs” and to “convey an appeal to the addressee(s) to help make the future state of affairs true.” (Auwera, Dobrushina, & Goussev, 2013). Van Olmen criticizes such a definition because advice and permission, which also use the imperative for their manifestation, do not contain the desire of the speaker for the addressee to carry out the specified action. *Yes, go ahead and close the window. Close the window if you are cold* (Olmen & Heinold, 2017, p. 6). To my mind the problematic point here is the overlapping of the imperative’s pragmatic function and its grammatical form. A. Aikhenvald, who is more cautious in defining the imperative, writes that “an imperative gets an addressee to act. [...] The idea of an ‘imperative’ is a command” (Aikhenvald, 2010, p.1).

Dissecting the term *imperative*, it is possible to single out key notions that in spite of all the variability of definitions are shared by most authors and are crucial for defining it. They are: directivity/command, causality, desire/will. Let us look at them in detail.

In the definitions of the imperative, the majority of researchers use such terms as “will”, “desire”, “volition” and “want” on the one hand, and “motivation” or “causation” on the other. For the imperative situation to take place, one needs a certain desire of a speaker and his/her willingness to fulfill that initial desire, and it turns out that it is possible to talk about two desires or a double desire: the desire itself and the desire to ensure that the action takes place. It is an important observation which helps to clarify situations when the speaker orders something against his/her will/desire, i.e. the contents of the directive is not in keeping with his/her wishes.

- (4) *Although he actually did not like the idea of leaving her in his care for some unknown reason. “Yoochun, take care of her while I am away. He ordered unwillingly.*
- (5) *Adzin raz mjane vyklikaũ načalnik atrada dy kaža: “Zbirajsja ũ ŠYZA”. Ja jamu — za što? A ěn halavoj uharu kivae dy šepča: “Jany zahadali”.* (In English: Once the of-

ficer called and said: Get ready to go to the penal isolation ward”. I asked him, what for? And he turned his head up and whispered, “They ordered”).

In spite of its second name ‘command mood’, the imperative form does not always necessarily mean command (*ibid.*, 2010, p. 1). *Give me your coat* — serves as an invitation rather than a command. At the same time commands can be expressed without imperatives. This asymmetry has become the research point for the study conducted and analyzed further in the current paper.

The imperative is traditionally included in the grammar as a component of the category of mood. In the Belarusian Grammar of 1985, the imperative is defined as something that “expresses a call to action (request, order, wish, etc.)” (Biryla & Šuba, 1985, p. 158). One of the key moments is the fact that the order is directed towards another person.

For the Belarusian language, five forms are singled out: two simple forms for the 2nd person singular and plural, *bjažy* (sg. ‘run’), *bjažyce* (pl. or polite ‘run’), as well as the form of a joint action: synthetic (*zazirnem* ‘let us look into’, *hadzemce* ‘let us come’, *hljan’ma* ‘let us have a look’) and analytical (*davaj(ce) čytac* ‘let’s read’), and two complex forms of the 3rd person singular and plural (*njaxaj dumae* ‘let him think’, *xaj spjavajuc* ‘let them sing’) (*ibid.*, 1985, p. 158).

Number	Person		
	1 st	2 nd	3 rd
Sg.	—	<i>bjažy</i>	<i>xaj/njaxaj bjažyc</i>
Pl. / Hon.	synthetic.f.	analytic.f.	
	<i>hadzem(ce)</i>	<i>davaj(ce) čytac</i>	<i>bjažyce</i> <i>xaj/njaxaj bjahuc</i>

TABLE 1: Imperative forms according to the traditional Belarusian grammar.

However, there are certain restrictions regarding the use of the imperative forms, i.e. verbs with the meaning of a purposeless action or condition (*važyc* ‘weigh’, *vyhljadac* ‘look like’, *značyc* ‘mean’, etc.), modal verbs (*mahčy* ‘can’, *xacec* ‘want’), verbs denoting actions of inanimate objects (*zmjaščac* ‘contain’, *bulkac* ‘gurgle’), impersonal verbs (*marozic* ‘to frost’, *paryc* ‘to soar’, etc.) do not take the imperative form (*ibid.*, 1985, p. 161), which testifies to the relationship of grammar and semantics, and indicates certain limitations on the use of imperative forms.

Thus, it is possible to single out two main approaches to the issue of how to deal with the imperative semantics: according to the first, “indirect” uses are included in the imperative paradigm, which significantly expands the imperative semantics; the second approach eliminates non-standard uses from the category of the imperative on the grounds that they bear a different meaning, which narrows down the imperative semantics.

It is evident that the grammatical approach alone would not be sufficiently consistent here, which is why the pragmatic aspect is often used when speaking of directives.



3. EXPERIMENT

The existence of different directive strategies which are employed by speakers to convey commanding semantics have led to the idea of providing experimental support for the assumption that the commanding force is different for different directives.

The aim of this pilot experiment was to uncover the hierarchy of the directives and to find a possible correlation between the commanding force and the morphological structure. The experiments conducted on the material of imperative semantics and structures are not numerous (although there are several studies that can be mentioned, e.g. Kaufmann and Poschmann (2013) or Kuehnast (2010)). The experiment I propose in this paper deals with the so-called language competence of the native speakers and its aim is to define how respondents evaluate the commanding force of several different directive strategies.

3.1 METHOD

To establish a correlation between the form and meaning expressing imperativeness, a linguistic experiment was designed and carried out to see how native speakers evaluate the imperative semantics expressed by different linguist forms. The imperative meaning can be transferred by means of imperative proper, declarative sentences, certain performative verbs with the meaning of command/order, etc.

3.2. PARTICIPANTS

Thirsty-seven native speakers of Belarusian took part in the experiment, of which 26 were female and 11 were male. The participants' ages ranged from 29 to 58, and all were specialists with a background in the humanities.

3.3. MATERIALS

There were five sentences presented in the test:

- a. *Ja zahadvaju tabe skazac jamu ũsju praũdu.* (In English: I order you to tell him the truth).
- b. *Ja xaču, kab ty skazaũ jamu ũsju praũdu.* (In English: I want you to tell him the truth).
- c. *Skazac usju praũdu!* (In English: To tell the truth!).
- d. *Skažy jamu ũsju praũdu!* (In English: Tell him the truth).
- e. *Ty skažaš jamu ũsju praũdu!* (In English: You will tell him the truth).

The meaning of all the sentences can be reduced to the formula

speaker A makes addressee B carry out the action



The sentences present five different directive strategies. Sentence (a) contains the performative verb *загадваюць* ‘to order’; sentence (b) uses the optative verb *хачець* ‘to want’; sentence (c) employs infinitive of the notional verb; sentence (d) uses the imperative form of the notional verb; sentence (e) takes up the notional verb in the future tense form.

Imperatives when functioning as commands are supposed to be pronounced with a certain intonation, which can be indicated by an exclamation mark in the written form. Due to the fact that the imperative form is polysemantic in terms of types of speech acts, intonation can help in distinguishing a request or wish from a command or order. “However, it remains an open question how exactly intonation interacts with the imperative convention, and how the observed interpretations are derived on the basis of intonation, the effect of imperatives on the context, their content, and contextual conditions” (Sunwoo & Condoravdi, 2018, p. 214).

3.4. PROCEDURE

The test was designed using Google Forms and was sent to the respondents by e-mail, or in the form of a link to their accounts in social networks. The respondents received the following task: “Please rate the following sentences from 1 to 5 as from the most commanding and least polite (rating 1) to the least commanding and the most polite (rating 5)”. Respondents could choose only one mark for one sentence. The page with the sentences had the following format (see Figure 1).

а. Я загадваю табе сказаць яму ўсю праўду.

	1	2	3	4	5	
Надзвычай загадны тон, зусім няветлівы	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	зусім незагадны тон і вельмі ветлівы

FIGURE 1: Example of the text sheet.²

3.5. RESULTS

The results of the study are presented in the corresponding diagrams (1–5).³

² Translation note: the text at the ends of the scales read ‘Extremely commanding tone, not polite at all’ and ‘Not a commanding tone at all, a very polite one’.

³ The data will be provided on demand via e-mail.

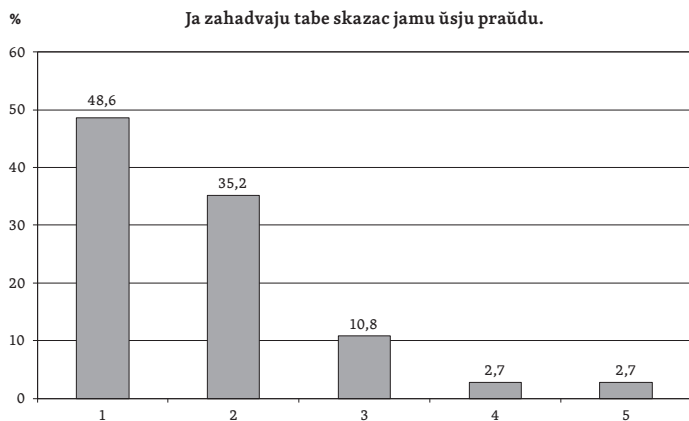


DIAGRAM 1: Respondents' reactions to phrase (a) 'I order you to tell him the truth'.

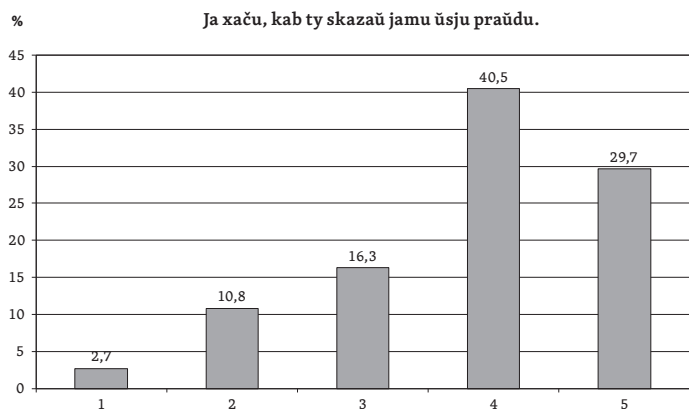


DIAGRAM 2: Respondents' reactions to phrase (b) 'I want you to tell him the truth'.

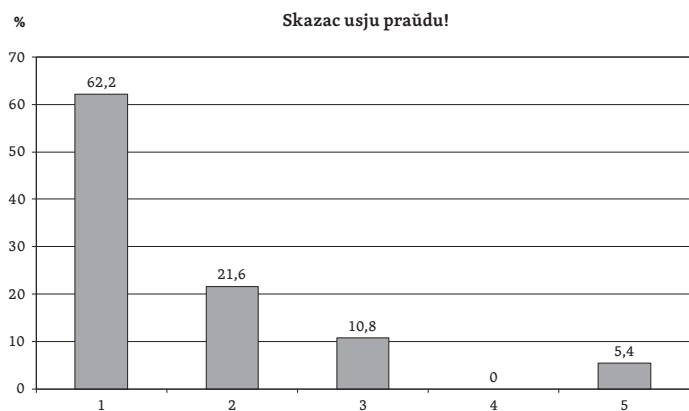


DIAGRAM 3: Respondents' reactions to phrase (c) 'To tell the truth!'

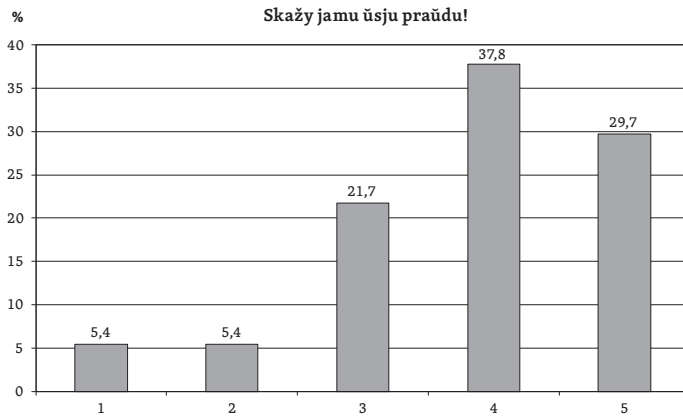


DIAGRAM 4: Respondents' reactions to phrase (d) 'Tell him the truth!'

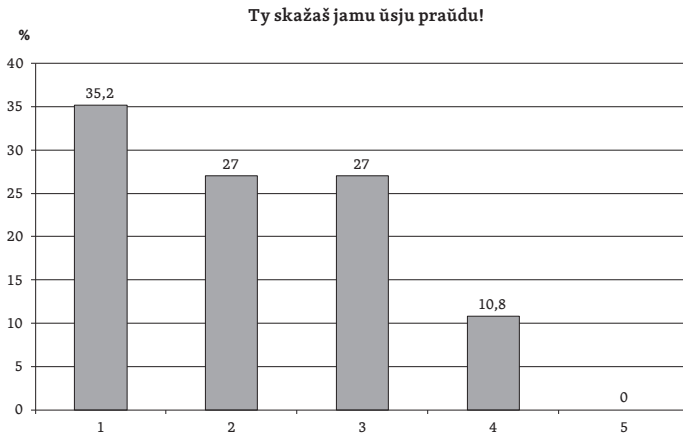


DIAGRAM 5: Respondents' reactions to phrase (e) 'You will tell him the truth!'

Some notes on the diagrams: (%) represents the percentage of respondents with the given answer, figures 1–5 is the scale of intensity, where 1 corresponds to the most commanding and least polite expression and 5 the least commanding and most polite one.

In order to confirm the hypothesis that there is a difference in the rating depending on the type of sentence, the data array consisting of two variables — the type of statement and the assessment — was analyzed. The sample size comprised 185 cases (37 people, each evaluated 5 sentences).



		type					Total
		Ja zahadvaju tabe skazac jamu ũsju praũdu.	Ja xaču, kab ty skazaũ jamu ũsju praũdu.	Skazac usju praũdu!	Skažy jamu ũsju praũdu!	Ty skažaš jamu ũsju praũdu!	
value	1.00	48.64%	2.70%	59.46%	8.11%	35.14%	30.81%
	2.00	32.43%	13.51%	21.62%	5.41%	27.03%	20.00%
	3.00	10.81%	16.22%	10.81%	21.62%	27.03%	17.30%
	4.00	5.40%	37.84%		37.84%	10.81%	18.38%
	5.00	2.70%	29.73%	8.11%	27.03%		13.51%
Total		100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%

TABLE 2: Contingency table.

We analyzed the contingency tables and calculated the Chi-square, which equaled 90,185.

	Value	df.	Asymp. Sig (2-sided)
Pearson's chi-square	90.158 ^a	16	.000
Likelihood ration	106.052	16	.000
Linear-by-linear association	.585	1	0.444
N of valid cases	185		

TABLE 3: Chi-square tests.

^a In 0 (.0%) cells have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 5,00.

The hypothesis that different grammatical forms result in a different evaluation of commanding power was confirmed at the probability level of 95%.

The majority of respondents (62.2%) gave the rating 1 to the phrase *Skazac usju praũdu* (In English: To tell the truth!) which employs the infinitive form in a directive meaning. The second most popular answer (48.6% of respondents) was the phrase which uses the performative verb *Ja zahadvaju tabe skazac jamu ũsju praũdu* (in English: I order you to tell him the truth). The third place (35.2%) is occupied by the phrase with the verb in future tense form *Ty skažaš jamu ũsju praũdu!* (In English: You will tell him the truth!). If we should sum up the 1- and 2-point ratings on the scale, the results would be as follows:

- 83.8% — *Skazac usju praũdu!* (In English: ‘To tell the truth!)
- 83.8% — *Ja zahadvaju tabe skazac jamu ũsju praũdu.* (In English: I order you to tell him the truth).
- 62.2% — *Ty skažaš jamu ũsju praũdu!* (In English: You will tell him the truth).
- 13.5% — *Ja xaču, kab ty skazaũ jamu ũsju praũdu.* (In English: I want you to tell him the truth).
- 10.8% — *Skažy jamu ũsju praũdu!* (In English: Tell him the truth).

4. DISCUSSION

The sentences used in the study represent different forms of expressing speaker's desire, which is addressed to a hearer, where the speaker wants the hearer to perform the action mentioned in the proposition.

The use of a personal pronoun with an imperative form is possible in Belarusian (as it is in English), but here its position may influence the meaning of the phrase. If the personal pronoun is in anteposition, it usually signals the continuation of the phrase with the description of the action which the speaker will perform e.g. *Ty idzi z usimi, a ja zbehaju*. (In English: You go with them all and (while) I will fetch it). *Vy idzice, a ja pažyla ūžo*. (In English: You go and (while) I have already lived enough). The pronoun in postposition has connotations of resentment, discontent, or swearing: *Idzi ty, Marfuša, lesam, kab ja cjabe ne bačyla* (In English: Go you, Marfusha, screw yourself, get off my sight!) As A. Aikhenvald points out, "adding the second person subject has a specific effect: it may have a patronizing effect, as in *You take your time*, or reflect an 'attitude of impatient hearer-directed anger on the part of the addressee', as in *You close the door*" (Aikhenvald, 2015, p. 11). The aim of the experiment was to verify the canonical form of the imperative in comparison with other directive strategies, which is why the form without a personal pronoun was chosen.

The imperative form, which supposedly should be perceived as the most commanding, was not seen by the respondents as such and even received more points, indicating that it is considered a polite phrase instead of severely commanding. Only 5.4% of respondents consider it to be the most commanding. In the results which summarize the first two ratings, the imperative form takes the last position, which testifies to the fact that native speakers consider it to be the least commanding directive strategy, pushed to the back by other possible means of expressing command.

Analyzing the most polite variants, it can be seen that the respondents were most in favor of the sentences *Ja xaču, kab ty skazaŭ jamu ūsju praŭdu*. (In English: I want you to tell him the truth) (29.7%) and *Skažy jamu ūsju praŭdu!* (In English: Tell him the truth) (29.7%). In fact, the general distribution of these two phrases is similar, which might lead to the idea that the speakers cognitively associate one type of phrase with the other. Thus the imperative form in this example is understood as the desire of the causer-agent. It is also noteworthy that the sentence containing the optative verb *to want* received a higher ranking on the command scale than the imperative. Although these results are drawn based on the pilot experiment with a small number of participants, and further studies are needed, as a hypothesis for future research we may assume that this difference in perception might suggest that the explicitly expressed verb of desire is seen as less polite than the imperative. Furthermore, the latter permits the use of the word *please* as an indication of politeness in its construction while the former does not, cf:

(6) *Tell him the truth, please.*

(7) *I want you to tell him the truth, please.** — This does not sound natural to native speakers. *Please* can be added as a separate phrase, but it definitely does not fit into the construction.



Three other strategies also have similar outlines: there is a steady fall from rating 1 to 5 (with an exception of *Skazac usju praŭdu!* (In English: To tell the truth!) where the 4-rating has 0 answers and the 5-rating has 5.4% answers). The only phrase which did not get any 5-ratings from respondents is the sentence with the verb in the future tense form. This means that among respondents this strategy is definitely not seen as polite and has a strong commanding impulse. The same is observed in the English language: “in English use of the future tense as an imperative tends to constitute a very strong and peremptory command, emphasizing the authority of the speaker (*You will go to school today, young man!*)” (Aikhenvald, 2010, p. 267).

What makes a future tense form a good candidate for the role of a transmitter of the “modal” meaning is the fact that the imperative and the future tense are both directed into the future and present the state of affairs that have not yet been carried out, which endows them with a hypothetical status. For this reason, some research confines future to the category of irrealis (Haan, 2006, p. 48). “Futurity is never a purely temporal concept; it necessarily includes the element of prediction or some related modal notion” (Lyons, 1977, p. 677). The connection between future and modality can be traced on the diachronic level as well: in a number of languages, the morphemes of the future tense developed from modal words, such as the English *will* or *shall* (Haan, 2006, p. 50).

Coming back to the most popular answers given by the respondents, i.e. the sentence with the notional verb in the form of the infinitive, it is important to note that this linguistic strategy is widely used in military discourse as well as different types of commands and instructions in Belarusian and other Slavonic languages. For example, the directive infinitive is used prototypically in Russian (which is also true for Belarusian) in two functions: 1) as an order or command, or strong urge (Fortuin, 2000, pp. 441–442). This use of the infinitive is typical form of an order given by an officer to a soldier, a human to his/her dog, or parents to their child: *Džym, ljažac’! — stroha skamandavaŭ Valošyn. Sabaka neaxvotna adstupiŭ I staŭ pobač* (In English: Jim, to lie down, — Valoshyn ordered strictly. The dog unwillingly stepped back and sat by); 2) in cases where the identity of the unexpressed infinitive agent remains unspecified. In such cases, the command has the character of a general statement regarding how one behave in a certain situation. This use of the infinitive is found in the case of recipes or general instructions: *Staranna zmjašac’ cesta I tonka raskačac’*. (In English: To mix the dough well and to roll it out finely). Furthermore, many prohibitory signs in Belarusian use an infinitive imperative:

(8) *Kupacca zabaronena!* (In English: To swim is forbidden = No swimming!).

(9) *Ne pryxinacca* (In English: Do not lean).

This directive strategy is not typical for English and phrases with a directive infinitive are usually translated either using the imperative or modal verbs *to be*, *should*, etc. As for a possible explanation of why the infinitive is perceived as a more forceful directive strategy, A. Wierzbicka writes: “the impersonal infinitive seems to annihilate the addressee as a person [...] it implies that the addressee is not worthy of being

addressed as an individual human being” (Wierzbicka, 1991, p. 36). Military discourse or, more broadly, the discourse of orders and commands which presupposes a strict hierarchal structure employs the infinitive in Belarusian, whereas in English such cases typically feature the imperative, and thus an infinitive would be looked upon by speakers as a very strong directive strategy.

5. CONCLUSION

The aim of this experiment was to study how native speakers evaluate the imperative semantics expressed by different linguistic forms. It shows that other directive strategies such as declarative sentences (with the verb in the future tense form), certain performative verbs with the meaning of command/order (*to order*), optative verbs (*to want*), and infinitive are as suitable for expressing the imperative meaning of a phrase. What is more, the imperative form proper received the lowest ranking on a scale containing other directive strategies. The experiment was conducted using five sentences and featured 37 respondents, which restricts the scope of the application of the obtained results and can serve only as an initial probe whose aim is to demonstrate the typological differences between Belarusian and English. Simultaneously, the results of the study reveal some tendencies for Belarusian, but for the hypothesis to be proven, further investigations based on larger quantities of empirical data are needed.

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