

Testing the Role of Immediacy on Imperative Form in Brazilian Portuguese Dialects

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In Brazilian Portuguese (BP), 2SG imperative expression is variable with most verbs. One of these forms is the “true” imperative form of the verb (from the 3SG present indicative) as in (1a), while the other is the 3SG present subjunctive form (1b).

(1a) Manda a tarefa agora! ‘Send the assignment now!’

(1b) Mande a tarefa agora!

This variability is found throughout Brazil but Scherre (2007, etc.) argues that there is change toward greater indicative use, especially in the southeast. Oliveira (2015) found an overall preference for the indicative form in corpus data from 25 Brazilian capitals; the only region that showed lower percentages of the indicative was the Northeast. However, prior studies analyze only imperative rates, not the constraints governing each form. Our research focuses on the variability in command forms in the states of Rio Grande do Sul (South), São Paulo (Southeast), Pará (North) and Bahia (Northeast). We created an online survey with 10 sentential target items, each including an imperative that can appear in either indicative or subjunctive. Following Johnson (2013, 2015) and Lamberti & Schwenter (2015), who found that the temporal immediacy of the imperative forms in Argentine Spanish and BP, respectively, matters for the choice of the command form, the items were divided according to two temporal contexts: immediate (5 items) vs. non-immediate contexts (5 items). We used temporal adverbial expressions to manipulate the (lack of) immediacy of each context: *hoje* ‘today’ and *agora* ‘now’ were examples of immediate, while *sempre* ‘always’ and *nunca* ‘never’ were examples of non-immediate expressions. All situations presented in the survey included the same degree of social distance between the speaker and the interlocutor (“amigos”).

A total of 385 speakers completed the survey (78 from São Paulo, 82 from Rio Grande do Sul, 190 from Bahia and 35 from Pará), for a total of 3850 responses. These data were submitted to multivariate analysis (logistic regression) in R, which revealed that there is a significant probability ($p < .01$) in all four dialects for the choice of subjunctive forms in non-immediate contexts. In immediate contexts, the dialects show considerable variability, but the subjunctive form is always chosen less frequently than the indicative, ranging from a low of 10% in Pará to a more evenly distributed variation in Bahia (40%). However, in NON-IMMEDIATE contexts, all four dialects showed very similar behavior: The subjunctive was chosen in over 75% of such contexts by all respondents regardless of state. Thus, while the indicative is preferred over subjunctive in immediate contexts, the converse is found in NON-IMMEDIATE contexts, where the subjunctive is heavily favored over the indicative.

Our results force a serious reconsideration of Scherre’s (2007, etc.) view that there is change toward greater use of the indicative in BP. We offer a much more nuanced picture that reveals the importance of the temporal location of the verbal situation for imperative form choice. Indeed, corpus data in general does not include the necessary broad range of contexts for testing imperatives, since they are nearly all situated in the “here and now” when found in corpora. Our methodology allows for more precise manipulation of contextual attributes in order to survey the whole continuum of possibilities of imperative use in BP. Moreover, the results show that while the ratios of indicative vs. subjunctive vary, the CONSTRAINTS on imperative choice are remarkably similar for all regions, and speaker choices vary predictably based on the (lack of) immediacy of the situation.