# Offering alternatives as a way of issuing directives to children: Putting the worse option last

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## Abstract

In a corpus of c. 250 h of recorded interactions between young children and adults in USA and UK households, we found that children could be directed to change their course of action by three syntactic formats that offered alternatives: an imperative, or a modal declarative, plus a consequential alternative to non-compliance (e.g. *come down at once or I shall send you straight to bed*; *you've got to stand here with it or it goes back in the cupboard*), or an interrogative requiring a preference (e.g. *do you want to put them neatly in the corner for mummy please or do you wanna go to bed*). Formatted syntactically as *or*-alternatives, these can perform the actions both of warning and threatening. But they make a 'bad' course of action contiguous to the child's turn. We argue that adults choose this format because the interactional preference for contiguity makes the negative alternative the more salient one. This implies that adults attribute to children the ability to appreciate the flouting of preference organisation for deontic effect.
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## 1. Introduction

How do people get each other to do things? Work on requesting in interaction (Lindström, 2005; Heinemann, 2006; Curl and Drew, 2008) has prompted an acceleration of interest in the varieties of ways of influencing others: from (to use rough glosses) hinting (Zinken and Ogiermann, 2011), through advising (Shaw and Hepburn, 2013), to proposing (Stevanovic, 2012; Stevanovic and Peräkylä, 2012), instructing (Antaki and Kent, 2012) and outright threatening (Hepburn and Potter, 2011; see also a quantitative survey of many these types in Takada, 2013). As Stevanovic and Svennevig (2015) say, this Special Issue adds to the body of research by reporting new work on the epistemic and deontic subtleties of the ways in which directives can be issued. In this article we explore how adults use an utterance the syntactic form of which offers children alternative courses of action to choose between; but which, on inspection of their deployment, can be seen to perform a less neutral action.

To prefigure the data that we shall analyse, examples of the three types of directives that we found in our survey of various data sources are: *you've got to stand here with it or it goes back in the cupboard*; *come down at once or I shall send you straight to bed*; and *do you want to put them neatly in the corner for mummy please or do you wanna go to bed*. These directives use different syntactic formats, but the common thread among them is the action that the adult is performing: issuing an utterance that confronts the child with two exclusive courses of action. One of these courses is favoured; the other,

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not. The effect of the utterance is to issue a recommendation at best, or a threat at worst; but in any case, it is a directive, claiming some form of deontic authority, in the terminology suggested by Stevanovic (2012) and Stevanovic and Peräkylä (2012). As we shall see, there is a puzzle about how the adults set out the alternatives in one of those formats, and solving it that will be the focus of our analysis.

### 1.1. Requests, directives and alternatives

As helpfully outlined in the introduction to this Special Issue (Stevanovic and Svennevig, 2015), the impetus for an interactional (as opposed to a syntactic or pragmatic) study of directives can be said to have come from Heinemann's (2006) work on requests to home helpers, but perhaps more significantly from Curl and Drew's (2008) paper on telephone requests to doctors' clinics and to family members. Curl and Drew identified two factors with which one could mark one's request: the degree of entitlement one had in making it, and the degree to which one acknowledged the contingencies that the recipient might face in carrying it out. Thus, they reported, a call for medical help could assert the caller's right to receive attention at home, irrespective of the inconvenience to the doctor; or, conversely, could be put tentatively to indicate uncertain entitlement and an acknowledgement of the imposition made.

Work on entitlement and contingency has subsequently been profitably extended, and since our interest is in adults' deontic authority over children, the direction that most concerns us is the work on imperatives during family mealtime conversations initiated by Craven and Potter (2010). Their focus on imperative formulations more starkly revealed participants' orientations to the management of deontic asymmetries. For example, contextual factors such as who was at fault or how urgently an action needed to be performed could be drawn on by speakers to provide a warrant for more entitled formulations (Antaki and Kent, 2012). Recipients, as well as speakers, designed their talk to display their deontic stance towards the projected course of action. When responding to parental directives, the timing and nature of a child's compliance could enable them to regain autonomy over their behaviour without openly defying the directive (Kent, 2012). In other words, it was found that the struggle over deontic authority could play out in such a way as not only to identify what rights and entitlements are in play between the participants, but also what the possibilities and consequences of compliance or resistance might be.

In delving further into the possibilities and consequences of directives by a more extensive empirical survey of the formats that adults used, we were struck by how the syntactic format of ''or'' alternatives could work as an action to get the child to do something (or stop doing something). So far as we know, this use of alternatives – although it has a hinterland in the pragmatics literature (see, for a comprehensive account of conditional connectives, Declerck and Reed, 2001) – has not yet been remarked on in the interactional literature on directives. As we shall see, its study throws up two intriguing issues in how adults manage their deontic authority: their flouting of the fundamental conversational norm of contiguity, and their ostensible privileging of the child's choice in complying with warnings and threats.

## 2. Data: sources

We searched for adults' use of alternatives in talking to children in two sets of sources: audio data deposited in the online resource *Talkbank*,[1] and video data held at Loughborough University, and at Keele University.

(a) *Talkbank audio data*

From the CHILDES data in the Talkbank database (MacWhinney, 2007) we randomly selected six sources, representing about 240 h of USA and UK recordings across a range of adult–child interactions, although the bulk of them are mother–child conversations. The age of the children in the recordings we sampled ranged from 1 year 9 months to 7 years 11 months.

(b) *The Loughborough and Keele family-meal video datasets*

The Loughborough data are from three UK, native-English-speaking families with small children, representing about 12 h of talk at mealtimes. The ages of children here were less precisely recorded than in the CHILDES dataset, but ranged between 3 years and 8 years old. The Talkbank and Loughborough datasets were used for our main survey, but later (as explained below) we also had recourse to a small corpus held at Keele University (the Beeston family-meal dataset, comprising 4 h of mealtime conversations between 2 UK, native English-speaking families with children aged 3–11 years old). This latter small collection was inspected for supplementary video evidence of children's visible compliance with the directives.

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[1] Available online at <http://talkbank.org/>.