The semantics of negative directives in Homeric Greek: a typological account[1]

Abstract

The difference between the aorist subjunctive and the present imperative in negative directives in ancient Greek has previously been described in purely aspectual terms. In this paper I argue that the change of mood is also significant. A typological analysis of several languages has indicated a distinction between two different types of negative directive construction, termed 'preventive' and 'prohibitive'. Although it will be shown that any conclusions about the ancient Greek data are difficult on semantic grounds alone, semantic analysis of the Homeric data does suggest that the two moods could be explained in this way. Furthermore, the ratio of present imperative to aorist subjunctive in the Homeric poems, which would otherwise be rather surprising, matches that found in languages where this distinction is found.

1 Introduction

As is well known, the paradigm in grammar books for directives in ancient Greek is asymmetric. While the present and aorist imperative are found in the positive construction, in the negative the aorist subjunctive is found instead of the imperative:

Positive	Negative
present imperative	μή + present imperative
aorist imperative	μή + aorist subjunctive

Several explanations for this phenomenon have been put forward. However, I will argue that none of them satisfactorily explain why the subjunctive should be found here. It is therefore interesting to find that in certain languages two different types of negative directive construction have been

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distinguished. If these two were also distinguished in ancient Greek it would better explain why the two different moods are found.

A semantic analysis of the Homeric data will show that at this stage of the language the two moods do correspond with the distinction noted in the other languages. The difficulty of concluding anything from such a semantic analysis is however quite clear. It is therefore interesting to note that there is a more objective reason to consider the Homeric data in a similar way: the distribution of the two moods. The preponderance of present imperatives is startling, and surely requires some explanation.

2   Previous explanations

Previous explanations for this phenomenon have argued that the two aspects in the negative construction must have developed at different times. For example, Chantraine (1948: §340) claims that the aorist developed first, at which time there would have been a restriction against the use of imperatives in negative directives. By the time the present construction developed, the restriction would no longer have been operational. He claims that the reason for this development was that the present «conviendrait mieux à l'ordre qu'à la défense».

However, this claim is not supported by cross-linguistic or even internal Greek evidence. In the Slavic languages, the branch of Indo-European apart from Greek where aspect is most entrenched, it is perfective negative directives which are rare (Boguslawski 1985: 225). In Homeric Greek, the present imperative is used much more commonly in negative directives than the aorist subjunctive (Stephens 1983). If there ever was a preference for perfective negative directives in Greek, it has apparently been completely reversed by the time of Homer.

Monro (1891: §328) similarly argues that the aorist subjunctive is the older form. In Vedic, mā (cognate with Greek μή) is found with the 'injunctive'. The situation in Proto-Indo-European is thought therefore to have been the same (Sihler 1995: §416). Monro claims that the injunctive would originally have been replaced by the subjunctive, both present and aorist, and only later by the imperative. Because of the rarity of the aorist imperative, and what he describes as the 'late

origin' of the forms of the weak aorist imperative in Greek, he concludes that, at the time of the replacement of the subjunctive by the imperative, there was no aorist imperative form in existence. However, the claim that the weak aorist endings in Greek are recent does not explain why imperatives were not formed to strong aorist roots, since these use the same endings as the present imperative. Furthermore, the claim is not proved; the origin is merely 'obscure' (Sihler 1995: §547.5).

Finally, no explanation is given for why the present imperative should ever have replaced the present subjunctive. Two waves of development are suggested when even one is difficult to explain.

Stephens (1983: 75) has analysed metrical evidence which indeed suggests that there were two different waves of development in this construction. However, it suggests the opposite development from that claimed by Chantraine and Monro. While all the present imperative forms are metrically secure, the aorist subjunctives are always metrically equivalent to injunctive forms. This suggests that the replacement of the aorist injunctive took place during the composition of the poem, while the replacement of the present injunctive was completed beforehand.

Although this metrical evidence is interesting, it still does not explain why we find the aorist subjunctive in this construction. The previous explanations assume that the aorist subjunctive is merely the aorist equivalent of the present imperative in this construction. This has not to my knowledge been disputed. Indeed, in one of the most recent discussions of this construction, McKay (1986: 44, fn. 13) explicitly denies the significance of the difference in mood in Classical Greek: «The substitution of subjunctive for imperative in ancient prohibitions does not affect the aspectual question», as does Goodwin (1889: §259) «The distinction of tense [*sic*] here is solely the ordinary distinction between the present and aorist and has no reference to the moods».

The aorist subjunctive is therefore seen as just 'filling a hole' in the paradigm. But such a description does not explain why it was specifically the subjunctive that was used here. If there was some reason against using the aorist imperative here, other forms existed which could have been used instead. The aorist infinitive is often used with imperative meaning in Homer, and sometimes later (Goodwin 1889: §784). For example:

(1)   O 4.408   ἔνθα σ' ἐγὼν ἀγαγοῦσα ἅμ' ἠοῖ φαινομένηφιν

                        εὐνάσω ἑξείης· σὺ δ' ἐῢ κρίνασθαι ἑταίρους

                        τρεῖς, οἵ τοι παρὰ νηυσὶν ἐϋσσέλμοισιν ἄριστοι.

                        I will take you there as soon as dawn appears, and lay you in a row. But
                        you, choose three of your companions, those you consider the best in
                        your well-benched ships.

Syntactically, there is also reason to believe that the subjunctive is in some way different from the
imperative. The subjunctive with μή develops a subordinate use. For example:

(2)   I 10.348   εἰ δ' ἄμμε παραφθαίῃσι πόδεσσιν,

                        αἰεί μιν ἐπὶ νῆας ἀπὸ στρατόφι προτιειλεῖν,

                        ἔγχει ἐπαΐσσων, μή πως προτὶ ἄστυ ἀλύξῃ.

                        If he outruns us, press him against the ship, away from his forces, and
                        rush at him with your spear so he can't escape back to town.

The imperative, on the other hand, is only very rarely found in subordinate constructions. Elmsley
(1825: commentary to line 543) has listed 12 examples in ancient Greek, but they always appear to
be some kind of anacoluthon.

Furthermore, while the meaning of the construction may be explained 'componentially' with the
imperative (NEG + imperative), the subjunctive, which after all does not express imperative
meaning in the second person without μή, must be explained in a different way.

3   The typological perspective

Given the certain differences between the subjunctive and imperative in this construction, and the
fact that previous explanations do not satisfactorily explain the use of two different moods in this
construction, it is interesting to note that other languages make a distinction between two different
types of negative directive construction. In Russian, Aleut, Tatar, Even and Armenian, scholars

have distinguished what are termed 'preventive' from 'prohibitive' constructions (see Xrakovskij 2001).

According to the basic definition of these categories, the 'prohibitive' is used to prohibit *controllable* actions (eg. 'don't paint', 'don't read') while the 'preventive' is used to prevent *uncontrollable* actions (eg. 'don't break the glass', 'don't fall') (Birjulin & Xrakovskij 2001: 34). It is important to note that the definition of 'controllable actions' is not intrinsic to the particular verb. For example, with the verb 'wake', one might set out deliberately to wake a baby, in which case if someone wanted to stop you they would use the prohibitive. Alternatively, you might be doing something which could have the consequence of waking the baby. To stop this, the preventive would be used.

But there are examples of both preventive and prohibitive markers being found in the 'wrong' situation according to the basic definition. However, these exceptions have been shown to occur in specific situations. For example, in Armenian, Kozintseva (2001: 258) has observed that the preventive may be used with controllable verbs in cautions or warnings (eg. sentence 3) and in strong prohibitions (eg. sentence 4):

(3) *De   zekucir   t'e   inč   es₁arel₂.   Tes,*

well,   report:IMP:2SG,   that   what   do:PRF:2SG$_{1, 2.}$ Mind,

čxabes,   ha... Teɣnyteɣə   kbr̊nem

NEG:cheat:SBJV:FUT:2SG (PREV),   hey...   At once   COND:catch:FUT:1SG

'Come on, report what you've done. Mind you, don't cheat (PREV)…I'll catch you at once'

(4) *Gna   čk'vir,   minčev šnikə   čberes*

go   get.out:IMP:2SG,   unless   doggy   COND:bring:FUT:2SG

ačk'is₁čerevas₂

NEG:show.oneself:SBJV:2SG$_{1, 2}$(PREV)

'Get out of my sight and don't show yourself (PREV) unless you bring the doggy here'

Conversely, the prohibitive marker is found with uncontrollable verbs in strong prescriptions to keep situation under control (eg. sentence 5), and to correct adverse emotions (eg. sentence 6) (Kozintseva (2001: 256)):

(5)　　*Ēli*　　　*čap'd*　　　　*mi*　　　*korcu,*　　　　　　　*ay*　　　*tɣa*

　　　　again　　size:POSS2　　　NEG　　lose:IMP:2SG (PROHIB)　　hey　　　buddy

　　　　'Don't you forget yourself again, buddy'

(6)　　*Aṙanjin ban*　　*čka,*　　　　　　　　　*gluxn*　　*ē₁ cavum₂,*

　　　　particular thing　　NEG:be:PRES:3SG,　　　head　　ache:PRES:3SG$_{1,2}$,

　　　　kancni　　　　　　　　*mi*　　　*anhangstana*

　　　　COND:pass:FUT:3SG　　　NEG　　worry:IMP:2SG (PROHIB)

　　　　'It's nothing, she's only got a headache, it'll pass. Don't worry.'

This description of the preventive and prohibitive markers in other languages may be summed up in the following table:

	basic	exceptions
preventive	uncontrollable	cautions or warnings strong prohibitions
prohibitive	controllable	correcting adverse emotions strong prescription to keep under control

4　Semantic analysis

Given the existence of such a distinction, it will be interesting to compare the ancient Greek data to see whether they may be analysed in a similar way. However, several caveats must first be drawn. Firstly, it has been observed that the distinction is not always drawn in the same way in the languages in which it has been observed. For example, the following sentence is from an Aleut translation of the Bible (from the Russian):

(7) *Tx̂idix̂ iĝatnas. Taĝa hamaan ngiin tunux-taqangis: Iĝatu-uĝana-xtxichix*

be afraid:PREV:2PL

'They were amazed. And he said to them "Do not be amazed . . ."'

(Mark 16:5, 6)

The original Russian uses the prohibitive marker, while the Aleut uses the preventive marker (Golovko 2001: 311).

Secondly, many languages (including English) do not grammatically mark the distinction. Just because the distinction exists does not mean it must be the way to explain the ancient Greek data.

Finally, it must be noted that the distinction is itself not terribly clear-cut. The decision over whether a particular action should be prevented or prohibited appears to be rather subjective. Different languages make different choices, and there is a degree of 'overlap' between the definitions.

For example, it is difficult to pin down the difference between the 'strong prohibition' (expressed with the preventive), and the less strong prohibition of 'controllable' verbs (expressed with the prohibitive), or between the correction of adverse emotions (expressed with the prohibitive) and the prevention of 'uncontrollable' emotions (expressed with the preventive). Indeed, deciding on whether a particular action is really controllable or not surely depends on complicated factors such as the relationship between speaker and addressee and what might be termed the 'discoure purpose' of the sentence.

Bearing these caveats in mind, data from the earliest stage of the language to exhibit this construction, namely the language of the Homeric epic poems, the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, may be analysed semantically.

Of course, the Homeric data bring their own particular problems for a semantic comparison with the typological evidence noted above. There are several non-trivial problems attached to using the Homeric language as a linguistic database at all. For example, as 'oral poetry' it has been shown to be 'non-synchronic' in nature. There is also a wide use of formulas which may not follow the rules of the 'natural' language. In general, it is impossible to ignore that the choice of a particular form

may be more due to metrical exigencies than anything else. (For further analysis of these problems, see Willmott 2007: §1.2).

Specifically for this construction the Homeric data suffers another problem, which is that there are only 13 aorist subjunctives in negative directives at all.[2] Such a small data-set means that any semantic conclusions drawn about the particular examples must be treated with caution: if we had more evidence, we might come to different conclusions. We will see later that the small number of examples is possibly significant in understanding this construction; nonetheless it is only troubling from the point of view of a semantic analysis, and if further conclusions were to be drawn in this way a larger data-set would certainly be desirable.

Given all of these caveats, it is nonetheless interesting that, in the Homeric epic poems at least, the aorist subjunctive could be analysed as being a preventive marker, while the present imperative could be analysed as a prohibitive marker.

6 of the 13 examples of the aorist subjunctive in negative directives in Homer are found preventing emotions. In Armenian, 'emotive' verbs would normally be prevented with the preventive, and therefore appear to be seen as 'uncontrollable' (Kozintseva (2001: 257). For example:[3]

> (8)   I 15.115   μὴ νῦν μοι νεμεσήσετ', Ὀλύμπια δώματ' ἔχοντες,
>
> τείσασθαι φόνον υἷος ἰόντ' ἐπὶ νῆας Ἀχαιῶν,
>
> Now, dwellers of Olympus, do not be enraged if I avenge the death of my
>
> son and set out against the ships of the Achaeans.

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[2] A further problem that will not be considered further is that there are three apparent exceptions to the grammar-book rule in the Homeric poems. Apparently, three aorist imperatives are found at I18.134, I4.410 and O24.248. These forms are in fact controversial: they have been discussed at length in Stephens 1983, and have been argued to have been formed on the analogy of a future formation. In any case, the existence of these anomalous forms does not affect the comparison of the aorist subjunctive and present imperative.

[3] See also I5.488, I9.33, I24.779, IO3.55. All Homeric examples are taken from the most recent Oxford Classical Text. References consist of the line number after I (*Iliad*) or O (*Odyssey*).

In I15.115, the anger of the gods at Ares going to avenge his son is in fact unavoidable given that Zeus has just ordered no immortal to be involved in the battle. A preventive marker is entirely expected in such a situation.

Those which are not found with verbs that may be thought of as more 'controllable' may be described as either cautions/warnings (eg. sentence 9), or strong prohibitions (eg. sentence 10), just as the 'preventive' in Armenian (cf. p. 5 above):[4]

(9)   I 23.428   στεινωπὸς γὰρ ὁδός, τάχα δ' εὐρυτέρη παρελάσσαι·

μή πως ἀμφοτέρους δηλήσεαι ἅρματι κύρσας.

The road is narrow here - soon it will be wider. Don't harm us both by crashing the chariot!

(10)   O 11.251   νῦν δ' ἔρχευ πρὸς δῶμα, καὶ ἴσχεο μηδ' ὀνομήνῃς·

αὐτὰρ ἐγώ τοί εἰμι Ποσειδάων ἐνοσίχθων.

Go home now, and restrain yourself and don't name me. But know that I am Poseidon, the Earth-Shaker

The overwhelming majority of the present imperatives in this construction (over 80%), on the other hand, are found with controllable verbs:[5]

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[4] The other examples of the aorist subjunctive which I have analysed as cautions, are those in I23.407 and I24.568. The other examples in strong prohibitions are I5.684, I9.522, O15.263.

[5] See also I1.032, I1.131, I1.210, I1.277, I1.295, I1.363, I1.545, I1.550, I1.550, I2.165, I2.179, I2.181, I2.247, I3.064, I3.082, I3.414, I3.438, I4.184, I4.234, I4.509, I5.218, I5.252, I5.440, I5.889, I6.264, I6.360, I7.111, I7.235, I7.279, I7.279, I8.244, I8.399, I9.612, I10.085, I10.249, I10.249, I10.447, I13.230, I15.093, I15.376, I15.426, I15.666, I16.019, I17.031, I18.074, I18.126, I18.134, I18.178, I18.295, I19.155, I19.306, I19.306, I20.133, I20.197, I20.200, I20.354, I20.376, I20.431, I21.095, I21.099, I21.099, I21.340, I22.038, I22.085, I22.185, I22.261, I22.339, I22.345, I23.443, I23.492, I23.735, I24.218, I24.218, I24.549, I24.553, I24.560, I24.778, O1.315, O3.313, O3.096, O4.326, O4.543, O4.594, O7.031, O7.031, O7.303, O8.350, O8.548, O10.457, O10.489, O10.548, O11.339, O11.339, O11.455, O11.488,

(11) I 1.275 μήτε σὺ τόνδ' ἀγαθός περ ἐὼν ἀποαίρεο κούρην,

ἀλλ' ἔα ὥς οἱ πρῶτα δόσαν γέρας υἷες Ἀχαιῶν·

And you, do not take the maiden, however important you are. Rather let

her be, as a prize which the sons of the Achaeans first gave to him.

Most of the exceptions to the above tendency are found correcting adverse emotions, just like the prohibitive markers above (see p. 6). For example:[6]

(12) I 16.22 ὦ Ἀχιλεῦ, Πηλῆος υἱέ, μέγα φέρτατ' Ἀχαιῶν,

μὴ νεμέσα· τοῖον γὰρ ἄχος βεβίηκεν Ἀχαιούς.

Achilles, son of Peleus, greatest of the Achaeans, don't be angry - the

Achaeans have suffered such distress.

There are also a few examples which could be described as strong prescriptions to control the situation:[7]

(13) I 5.249 ἀλλ' ἄγε δὴ χαζώμεθ' ἐφ' ἵππων, μηδέ μοι οὕτω

θῦνε διὰ προμάχων, μή πως φίλον ἦτορ ὀλέσσῃς.

Come on, let's give ground on the horses, don't rage so at the front, or

you will no doubt lose your life!

Each of the examples I have given for this category, however, is again dealing with emotions, and so therefore could fit into the previous category.

O14.387, O14.387, O15.199, O16.168, O17.046, O17.046, O17.393, O17.401, O18.020, O18.171, O18.173, O18.178, O18.416, O19.042, O19.116, O19.584, O20.314, O20.324, O21.111, O21.111, O21.310, O22.251, O22.349, O22.356, O22.411, O22.431, O23.059, O23.365, O23.365, O24.054, O24.248.

[6] See also I5.830, I6.486, I10.069, I10.145, I20.366, I21.288, I21.288, I24.065, I24.171, O5.160, O5.215, O7.050, O11.486, O14.168, O18.062, O23.209, O23.213, O23.213.

[7] See also I23.735, I9.600, O19.263.

It should be noted, however, that there would not need to be examples which fit into all of the categories distinguished in the Armenian or other languages for there to be a correlation between the Homeric data and the preventive and prohibitive distinction. It is sufficiently interesting to note that the majority of both the aorist subjunctive and present imperatives in this construction are comparable to preventive and prohibitive markers.

However, it could well be argued that this comparison is based on too subjective a methodology. Given the difficulty of ascertaining whether certain actions are really 'controllable' or 'uncontrollable', and given that there is rather an overlap between the two categories where they are grammatically distinguished, it could be said that it would be all too easy to describe the ancient Greek data in a similar way. The inconclusiveness of a semantic analysis is particularly marked for the Homeric data, where there are so few examples of the aorist subjunctive.

5   Distribution

The small number of examples of the aorist subjunctive is in fact striking given the total number of examples of this contruction. Out of 167 examples of the second-person negative directive, only 13 of them are in the aorist subjunctive, while the rest are in the present imperative, therefore under 10% of the total. Such a skewing of aspect is unexpected in comparison with the positive construction. Stephens (1983: 69) claims that here, the aorist makes up 45.95%. In general, the aorist subjunctive is more commonly found than the present in Homer. In my analysis of all the subjunctives in Homer, I found 269 subjunctives in the Homeric poems, of which 185 were certainly aorist, and 63 certainly present, which is 68.77% to 23.42%. The skewing of aspect in this construction certainly needs some explanation.

It is therefore interesting to note that, in languages with a prohibitive and preventive distinction a similar skewing is observed. For example, one Russian novel (Goncharov's Oblomov) had 126 negative directives, of which 114 (90%) were prohibitive and only 12 preventive (10%). In a selection of Armenian texts, the percentages were 79% prohibitive vs. 21% preventive (Kozintseva 2001: 259). These are similar ratios to that noticed between the aorist subjunctive and present

imperative in Homeric Greek. This comparison therefore appears to be more 'objective', and supports the semantic analysis made above.

In order to investigate whether this distinction persists in later Greek, further analysis would need to be carried out. However, a consideration of the distributional evidence suggests that such an analysis might be fruitless. Stephens (1983: 69) notes that the aorist is found 43.75% of the time in negative directives in the Attic orators, compared to 45.32% in the positive construction. The evidence from the distribution would suggest that, even if there was something which could be called 'preventive' in Homeric Greek, it no longer existed by the time of the Attic orators.

6   Further thoughts

The semantic and distributional evidence suggest that in the negative directive construction in Homer, it might be correct to describe the aorist subjunctive as preventive and the present imperative as prohibitive. But this conclusion raises several questions for an understanding of the ancient Greek data.

Firstly, this claim does not explain why we do not find the aorist imperative or the present subjunctive. After all, if there are two distinct types of negative directive construction we might expect to find an aspectual distinction in both. The evidence from Russian suggests that this is not of itself problematic, because the meanings appear to be connected with aspectual distinction. In that language, the 'prohibitive' is marked by the imperfective imperative, while the 'preventive' is marked by the perfective imperative (Golovko 2001: 308-9).

Indeed, further evidence from ancient Greek appears to confirm that the meaning is connected with aspect: certainly there is similar 'aspectual skewing' in other negative directive constructions. For example, in the third person negative construction, the aorist is found in 6.97% of the examples, while in the positive it makes up 37.35%. Similarly, when the imperative is used as infinitive, in the negative construction 13.04% are aorist, in comparison with 44.89% in the positive construction.

However, this evidence suggests that we are again lacking an explanation for why there is a change in the mood. After all, if the skewing of aspect in the infinitive construction may be explained as

due to the prohibitive/preventive distinction, that would suggest that the distinction could be marked merely by a change in aspect, just as is in fact done in Russian.

Nonetheless, the suggestion that there is a certain distinction in meaning could help to explain the the use of two different moods, particularly in combination with the observations that the two moods developed at different times (see p. 3). A possibly comparable situation is found in Armenian, where the preventive is marked by the future subjunctive, and the prohibitive by the imperative (Kozintseva 2001: 256).

A further question concerns the original system from which such a language situation developed from. It is claimed, on the basis of the Vedic evidence, that in Proto-Indo-European the injunctive would have been used in this construction. My claims for ancient Greek raise the question of whether there was a preventive category in Proto-Indo-European, and if so, how it was expressed. However, such a question is of course not to be answered on the basis of the ancient Greek data alone. And in Vedic Sanskrit a very different distribution occurs from that noted in ancient Greek. There, 88.1% of negative directives with the injunctive are aorist. This compares with the positive, where only 6.23% of the imperatives are aorist (Stephens 1983: 69). This suggests that one of the two languages has innovated significantly from the parent language. The analysis of the ancient Greek data therefore does not necessarily have any effect on claims about the proto-language.

7   Conclusion

Although the analysis of the data which I have proposed has these few 'loose ends', I hope to have shown that the asymmetric pattern in the negative directive construction in ancient Greek deserves attention. The ratio of the aorist subjunctive to the present imperative in the Homeric data is also problematic.

Both may be explained by claiming that the aorist subjunctive is 'preventive' and the present imperative is 'prohibitive', using definitions established from the typological comparison of several languages. Although these two categories are not perhaps very clearly distinguishable at the semantic level, so that any comparison made on purely semantic grounds will not be conclusive, the distributional parallel between these languages and the Homeric data is striking.

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