Temporal interpretation and the performative use of modals
Sven Lauer, University of Konstanz

The problem. Modal sentences can be used to report that an obligation or permission exists (the ‘descriptive use’, (1)), but also to bring about an obligation or permission, provided that the speaker has the requisite authority (the ‘performative use’, (2)).

(1) [Tax lawyer to client.]
   a. You have to declare this income.
   b. You may take this exemption.

(2) [Mother to child.]
   a. You have to clean up your room.
   b. You may go out and play.

Kamp (1978) suggested an attractive pragmatic account of such uses, which was formally spelled out in considerable detail by Kaufmann (2012). On this approach, modals always have their usual (‘descriptive’) content, but under certain contextual conditions, asserting this content can create an obligation by claiming that it exists. Such an account is prima facie preferable over an approach that takes modals to be ambiguous between a descriptive and a performative meaning (Lewis 1979, van Rooy 2000). However, the pragmatic approach is challenged by a range of expressions that have (deontic) modal meanings, but which cannot be used performatively: The sentences in (3) are typically assigned the same content as modals on their descriptive use (though with a more constrained range of modal backgrounds). On the pragmatic approach, we hence would expect that they can be used performatively under the same conditions under which (2a) can be so used, contrary to fact.

(3) a. You are obligated to clean up your room. (descriptive use only)
   b. You are obliged to clean up your room. (descriptive use only)
   c. You are required to clean up your room. (descriptive use only)

Temporal interpretation to the rescue. I argue that the unavailability of performative uses for the sentences in (3) is expected on the pragmatic account, given plausible assumptions about temporal interpretation. In particular, I assume that the predicates in question are stative and that unembedded stative claims in the simple present tense require that the state obtains throughout the utterance time $s^*$ (Bennet and Partee 1972, Taylor 1977, Ogihara 2007). Assuming $s^*$ is a convex set of moments (i.e., an interval) and employing a deontic modality $\Box^m$ which universally quantifies over the possibilities that are deontically accessible at moment $m$, the proposition expressed by (3a) can be represented as in (4).

(4) $\forall m \in s^* : \Box^m ([\text{you clean up your room}])$

Following Ogihara, I assume that $s^*$ is the actual runtime of the ongoing utterance event. In a framework which represents both utterance events and the eventualities talked about (Condoravdi and Lauer 2011, Eckardt 2012), this means that for a given utterance $u$ of (3a), $s^* = \tau(u)$. On the pragmatic approach, a performative use asserts the proposition in (4) and the obligation comes about as a result of the utterance event. Consequently, the state of obligation will only temporally abut $\tau(u)$, or overlap it in the final moment. In either case, (4) will still be false in the world of utterance $w^*$. Informally speaking, the obligation comes into existence ‘too late’ to make the asserted proposition true.

A new puzzle. Why, then, do modals like have to have performative uses? I explore two possible answers to this question: (i) Such modals have a more liberal temporal interpretation than the predicates in (3); (ii) Performative uses of modals do not involve deontic readings of the modals involved but bouletic ones, and function like performative uses of desideratives (I want you to clean up your room NOW, Condoravdi and Lauer (2009)). In the absence of corroborating evidence for a difference in temporal interpretation, I tentatively argue in favor of the second option and show that, unlike the Kamp/Kaufmann approach, it is immune to a further problem noted already by Kamp (1978).
References


