Epistemic determiners and imperatives: the unlikely reconciliation

**BACKGROUND:** Recent work on Romance epistemic determiners (e.g. Fălăuş 2009) has shown that Romanian vreun has a more restricted distribution than other epistemic determiners (e.g. Spanish algún, French quelque). Unlike its Romance counterparts, it is restricted to contexts which are interpreted with respect to an epistemic modal base, and which satisfy the constraint in (1):

(1) **THE EPISTEMIC CONSTRAINT:** Context of occurrence: Op […vreun…]

Op p entails that the speaker’s epistemic alternatives include non p-worlds

This generalization has been argued to capture the occurrence of vreun under epistemic modals and epistemic attitude verbs (e.g. think, suppose, guess, hope) and its non-occurrence under non-epistemic (e.g. deontic modals) and factive (know, regret) or non-epistemic intensional verbs (advise, say, intend).

**PROBLEM:** In this paper, we take this generalization one step further, by examining the distribution of vreun in an understudied context, namely imperatives. Farkas (2002) argues that vreun is ruled out in imperatives, as illustrated in (2):

(2)  

* Ia vrepo prăjitură!  

Take.IMP.2SG VREUN cookie

However, a closer examination of empirical facts reveals that there are imperatives which allow vreun, like in the following example:

(3)  

Verifică pe vreun site, nu sunt sigur că nu e o greșeală.  

Check.IMP.2SG on VREUN site, NEG be.1SG sure that NEG be.3SG a mistake

‘Check on some website, I’m not sure it’s not a mistake.’

Standard analyses of imperatives treat them as ‘modalized’ propositions (e.g. Han 2000, Schwager 2006, Aloni 2007). Accordingly, their interpretation involves a modal base and an ordering source, which is obligatorily ‘preference-related’ (e.g. deontic, bouletic or teleological). On these assumptions, the occurrence of vreun in (3) is surprising. We know that its use under modal operators is restricted to epistemic contexts, but imperatives are not epistemic modals. Consequently, these examples pose a double challenge. On the one hand, we want to pinpoint the distinction among imperatives that determines the (non-)occurrence of vreun. On the other hand, we need to understand whether and how these examples square with the data covered by the epistemic constraint in (1).

**PROPOSAL:** In order to account for the use of vreun in imperatives and put it together with the facts captured by the generalization in (1), we adopt the alternative-based approach to polarity developed in Chierchia (2006 et seq) and Fălăuş (2009). On this account, a dependent determiner like vreun has as part of its meaning active alternatives, which require the insertion of an exhaustivity operator (akin to only), and give rise to (obligatory) implicatures, used for enriching the basic meaning of assertions. Differences among polarity-sensitive elements come from either the type of alternatives these items introduce or the way exhaustification proceeds. The aforementioned analyses have shown that (i) like all indefinites, vreun triggers scalar alternatives and (ii) like all polarity-sensitive items, it activates domain alternatives, which have been argued to be restricted to singletons. The switch to singleton alternatives derives a parametric difference among existential dependent determiners (as originally discussed by Jayez & Tovena 2006), namely the extent of variation (‘freedom of choice’) among the members of the restriction set – TOTAL for existential FCIs like un NP oarecare / qualsiasi/ quelconque (4) and PARTIAL in the case of epistemic items like algún, quelque or vreun (5):

(4)  

Poți dansa cu un coleg oarecare, # dar nu cu Paul.  

‘You can dance with a colleague whatsoever, but not with Paul’

(5)  

E posibil să se fi întâlnit cu vreun prieten, dar nu poate fi Luca tocmai l-am văzut.  

‘It’s possible she met some friend, but it cannot be Luca, I have just seen him.’
This meaning difference stems from different sizes in the domain alternatives considered for exhaustification: if the domain alternatives are non-minimal, the resulting meaning is a total free-choice interpretation: there is a single individual satisfying the existential claim, and all relevant alternatives qualify as possible options (existential FCI); if the domain alternatives to which we apply the exhaustification operator are minimal (singleton), the resulting meaning is partial variation - some, but not necessarily all, alternatives qualify as possible options (epistemic items).

Elaborating on this analysis, we show it can capture the imperative facts. More precisely, we argue that the contrast in (2)-(3) can be reduced to a more general distinction between two types of imperatives, discussed in Aloni (2007), which differ precisely along the total/partial variation dimension. We show that vreun is excluded from choice-offering imperatives (2) and possible in alternative-presenting imperatives (3) and (6) below. The relevant difference is that only the latter is compatible with a continuation of the type don’t do b, overtly excluding one possible value, hence only alternative-presenting imperatives qualify as partial variation models. This is confirmed by the continuation in (6):

(6) A is waiting for an important parcel, but will be away for the next couple of days. B says:

‘Talk to some neighbor, so that he picks up the parcel in your absence. But not to Peter, he is never willing to help.’

In contrast to this, choice-offering imperatives like (2) qualify as total variation models, and hence rule out the use of vreun. To account for the observed pattern, we argue that the full range of occurrences of vreun can be captured by assuming that vreun differs from other dependent determiners by imposing a stronger constraint on its domain alternatives – not only does vreun allow partial variation, like other epistemic determiners, but actually requires it:

(7) Vreun rules out total variation, i.e. one of the domain alternatives must stand a chance of being false.

We implement this requirement by assuming that the total variation implicature gets added to the set of alternatives over which we exhaustify, and show that the resulting meaning in a modal context (both necessity and possibility) entails that one of the alternatives must be false (but we ignore which one). Crucially, this requirement cannot be met under deontic modalities, like in the case of free-choice permission sentences like You may eat the cake or the icecream which arguably require that each disjunct be a possible option (Fox 2007). In other words, the lexical semantics of deontic modalities and choice-offering imperatives allows for total variation, a situation which gives rise to a clash with the partial variation requirement imposed by vreun (7), and therefore vreun is correctly predicted to be ruled out in these contexts.

Summarizing, our proposal to reformulate the epistemic constraint as a condition on domain alternatives maintains the empirical coverage of (1), and has the advantage of offering an account for the distribution of vreun in imperatives. The alternative-based proposal we pursue allows us to integrate vreun in a broader typology of dependent elements, and retains the recurrent insight that differences among dependent indefinites result from different operations on quantificational domains. Their restricted distribution then comes out as the result of the logical interaction of their lexical meaning with other operators in the context.