

The imperative imperative: a complex interpersonal domain in Nen

The Nen language (Yam family, Morehead district, Western Province, PNG) contains a rich set of imperative choices, embedded in an exuberant system of verbal morphology that indexes subject and object, for person and up to four number values. To begin with, there is a contrast between basic imperatives (to be carried out by the hearer here and now) and future imperatives (to be carried out by the hearer at some future time). Then there is a 'mediated imperative' series, where the speaker instructs their addressee to take a message to a third person to carry out some action, at a different place, in the future. Each of these imperatives is available across two aspect series, at least for verbs with full aspectual possibilities.

Future imperatives have richer morphological possibilities than present ones, since (a) they are compatible with stative verbs (they are commanding that a future state be the case) where present imperatives are not (since they could only be carried out by changing state, incompatible with stative verb meaning). This makes imperative type a good test for semantic stativity

(b) future imperatives, uniquely, allow the signalling of actor number by prefix (whereas elsewhere it is signalled by suffix); this creates special number possibilities for future imperatives

(c) in addition to their basic form, future imperatives in the imperfective can feed an 'iterative future imperative' category by left partial internal reduplication, meaning 'do – in the future – at many places or times, or with many objects'.

On top of the above distinctions, there is an additional 'careful imperative', used to tell the interlocutor to carry out the action with especial care.

This paper will illustrate the workings of this intricate system in detail, discussing its inflectional semantics, morphology, and its usefulness in investigating the semantics of the verb stem. In addition, I will discuss the system of categorial metalanguage which Nen speakers have developed, as part of a project to elaborate a full grammatical metalanguage in Nen for the purposes of vernacular analysis of their own language.