Performative Modality Without Imperative Morphology: The Case of Georgian *ver*

1. Introduction. Georgian exhibits a tripartite system of negation: *nu* 'don't' (imperative), *ver* 'cannot' (modal inability), and *ar* 'not' (unmarked, universal negation). Traditional grammars (Sharashenidze et al. 2019; Lobjanidze 2023) describe *nu* as the only form morphologically licensed in imperatives. However, native speakers frequently use modal *ver* with future indicative forms to express strong prohibitions—despite its declarative structure and non-imperative semantics. This usage presents a cross-linguistically common pattern between clause type and directive force.

2. Canonical Imperative Morphology. Georgian encodes imperative meaning via person-specific forms:

- **2nd person**: bare aorist indicative (e.g., *aašene!* 'build!')
- **1st person plural**: future conjunctive (e.g., *avašeno-t!* 'let us build!')
- **3rd person**: optative/conjunctive (e.g., *c'aiǧos!* 'let him/her take it!')

Nu and *ar* are negators are both licensed with these imperatives.

3. The Puzzle: Modal Prohibitions. In natural speech, speakers often use *ver* with future indicative to issue prohibitions—unexpected given its semantics of circumstantial impossibility:

(1) ver shetcham
NEG.MOD eat.fut.ind.2sg
'You won't be able to eat it!' which functions as 'Don't eat it!'

(2) ar/nu dalev
NEG drink.fut.ind.2sg
'You won't drink!' (expected negators)

While the use of *ar* and *nu* in imperatives reflects their general scope and is unsurprising, the performative use of *ver* is semantically marked: it encodes impossibility, not direct prohibition. Its directive interpretation constitutes the core theoretical puzzle.

4. Experimental Evidence. A Likert-scale task with 21 native speakers measured the perceived strictness of future indicative clauses negated with *nu*, *ver*, and *ar*. Sentences like *(negator)+ Future Indicative* forms of *go, eat, drink* were rated. Results: *nu* was rated as the

softest negator in prohibitive contexts, while *ver* and *ar* were consistently rated as having similar degrees of prohibitness. The mean strictness ratings (on a 5-point Likert scale) were: *ar*: 4.29, *ver*: 4.27, *nu*: 2.36.

5. Performativity Diagnostics. To test the performative status of *ver*-negation, we apply diagnostics from Han (2000), Portner (2004, 2007), and Schwager (2006). While *ver* retains its modal declarative syntax and remains grammatically truth-evaluable, these tests reveal how speakers pragmatically reinterpret it as directive in context:

1. **Truth-evaluability:** *ver shetcham* can be denied (*ara, shevtchame*), but such replies are interpreted as defiant rather than simply correcting a belief.
2. **Response compatibility:** Obedience-style replies like *k'argia* ('okay') are natural, while truth-committed replies (e.g., *ki shevtcham*) signal resistance.
3. **Tag question availability:** *Ver ts'akhval, ara?* is grammatically acceptable, but weakens directive force and pragmatically seeks confirmation, not compliance.
4. **Person sensitivity:** Only second-person *ver* clauses receive a performative interpretation; first- or third-person uses (e.g., *ver mova*) remain descriptive.

6. Prosodic Licensing and Lexicalization. Prosodic analysis reveals that prohibitive readings of *ver* and *ar* are licensed only under a specific high-pitched, dynamic intonation contour characteristic of imperative force. By contrast, *nu* readily supports imperative readings regardless of prosodic contour, and allows mitigation or softening (e.g., 'please don't go').

This suggests a division of labor: while *nu* lexicalizes directive force and allows prosodic modulation, *ver* and *ar* lack imperative morphology or illocutionary encoding and must rely on prosody for performative interpretation.

Importantly, *ver* and *ar* pattern alike in this respect: both can trigger imperative readings only under strong intonation, and neither allows mitigated imperatives. This undercuts a reanalysis view in which *ver* has grammaticalized into a dedicated prohibitive operator. Instead, it supports a model where Georgian imperatives can be licensed either lexically (via *nu*) or prosodically (via imperative intonation), with *ver*-imperatives representing prosodically induced performatives grounded in modal semantics.

8. Typological Comparison. Similar pattern occurs in Turkish (*yapamazsın* 'you can't do it!') and English (*you can't touch that!*), where modal negation is interpreted as directive when accompanied with a specific intonation. Georgian differs by coexisting with a morphologically dedicated prohibitive system, offering a clear look at the phenomenon.

9. Contribution. This paper presents: (i) new experimental data on Georgian negation and imperatives, (ii) evidence for directive force arising from prosody, (iii) possible groundwork for a future typological generalization about imperatives based on modality and intonation.

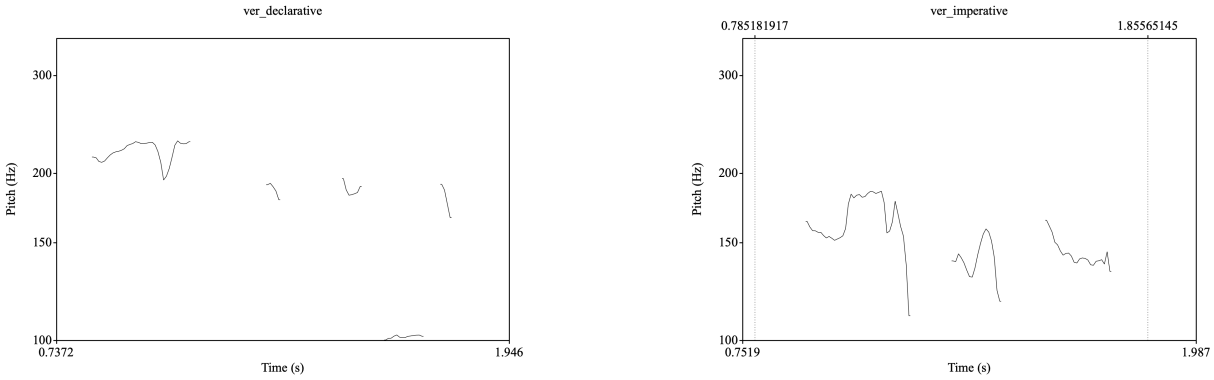

Figure 1: Pitch contours of declarative (left) vs. imperative (right) readings of *ver ts'akhval* 'you can't go'. The imperative reading requires a steeper, higher pitch contour.

References

- Han, C. (2000). *The Structure and Interpretation of Imperatives*. PhD Dissertation, University of Pennsylvania.
- Kaufmann, M. (2012). *Interpreting Imperatives*. Dordrecht: Springer.
- Lobjanidze, M. (2023). *Kartuli Enis Gramatika*. Tbilisi: TSU Press.
- McClay, E., Keough, M., Babel, M., & Matthewson, L. (2023). *Prosodic realization and interpretation of English imperatives*. *Glossa: a journal of general linguistics*, 8(1).
- Portner, P. (2004). The semantics of imperatives. In R. Young (Ed.), *Proceedings of SALT XIV*.
- Portner, P. (2007). Imperatives and modals. *Natural Language Semantics*, 15(4), 351–383.
- Schwager, M. (2006). *Interpreting Imperatives*. PhD Dissertation, University of Frankfurt.
- Sharashenidze, N., Advadze, M., & Ghambashidze, M. (2019). Modality and Negation in Georgian. *Kartvelology Conference Proceedings*.