

# “You Should Know” as Imperative

Alexei Cherniak

Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences  
Peoples' Friendship University of Russia

Moscow, Russia

E-mail: abishot2100@yandex.ru

**Abstract**—We often use the verb “know” to form utterances which look like imperatives (like “You should know that p”). But while people can choose to believe in certain subject-matter proposed in an utterance they cannot literally choose to know that subject-matter, because to know means not only to be in certain state of mind but also to be in certain relation to the world, and we cannot literally choose to be or not to be in corresponding relation. We cannot do it because being in such state is partly determined by facts of the world. Then “You should know that...” may be an imperative? Or cannot they? The semantic meaning of utterances of the form “You should know...” is investigated in this article, and the author shows that in spite of human inability to choose to make oneself knowing what is required to be known by such imperatives they still may be treated as partial imperatives.

**Keywords**—knowledge; belief; imperative; utterance; truth; semantic meaning; human power

## I. INTRODUCTION

We often say "Believe me" or "Keep hope" after certain phrases explaining what is the matter of the belief or hope in question. Also, some utterances begin with such clauses, in which cases they are followed by descriptions of what is to be believed in or hoped for. The use of these expressions may be understood either as requests or as demands, imperatives or prescriptions. Understood in either way "Believe me" seems to call for realization of certain psychological attitude. But as imperative it presupposes that an addressee in response to his/her understanding of the utterance would take the realization of the belief-attitude as what he/she must do. But to choose to believe is within human capabilities, this is what human beings can do; so, they usually can accomplish what "Believe me" commands when understood as an imperative. In order to do this an addressee just has to begin to believe in the proposed state of affairs or proposition if he/she did not believe in it in advance. It is within human powers to come to be hoping or believing.

But sometimes we also produce phrases which look like imperatives but require from an addressee to come to the state of knowledge in response to his/her understanding of what was or will be said. I mean utterances like "You should know that p" or "p; you should know that" where "p" represents some state of affairs. In such cases it looks like an addressee, if he/she tries to fulfill the command, is required to produce by his/her own actions in him/herself the state of

knowledge of the subject-matter explicated in another part of the utterance, i.e. make him/herself knowing this subject-matter. But knowledge, as we normally think about it, at least what we understand as knowledge of facts or of how things are, is something only partly dependent on our actions. I may decide to learn how things are in certain sphere and to require from myself certain actions which as I think must lead me to this knowledge; in this case I may be said to decide to change my current cognitive state from that of lack of knowledge of certain things to that of knowing these things, being in state of knowledge relative to them. Thus, in a sense I can decide to come to knowledge by doing what is needed to be done to obtain certain knowledge. But what I cannot do is to make what I have learned by committing certain actions knowledge, i.e. certain state of the system consisting from me and the world which I dwell. For in order to be knowledge, certain state of mind must be true of the world which it represents, and from what we normally think about truth it is not the feature fully determined by our own actions. Of course, one can understand truth as what people think is true; there are different definitions of truth including which identifies it with the consensus between experts in corresponding field of knowledge.<sup>1</sup> But most people still think that truth results from the relation of correspondence between thoughts or utterances and reality.<sup>2</sup> And we cannot make things to correspond to what we think by simple act of will or by some action based on it.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, we suppose that normal human being cannot just begin or choose to know that p if he/she did not know that p in advance by some act of will; we only can begin or choose to believe in p or

<sup>1</sup> On different concepts of truth see [5].

<sup>2</sup> Of course, there are also different concepts of what reality is. Realists believe that there is objective reality, the world as it is in itself independently on our desires, beliefs, hopes etc., and that this world we try to know and represent in our thoughts and theories. Ultimate antirealists or constructionists construe all reality as human creation, as what we make by our minds and collective activities; they also believe that models or versions of reality are the only subject-matter of our knowledge: there is nothing to be represented by them (see [1]). On different accounts of reality in details see [7]. But even if we choose an antirealist view of reality, the truth as correspondence to reality would be a result of the work of previous generations of people, which is definitely beyond individual control of the subject who is commanded to know what is true in this sense.

<sup>3</sup> Even if we choose an alternative concept of truth, e.g. if we identify it with coherence or practical usefulness, the truth of a proposition would depend on how things are independently on what the subject of the corresponding attitude have chosen to do - whether it is objectively coherent or practically useful.

assign p some probability of being true. And therefore, it is hard to imagine how someone can begin to know something by just following an order or prescription. And this makes us doubt whether utterances with "You should know..." are true imperatives or prescriptions, or commands.

## II. KNOWLEDGE IS UNCONTROLLABLE

Normally after "You should know" goes some description of the matter of knowledge: e.g., "You should know that Peter hates you". That Peter hates the addressee is what he/she should know in this case. Grammatically the context for "believe" is slightly different: "Believe me: Peter hates you".<sup>4</sup> Meanwhile as "You should know that" so "Believe me" may follow the description of some matter of fact.<sup>5</sup> What addressee is proposed to know or believe in is certain state of affairs or proposition: that Peter hates the addressee. If the speaker has an authority over an addressee the later may react to the utterance of "Believe me" by really beginning to believe in, or by improving his/her belief relative to, the subject-matter. But it is doubtful that in the same case an addressee is capable of doing something like beginning to know the subject-matter.

Knowledge is different from belief since whether someone knows that p does not depend completely on psychological features of the attitude, but also on how things objectively are. I may want very much to fulfill the command of the form "You should know that..." but I ordinarily lack the capacity to control facts due to which I could have knowledge. When I know, say, that snow is white, that snow is white is a fact; such is at least one of the basic presumptions of the logic of "know that".<sup>6</sup> Therefore, if I am commanded to know that snow is white, I am commanded to make certain state of affairs (that snow is white) a fact.<sup>7</sup> There is, of course, a simple way to make a fact of something: it suffices to make the corresponding proposition true. But first, this presupposes certain treatment of the nature of facts, according to which facts are true propositions. Still it is normal to distinguish between true propositions which describe facts, and facts themselves. And second, we are capable of making propositions true in one very special sense of truth, i.e. if truth of proposition is identified with considering that proposition as true (individually or collectively). Again, we normally take truth as property which propositions, thoughts, statements or sentences have due to how world is independently on how we think it is. So far as we don't reduce facts to true propositions or truths of propositions to considering them as true I may make all I can in order to know some x (that certain state of affairs takes place), and still fail to come to know x, since I am not responsible for how things in the world I live in are. This part of the job of knowledge does not depend on me.

<sup>4</sup> Alternatively, it may be said "You better believe that Peter hates you"; but this is definitely not an imperative, but rather a recommendation. In some languages, for instance in Russian, this difference may be absent; ср.: "Знай: Петя тебя ненавидит", and "Поверь: Петя тебя ненавидит".

<sup>5</sup> As in: "Peter hates you. You should know this (Believe me)".

<sup>6</sup> On epistemic logic see [2], [3].

<sup>7</sup> Knowledge is sometimes defined as a state of equilibrium between a cognitive system and the world (see [6]). But see [4].

Does that mean that at best one can achieve by such command the same as he/she can achieve by command of the form "Believe me..."? If so, why people systematically use "know", and not only "believe" to describe their attitudes in correspondent contexts? There is a feeling that they want in such cases to say something more than that one has to believe or even to believe strongly, or that there are good reasons to believe in certain subject-matter. But if so, then don't we require something impossible from each other when we use "know" to command to know something (become knowing by some addressee's actions) what wasn't known by him/her in advance? Or maybe clauses with "know", although they look like analogous to clauses with "believe", "hope" etc., are semantically different from the later in that they just don't express imperatives or prescriptions?

The one who commands someone else to believe in something described in that or the previous utterance may, remaining sane, take the addressee as capable to accomplish this command; the experience of the humankind tells us that people have enough control over their beliefs. These are what we can literally choose (if only we can choose anything literally). And an addressee may indeed, being inspired by the speaker, have a motivation, to believe in what he/she is commanded to believe. But if someone understands the utterance beginning with "You should know" as an imperative and believes that normal human addressee may accomplish such demand, even if he/she gets enough motivation from the utterance to accomplish it, he/she may be blamed as not understanding what "to know" means. But still we wouldn't be justified in thinking that the usage of "know" in such contexts creates just the same effect as the usage of "believe" in the same linguistic environment.

## III. PROPER FUNCTION OF "YOU SHOULD KNOW"

Perhaps then "You should know", properly understood, expresses the request even if it was intended to serve as an imperative? Maybe it is right to treat this clause as "I'd like that you know..."? In the same manner, though, any command may be treated. Thus, "Believe me..." may be treated as "I'd like you to believe..." and "Stop" as "I'd like you to stop". But requests may be, minimum, of two sorts: those which address the addressee, and those which address the Universe, some higher power or something else different from the addressee. When someone says "Damn you!" in Russian, it sounds as if it is a command - "Будь ты проклят!"; but definitely the speaker does not require from the addressee to do something to become damned, i.e. to accomplish the command. He/she addresses the very world order and expresses the desire that things be the way that the person in question is damned. Still in a sense he/she addresses the addressee: i.e. he/she informs him/her about his/her desire. But the request itself is not addressed in this case to the addressee. And certainly, one cannot literally demand anything from the universe or command it,<sup>8</sup> and people usually understand this. If the speaker thinks otherwise, we may doubt that he/she is rational or even

<sup>8</sup> Unless he/she is an omnipotent being.

mental sane; and still we would not consider his/her utterance as true imperative.

May be "You should know" also reports only the request which addresses the Universe or something like that, the request that things become such that the addressee knows that certain state of affairs takes place or that certain proposition which the rest of the utterance describes is true? In the same way when someone utters the Russian analogue of "Damn you!" he/she most likely reports that the speaker wants the addressee to be damned which does not mean that the speaker wants the addressee to do something to become damned. If so, then it is definitely not a command. One need to be insane in the common sense of this word to believe that by "Damn you!" he/she commands an addressee to damn him/herself. And even if someone believed this he/she wouldn't actually command the addressee to become damned, only to produce some act of damnation. Whether this act would result in the addressee's becoming damned, depends on how the world around us is.

It seems that almost in all cases where "You should know" is used it may be substituted by "I'd like you to know...". It does not mean, of course, that the reverse substitution is always realizable: thus, in "How I'd like you to know" "I'd like you to know" cannot be replaced by "you should know" without the substantial change of the meaning of what is said. Still all occurrences of "You should know" in the utterances pretending to be imperatives may be considered as replaceable by "I'd like you to know". But why then we prefer to say "You should know" instead of "I'd like you to know..."? Aesthetics or brevity may be not the only reasons for this.

Compare the difference between "I wish you to go in peace" and "Go in peace". The first phrase only reports that the subject wants that certain situation obtains (the addressee is going in peace), whereas the second intends also to ask something from an addressee - that he/she may or even should go, and may not or should not be afraid of hostile actions from the side of the speaker or those whom he/she represents. This context may be represented as consisting of two different utterances: "Go!" and "Be in peace", one of which addresses an addressee and may be considered as an imperative (why not, if the addressee is capable of doing what it requires, i.e. to be going?), whereas another addresses the Universe or higher power and is about the addressee. The later part is a request that things be such that the addressee's fulfilling the command expressed in the first part would satisfy certain condition described in the second part, i.e. that he would be going in peace.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

I think that "You should know..." is like "Go in peace" in that it contains two clusters of information one of which is a demand or command to do certain thing, while another is a request or an expression of hope that things are going to be some certain way. The imperative part says that an addressee should accept the information proposed by the speaker (what was said before "You should know" or what will be said after). At the same time the second part is the request that the

information accepted by the addressee is true or that facts are in accord with this information.<sup>9</sup> This request does not address an addressee of the utterance; it does not say that there is something which an addressee must or has to do. Therefore, the utterance as a whole does not require from normal human being anything that he/she cannot provide, i.e. to make oneself knowing something previously unknown by him/her by some act of will. But understood in the proposed way the utterances under consideration may well (and do) contain imperative parts; these parts require nothing impossible though: normal human being is quite capable to accept the information he/she is proposed in the utterance. Thus, we can see that there is nothing counterintuitive in considering "You should know..." as an imperative, although imperative is only part of what these utterances normally report.

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<sup>9</sup> Or have whatever other feature is necessary for his/her knowing what he/she was or will be informed about.