

On the Subject of Bare Imperatives in English

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SUMMARY

In transformational grammar there is a tradition for deriving superficially subjectless imperatives in English from structures containing a subject NP *you*, via a rule deleting this pronoun. There are a number of difficulties with this analysis (detailed in section 1). In part in response to these difficulties, though in larger measure as a consequence of shifts toward restricted theories of syntax, one feature of the traditional analysis (the *You-Deletion* rule) has been generally abandoned. Another feature, a second-person (hereafter, 2P) pronoun subject in (some or all) imperative sentences, remains, at least as an option; rather than the specific lexical item *you*, however, the pronoun in question is a phonologically empty abstract element.

What evidence is there for this analytical construct? Section 2 surveys the relevant arguments, which depend on properties of two classes of phenomena: anaphoric elements with syntactic conditions on their distributions, and syntactic processes creating derived subjects. Every relevant datum appears to support the positing of a 2P pronoun subject.

However, section 3 observes that there are substantial arguments that the phenomena providing so much evidence in favor of *you*-subjects are to be described not by syntactic rules, but by rules in other components of grammar — the lexicon and semantics, in particular. It then seems that there are no syntactic arguments whatsoever for this analysis, possibly that there cannot be any. No known facts about English distinguish between a syntactic analysis positing 2P pronoun subjects that can be phonologically empty and one positing structures lacking subjects, with 2P-subject interpretations supplied by interpretive principles. As matters stand, the choice is not an empirical one, but instead follows from theoretical assumptions.

1. UNDERSTOOD *YOU* AND ITS TRIALS

The traditional wisdom on English grammar has it that sentences like (1) and (2) — which I will refer to as BARE IMPERATIVES, because they lack visible subjects — have an ‘understood *you*’ as their subject.

- (1) Get that drunken kangaroo out of here!
- (2) Open up the window and let the bad air out!

Just what is meant by ‘understood’ in this context is not at all clear; the traditional grammarians who used the locution were not, after all, aiming to provide a precise and complete description of the language, and the terminology was adequate for their purposes, conveying at least that if one must supply a grammatical subject for bare imperatives, then that subject will be one referring to the addressee.

In classical transformational grammar the traditional wisdom is embodied in an analysis that posits *you* in the remote structure of sentences like (1) and (2). As a result, all major sentences have subjects in base structure. This is usually seen as a benefit of the analysis, since the treatment of the category *S* is uniform in this analysis.

Bare imperatives are then derived by the application of a syntactic rule deleting *you*-subjects in imperatives. *You*-Deletion can be assumed to be optional, so that if it is not applied (3) and (4) are generated instead of (1) and (2).

- (3) You get that drunken kangaroo out of here!
- (4) You open up the window and let the bad air out!

The rule will not affect third-person subjects in imperatives, as in (5) and (6).

- (5) Somebody get that drunken kangaroo out of here!
- (6) Everybody open up their windows and let the bad air out!

Three sorts of objection have been raised against this line of analysis.

First, it may be objected that analyses that posit material in a remote structure for a sentence that does not actually contain that material are inherently suspect, or at least require an extended defense. This is the starting point of such criticisms of the standard analysis as Downes (1977) and Schmerling (1977).

Second, it may be objected that the standard analysis incorrectly gives

imperatives the same sort of remote structures as declaratives. This is the line taken by Goodman (1973) in his attack on early transformational treatments of bare imperatives:

My feeling for English is that it is highly unlikely that 'Watch out!' has a 'You' to be understood as the subject of the verb, as traditional grammars have asserted, and ... Chomsky is trying to construct the 'simplest grammar' [here, a grammar with only one type of base S — AMZ]. It is less artificial to take the absence of the subject at face value and say that imperatives never were sentences talking about the world, but were direct actions (21).

My claim is that Chomsky's derivation is too simple and misses the actual use and depoverishes it: the essence of imperatives is direct action, not declaration about (125).

Since Goodman never provided anything like a precise description of the sort that would satisfy linguists, his criticism was ignored. Moreover, it is met to some degree by analyses that provide different underlying structures for imperatives and declaratives, as all analyses since that of Katz and Postal (1964) have done, either via an underlying mood marker like IMP (which might be a formative or a feature of some node) in imperatives, or via different hypersentential structures in imperatives and declaratives.

A third line of objection builds on the fact that imperative sentences differ from declaratives and interrogatives both in their internal syntax and in their external privileges of occurrence. As a result, any analysis that treats the three sentence types as all having remote structures in which some indicator # of sentence type combines with a sentential constituent S will require some rather complex mechanisms (a) to solve INTERNAL PROBLEMS, that is, to provide for different expansions of S depending upon which # it is combined with, and (b) to solve EXTERNAL PROBLEMS, that is, to ensure that S can occur with different constituents depending upon which # it is combined with. I remarked above that the assumption of *you* as remote subject for sentences like (1) and (2) may be defended in part on the grounds that the category S will no longer require a different expansion for imperatives from the expansion for the other sentence types. This small saving in descriptive complexity must be weighed against the cost of the mechanisms for (a) and (b), insofar as these are required in the standard analysis of imperatives.

Evidence supporting this line of objection has been offered by a number of writers, including Schmerling, who proposes an alternative to the standard analysis; and the UCLA grammarians (Stockwell, Schachter, and Partee 1973: Ch. 10), who provide what is undoubtedly the most extensive formalization of the standard analysis. I will first list some of the ways in

which imperatives differ from declaratives and interrogatives (using declaratives as the basis for comparison) with respect to their internal syntax. These internal problems include, beyond the optional nonappearance of a subject in imperatives, those characterized and exemplified in List 1.

LIST 1. INTERNAL DIFFERENCES BETWEEN IMPERATIVES AND
DECLARATIVES

1. The absence of tense/person marks in imperatives:

Imp.: (You) be/*are/*were quiet!
Decl.: You *be/are/were quiet.

2. The absence of modals in imperatives:

Imp.: *Will/*Must/*Be about to respond!
Decl.: You will/must/are about to respond.

3. The absence of perfective *have* in imperatives:

Imp.: *Have eaten/Eat/Finish eating dinner by 8!
Decl.: You have eaten/ate/finished eating dinner by 8.

4. The possibility of *do*, *do not*, and *don't* in combination with an imperative verb — including the verb *be*, with which *do*, *do not*, and *don't* may not occur in declaratives and interrogatives:

Imp.: Do/Do not/Don't be unintelligible!
Decl.: *You do/do not/don't be unintelligible.

5. The impossibility of *do* in imperatives when the subject is expressed rather than understood:

Imp.: *You do/*Do you move slowly.
Decl.: You do move slowly.

6. The failure of negation to be located after *be* in imperatives, though negation appears after inflected forms of *be* in the other sentence types:

Imp.: Do not be/Don't be sluggish!
*Be not/*Ben't sluggish!
Decl.: *You not/*Youn't are sluggish.
You are not/aren't sluggish.

7. The ability of *don't* to precede *you* in imperatives but not in declaratives:

Imp.: Don't you/?You don't touch me!

Decl.: *Don't you/You don't touch me.

8. A failure of parallelism between *do not* and *don't*, with only the latter occurring with subject *you* in imperatives:

Imp.: *Do not/Don't you touch me!

Decl.: You do not/don't touch me.

9. A restricted set of expressed subjects in imperatives as opposed to the other types:

Imp.: (two of) you, everybody (from Skokie),
the boy with the huge penguin,
*Herbert Hawkins, *many people, *she,
*a boy with a huge penguin

Decl.: permits all of the above

10. The occurrence of sentence-initial *please* in imperatives, but not in the other types:

Imp.: Please help me!

Decl.: *Please you will help me.

(I exclude from this list differences that can reasonably be explained as following straightforwardly from the meaning or function of imperative sentences — for instance, the absence of epistemic adverbs like *probably* or *maybe* in imperatives, the absence of past time expressions like *yesterday* in them, and the nonoccurrence of imperative VPs like *contain monosodium glutamate* or *comprise a trio*, which describe states not under human control.)

There are many possible analytic responses to facts like those in List 1. With respect to items 1 and 2, for instance, it has often been suggested that the imperative rule deletes tense/person markers and some specified modal, so that the absence of these surface elements is predicted. The UCLA grammarians opt for an analysis in which imperatives are treated as parallel to such 'bare subjunctives' as those in (7)–(9),

(7) I insist that you be more careful with that ham.

(8) They will ask that Simon be allowed to continue his administrative duties.

(9) Myra requested that she be given the southern half of Honshu.

with the result that the indicator # is analyzed as a constituent of the auxiliary in remote structure. I do not intend to survey the literature responding to such facts as those in List 1. It suffices for me to say that these internal problems present serious challenges to the standard analysis of imperatives.

An external problem, having to do with the syntactic environments in which imperatives occur, arises from the fact (stressed by Schmerling) that English has nothing that amounts to an embedded imperative construction, though both declaratives and interrogatives occur embedded, as in (10) and (11).

(10) I am sure that there are artichokes in this soufflé.

(11) I wonder how often these little green bits will turn up.

Thus, the imperative is in an important way not parallel to the other major sentence types of English. It is a 'root' construction, in the sense of Emonds 1976. Moreover, the special character of the imperative in this respect is not a peculiarity of English, but rather represents a very widespread pattern, as noted by Sadock and Zwicky (1985).

I have supplied a considerable list of detailed objections to the traditional assumption that every English bare imperative has a *you*-subject (at some level of analysis), which is deleted by rule. There are actually three interlocked assumptions in the traditional analysis, and these must now be prised apart. First, there is the choice of an analysis with a subject NP for bare imperatives, over an analysis in which some Ss lack subjects; in the latter sort of analysis, an interpretive principle must supply a 2P-subject interpretation for these truly subjectless Ss. Second, given that bare imperatives are to have subjects, there is the choice of an actual English word, *you*, as that subject, over the positing of a 2P, but phonologically empty, pronoun. Third, there is the choice of this analysis for all instances of bare imperatives.

It is the second assumption that requires *You*-Deletion and so leads to the internal and external problems just listed. Assuming **either** an absent subject or an empty 2P subject (or sometimes one and sometimes the other) will permit facts like those in List 1 to be described, by brute force if necessary. Moreover, the move towards more restricted theories of syntax would speak against any solution requiring a transformational deletion rule; the transformational aspect of the traditional analysis for bare imperatives is now unappealing within a wide range of theoretical frameworks (including at least GB, LFG, and GPSG), while absent-category (AC) and empty-category (EC) analyses are both available in these frameworks.

2. EVIDENCE FOR A SECOND-PERSON SUBJECT

I now survey the evidence favoring the EC alternative over its AC competitor. The textbook arguments **against** absent subjects in bare imperatives rely on two phenomena: **ordinary** reflexive objects and tagged imperatives. The first of these turns out to be only the tip of an evidential iceberg. The second is seriously flawed, and I will pass over it quickly (section 2.1) before taking up anaphoric processes subject to syntactic constraints (section 2.2), which is the class of phenomena to which ordinary reflexive objects belong, and, then, syntactic processes deriving subjects (section 2.3), whose importance in the context of imperatives Schmerling (1977) seems to have been the first to stress. Section 2.4 briefly evaluates the evidence in the two sections preceding it.

2.1. Tagged imperatives

A standard argument for a 2P subject in bare imperatives involves the appearance of 2P, and only 2P, pronouns in tags to imperatives:¹

- (12) Give me a hand with this penguin,
won't you/would you/will you/could you/why don't you?
- (13) Give me a hand with this penguin,
*won't he/*would I/*should she/*when did they?

This argument carries through only if the analysis of tagged imperatives is to be referred to the analysis of tagged declaratives, where there is an echo relationship between the (expressed) subject of the declarative and the pronoun in the tag:

- (14) You aren't happy, are you/*is he/*am I?
- (15) He would be happy, wouldn't *you/he/*I?

But there is no reason to think that the two types of tags have anything in common syntactically (or even semantically). In fact, Sadock (1974: 105–7) has suggested that tagged imperatives like (12) are 'fractured whimperatives', directly related to interrogatives that request:

- (16) Won't you/Would you/Will you/Could you/Why don't you
hand me that penguin?

Although this argument fails to go through it is useful, since it illustrates

what a relevant case would be like. What would be probative is a syntactic association, requiring identity of person features, between the subject position in a construction and some other NP in the construction. If bare imperatives act 'as if' they had 2P subjects for the purpose of this association, we have reason to say that, syntactically, bare infinitives have 2P subjects (even though these are inaudible); otherwise, a generalization about person identity would be split into two unrelated (but virtually identical) generalizations, one about the construction when it has a subject (mentioning identity of grammatical person), the other about the construction when it lacks a subject (prescribing 2P).

2.2. Anaphora with syntactic conditions

The crucial phrase in the preceding paragraph is *syntactic association*. If the requirement is merely that two NPs be coreferential, we learn nothing about the syntax of the construction they occur in. But a requirement that NPs **standing in a certain syntactic relationship to one another** be coreferential could be a powerful tool. Just such a requirement is claimed in the other textbook argument for a 2P subject in bare imperatives, the argument from ordinary reflexive objects, as in (17).

- (17) Make yourself/*himself Prince Regent!
 Make yourselves/*ourselves a drink!
 Shave yourself/*myself before dinner, please!

What is important here is that normal reflexive objects in English are subject to the 'clause-mate' condition, the requirement that a reflexive object NP must have an antecedent earlier in its clause:

- (18) He made *yourself/himself Prince Regent.
 He thought you had made yourself/*himself a drink.

In bare imperatives, it appears that this requirement is not satisfied, but that instead an (unrelated) requirement holds requiring 2P reflexives.

I now enumerate some further cases of this sort, involving anaphoric elements with a syntactic condition (at least putatively) associated with them. For the sake of brevity, I merely name the phenomena and give crucial examples involving bare imperatives, leaving to the reader the exercise of discerning the syntactic condition that might be at play. I make no claim that phenomena discussed under different names must be analyzed separately; but I have tried not to make any startling conflation of phenomena under a single heading.

2.2.1. *Overt anaphors*

The examples in (17) have reflexive NPs filling open slots as objects of verbs. Similar conditions hold for all the overt anaphors in the following list:

LIST 2. OVERT ANAPHORA TO SUBJECT NPs

1. 'Picture reflexives', which appear in prepositional complements to certain nouns:

Draw a picture of yourself/*himself!
Write another article about yourself/*ourselves!

2. 'Reflexives of independence', which fill adverbial slots:

Do it yourself/*myself!
Get there by yourselves/*herself!

3. 'Absolute reflexives', which are (semantically intransitive) idioms containing an obligatorily reflexive NP:

Behave yourself/*himself!
Absent yourselves/*ourselves as soon as possible!
Make yourself/*herself scarce!

4. Ordinary *own*-possessives:

Make your/*our own drinks!

5. '*Own*-possessives of independence':

Do it on your/*her own!

6. 'Absolute possessives', parallel to absolute reflexives:

Do your/*their best!
Give your/*my all, boys!

2.2.2. *Zero anaphors*

Another set of relevant phenomena is exemplified by verb complements without surface subjects; a condition requires coreference between the empty subject in the complement and the subject of the verb. The paradigm

example is the Equi-NP construction with verbs like *try*:

(19) He keeps trying to express himself in Norwegian.

Bare imperatives, as in (20a), have 2P subjects, as can be seen in (20b):

- (20) a. Try to be more thoughtful.
b. Try to express yourself in Gwamba-Mamba.

Zero anaphors in general support the positing of a 2P subject, a fact that would follow if there was only one zero anaphor, PRO, whose coindexing with other NPs was achieved by one rule. This proposal has been widely adopted, and under it all the phenomena in this section would be interpreted merely as further instances of a single phenomenon, already illustrated in (20). It is not clear to me that a single zero anaphor and a single coindexing rule will suffice for the full range of cases, so that I will break the data into subsets. With the understanding, then, that there might be only a single argument in all of these data, I present further instances of zero anaphors giving evidence about the subjects of bare imperatives. These appear in two lists, one for zero anaphors in verb complements, another for zero anaphors in adverbial subordination.

LIST 3. ZERO ANAPHORS IN VERB COMPLEMENTS

1. Infinitival *wh*-complements:

Figure out how to open the door!
Ask him how to express yourself better.

2. Infinitival 'hidden question' complements:

Figure out a way to open the box!
Ask her the time to absent yourself.

3. Some gerundive complements:

Work at being more thoughtful.
Give some thought to behaving yourself better!

LIST 4. ZERO ANAPHORS IN ADVERBIAL SUBORDINATION

1. Marked-infinitive constructions:

Open that door (in order) to give yourself a treat.

Watch him (so as) to find out how to express yourself clearly in a topic-prominent language.

2. Unmarked-infinitive constructions:

Give me a hand rather than just sit there.

Stay and fight rather than absent yourselves!

3. Finite-verb constructions (in B's contribution to the second exchange below):

A: Herman sang. B: He danced instead of sang.

A: I think I'll sing. B: Dance instead of sing!

4. Subjectless complements related to copular constructions; these can include (at least) past participles, present participles, predicate adjectives, and prepositional phrases:

Give Gorgo the book when addressed.

Look intelligent when expressing yourself to them!

Give them your attention instead of making yourself such a pest.

Speak up (even) though unhappy.

Answer the door even if in pajamas.

2.3. Derived subjects

The remaining source of evidence about the subjects of bare imperatives, at least in terms of classical TG and related frameworks, comes from syntactic processes creating derived subjects. Schmerling (1977) cites three such processes that derive human subjects, which are then (in the traditional analysis) available for the rule of *You*-Deletion.

What is important about these processes is that the NPs that are turned into subjects must be available in the structures to which the processes apply, a fact that argues against the AC analysis for the subjects of bare imperatives and in favor of the EC analysis. The crucial examples include the following, involving Raising to Subject in (21), *Tough* Movement in (22), and Passive in (23):²

(21) Do (not) stop writing when the bell rings.

Just happen to be here when I arrive.

Appear to be going through the files when the boss comes in.

Look as if you're having fun when the inspectors arrive.

- (22) Do (not) be easy for us to spot.
Be tough to deal with when these people bargain with you.
- (23) Do (not) be examined by a doctor.
Be as pleased by these offers for your flying pig as you can be.

2.4. Evaluation

The evidence in the two preceding sections is much more impressive than might appear at first glance. It is not merely that there are n arguments for an empty 2P pronoun subject in bare imperatives; that would be worth little if the n arguments were based on samples selected from a large population of potentially relevant data, within which lurked unexamined data that might well constitute counterevidence. The cogency of the evidence above arises from the fact that it covers all the data I know of that might be relevant. Every anaphoric process with a syntactic condition on it supports the same conclusion about the subjects of bare imperatives. Every syntactic process creating (human) derived subjects says the same thing.

I stress this fact because not all the arguments alluded to above are equally compelling. It might turn out, for instance, that some of the zero anaphors in List 4 obey a condition requiring coreference between the empty subject in the adverbial subordinate clause and **some** NP in the main clause, not necessarily the subject; if so, these anaphors would tell us little about what the main-clause subjects were like in particular examples. It might be discovered that some of the conditions were not even syntactic in character. However, the possibility that some of the arguments I have given will turn out to be beside the point does not affect the general conclusion, which is that every piece of evidence I know of which has a conceivable bearing on the matter indicates that bare imperatives have empty 2P pronouns as subjects, rather than lacking subjects entirely.³

3. CONCLUSIONS

I do not claim to have presented an analysis (syntactic, semantic, or pragmatic) of the English imperative. The full range of syntactic facts is considerable — see Bolinger (1967), who emphasizes the connection between imperative verb forms and bare infinitives, for some indication of this range — and the semantic and pragmatic description of imperatives presents many knotty problems (see, e.g., Schmerling 1982 and Huntley 1984). I have merely demonstrated that insofar as English syntax has anything to say on the question of how to analyze the subjects of bare imperatives, it appears to speak with one voice: these subjects are 2P, and they are present (though phonologically empty) in syntactic structure.

But now consider what current theories of grammar have to say about the phenomena in sections 2.2 and 2.3. Considerable evidence has been amassed, first of all, that anaphoric linkages are not to be described by rules of syntax; instead, principles of interpretation (subject, to be sure, to conditions referring to syntactic structure) are responsible for indicating when such linkages are possible, necessary, or prohibited. The phenomena in section 2 are no longer viewed as syntactic at all, in the sense that syntactic rules are responsible for describing the distribution of particular pronouns and zero anaphors. For the most part — I am about to discuss the possible exceptions — pronouns and zero anaphors are freely distributed NPs. It follows that the evidence of section 2.2 is not syntactic.

The possible exceptions in the previous paragraph are the phenomena of section 2.2.1, of which ordinary reflexive objects and absolute reflexives can serve as representatives, and Equi-NP constructions. Absolute reflexive constructions are quite clearly lexical items; no syntactic rule distributes the reflexive pronouns in *make oneself scarce*, *make a nuisance of oneself*, and the like. Ordinary reflexive objects and Equi-NP constructions make a natural class with the phenomena of section 2.3: Reflexivization, Equi-NP Deletion, Raising to Subject, *Tough* Movement, and Passive are five of the standard cyclic transformations of English — the remaining standards being *There*-Insertion, Raising to Object, and Dative Movement, plus of course *You*-Deletion, or Imperative.

Two facts about the standard cyclic rules are important here. First, they are mutually motivating, via what Bach (1974: 171–2) calls ‘arguments from other rules’; positing Dative Movement motivates Passive, which in turn motivates Raising to Subject, and so on — which means, of course (by contraposition) that rejecting Raising to Subject means rejecting Passive, and then in turn Dative Movement, and so on. Second, they have been widely abandoned as syntactic rules, in favor of lexical and/or semantic-interpretive treatments. See Brame (1978a, b) and Bresnan (1978, 1982) for discussion of both points, Brame emphasizing the bounded character of the cyclic rules, Bresnan their susceptibility to lexical exceptions.

It follows that in many widely held syntactic frameworks there is no syntactic support for the EC position. But neither is there any syntactic evidence against it. All the available evidence concerns the lexicon, semantics, or pragmatics, and it is consistent with either a thoroughgoing EC approach or a thoroughgoing AC approach, the choice between these being determined by theoretical assumptions rather than empirical facts.

NOTES

Earlier versions of this paper were presented at University College London, Sussex University, and Lancaster University in 1977, and portions of another version

were distributed at the Ohio State University in 1979. A Fulbright research fellowship in Theoretical Psychology at Sussex enabled me to begin work on imperatives, and a visiting appointment at the Center for the Study of Language and Information, Stanford University, enabled me to consolidate some of my earlier thoughts on the matter.

1. I assume that sentences like *Give me a pink wrench, will he!* are to be treated as exclamations with interrogative form, not as imperatives.

2. In each case, the first example is Schmerling's.

3. The arguments apply equally to imperatives with the marker *do* and to those without it, undercutting a suggestion of Schmerling's (1977) that the former be analyzed as subjectless, the latter as having a subject. Moreover, the arguments as a set speak very strongly against the proposal of Downes (1977), who considers only the argument from ordinary reflexive objects and then proposes to posit a subject pronoun only where it is actually needed to trigger reflexivization.

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