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The Syntax of Imperatives

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THE SYNTAX OF IMPERATIVES

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THE SYNTAX OF IMPERATIVES

The imperative clause is one of three major sentence types that have been found to be universal across the languages of the world. Compared to declaratives and interrogatives, the imperative type has received diverse analyses in the literature. This cutting-edge study puts forward a new linguistic theory of imperatives, arguing that categories of the speech act, specifically Speaker and Addressee, are conceptually necessary for an adequate syntactic account. The book offers compelling empirical and descriptive evidence by surveying new typological data in the critical assessment of competing hypotheses towards an indexical syntax of human language. An engaging read for students and researchers interested in linguistics, philosophy, and the syntax of language.

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Abbreviations

A	Absolutive agreement
AA	Allocutive agreement
ABS	Absolutive case
ACC	Accusative
AND	Conjunction
AUX	Auxiliary
COMP	Complementizer
D	Dative agreement
DAT	Dative case
E	Ergative agreement
ERG	Ergative case
ETH.DAT	Ethical dative
FEM	Feminine
FUT	Future
GER	Gerund
IND	Indicative
INF	Infinitive
IMP	Imperative
IMPF	Imperfective
INSTR	Instrumental
MASC	Masculine
NEG	Negation
NOM	Nominative
PART	Partitive
PAST	Past
PER	Perfective
PRED	Pre-dative
PRES	Present
PROG	Progressive
PROH	Prohibitive
PL	Plural
Q	Question marker

SG	Singular
SUBJ	Subjunctive
THV	Thematic vowel
VOSEO	<i>Voseo</i> form

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1 *Introduction*

1.0 Chapter overview

This chapter begins with a discussion of the imperative clause and a review of earlier studies of imperatives in generative grammar (1.1). The imperative clause appears to require recourse to conditions seemingly outside the realm of narrow syntax, such as “the subject of the imperative clause must be the addressee.” Faced with this challenge, earlier generative studies have struggled to provide a principled syntactic account of the imperative type.

We claim that an adequate account of the syntax of the imperative clause must represent the *context of utterance* (1.2). More narrowly, imperatives require access to *indexicality*: speaker, hearer, time and world of utterance. Such referential categories have not played a formal role in the computation of the clause in narrow syntax. Accordingly, computational compliance would call for a derivational interface between syntactic categories (*content*), such as the subject of the imperative clause, and its binding thematic categories (*context*), such as addressee.

Before this interface challenge, earlier generative studies attempted to provide a principled syntactic account of the imperative type with the performative hypothesis (PH) (Ross 1970). In the spirit of PH, our proposal (Chapter 4) may be considered a recasting of Ross’s conceptual bases implemented within the minimalist program (Chomsky 1995–2008), but focused on the imperative clause. We propose that the speaker and addressee of the utterance are encoded in a phase-theoretic context-to-content perspective: CP(vP).

Beyond the imperative clause type, diverse phenomena argue that syntax may be context sensitive. For example, indexical shift (Schlenker 1999, 2003, 2004; Baker 2008), logophoric pronouns (Hagège 1974; Clements 1975), complementizer deletion in Italian (Giorgi 2010) and conjunct-disjunct systems (Hale 1980; DeLancey 1986, 1992) suggest that the speaker and addressee must be syntactically present.

Other scholars have put forward alternative proposals to represent indexicality in syntax by means of accounting for context-sensitive phenomena, but without specific attention to imperatives (Speas and Tenny 2003; Bianchi 2003; Sigurðsson 2004). For a comprehensive review of generative studies on imperatives the reader is referred to the extensive introduction by van der Wurff (2007b).

1.1 Imperatives in generative grammar

This section presents a succinct overview of the imperative clause (its characteristics are discussed at length in Chapter 2) along with previous generative studies.

Compared to declarative and interrogative clauses, imperative clauses have distinctive morphosyntactic properties that set them apart as a basic clause type (1.1.1). We broadly characterize the previous generative analyses in relation to working assumptions that have remained constant across generative syntax (1.1.2). Emerging typological data, nonetheless, suggests that a reassessment is in order. At the same time, new empirical data may lead to alternative hypotheses with enhanced descriptive as well as explanatory advantages.

1.1.1 *The imperative clause*

The imperative clause is a basic sentence type (Sadock and Zwicky 1985) along with the declarative and interrogative. Each type differs in its communicative function¹ (orders, statements, questions) and often displays salient morphosyntactic differences. Consider English for illustration. Imperatives need not express an overt subject (“go!”). Yes/no-questions display subject–verb inversion with certain verbs (“Are you the manager?”) or do-support (“Do you carry this brand?”). Wh-questions, in turn, typically feature movement of the interrogative pronoun to a sentence-initial position along with do-support (“Who did you see?”), except in the case of echo-questions, where the wh-element remains in situ (“You saw who?”). Declaratives display neither subject–verb inversion nor the verb *do* in this auxiliary role, and the subject is in most cases obligatorily expressed (“Peter saw Mary.”). These morphosyntactic differences help us recognize and identify basic sentence types in English.

A closer look at the morphosyntax of basic clause types reveals that the imperative clause has distinctive characteristics that set it apart from both declaratives and interrogatives (henceforth D&I). While this is also arguably true of each type, in the imperative these distinctive properties appear to resist

principled syntactic or morphological explanation without recourse to specific pragmatic conditions, such as “the imperative subject must be second person.” By contrast, subject–verb inversion and do-support in interrogatives can be studied independently of pragmatic considerations. In the remainder of this section, we are going to briefly examine some of these differences between imperatives, on the one hand, and D&I on the other.²

Perhaps the most salient characteristic of imperatives is that their subject must be the addressee of the speech act (“you/you guys/you all go!”). Other person and number combinations in English are normally disallowed (*“I/he/she/it/we/they go!”), but see Potsdam 1998; Zanuttini 2008 for exceptional cases; on *let* forms, see 1.1.2). By contrast, in D&I the subject can be any number and person combination. This first asymmetry appears to indicate a pragmatic constraint in the interpretation of the imperative clause. Because the grammatical category person cannot be first or third person, it may seem unnecessary or even redundant to express a subject (a rationale offered by many scholars, see van der Wurff 2007b).

A similar restriction holds of the tense of the imperative in that the grammatical category features fewer possible values. Imperative tense is limited to a present or (near) future interpretation (“do it now/tomorrow/next year!”); the past tense is not attested in English (*“do it yesterday!”). A counterfactual past imperative is possible in some languages (Spanish: *¡haber-lo hecho antes!* [have.INF-it do.PART] ‘You should have done it before’ (Bosque 1980); also in Dutch, Beukema and Coopmans 1989, and other languages, Aikhenvald 2010). A true imperative past is seemingly not attested. By contrast, D&I display rich tense paradigms that include reference to the factual past (declaratives: “You work/worked/will work.”). While English imperatives can refer to the future, they lack a distinct verb form (*“(will) work tomorrow!”). The tense value of imperatives is thus limited to the present and future/irrealis. This gap could be grounded in context-sensitive constraints or historical evolution similar to the interpretation and optionality of the imperative subject. Mainstream proposals, on the other hand, have argued that imperatives lack tense (Zanuttini 1996), along with other grammatical categories (1.1.2).

These properties of imperative clauses (i.e., second person subjects, optionality of the subject, limited tense values) seem to suggest that the imperative subject and tense are sensitive to the context of the speech act. On standard assumptions, this would constitute a descriptive argument for extended functional phases of CP(vP) syntax. Hence, beyond narrow imperative syntax, reference to speaker and addressee makes context sensitivity a conceptual necessity (1.1.2).