

Imperative Constructions in English: A Syntactic Analysis

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What are imperatives?

- ❖ "Wash the dishes."
- ❖ "Please take a seat."
- ❖ "Listen carefully."
- ❖ "Be on time tomorrow."
- ❖ "Don't be a fool."



Why do we care?

- ❖ English does not provide specific morphological markers to differentiate between imperatives and other constructions
- ❖ In the study of syntax, our goal is to find a consistent way to document the structures of human language

What's the problem?

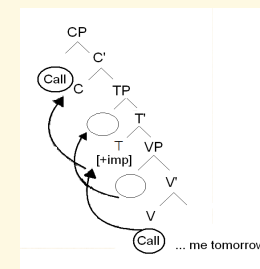
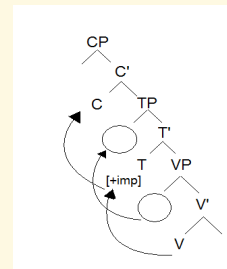
- ❖ How can we account for these types of utterances in syntactic theory?
- ❖ According to the Extended Projection Principle (EPP) every sentence needs a subject to be acceptable. How can we explain why imperatives seem to work without overt subjects?
- ❖ So, are subjects optional in imperatives?

The Solution?

There must be some kind of movement occurring in these constructions that does not conflict with the established syntactic rules (X-bar Theory), but still allows us to generate grammatical imperatives.

[+imp] in action:

- Key for Diagrams:
- ❖ CP – complementizer phrase
 - ❖ TP – tense phrase
 - ❖ VP – verb phrase
 - ❖ C – complementizer
 - ❖ T – tense
 - ❖ V – verb



"Call me tomorrow."

Movement in X-bar theory:

- ❖ In other types of constructions, syntactic theory has already had to devise certain kinds of features in order to explain consistent 'movement' in the sentence.
- ❖ [+wh] for interrogative sentences that start with words like 'what' 'where' and 'why'
- ❖ [+Q] to show that a sentence has become a question

SO...

The Solution:

- ❖ The [+imp] feature triggers movement in the structure tree
- ❖ V → T movement
- ❖ T → C movement

Explanation:

There is movement from the specifier position of the VP to the specifier position of the TP, which fills the *subject* position of the sentence (satisfying the EPP)
The movement of the main verb from V to eventually C explains why imperatives start with the base form of the verb

Theta grid requirements:

- ❖ In both syntactic and semantic theory, every verb has a theta grid, that explains what other things in the sentence is required in order for the verb to be complete
- ❖ Below is an example of a theta grid for the verb *give* that is in an imperative sentence.
- ❖ The [+imp] feature absorbs the requirement for an agent in order to be complete

"Give it to me."

Agent	Theme	Recipient
Absorbed by [+imp]	it	me

Conclusion:

- ❖ In order to comply with syntactic theory, they must have an additional [+imp] feature to provide for the **seemingly missing** subject. It absorbs the theta role requirement for an agent and satisfies the EPP by providing something in the subject position of the diagram
- ❖ Since this [+imp] feature explains how imperatives can work in English, we can now be one step closer to finding a consistent way to document the structures of human language.

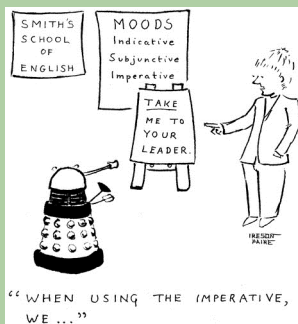
A brief syntactic background:

"Be on time tomorrow."
*"Is on time tomorrow."
•From these examples, we can see that the bare stem of the verb must be taken in order to form an imperative construction.

- Using the bare stem of the verb is very unique

"Paula, go to the store today."
"Do go to the store today."
"Go to the store today."

- We can see from these examples that a you-subject is optional, as is the do-insertion in a positive imperative.



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