

The Information Structure of Imperatives

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Imperatives differ from other clause types in ways that are well-known, but poorly understood. First, in the unmarked case, the subject of an imperative (ImpSubj) sentence is phonetically null - even in a non-null subject language like English (1), cf., *inter alia* Bolinger 1967; Potsdam, 1998; Rupp, 2003; Zanuttini 2008. Second, evidence from anaphor binding clearly establishes that the ImpSubj is always the addressee (2), but curiously the ImpSubj cannot felicitously be realized as an (unstressed) second person pronoun in an out of the blue utterance(3):

(1) a. *pro* take out the trash. b. **pro* took out the trash. c. *Will *pro* take out the trash?

(2) a. *pro* introduce yourself/*himself. b. John introduce yourself/*himself.

(3) #You introduce yourself.

We explore the following questions: (i) Why do English imperatives have null subjects while other clause types do not? (ii) Why does the ImpSubj always correspond to the addressee, even when it is a 3rd person DP?

We propose that the answers lie in an exploration of the distinctive Information Structure (IS) properties of the imperative clause type, and develop an analysis couched in the F(ocus)-structure framework of Erteschik-Shir (ES) (1997, 2007). According to ES, every sentence must have a topic, including apparent all-focus sentences, such as the following:

(4) e_{TOP} [It's raining] $_{FOC}$

ES reasons that sentences must have topics because topics are the pivots of truth-evaluation. In order to evaluate (4) we need to know whether it is true at the time and place of utterance. Thus, ES hypothesizes that such sentences have a null STAGE TOPIC, - the spatio-temporal coordinates of the utterance. The reason that the stage may be null is because it functions as the default topic. We hypothesize that imperatives differ from declaratives in that the addressee – not the stage - functions as the default topic of this clause type. Indeed, an imperative uttered without an identifiable addressee is meaningless. Imagine (5) uttered in an empty room, and addressed to no one:

(5) e_{TOP} [Dance!] $_{FOC}$

In addition to default topics ES claims that there are two other types of topics – contrastive and restrictive. We propose that the ImpSubj is always the topic of the imperative: When the ImpSubj is null it is a default topic, and when it is overt it falls into one of these other two types of topics. A CONTRASTIVE TOPIC is one that (a) eliminates alternative topics and (b) has contrastive stress pattern consisting of a Low+High* pitch contour. The ImpSubj YOU in (6) has both the distinctive intonation and interpretation that are associated with contrastive topics: When she chooses the ImpSubj YOU, B is signaling that she is eliminating herself as the person with the obligation to 'shut up'. Note that her utterance is infelicitous with a null subject.

(6) A: e_{TOP} Shut up! B: No! **YOU** $_{TOP}$ shut up! (Compare: B: No. # e_{TOP} SHUT UP!)

RESTRICTIVE TOPICS (a) lack contrastive stress, and (b) are used to partition a contextually determined topic set without eliminating alternatives. Both ImpSubjs in (7) have these properties:

(7) a. [One of you] $_{TOP}$ tell me what the topic is. b. [Somebody] $_{TOP}$ give me a drink!

We further demonstrate that overt ImpSubjs can be distinguished from vocatives by their IS roles: While ImpSubjs are always topics, vocatives are always foci. An initial vocative is always followed by a pause (indicated by the comma), and optionally preceded by *hey*, as in (8). It serves to introduce a new discourse referent as the addressee, and to call for the attention of that addressee. Once introduced, the new addressee can then serve as a null topic. According to ES, these are precisely the properties of a focus.

(8) [(Hey) John] $_{FOC}$, e_{TOP} take out the trash

In conclusion, the IS properties of imperatives, which have never been previously explored, are critical to understanding the distinctive grammatical properties of this clause type.

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