THE SUBJECT IN IMPERATIVE SENTENCES:
SYNTAX, SEMANTICS, AND PRAGMATICS

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Abstract: Imperative sentences, often characterized by their directive nature, exhibit several syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic challenges in the study of linguistics. In most situations, imperative sentences often lack an explicit subject which typically leads to the generalization that the implied and recoverable subject is the second person. Linguistic research has challenged this view as it draws attention to contexts where subjects are employed in an overt, explicit way. The present paper explores these contexts and investigates the syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic dimensions of the subject in imperative sentences which traditionally omit overt subjects.
Keywords: subject ellipsis, imperative sentences, overt subject, syntactic, illocutionary force, pragmatics

1. Introduction

From a syntactical point of view, imperative sentences present an alienation from standard sentence structures due to their unique functions and, as analysed in the present paper, the absence of overt subjects. A traditional grammatical perspective on subjects in the imperative mood in English provides a different angle than generative ones as it focuses on descriptive grammar conventions and usage in historical and contemporary contexts. Various approaches in syntax have treated imperatives as subjectless constructions. However, more recent research has shown that subjects in imperatives can surface under certain conditions. When it happens, it adds both syntactic and interpretative significance to these structures.

The imperative is the mood that commonly expresses commands, requests, or instructions. As has already been stated above, imperatives in English are understood to be subjectless, with an implied second-person subject which is not overtly mentioned. However, grammarians have acknowledged cases where the subject is explicitly included, especially in cases where there is the necessity to add emphasis or clarify the command's addressee. The presence or absence of a subject in English imperatives has thus been a point of interest, since it challenges the standard rules regarding the completeness of a sentence as well as subject-verb agreement. In imperative sentences, grammarians argue, the syntactic subject may be omitted without compromising grammaticality, owing to the nature of the imperative form itself, which is inherently directed at a second-person subject.

When analysing the historical evolution of English syntax, it becomes apparent why marked subjects in imperatives are relatively rare. Subject omission in imperatives has evolved over time, being especially influenced by broader linguistic

shifts toward syntactic economy. Early and Middle English texts display a variety of imperative forms, some with explicit subjects and others without. For instance, when analysing examples such as 'Ye listen!' in Early English, it becomes evident that while subject inclusion was once more common, there was a gradual shift toward omitting the subject. In time, English developed a strong preference for dropping the subject in imperatives, and, as this trend has eventually been perceived as the norm, it led to the present-day structure where an implied 'you' is the default.

This evolution reflects a general trend in English toward a more analytical language structure, which prefers conciseness and clarity. This aligns with a broader development in English syntax toward minimalism in sentence structure, entailing other changes in several syntactic areas, such as, for instance, the omission of second-person pronouns in informal speech. Thus, while marked subjects in imperatives have become less common, the fact that they may occasionally resurface points back to an earlier, more flexible syntax where subject inclusion in commands was more common. Traugott notes that the imperative form became progressively simplified as English moved away from inflectional morphology, allowing the implicit 'you' to be universally understood in commands[1]. This shift corresponds to the view exhibited by traditional grammars that subject omission is not only efficient as far as syntax is concerned, but it is also pragmatically intuitive.

2. Omission of Subjects in Imperative Sentences

In English, the standard or 'unmarked' form of imperative sentences typically omits an overt subject. Instead, it relies on an implicit 'you' in order to designate the addressee, traditional grammar considering it the default construction. Such a structure is employed mainly to generate directives by focusing completely on the action to be performed without the explicit presence of a subject. From a syntactic perspective, the omission of the subject is both efficient and pragmatic as it agrees with the main role of the imperative such as expressing commands, requests, or instructions. For instance, sentences such as 'Open the window! or 'Raise your hand!' operate with an implied second-person subject. Quirk et al. note that 'imperatives are characteristically 'elliptical' in omitting the subject' because the context of communication makes the addressee evident without syntactic marking[2].

The fact that 'you' is the accepted implicit subject of the imperative becomes evident when employing reflexive pronouns with several imperative constructions. Pop notes that the presence of 'yourselves' in the sentence below proves the fact that the second person pronoun 'you' in the plural is the subject of the imperative.

Behave yourselves!
Hush yourself!

Any other reflexive pronoun associated with a different person is regarded as grammatically unacceptable:

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[1] Elizabeth Closs Traugott, *The History of English Syntax: A Transformational Approach to the History of English Sentence Structure,* New York, Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1972, p. 31.
[2] Randolf Quirk, Sidney Greenbaum, Geoffrey Leech, Jan Svarvik, *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language*, London and New York, Longman Group UK Limited, 1985, p. 828.

*Behave herself!

*Hush myself!

The fact that 'you' is the implied subject is also emphasized by the presence of the pronoun when making use of tag questions with imperatives:

Listen to the teacher, will you?

Sit down, will you?'[3]

Huddleston also discusses this as the default structure of imperatives in English, noting that the second-person imperative in English is grammatically complete without a subject. The absence of the subject, he argues, is 'a structural feature rather than an omission' since the imperative verb form itself carries the direction toward the addressee[4]. From this perspective, traditional grammar describes imperative structures as inherently subjectless while accommodating occasional subject use as a marked form.

In terms of syntax, imperative sentences in English do not require an overt subject, largely because the grammatical construction assumes a second-person addressee. Curme describes this absence of a subject as 'intrinsic to the imperative mood', noting that the omission reflects an economical structure designed to prioritize the action of the directive[5].

The imperative verb typically appears in the base form, without inflections or auxiliary elements that might indicate tense or aspect (e.g., 'Read!' or 'Start!'). This construction is especially efficient because it simplifies sentence formation, stripping the command down to its essentials. However, there are several instances in which, according to Pop, 'when employed in the imperative mood, the verb faces several constraints regarding the tense it can be used in, the aspects it can assume, the active or passive voice as well as modality. For instance, the perfective aspect is not encountered with the imperative, whereas the progressive one is extremely infrequent. It is possible to employ it in sentences such as:

Be working on your essay when I arrive home![6]'

The employment of a different aspect, be it progressive or not, is rather restrictive. As is the situation of encountering the passive aspect. When this happens, however, it takes place only in several sequences. Pop notes that it 'appears in combinations with verbs such as 'get', and, even then, it is rather uncommon:

Get lost!

When 'be' is used in the imperative mood in the passive voice, it is mainly limited to several fixed phrases:

Be reassured by me!

Be prepared!

Be seated!

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[3] Ioan-Beniamin Pop, *Grammar of the English verb: from (Primary) Auxiliaries to Past Participles*, Alba Iulia, Editura Aeternitas, 2022, p. 139.

[4] Rodney Huddleston and Geoffrey K. Pullum. *The Cambridge Grammar of the English Language,* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002, p. 129.

[5] George O. Curme, *Syntax*, London, D.C. Heath and Company, 1931, p. 211.

[6] Ioan-Beniamin Pop, *Grammar of the English verb: from (Primary) Auxiliaries to Past Participles*, Alba Iulia, Editura Aeternitas, 2022, p. 137.

Be gone!'[7]

Quirk et al. posit that the imperative structure inherently 'fuses subject and verb into a single directive force', negating the need for separate subject pronouns or markers[8].

There exists pragmatic efficiency when omitting subjects in imperatives, and this arises from the conversational assumption that the speaker is addressing a present listener directly. Since the addressee is normally expected to be present in the conversation, the activity of stating the subject becomes redundant. For example, in a sentence such as 'Give me the keys!', the listener can easily infer that he/she is the subject intended by the speaker. This structure lines up with Grice's maxim of economy which posits that speakers aim to convey meaning with minimal effort, especially when they are employed in informal or everyday speech[9]. There is also another aspect associated with the unmarked absence of a subject, namely the fact that it conveys a sense of directness and immediacy. The imperative sounds more blunt without the subject as it receives a forceful quality and emphasizes action over formality. Grammarians recognize this feature as a fundamental aspect of the communicative power of the imperative mood, as the subjectless structure aligns with the directive function by means of 'allowing the verb to take centre stage'[10]. Thus, commands become concise, efficient, and impactful, essential qualities specific to the role of the imperative in language.

The implicit 'you' serves as an understood subject in imperative sentences and represents an interpretation which, by default, assumes that the command is directed at the listener. This silent subject is a 'zero pronoun', which traditional grammar recognizes as inherently understood without any specific need of it being expressed. In Huddleston and Pullum's terms, English imperatives rely on 'a pragmatically determined subject that does not need to be overtly specified' because the context typically provides sufficient information[11]. This implicit 'you' allows speakers to issue commands universally as it targets an assumed listener without extra clarification.

In terms of the Government and Binding (GB) Theory, as developed by Chomsky, we should take into consideration several principles when analysing sentence structures, including imperatives. One of the aspects that comes under the GB Theory and is relevant to imperatives is the concept of empty categories. They make reference to positions in syntactic structure that are not filled but assumed to exist based on syntactic and interpretive requirements. In imperative sentences, the empty category allows for an implicit or, in other words, a null subject which is the unexpressed syntactic subject that can be inferred from the context. This entails that

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[7] *Ibidem.*

[8] Randolf Quirk, Sidney Greenbaum, Geoffrey Leech, Jan Svarvik. *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language*, London and New York, Longman Group UK Limited, 1985, p. 823.

[9] Herbert Paul Grice, *'*Logic and conversation', in *P. Cole, & J. Morgan (Eds.), Syntax and semantics,* New York, Academic Press, 1975, p. 41-58.

[10] Rodney Huddleston and Geoffrey K. Pullum, *The Cambridge Grammar of the English Language,* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002.

[11] *Ibidem,* p. 927.

imperatives can be analysed as containing a null subject, PRO, which is controlled by a covert second-person interpretation. This interpretation aligns with the typical nature of the imperative as being addressee-oriented. In imperative sentences such as 'Tie your shoelaces!' or 'Open the book!', the assumed subject is PRO, controlled by the listener in the discourse context. This treatment of imperatives with PRO reveals an explanation of why overt subjects are often omitted, as, due to the fact that there is no need for explicit marking, the syntax implicitly attributes these actions to the addressee.

From a linguistic theory perspective, the omission of subject in imperative clauses lines up with the principles formulated within the Minimalist Program[12] which emphasizes the principles of economy and computational efficiency in linguistic structures. According to Minimalist theory, the tendency of language structures is toward simplification since it reduces syntactic components to those essential elements which are necessary for clear communication. In Minimalist terms, it implies that sentence structure is determined by the necessity to satisfy syntactic features with the least possible amount of structural complexity. This approach to syntax which is driven by economy of style provides a framework for understanding why imperatives typically lack overt subjects and when they may surface. The omission of the subject in imperative structures exemplifies the economy of expression, which is specific to Minimalist syntax, since the fewer overt elements in a structure are, the greater the syntactic efficiency is.

In imperative constructions, Minimalist theory states that the subject position (Spec-TP) does not need to be filled overtly if the features of the imperative verb essentially satisfy the syntactic requirements. This interpretation corresponds to the minimalist concept of feature checking due to the fact that imperative verbs inherently exhibit a [+imperative] feature that no longer require an overt subject for the feature to be satisfied. Thus, in a sentence such as 'Start shooting!', the imperative verb 'start' carries the command feature in an effective way which renders the presence of an explicit subject as redundant and unmotivated when considering syntactic economy.

In pragmatic terms, the unmarked structure of subjectless imperatives gives English speakers considerable flexibility, allowing them to adapt the force and scope of a command without altering its basic structure. This flexibility becomes evident in a variety of imperative uses, ranging from formal instructions:

Proceed with caution!

to casual invitations, such as:

Come eat with us!

The lack of a subject makes the command adaptable to different tones and degrees of urgency since it allows context and intonation to fill in nuances rather than syntax. It also strengthens the inherent directive force of the imperative which intensifies the sense that the command is urgent or immediate. Without a subject to soften or qualify the statement, imperatives exhibit an intensity which is not filtered.

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[12] Noam Chomsky, *The Minimalist Program,* Cambridge, MIT Press, 1995.

In this sense, subjectless imperatives embody the illocutionary force of the command by focusing exclusively on the action.

3. Marked Use of Subjects in Imperatives

One of the primary reasons for including a subject in an imperative is to resolve ambiguity, especially in situations with potentially multiple addressees. When a speaker is addressing a group, it sometimes becomes crucial to specify the intended addressee in order to ensure that the command is directed at the correct individual. This is a pragmatic need for clarity that is grounded in Grice's maxim of relevance, which implies that speakers provide enough information to make their resolution clear and, at the same time, without overloading the listener with unnecessary details[13]. By the fact that they specify a subject in an imperative, the speakers evade potential ambiguity in an effective way, ensuring that the listener understands precisely who is expected to act. Quirk et al. note that this use of a subject helps differentiate between individual and collective commands, adding precision to the interaction[14].

Therefore, when the subject is included in imperatives explicitly, it is normally for emphasis or clarification. Grammarians regard these cases as marked constructions which deviate from the norm of subject omission. An overt subject in imperatives typically signals a stronger or more directed command than its subjectless counterpart. By explicitly including the subject, the speaker emphasizes the responsibility or the urgency of the action directed at a specific individual or group, which in turn intensifies the directive force of the command. The inclusion of an overt subject in imperative sentences such as

You stay here!

Everybody listen!

often implies a contrast with others or adds urgency to the directive. As Quirk et al. explain, 'the explicit mention of the subject tends to add a degree of insistence or contrast' that is otherwise absent in unmarked, subjectless imperatives particularly when the command distinguishes one addressee from others in the context[15]. For instance, compare:

a) You be quiet!

b) Be quiet!

Sentence a) explicitly singles out the addressee and intensifies the command, which creates a stronger rhetorical or emotional impact that is not shared by sentence b). In such sentences, the subject functions not only to specify the agent of the action but also to underscore the speaker's authority or urgency. This marked structure is therefore employed for rhetorical or communicative effect, and it allows grammar to

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[13] Herbert Paul Grice, 'Logic and conversation', in *P. Cole, & J. Morgan (Eds.), Syntax and semantics,* New York, Academic Press, 1975, p. 41-58.
[14] Randolf Quirk, Sidney Greenbaum, Geoffrey Leech, Jan Svarvik, *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language*, London and New York, Longman Group UK Limited, 1985, p. 828.
[15] *Ibidem,* p. 831.

account for the pragmatic dimensions of syntax without deviating from descriptive conventions.

The inclusion of a subject can also serve to delineate boundaries among participants as they make clear who is expected to act and who is not. This contrastive function is especially evident when a command is directed at one person among several, which implies that the instruction applies solely to that individual, not to others present. Consider the following examples, for instance:

a) You sit here; I'll take care of it.

b) Mary, you lead while the others follow!

Note that in sentences such as b), 'it is possible sometimes to come across situations where the subject of the vocative may be mistaken for a vocative construction. The difference lies in the fact that the subject, when used in the imperative, has to precede the verbal expression, whereas when the subject is employed with the vocative, it may assume not only initial position but also end position as well', according to Pop. He mentions that 'it is easier, perhaps, to make the distinction between the vocative and the imperative in terms of subject interpretation when both the imperative and vocative are employed in the same sentence. Consider the following example:

Mike, you take the penalty kick!'[16]

The possibility of their co-occurrence in the same sentence makes their identification more straightforward, easily distinguishing the imperative subject from the vocative.

These are situations where one has to distinguish among multiple addressees. The addition of a subject helps differentiate directives as it specifies which individuals are expected to take action. This distinction is relevant in group contexts, as the speaker might need to address separate individuals with different instructions. For example, in a team setting, a manager might say:

Thomas, you handle the gas exhaust!

John, you change the engine oil!

The fact that the manager makes use of subjects clarifies distinct roles and responsibilities, avoiding confusion by clearly assigning tasks to specific people. This kind of differentiation correspond to the notion of 'recipient design' since speakers shape their utterances based on their intended audience. In imperatives, recipient design involves tailoring commands to the addressee or addressees, ensuring that each individual understands their specific role within the group. By the fact the speaker includes a subject, he/she maintains clarity in multi-party interactions, facilitates effective coordination and minimizes misunderstandings. Curme, who describes this usage as 'restrictive', states that the explicit subject in such imperatives reinforces the unique role of the addressees in the command, which sets them apart from the group and underlines their personal responsibility[17]. This usage is often associated with contexts relevant to hierarchical structures or

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[16] Ioan-Beniamin Pop, *Grammar of the English verb: from (Primary) Auxiliaries to Past Participles*, Alba Iulia, Editura Aeternitas, 2022, p. 141.
[17] George O. Curme, *Syntax*, London, D.C. Heath and Company, 1931, p. 167.

authoritative situations, where the speaker aims to direct the actions of a specific individual as clearly and unequivocally as possible.

The use of subjects in imperatives is a strategic choice which the speaker employs in order to achieve greater impact or control over the discourse. Huddleston describes this emphasis as a form of 'contrastive stress' since the inclusion of the subject conveys the expectation of the speaker of immediate compliance from the specified individual, not from others in the immediate context[18]. In such circumstances, the subject acts as a focal point due to the fact that it draws the addressee's attention more directly to the action requested. The same process appears in sentences such as:

All of you take your hats off!

Each of you salute wholeheartedly!

The inclusion of the subjects in the imperatives clarifies that the command is intended for all addressees, rather than being directed at a single individual or subset of listeners. Otherwise, ambiguity could lead to inaction on the part of the listeners.

Leech notes that when speakers need to clarify the target of an imperative, the inclusion of a subject 'prevents misunderstandings about the intended addressee or the nature of the command'[19]. When the subject is named explicitly, the speaker removes interpretive ambiguity, facilitates smoother communication and ensures that the desired action is taken by the appropriate individual(s).

We can also interpret marked imperative subjects through the lens of speech act theory, particularly how they modulate the illocutionary force, the speaker's intended action, of the command. Searle identifies directives as speech acts aimed at getting the listener to perform an action, with varying degrees of force. Marked imperative subjects help modulate this force since they affect how the addressee is likely to receive the command[20]. For instance, a sentence such as:

You close the door!

exerts a strong directive force by means of addressing the command explicitly to 'you', adding urgency and making the addressee's role unmistakable. In the sentence

You take a break if you'd like!

the marked subject softens the illocutionary force, making the directive more of a suggestion than an outright command. Speech act theory thus provides an additional perspective on why speakers choose to include subjects in imperatives, as it influences the perceived intensity of the directive and shapes the listener's response.

From a discourse analysis perspective, this use of an explicit subject can be seen as a way to 'stage manage' the interaction since it allows the speaker to control who is actively engaged in the exchange. Goffman describes this as 'participant

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[18] Rodney Huddleston, *Introduction to the Grammar of English*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1984.

[19] Geoffrey Leech, *Principles of Pragmatics*, London, Longman, 1983, p. 120.

[20] John R. Searle, *Speech acts: An essay in the philosophy of language*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1969, p. 65.

management' due to the fact that speakers use language to direct attention and orchestrate conversation[21]. When a specific individual is named, the speaker subtly enforces turn-taking norms and creates a more organized and responsive interaction.

Another area of interest is the occurrence of non-second-person subjects in imperative constructions. Sentences such as:

Someone call 112!

Everybody shut up!

illustrate cases where the subject is not directly addressed as the second person singular or plural but serves as the target of the command. Even though they are not very usual, they are syntactically possible, and they generally imply a command addressed to a broader group of people rather than a specific individual.

For example, in a situation with several people present, a command such as

Someone get the door!

specifies that any one of the present individuals should take the action, without addressing the group as a whole. The subject 'someone' ensures that the imperative is directed broadly yet specifically, creating a non-directive imperative that does not assign responsibility to a single, identifiable person.

Besides indefinite pronouns such as 'everybody' or 'somebody', as Pop posits, it is also possible to employ a third person subject. Consider, for instance, the examples:

Mike play on my side, not Mary!

Mike and Mary sit down!'[22]

Quirk et al. likewise describe these constructions as 'addressed at an implicit group' rather than an individual, with the subject taking a third-person form that stands in for the intended participants[23]. This construction broadens the function of the imperative to include collective instructions, making it a flexible tool for speakers in directing action among groups.

4. Conclusion

As highlighted in the present paper, the function of subjects in imperative sentences, regardless of whether overtly or covertly expressed, is motivated not only from the point of view of syntax but also from a pragmatical aspect. From the perspective of GB Theory and the Minimalist Program, the omission of subjects in imperatives is a direct consequence of syntactic economy and feature satisfaction. However, when subjects are employed overtly, they serve a pragmatic function as they adapt to a specific discourse, add emphasis or resolve potential ambiguities as far as the addressee or addresses are concerned. The present paper has analysed the interaction between syntax, morphology, and pragmatics and has underscored the

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[21] Erving Goffman, *Forms of Talk (Conduct and Communication)*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981, p. 47.

[22] Ioan-Beniamin Pop, *Grammar of the English verb: from (Primary) Auxiliaries to Past Participles*, Alba Iulia, Editura Aeternitas, 2022, p. 141.

[23] Randolf Quirk, Sidney Greenbaum, Geoffrey Leech, Jan Svarvik, *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language*, London and New York, Longman Group UK Limited, 1985, p. 823.

complexity of imperative sentences. It has also investigated how language structures adapt to fulfil communicative purposes while respecting syntactic constraints specific to imperative sentences.

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