

Atypical Ellipsis Patterns in Imperative Fragments

Michael Donovan

1. Introduction

This paper will be an investigation of the properties of a construction that I term GOAL-ORIENTED LOCATION COMMANDS (GOLCs). Goal-Oriented Location Commands (or GOLCs), are fragments that involve a noun (typically) without a determiner followed by a goal-oriented location phrase. Some examples of GOLCs are seen below in (1).

- (1) a. Feet on the floor, now!
b. Hands where I can see them!

Throughout this paper, I will use the word “theme” to refer to material like *feet* and *hands* above, and the term “goal” to refer to material like *on the floor* and *where I can see them*. GOLCs are possible without any overt theme at all.¹

- (2) a. Out of my sight!
b. Into that car, quickly!

To my knowledge, forms like the ones in (1) and (2) have gone heretofore unnoticed and unanalyzed in the generative linguistics literature. This is despite the fact that, far from being an English phenomenon, this type of construction appears in languages from several language families. GOLCs are quite common cross-linguistically, appearing at least in Turkic, Semitic, Quechuan, and Germanic languages.

- (3) Qo'l-lar stol-da!
hand-PL table-LOC
'Hands on the table!' (Uzbek)
- (4) Lichi-ta refrigeradura-pi!
milk-ACC fridge-LOC
'Milk into the fridge!' (Quechua)
- (5) al-kutub-(u) ʕala at-tawla!
the-book.PL on the-table
'Books on the table!' (Najdi Arabic)
- (6) bøk-ene på bord-et!
book-PL.DEF on table-DEF
'Books on the table!' (Norwegian)

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¹GOLCs may also be possible without any overt goal.

- (1) (Surgeon to assistant) Scalpel.

This paper will investigate the properties of GOLCs in English. The conclusion will be that they pattern with imperative clauses in most relevant morphosyntactic respect. However, GOLCs involve a type of truncation that is not present in standard imperatives. I will show that current theories of imperative clauses do not provide the mechanisms for explaining the morphosyntax of the construction, and propose a possibility.

2. Background

Sadock and Zwicky (1985) argue that sentence types in languages form clause-type systems in which each sentence is a member of exactly one sentence type. Thus, there are distinguishing morphosyntactic characteristics of DECLARATIVE, INTERROGATIVE, and IMPERATIVE clause types, typified below in (7).

- (7) a. You caught the speckled geese. (Declarative)
 b. Did you catch the speckled geese? (Interrogative)
 c. Catch the speckled geese! (Imperative)

In the generative linguistics literature, IMPERATIVE has traditionally been considered to be a universal clause type, along with DECLARATIVE and INTERROGATIVE. The clause-type system shown in (7) is therefore meant to be representative of the type of system that exists in most, if not all, languages. Languages are organized into systems of clause types that are each associated with a distinct morphosyntactic form. Kaufmann (2012) points out that each of the clause types shown in (7) not only have a prototypically morphosyntactic form, but each is also associated with a prototypical *function*. Dating back to at least Austin (1962), these functions have been known as *illocutionary forces*. She sketches a simple clause-type system, based on a paradigm similar to that in (7), which looks like the following.

- (8) A Simple Clause Type System (from Kaufmann 2012)
 a. declarative := <declarative (sentence), ASSERT>
 b. interrogative := <interrogative (sentence), QUESTION>
 c. imperative := <imperative (sentence), COMMAND>

Under this conception of the grammar, at least in the simple, prototypical case, clause-type systems serve as functions that map utterances of a specific sentence form onto an illocutionary force like ASSERT, QUESTION, COMMAND. An utterance like “Paint these walls!” has the sentence form of imperative, and therefore most typically gets mapped onto the illocutionary force of COMMAND. Although there are illocutionary forces outside of those listed in (8), this system can easily be modified to account for multiple illocutionary forces, outside of the prototypical illocutionary forces.

Given a three-way choice between the clause-types above listed by Sadock and Zwicky in (7), where do GOLCs fit in? I believe most readers would, if given a forced choice, place them most comfortably with the IMPERATIVE, rather than DECLARATIVE or INTERROGATIVE. This is most likely because GOLCs are used for the illocutionary force of ordering. Despite the fact that traditional imperatives are prototypically associated with the illocutionary force COMMAND, they are not limited to COMMAND. As Schmerling (1982) observes, English imperatives can be used as at least wishes and permissions in addition to the command usage.

- (9) a. Get out of my sight! (Command)
 b. Take a cookie, if you like. (Permission)
 c. Please don’t rain tomorrow! (Wish)

GOLCs do not, however, participate in this range of uses entirely. The only possible illocutionary force for a GOLC like (10) below is as a COMMAND.

(10) Out of my sight!

Permission and wish uses are not possible for GOLCs.

- (11) a. #Package in the mailbox! (Wish)
 b. #Into my apartment, if you like. (Permission)

It is, therefore, unclear whether or not GOLCs fall into the category IMPERATIVE or not, given their limited range of uses. Korean GOLCs illustrate this issue as well. Korean possesses overt imperative morphology. Standard imperative sentences with verbs, like in (12) below, require imperative morphology on the verb.^{2,3}

- (12) mek-ela!
 eat-IMP.PLN
 ‘Eat!’

Interestingly, however, despite the fact that an overt imperative morpheme is mandatory in Korean imperative clauses, this morpheme is not allowed in GOLCs. Instead, the fragment is unmarked, as in English.

- (13) a. Sinpal-un sinpalcang-ey!
 shoe-TOP shoe.rack-LOC
 b. *Sinpal-un sinpalcang-ey-ela!
 shoe-TOP shoe.rack-LOC-IMP
 ‘Shoes on the rack!’

A reasonable analysis of the pattern in (13) is that the Korean imperative morpheme “-ela” must attach to verbs, and in the absence of a verb, it has no viable host. But this is curious in and of itself. If Korean imperative clauses require imperative morphology, this means that imperative clauses in Korean require verbs. If that is the case, then what clause type should we categorize the Korean utterance from (13a)?

Focusing on the English case, I will argue that, despite their atypical features, GOLCs are derived from a clause with imperative morphosyntax underlyingly. The difference between GOLCs and traditional imperatives is derived from an ellipsis process that is present in the GOLC that is absent in the traditional imperative.

3. Properties

3.1. Subject

It is well-known that the subject of imperative clauses is restricted to the addressee or a subset of the addressees (Schmerling 1982; Potsdam 2017; Portner 2007; Zanuttini 2008). Each of these works argues that it is clear that the addressee restriction on imperative subjects must be a syntactic requirement, separate from the directive force imposed by imperatives (Oikonomou 2016). In English, the traditional imperative subject can be either overt or covert.

- (14) a. (You) be careful now!
 b. Don’t (you) tell me what to do!

²All Korean judgments are from Jinwoo Jo, Juyeon Cho, and Myunghye Yoo, p.c.

³This morphology also provides honorific information, in this case in the “plain” speech-style. I will omit this information hereafter, as it is not relevant to the task at hand.

When the imperative subject is covert, there is still good evidence that it is restricted to 2nd person features. Zwicky (1988) cites evidence from tag questions and binding to convincingly show the subject of imperatives is 2nd person.

- (15) a. Give me a hand with this penguin, won't you / *he?
b. Make yourself / *ourselves a drink!

Tag questions in English are well-known to be dependent on the values in Spec-TP and T⁰. If the pronoun in the tag is restricted to 2nd person, it follows that the covert subject of the imperative must be 2nd person.

At first glance, GOLCs are not similar to traditional imperatives in regards to their subject. Unlike traditional imperatives, "you" is not possible in subject position. It is possible as a vocative phrase, which can be expressed either before or after the goal.

- (16) a. *You feet on the floor!
b. You, feet on the floor!
c. Feet on the floor, you!

We might take data like (16a) to indicate that an analysis of GOLCs as deriving from imperative clauses is on the wrong track, given that they act differently than traditional imperatives with regards the possibility of an overt subject. There are, however, several reasons to think that the subject of GOLCs is "you," exactly like traditional imperatives, but that the subject is obligatorily covert.

The semantic/pragmatic update of a GOLC is identical to that of a traditional imperative. Thus, after the utterance of both a GOLC or an imperative, the addressee becomes obligated.

- (17) Hand me that book! → The *addressee* must hand me that book.
(18) Books off the shelf! → The *addressee* must make the books be off the shelf.

Portner (2004, 2007) has a model of this semantic/pragmatic update called the *To-Do List*, which is a list of obligations that everyone carries around. Imperatives update the To-Do List with new obligations. It seems that the imperative in (17) and the GOLC in (18) provide an identical semantic/pragmatic update, and that update obligates the addressee(s).⁴

The morphosyntactic facts also point to a 2nd person subject, as they do for traditional imperatives (Zwicky 1988). 1st and 3rd person reflexive pronouns produce a Condition A violation (19a), and non-reflexive 2P pronouns produce a Condition B violation (19b).

- (19) a. Hands off yourselves/*myself/*himself/*themselves!
b. Hands off *you / me!

Tag questions are also marginally possible with GOLCs, but the pronoun in the tag is also obligatorily 2nd person, and never matches the theme of the GOLC, or anything else.

- (20) Hands off the table, won't you? / *won't I? / *won't they? / *isn't there? / *isn't it?

The subject of GOLCs is "you", which is the same as traditional imperatives. However, unlike traditional imperatives, this subject is obligatorily omitted. This begs the question: Why is the subject obligatorily omitted only in GOLCs? The next section will show that nothing can appear to the left of the theme in a GOLC and that subjects are just one of several objects that are restricted from this position.

⁴Note that this insight is still useful even if we reject the formal details of Portner's analysis, as we will do here.

3.2. *Left Edge Restrictions*

We have already seen that subjects are not possible in their normal position in GOLCs. Interestingly, other things that might precede the theme are also impossible.

No form of negation is possible with GOLCs, unlike traditional imperatives. Negative traditional imperatives require do-support in English, but this, and other options are all impossible with GOLCs.

- (21) a. *Don't out of my sight!
 b. *Do not out of my sight!
 c. *No out of my sight!
 d. *Not out of my sight!

Thought (21c) is indisputably unacceptable, one might conjure an example with the theme overtly expressed with “no” as a possible counter-example.

- (22) No dogs in my apartment!

This type of expression has quite different properties, however. For example, (22) can optionally take the word “allowed” with no change in meaning.⁵

- (23) No dogs allowed in my apartment!

I will, therefore, not consider this to be a genuine counter-example, but a separate construction. This means that GOLCs cannot be negated. This is quite unlike the typical restrictions on negative imperatives in languages more generally. In a series of influential works, Zanuttini (1994, 1997) argues that some languages lack true negated imperatives. Spanish, for example, does not allow for imperatives to be directly negated, and instead requires the use of a subjunctive.⁶

- (24) a. *Habl-a!*
 speak-IMP
 ‘Speak!’
 b. *No habl-es!*
 no speak-2.SUBJ
 ‘Don’t speak!’
 c. **No habl-a!*
 no speak-IMP
 ‘Don’t speak!’

In the case of GOLCs, it is not a different form of negation that we see, but no possible negation at all. There does not seem to be a conceptual issue with negating a GOLC, and indeed, some pairs of prepositions can produce opposite meanings.

- (25) a. Books onto the table!
 b. Books off the table!

The issue seems to be a syntactic one, and not anything to do with the semantics. An explicit imperative with an overt verb can express the idea a negative GOLC would express with no problem.

- (26) Don't put the books onto the table!

⁵See Donovan (2020) for an in-depth discussion and analysis of this construction

⁶Thanks to David Rubio, p.c., for Spanish judgments

Adverbial data also shows that adverbs can appear to the right of the theme in GOLCs, but never to the left.

- (27) a. *Immediately feet on the floor!
b. Feet on the floor immediately!

An intermediate position is also available for adverbs.

- (28) Feet immediately on the floor!

The generalization seems to be that adverbs can appear anywhere within a GOLC, so long as they are not the leftmost object. In traditional imperatives, there is a pre-verbal position that is available to adverbs on the left edge.

- (29) a. Immediately put your feet on the floor!
b. Put your feet on the floor immediately!

All of these restrictions share a common property: material is banned from appearing to the left of the theme. The subject position is obligatorily to the left of the theme in GOLCs, therefore no overt subject is possible. Negation would have to be to the left of the theme as well, therefore negation is not possible. Adverbs are allowed, but only if their position is to the right of the theme.

There is one additional restriction on left-edge material, even within the noun phrase of the theme. Determiners are also typically unacceptable.

- (30) *The/Those/Some books onto the shelf!

Determiners can surface, however, if they receive contrastive focus.

- (31) THOSE books onto the shelf, THESE books into my trunk!

The generalization is, therefore, that to the left of the theme NP, nothing is permitted. Within the theme NP, focused material is permitted to the left of the theme.

4. Analysis

4.1. Theoretical Issues

The morphosyntax of GOLCs can be straightforwardly derived by a *movement-and-ellipsis* approach in which the pronounced material escapes the ellipsis site via movement, such as the approach used to analyze fragment answers in Merchant (2005) or VP ellipsis in Lobeck (1995). This would create the effect of anything to the left of the moved site being elided, such as the subject, negation, or any left-edge adverbial material. Such a derivation would have to look something like below in (32).

- (32)
-
- ```

graph TD
 FP --> A["Out of my sightt"]
 FP --> F_prime["F'"]
 F_prime --> F["F"]
 F_prime --> IP["< IP >"]
 F --- E["[E]"]
 IP --> B["you t"]

```

The question is not whether there exist mechanisms capable of deriving the ellipsis that would be necessary to derive the surface forms of GOLCs. There clearly are. The question is whether or not it is appropriate to posit a feature like Merchant's E-FEATURE in a derivation like (32).

As originally conceived, the E-FEATURE is subject to a semantic-givenness constraint. In cases of other fragments, the elided material must have been previously given in the discourse to be licensed.

(33) A: Who is Beth bringing? B: Alex. (from Merchant 2005)

Furthermore, ellipsis in fragment answers, at least in the case that Merchant looks at, is always optional. Thus, the following discourse is grammatical, even if slightly awkward.

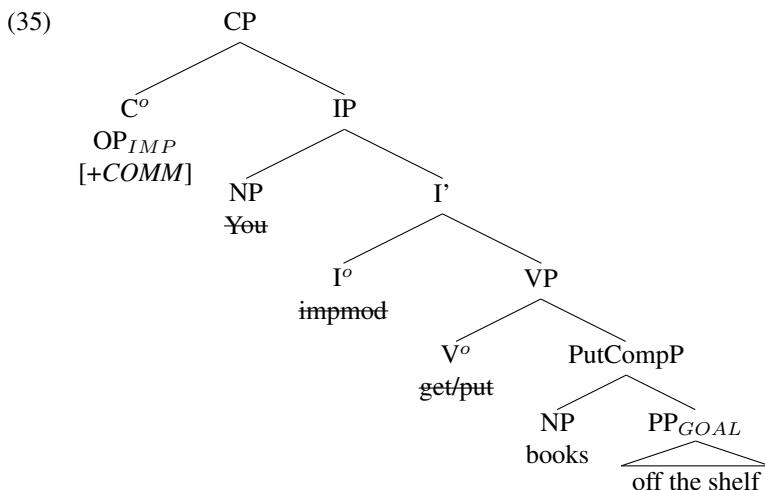
(34) A: Who is Beth bringing? B: Beth is bringing Alex.

Clearly, if GOLCs are derived by ellipsis, they are not subject to the same constraints as VP ellipsis or fragment answers. GOLCs seem to have no givenness requirement at all, being perfectly felicitous out of the blue. Additionally, the ellipsis in GOLCs is mandatory, the underlying subject is never pronounced.

Therefore, although the E-FEATURE is capable of deriving the pattern in GOLCs, at least for most of them, I think there are undesirable theoretical reasons to adopt it for GOLCs, because the circumstances by which the ellipsis is conditioned are totally different. Instead, I will briefly pursue an analysis that involves a command feature on the imperative operator.

#### 4.2. Pursuing a Command Feature

GOLCs receive an identical illocutionary force to command imperatives, and are subject to the same series of presuppositions (e.g., epistemic uncertainty, authority, per Kaufmann 2012) despite lacking an overt verb bearing imperative morphology. Given that the semantic/pragmatic update seems to be identical, I follow Kaufmann (2012) and Oikonomou (2016) in utilizing an operator to derive the appropriate update for GOLCs. Given the similarity between GOLCs and imperatives, and given the morphosyntactic similarity between imperative clauses and GOLCs, I think it is appropriate to use the same operator.



The operator in (35) is intended to be the same operator used by Kaufmann (2012) and Oikonomou (2016). The semantic/pragmatic update is therefore the same for a GOLC and a traditional imperative. The verb is an unspecified verb that selects both a theme and a location argument.<sup>7,8</sup>

<sup>7</sup>It is unclear to me how best to represent this idea. Some GOLC paraphrases sound best with “get,” others with “put” and some with “keep.” The essential idea is that the predicate is a so-called “put-type” predicate.

<sup>8</sup>The correct analysis of the predicate of “put-type” verbs is elusive. See Bruening (2018) for data arguing against a small clause.

An imperative operator on its own, however, will not produce the desired distribution for GOLCs. Recall that the full range of illocutionary forces typically associated with imperatives is not entirely available to GOLCs.

- (36) a. Out of my sight! (Command)  
 b. #Package into the mailbox! (Wish)  
 c. #Books off the shelf, if you like. (Permission)

The semantics of the imperative operator are intended to derive the range of meanings available to imperative clauses. By using the same operator, we predict that the same range of uses should be available. It is, therefore, not the imperative operator that conditions the left-edge ellipsis in (35), but the COMMAND feature. The mechanics of this ellipsis are that it begins at the theme, and deletes everything to the left of the theme. A similar type of ellipsis has been recorded previously for diary entries in Weir (2012). This left-edge ellipsis explains why subjects, negation, and left-edge adverbs cannot appear in GOLCs; they are in the path of the ellipsis. A command feature was posited; this feature licenses the left-edge ellipsis that restricts material on the left edge.

## 5. Conclusion

GOLCs pattern identically with traditional imperatives in terms of their morphosyntax, except in the case of material that appears to the left of the theme. A left-edge ellipsis process was posited, starting at the theme, that deletes everything to its left. GOLCs also pattern identically with traditional imperatives with respect to their semantic/pragmatic update, except for the range of uses available to them, which is more restricted in the case of GOLCs.

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