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On Passive Imperatives

Hidemitsu Takahashi

1. Introduction

This paper will discuss phonemena pertaining to English imperatives in the passive form like those in (1) and (2) below:

(1a) *George, be taken to church by your sister.
(1b) *Be helped by Jill.
(2a) Be checked over by a doctor, then you'll be sure there's nothing wrong.
(2b) Be flattered by what he says, it'll make his day.

I would like to explain why passive imperatives like those in (1) are unacceptable, whereas those in (2) are better-formed.

Early generative grammar work once claimed that English imperatives disallow the passive form syntactically (cf. Lees 1964), based on facts like those in (1) above. However, later pragmatic and descriptive work found that this restriction is far from absolute (cf. Bolinger 1977; Davies 1986). Given appropriate contextualizations as in (2), passive imperatives can be rendered perfectly acceptable. However, the previous analyses fell short of accounting for the full range of felicitous imperative sentences in the passive form in a unified way.

I want to demonstrate that cognitive grammar notions, notably the degree of force, image schema, prototype effect and construc-tional meaning, are useful in providing a unified treatment for the problem under investigation. First, the paper will illustrate the way in which English imperatives can be characterized within the framework of currently available cognitive grammar. Second, it will examine the extent to which such an analysis will explain the old problems pertaining to the acceptability of imperatives in the passive form. It will be argued that the passive may occur in the imperative provided that the former and the latter are compatible *conceptually*. I suggest that the passive construction does not clash with the imperative syntactically but rather between prototypes.

2. English Imperatives and Their four features

By 'imperative' I mean a sentence/construction which occurs only in the main clause, normally has no grammatical subject and contains the verb in its most basic form, as illustrated in *Get up and go or Call Sharon tonight*. In my previous work (Takahashi 1994), I characterized English imperatives in terms of four essential features, *hypotheticality, non-past, second-person* and *speaker commitment*. I believe the first three notions are largely self-evident, so let me explain only the last feature, speaker *commitment*, though only briefly. This is a mental notion, not directly observable from surface linguistic structure, as defined in (3):

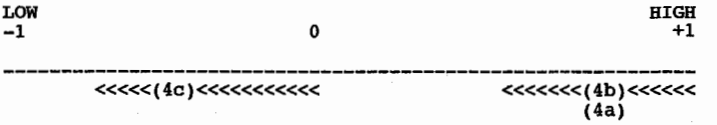
(3) Speaker Commitment:
the degree of (directive) *force* that the speaker is applying (at the utterance time of an imperative) toward the addressee's carrying out the action.

Here the term force is used in the sense of 'force dynamics' introduced in Talmy (1988). The idea of (3) is that the utterance of an imperative expresses the speaker's exertion of psychologi-cal, interpersonal force toward the addressee's performing an action, and that this force should be viewed as a gradient, rather than an all-or-nothing, concept.

To illustrate:

(4a) Sleep until noon.
(4b) Sleep until noon; you're tired.
(4c) Sleep until noon, and you'll miss lunch.

The preferred interpretation of (4a) is a positive sense such as command, advice, etc. and so is the case in (4b). The identical form in (4c), however, normally obtains a negative reading including both a condition and warning. The spirit of speaker commitment resides in providing a unified treatment for these positive as well as negative readings, as illustrated in figure 1 below:



<figure 1>

The idea of the figure is as follows. i) An imperative is potentially ambiguous concerning the value of speaker commitment — from minimum [−1] to maximum [+1] including [0]. ii) An imperative like (4b) involves a high (positive) speaker commitment. iii) In a default-case context, an imperative like (4a) strongly evokes a high speaker commit-

ment, a sense considered prototypical of imperatives.

Being highly schematic, the notion of speaker commitment is designed to cover a wide range of uses, including 'pseudo-imperatives,' or imperatives without any conception of force. It explains the humor in the bumper-sticker sign, *Eat, drink and get fat!*.[1] From this perspective, the 'command' sense can be considered the prototypical sense, rather than an intrinsic feature, of an imperative.

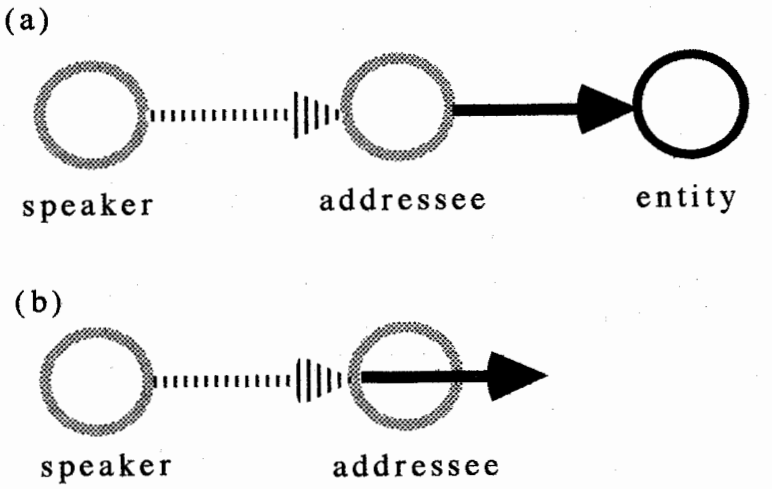
3. A Cognitive (image-schematic) Model of Imperatives

3.1 Action Chain Model

Next, I would like to characterize the above four features within the framewrok of cognitive grammar. I assume the proposals common to work such as Talmy 1988, Langacker 1987/1991, and Croft 1991. That is, the semantic content of clause structure essentially resides in the conceptions of entities and their energetic interactions with respect to one another. Let me illustrate how one such model, which Langacker labels as 'Action Chain (Billiard-ball) Model', will characterize the imperatives such as (5) below:

(5a) Call Sharon tonight. (Transitive)
(5b) Get up and move. (Intransitive)

I use bold circles and arrows for profiled conceptions, and light ones for unprofiled conceptions. The idea is, i) The imperative is comprised of two separate (though interrelated) subevents, which combine to form a dynamic chain of actions; ii) The speaker and addressee both participate in this action chain as indispen-sable entities — the speaker as head, the addressee as a second entity engaged in further action; and iii) The



<figure 2> Action Chain & the Imperative

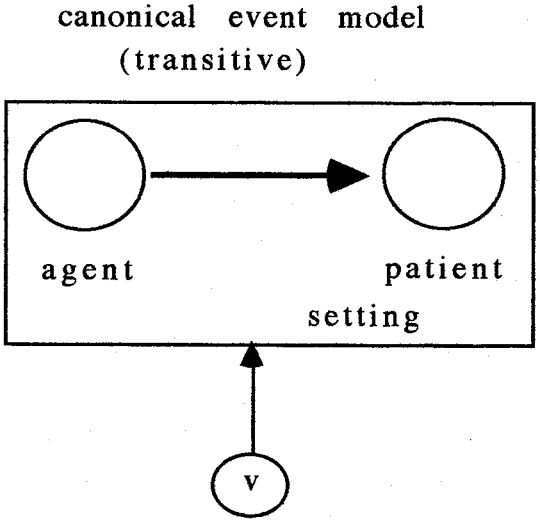
imperative makes explicit only the addressee's action and leaves implicit the two key entities; nor does it overtly code the application of directive force (or speaker commitment).

I believe this action chain analysis captures some important facets of second-person nature and speaker commitment. Being a naive model, however, the analysis is not capable of adequately handling two other features, namely, hypotheticality and non-past. Moreover, it does not specify the semantic roles of participants (speaker and addressee). A fuller characterization will require a more elaborate and finely-grained model. For this purpose, I will employ 'Canonical Event Model' as introduced in Langacker (1991)

3.2 Canonical Event Model

The Canonical Event Model takes into account several semantic notions not dealt with in the action chain model. Specifically, this model

adds the notions of setting, semantic role, and viewer. This image-schematic model portrays the meaning of an 'ideal' clause structure as in figure 3.



<figure 3>

The idea is that the simplest transitive clause contains two participants which play semantic roles, agent and patient, respectively. These participants are engaged in a kind of energetic interaction in a specific conceptual domain called a 'setting' chosen to be highlighted by a viewer. A transitive clause such as *John ate the apple in the kitchen*, where John acts as an agent and participates in an energetic interaction of eating an apple which is patient in the 'kitchen' setting, would be a straightforward illustration of this model.

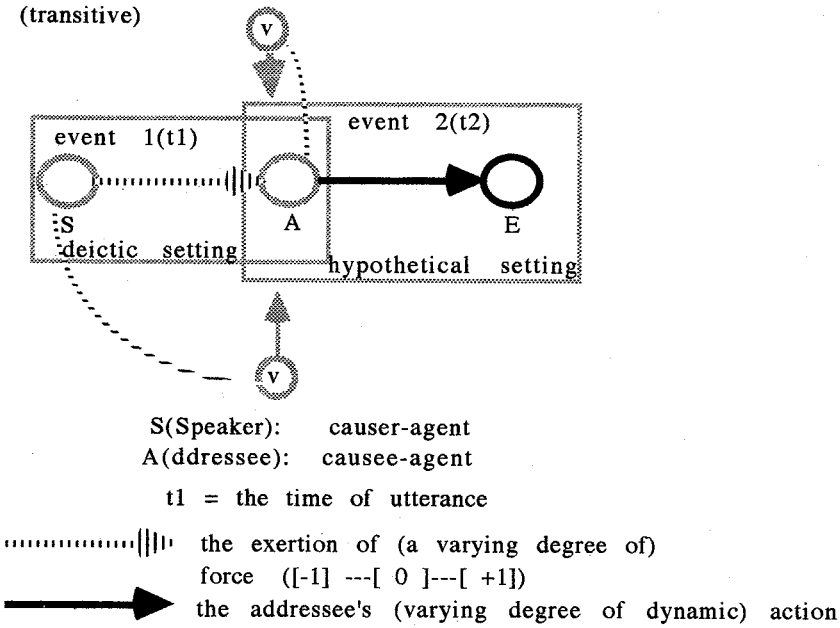
To obtain a Canonical Event Model of the imperative, we need to specify the *setting and the semantic roles* of participants. As for the

setting, it should be noted that the first subevent is restricted to an extremely narrow speech situation, the here-and-now of speaking, only populated by the speaker and addressee. It would be reasonable to analyze this subevent as occurring in *deictic* setting. On the other hand, the second subevent (or the addressee's action) is hypothetical in nature, regardless of whether or not the addressee's act will be realized in the objective world. For this reason, let me treat the second subevent as taking place in *hypothetical* setting (or mental space).[2]

Next, let us consider the speaker and addressee's semantic roles. To begin with, it would not be a gross oversimplification to regard the speaker and addressee as both *Agents*, since after all both individuals are 'doers'; they typically initiate a process, engaged in some volitional activity. Needless to say, natural language affords multiple kinds of agency, and varying degrees of agency (cf. Delancy 1985). In addition, the semantic role of a noun phase is not necessarily restricted to one. The grammatical subject (or 'an argument') may readily play more than one semantic role at once (cf. Schlesinger 1989). Considering all these factors, I would like to analyze the speaker in terms of *causer-agent*, and the addressee in terms of *causEE-agent*. The rationale behind this treatment is that in the prototypical scene of an imperative, the addressee is *triggered* to act or undergo a substantial change in state by the utterance of an imperative. Needless to say, the viewer of the imperative event would be primarily the speaker, and secondarily the addressee. Important-ly, the viewers are identical to two key participants in imperative clause structure.[3]

In light of these discussions, the Canonical Imperative Event Model would be something like figure 4 below:

This model incorporates and refines the action chain model in figure 2 above, by adding the notions of *setting*, *viewer*, and *semantic role*. Two



<figure 4> Imperative Event Model

settings are assigned to two corresponding subevents as indicated in the thin squares, where the addressee belongs in these two settings at once. The broken arch lines connecting viewers and participants signify the identity of the entity. The time of event 1 coincides with the time of utterance, and event 2 occurs only after event 1. Although the figure appears to only illustrate the prototype command imperative, the analysis here is essentially flexible in nature. It is intended to accommodate the whole range of uses — central cases as well as departures from the norm, pseudo-imperatives as well as 'true' imperatives.[4]

This model characterizes the prototypical imperative as in (6) below:

(6) The prototype IMPERATIVE

i. The speaker exerts a high (near [+1]) directive force in deictic setting toward the addressee, who will thereby perform an action in hypothetical setting.

ii. The speaker plays the semantic role of causer-like agent, and the addressee causee-like agent.

More generally, the model defines the imperative as in (7) below:

(7) The schematic IMPERATIVE

i. The speaker exerts a varying degree of force (ranging from [+1] to [−1]) in deitic setting toward the addressee, who will thereby perform a varying degree of dynamic action in hypothetical setting.

ii. The speaker plays the role of a varying degree of causer-agent, and the addressee a varying degree of causee-agent.

One obvious advantage of the model sketched above is that it captures the full four features of English imperatives discussed in section 2 in a more integrated manner.

4. *English Imperatives and Passives*

We are in a position to turn to the central question: why are passive imperatives in (2) acceptable while those in (1) are odd?

(1a) *George, be taken to church by your sister.

(1b) *Be helped by Jill.

(2a) Be checked over by a doctor, then you'll be sure there's nothing

wrong.

(2b) Be flattered by what he says, it'll make his day.

Many scholars have pointed out that passives with *be* occur more frequently in negative imperatives than positive (cf. Quirk et al 1985: 827), and I focus more on positive imperatives in be passives here.

Most previous works on passives are in general agreement concerning the following three points, although several other proposals have been made: i) decreased sense of dynamicity (cf. Givon 1981/1990), ii) topicalization of patient (cf. Jespersen 1924; Givon 1981/1990), and iii) defocussed agent (cf. Shibatani 1985). Let me treat (8) as the prototype PASSIVE:

(8) The prototype PASSIVE
The passive construction prototypically stativizes the conceived situation, topicalizes a patient and defocuses an agent.

Careful examination of the characterizations in (6) and (8) will reveal a serious incompatibility between prototype imperatives and prototype passives. Crucially, the semantic role of imperative subjects and that of passive subjects differ. The prototype imperative demands an agent as a subject, whereas the passive prefers a patient. Agent and patient are normally two mutually exclusive semantic roles. Secondly — and less seriously — the degree of dynamicity is different. The imperative prefers a highly dynamic reading, whereas the passive inherently stativizes the conception of the event, although passives also vary in the degree of dynamicity.

Now, we come up with the following working hypothesis:[5]

(9) Hypothesis

> The passive construction does not clash with the imperative syntactically but on conceptual grounds, i.e. the clash occurs between prototypes.

I believe that the data in (1) substantiate this claim. A semantic conflict occurs between the 'ideal' imperative vs. the 'ideal' passive. A linguistic construction has a strong tendency to evoke its most natural reading in isolated contexts, i.e. its prototype. Interpreted as a PASSIVE, the subject of the construction *Be taken to church by your sister* should be a patient. Interpreted as an IMPERATIVE, however, it should be an agent. The subject slot in (1a) demands both an agent and patient at the same time, two semantic roles which are normally at odds with each other.[6] In addition, the lexical content increases the conflict. An individual who is taken to church is 'physically affected', i.e. close to archetypal patient. The patient role of the implicit subject is strengthened by the presence of the agentive by-phrase as well. Overall, the prototypicality of PASSIVE is both constructionally and lexically emphasized here (cf. Goldberg 1995, Rice 1987).[7]

Next, let us consider why the passive imperatives in (2a) and (2b) are well-formed. Previous work employed the notion of '(self)-controllability' (Davies 1986) or 'willfulness' (Bolinger 1977). The Imperative Event Model naturally incorporates these pragmatic accounts. In fact, the model will succeed where previous accounts fail, as later discussions will reveal. Note that controllability and willfullness are among central concep-tions constituting the notion of agency. Take an instance of (2a). While an individual who is examined by a doctor appears to involve little agency, the additional context provided by the subsequent clause *you'll be sure there's nothing wrong* makes it apparent that the addressee is advised to see a doctor with a clear purpose — for check-up.

S/he will not be forced to be examined; s/he *chooses to* act on his/her own will instead. Similarly, (2b) is best paraphrased as '*Try/Appear to* be flattered...', a reading overtly indicative of agency. Therefore, both (2a) and (2b) are acceptable on the ground that peripheral exemplars of PASSIVE are acceptable within the prototype IMPERATIVE.

Interestingly, even in cases when *be*-passives are perfectly acceptable, speakers of English prefer to use *get*-passives if available:

(10) Get checked over by a doctor, then you'll be sure there's nothing wrong.

One may say that the intrinsic dynamicity of *get* better conforms to the conception of the prototype IMPERATIVE.[8]

Passive imperatives do not have to be comprised of prototype IMPERATIVE and peripheral PASSIVE to be acceptable. Groups A, B and C below list at least three distinct patterns in which passives fare well within imperatives:

Group A: near-prototype IMPERATIVE & peripheral PASSIVE (2a), (2b)

(11a) Be prepared./ Be warned.

(11b) Don't be fooled by his act./Don't be taken in by the doctor, he's really a quack.

(11c) Oh, come on; be taken in just once —— it isn't going to hurt you; do you think you're perfect? (Bolinger 1977)

(11d) Be impressed by his stamp collection if you want him to like you! (Dixon 1994)

In Group A, non-central instances of the PASSIVE merge with the (near)

prototype IMPERATIVE, a case most frequently pointed out in the previous literature. Set phrases such as (11a) and negative forms such as (11b) can be included here.

The examples in Groups B and C present a serious challenge to previous pragmatic accounts, since the imperatives here are perfectly well-formed without involving any 'controllability' or 'willfullness'. In Group B, the passive imperative occurs immediately after an ordinary imperative:

Group B: non-prototype IMPERATIVE & non-prototype PASSIVE

(12a) Come to Palm Court and *be entertained by Joe Loss and his orchestra*! (Dixon 1994)

(12a') ?Be entertained by Joe Loss and his orchestra!

(12b) Come to my office, *be amazed at the mess I've made.*

(12b') ?Be amazed at the mess I've made.

The italicized passive imperative in (12a) or (12b) conveys not so much a command as an outcome assumed to result from the action designated in the immediately preceding imperative. Interestingly, the passive imperative here does not involve any sense of controllability or willfullness. The addressee is incapable of choosing to be entertained or be amazed, which means that s/he is not too much of an agent. On the other, the addressee is not too much of a patient either, since s/he is not 'physically affected'. The addressee is more of an *experiencer* than a patient. The PASSIVE successfully merges with the IMPERATIVE here because each construction diverts to some extent from its prototype.

In Group C, the IMPERATIVE departs farther away from its prototype conception than in Group B. While more than one reading is possible, the imperatives in (13a) and (13b) may obtain a pure conditional

(IF-THEN) reading, a reading without any notion of force:

Group C: peripheral IMPERATIVE & non-prototype PASSIVE

(13a) Be pleased to see him, you'll make his day.

(13b) Be impressed by his stamp collection, you will make his day.

The passive imperatives here are perfectly acceptable, because no serious conflict occurs here between PASSIVE and IMPERATIVE, both of which construction diverts drastically from the prototype.

Finally, let me briefly observe the imperative in Japanese to examine the cross-linguistic implications of the present analysis. In Japanese, a clause's category as an imperative is explicitly spelled out by an imperative marker, which indicates the exact nature of force as 'directive'. As a result, Japanese imperatives with the standard form nasai do not readily tolerate readings other than prototypical command. In many cases, the imperative with nasai cannot obtain a conditional reading, as exemplified in the oddity of (14b):

(14a) *ugoki nasai*
Move IMP
"Move!"

(14b) **ugoki nasai, soshite utsuzo*
move IMP, and (I'll) shoot
"Move, and I'll shoot"

This does not mean, however, that the *nasai* imperative never involves the DEGREE of force, since the imperative in (15) is marginally acceptable with a conditional ('dare') reading:

(15) (?)*hiru made ne nasai, soshite gohan nakunaru yo*
noon until sleep IMP, and lunch be gone will
"Sleep until noon, and you'll miss lunch"

Next, the occurrence of the passive form *rare* with the imperative is extremely restricted, if not totally ungrammatical. The majority of felicitous passive imperatives in English we have observed in Groups A, B, and C translate into active sentences in Japanese. The only pattern in which the passive combines with the imperative seems to be the one in Group A: peripheral PASSIVE and (near) prototype IMPERATIVE. And the negative form is prefer-rable, as in (16):

(16a) *sono isha ni damas -areru na*
the doctor by taken in be-PASS NEG-IMP
"Don't be taken in by the doctor"
(16b) (?)*kanojo ni suk -are nasai*
her by liked be-PASS IMP
"?Be liked by her"

The Japanese imperative in the passive form like (17a) is simply ungrammatical, although the English counterpart of it can be rendered acceptable if provided with an 'appropriate context':

(17a) **isha ni mi- rare nasai*
doctor by examined be IMP
"Be checked over by a dcotor"

The only way to improve the sentence in (17a) is to employ the form -morau, a verb of receiving used to indicate the gaining of some benefit

from the agentive action described in the -te verbs:

(17b) *isha ni mite morai nasai*
doctor by examined have IMP
"Have (yourself) examined by a doctor"

The fact that the passive form rare cannot combine with the imperative form *nasai* can be explained in terms of a conflict in the subject's semantic role — between patient vs. agent. The phenomenon we obtain here might be viewed as just another instance in which the Passive and Imperative clash in conception — between prototypes.

I hope I have shown that the analysis made here may offer a principled treatment for both acceptable and unacceptable passive imperatives as well as subsuming insights from previous pragmatic accounts. As its central claim, the paper has argued that the passive may occur in the imperative provided that the two constructions are mutually compatible conceptually. The once alleged 'syntactic' restriction can be viewed as the result of a mismatch between the prototypical conception of passives and that of imperatives.

Footnotes

* I thank Joseph Tomei for checking the manuscript as well as providing a number of helpful suggestions.

[1] The framework here is also flexible enough to capture the blend between the infinitive and the imperative:

(i) My advice to international travelers is: *Never arrive in a foreign country without some ready cash or travelers checks in that country's currency.*

The italicized clause can read either with or without the conception of force.

[2] Within a Mental Space framework (Fauconnier 1985), an imperative can be analyzed

in terms of space builder, which evokes a hypothetical space which contains a variety of entities including the addressee. The parent space is a deitic space, a narrow actual space only populated by the speaker and the addressee. Crucially, the actor in the hypothetical space corresponds to the addressee in the parent space. I believe the analysis in figure 4 is fully compatible with, and incorporates, this mental space characterization. I thank Arie Verhagen (at the fifth ICLA conference) and Joseph Tomei (p.c.) for suggesting to me the implication of the present model for the Mental Space semantics.

[3] This identity is not peculiar to the imperative alone but common to other performatives such as *I order you to leave now or I name you husband and wife.*

[4] It may be noted that the must clause *You must go* and the imperative *Go!* carry an analogous semantic content: force and hypotheticality. The present model helps distinguish between the two constructions as well as capturing the commonality. First, the action chain head is different. The head of must clauses is a compelling (social) force, whereas the head of imperatives is the speaker. Second, the subject of must clauses can be any person, quite unlike the imperative. Third, must conveys only one kind of force: *compelling*, irrespective of whether the force pertains to the social domain (root) or to the domain of reasoning (epistemic) (cf. Sweetser 1990: ch. 3)

[5] Croft (1994: 113) distinguishes among process passive, antipassive, and stative passive.

[6] According to Saksena (1980), the 'affected' agent may appear in some languages, a fact suggesting that Agent and Patient do not constitute single primitive categories which are mutually exclusive.

[7] I assume that a construction carries an inherent semantic content independent of the information from lexical items (cf. Goldberg 1995).

[8] I would like to thank Peter Grundy (at the ICLA conference) for informing me that sentence (2a) is not acceptable in British English.

Arce-Arenales et al. (1994: 11) find that *get* passives allow two readings: 'reflexive' and 'true passive'. They explain that the subject can be both agent and patient only in the reflexive use; in the passive reading, the subject is unambiguously patient. To illustrate the point, they provide the get passive in (i) below with an explicit agentive *by* phrase:

(i) (*) I got dressed by my mother.

(i) is unacceptable in a reflexive reading; only when the subject is interpreted in terms of just patient is the sentence acceptable.

However, the division between the two readings seems less clear-cut. As suggested in my example in (10), even the 'passive' reading allows for agentive subject.

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