

ENGLISH SENTENCES WITHOUT OVERT GRAMMATICAL SUBJECT¹

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There is an extensive literature dealing with English imperative sentences. As is well-known, these sentences have no overt grammatical subject:

(1) Close the door.

There is general agreement among scholars² that these sentences have deep structures involving an underlying subject you which is deleted by a transformation.

There is a widespread misconception that utterances such as
(2) Fuck you.

which also appear to have the form of a transitive verb followed by a noun phrase and preceded by no overt subject, are also imperatives. This paper will be concerned with the syntax of sentences such as (2). While my study will offer only a tentative conjecture as to what the deep structure of sentences such as (2) is, it will at least demonstrate conclusively that they cannot be analyzed as imperatives.

One characteristic of sentences such as (2) which, as has been frequently noted³, is an anomaly if sentences such as (2) are analyzed as imperatives, is the absence of reflexivization in (2): whereas

(3) *Assert you.

is ungrammatical, (2) is not. However, there are many other anomalies which are not so widely recognized. Note first that there are a large number of structures in which imperatives appear either embedded in a matrix sentence or with various adjuncts:

(4) I said to close the door.

(5) Don't close the door.

(6) Do close the door.

(7) Close the door, won't you?

(8) Go close the door

(9) Close the door or I'll take away your teddy-bear.

(10) Open the door and I'll give you a dollar.

There are no such sentences corresponding to (2):

(11) *I said to fuck you.

(12) *Don't fuck you.

(13) *Do fuck you.

(14) *Fuck you, won't you?

(15) *Go fuck you.

(16) *Fuck you or I'll take away your teddy-bear.

(17) *Fuck you and I'll give you a dollar.

Further, there are sentences containing the word fuck which are ambiguous between a meaning parallel to (1) and a meaning parallel to (2):

(18) Fuck Lyndon Johnson

This sentence can be interpreted either as an admonition to copulate with Lyndon Johnson or as an epithet indicating disapproval of that individual buy conveying no instruction to engage in sexual relations with him. When sentences with the embeddings and adjuncts of (4) to (10) are

formed, the resulting sentences are unambiguous, allowing only the former reading:

- (19) I said to fuck Lyndon Johnson.
- (20) Don't fuck Lyndon Johnson.
- (21) Do fuck Lyndon Johnson.
- (22) Fuck Lyndon Johnson, won't you?
- (23) Go fuck Lyndon Johnson.
- (24) Fuck Lyndon Johnson or I'll take away your teddy-bear.
- (25) Fuck Lyndon Johnson and I'll give you a dollar.

Consideration of these examples makes it fairly clear that the fuck of (19)-(25) (henceforth fuck₁) and the fuck of (2) (henceforth fuck₂) are simply two distinct homophonous lexical items. These two lexical items have totally different selectional restrictions, as is shown by the examples:

- (26) Fuck these irregular verbs.
- (27) *John fucked these irregular verbs.
- (28) Fuck communism.
- (29) *John fucked communism.

Moreover, fuck₂ has a peculiar restriction on the determiner of the following noun phrase, a restriction not shared by fuck₁, namely that the determiner must be either definite or generic:

- (30) Fuck those 7 irregular verbs
- (31) Fuck irregular verbs.
- (32) Fuck all irregular verbs.
- (33) *Fuck 7 irregular verbs
- (34) *Fuck any irregular verb.

but

- (35) Fuck 7 old ladies by midnight or I'll take away your teddy-bear.
- (36) Fuck any old lady you see.

(the latter two involving fuck₁). It should be noted that the word 'generic' must be interpreted in such a sense that all is generic (cf. example (32)) but each is not:

- (37) *Fuck each irregular verb.

Indeed, substitution into the frame 'Fuck ____ irregular verb(s)' is an excellent diagnostic test for genericness. As example (35) makes clear, the two fuck's also differ in their potential for allowing adverbial elements: while (35) is normal,

- (38) *Fuck you by midnight.

is not. Moreover, note the examples

- (39) Fuck my sister tomorrow afternoon.
- (40) *Fuck those irregular verbs tomorrow afternoon.
- (41) Fuck my sister on the sofa.
- (42) *Fuck communism on the sofa.
- (43) Fuck my sister carefully.
- (44) *Fuck complex symbols carefully.

Evidently, fuck₂ does not allow any adverbial elements whatever. This restriction suggests that fuck₂ not only is a distinct lexical item from fuck₁ but indeed is not even a verb itself. Chomsky⁴ observes that the adverbial elements of (39)-(42) are outside of the verb phrase and that only elements within the verb phrase play a role in the strict sub-categorization of verbs. That principle would clearly be violated if

fuck₂ were a verb. While the 'principle of strictly local subcategorization' proposed by Chomsky is in fact not valid in precisely that form⁵, the fact remains that no case has been reported of any English morpheme which is unambiguously a verb and which allows no adverbial elements whatever. Since the only reason which has ever been proposed for analyzing fuck₂ as a verb is its appearance in a construction (that of (2)) which superficially resembles an imperative but in fact is not, one must conclude that there is in fact not a scrap of evidence in favor of assigning fuck₂ to the class 'verb', and indeed, assigning it to that class would force the recognition of an anomalous subclass of verbs which violate otherwise completely valid generalizations about 'verbs'.

If fuck₂ is not a verb, then what is it? To make some headway towards answering this question, let us consider the following expressions, which have much in common with (2):

- (45) Damn Lyndon Johnson.
- (45) Shit on Lyndon Johnson.
- (46) To hell with Lyndon Johnson
- (48) Hooray for Christine Keeler.

These expressions likewise exclude adverbial elements and require the following noun phrase to be definite or generic:

- (49) Damn those irregular verbs.
- (50) *Damn those irregular verbs tomorrow.
- (51) *Damn 7 irregular verbs.
- (52) Shit on all irregular verbs.
- (53) *Shit on each irregular verb.
- (54) *Hooray for an irregular verb last night.

Only rarely have hypotheses been advanced as to the deep structure of expressions such as (45-48). One hypothesis⁶ has been that (45) has an underlying subject God, which is deleted. However, this proposal is untenable since it would exclude the completely acceptable sentence

- (55) Damn God.

and imply the grammaticality of the non-sentence

- (56) *Damn Himself.

It is interesting that in this respect goddamn works exactly like damn:

- (57) Goddamn God.
- (58) *Goddamn Himself.

While the assumption of a deleted subject God has semantic plausibility in the case of sentences such as (46) and (2), such an analysis must be rejected for the same reason as in the case of damn, namely the grammaticality of

- (59) Fuck God.
- (60) Shit on God.

and the ungrammaticality of

- (61) *Fuck Himself.
- (62) *Shit on Himself.

Consider now the semantics of fuck₂, damn, to hell with, shit on⁷, hooray for, etc. A sentence consisting of one of these items plus a noun phrase has neither declarative nor interrogative nor imperative meaning: one can neither deny nor 'answer' nor 'comply with' such an utterance. These utterances simply express a favorable or unfavorable attitude on the part of the speaker towards the thing or things denoted by the noun phrase. The fact that they have such a semantic interpretation explains the restriction on the determiner of the noun phrase: the noun phrase must specify a thing of class of things in order for the utterance to be semantically interpretable. Note further the possibility of using most of the words in question without any following noun phrase:

- (64) Fuck!
- (65) Damn!
- (66) Shit!⁸
- (67) Hooray!

These sentences indicate the attitude in question but do not specify what object that attitude is directed towards by the speaker.

The fact that sentences of the form fuck₂ plus NP are not known to be validly analyzable as NP & VP in deep structure, the fact that they are not embeddable in any sentences⁹, and the fact that they allow none of the adjuncts which all other sentences allow, makes highly plausible the hypothesis that they should not even be analyzed as sentences: that the category 'utterance' be divided into two subcategories, 'sentence' and 'epithet' (the latter class including utterances such as (2), (46), and (64)), that only 'sentence' and not 'epithet' be embeddable within an utterance, that 'epithet' involve a lexical category of 'quasi-verbs' (this category consists of fuck₂, shit on, etc.), that there be a phrase-structure rule

Epithet → Quasi-verb NP

and that 'Quasi-verb' appear in no other phrase-structure rule.

In closing, I should mention certain problems which I have not dealt with and which the reader should be aware of. First there is the matter of stress in 'epithets'. I know of no non-ad-hoc treatment of the stress difference between

- (71) Fûck yôu.
- (72) Dâmn yôu.

Moreover, quasi-verbs have a tendency to take primary stress: stress may disambiguate (63) (although the distinction is lost when contrastive stress is placed on the NP):

- (73) Shît on the cârpet. (= Fuck₂ the carpet)
- (74) Shît on the cârpet. (= Defecate on the carpet)

A second matter which deserves a full treatment is the process of historical change whereby normal lexical items become quasi-verbs. I conjecture that fuck₂ arose historically from fuck₁, although the paucity of citations of fuck makes the philological validation of this conjecture difficult. However, it is clearly no accident that many quasi-verbs are homophonous with normal morphemes.

FOOTNOTES

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² Katz and Postal, An Integrated Theory of Linguistic Descriptions (MIT Press, 1964), pp. 74, ff.; James P. Thorne, 'English imperative sentences', Journal of Linguistics 2.69-77 (1966).

³ Yuck Foo, 'A note on English reflexives', Quarterly Progress Report no. 29 of the Research Laboratory of Experimental Theology, South Hanoi Institute of Technology (henceforth QPR of the RLET of SHIT), pp. 220-219, July 15, 1963.

⁴ Aspects of the Theory of Syntax (M.I.T. Press, 1965), pp. 101ff.

⁵ A criticism of this principle and of the claims which Chomsky makes about the constituent structure of the verb phrase is given in George Lakoff and John R. Ross, 'Why you can't do so into the sink', Harvard Computation Laboratory report NSF-17, pp. II-1 to II-11. Ross and Lakoff contest Chomsky's assertion that the manner adverb of (43) is part of the verb phrase.

⁶ Barbara Hall Partee, personal communication (Nov. 29, 1963).

⁷ Ambiguities are possible in sentences of the form shit on NP:
(63) Shit on the carpet.

may be either an expression of distaste for the carpet or an answer to the question 'Where shall I shit?'. The former meaning is to be understood throughout the the remainder of this paper.

⁸ The absence of the preposition in this example should be considered in the light of Lakoff's assertion (On the Nature of Syntactic Irregularity, Indiana University dissertation, 1965) that in verb-plus-preposition units the preposition is lexically a feature of the verb and is added to the noun-phrase by a 'segmentalization' transformation. Cf. Paul M. Postal, 'On so-called "Pronouns" in English', Georgetown University Monograph Series on Language and Linguistics, 1966. I will argue below that fuck₂, etc. are not verbs. However, they apparently share some property with verbs, namely that of causing prepositions to be inserted by some segmentalization rule.

⁹ An apparent exception is quotations such as
(68) John said 'Fuck you'.

However, the object of verbs such as say not only is not restricted to be a sentence or a part thereof, but indeed is not even required to belong to the language to which the matrix sentence belongs: it may be something a foreign language:

(69) John said, 'Arma virumque canō'.
or even something consisting of non-speech sounds:

(70) John said, (imitation of a camel belching).
I do not take up here the interesting but difficult problem of deciding whether quotations involving sounds which the human vocal organs are incapable of producing (for example, a chord played FFF by a quartet of trombones) are to be considered ungrammatical or simply grammatical but non-occurring for performance reasons. This problem is of importance because it has bearing on the question of whether the (infinite) set of grammatical sentences in a language is denumerable or non-denumerable.

One more significant possible exception to the generalization that 'epithets' are not embeddable is the 'adjectival' fucking:

(71) Drown that fucking cat!
It might appear that an analysis with embedded 'fuck that cat' is excluded by the restriction on determiners: one can say

(72) I found seven fucking irregular verbs.
but not

(73) *Fuck seven irregular verbs.
However, since Kuroda ('A note on relativization', to appear in Language) has shown that relative clauses all go through an intermediate stage in which the relativized NP is made definite, that is no obstacle to the analysis. Moreover, a sentence such as (71) conveys the same attitude by the speaker towards the cat as does

(74) Fuck that cat.,
thus giving much semantic plausibility to this analysis. However, one must keep in mind two problems: (a) many quasi-verbs do not allow such a construction:

(75) *Drown that shitting cat.
and (b) there is no corresponding relative:
(76) *Drown that cat which fuck.