

Title	THE SIMPLE IMPERATIVE
Author(s)	Kodani, Shinichiro
Citation	Osaka Literary Review. 8 P.21-P.30
Issue Date	1969-06-20
Text Version	publisher
URL	https://doi.org/10.18910/25821
DOI	10.18910/25821
rights	
Note	

Osaka University Knowledge Archive : OUKA

<https://ir.library.osaka-u.ac.jp/repo/ouka/all/>

THE SIMPLE IMPERATIVE

Shinichiro Kodani

1. Introduction

“Stand up,” “Sit down,” “Open your books,” “Read,” ... Perhaps no English sentences are more familiar than these simple imperatives to those in Japan who have ever been exposed to English as a foreign language -- so frequently have we heard them in the classrooms. These imperatives, however, seem to be sparingly used in our intercourses with Americans, and even among the native speakers. In the classrooms I have often watched with a little surprise an American instructor tell his Japanese students “Could you read ... ?” instead of just “Read ...”

These instances convey the impression that simple imperative sentences might not be used so much as we Japanese expect them to be. Some scholars have pointed out that the use of simple imperatives is now restricted to children and employers, that is, in the circumstances in which ‘thou’ was used three centuries ago. Some have gone so far as to predict the possibility that the simple imperative will be out of use in the English language in three centuries.¹ When reading detective stories and film scenarios, however, we find so many simple imperatives that we feel as if half of the book were written in sentences of this sort. Which view, then, is more true to facts?

The aim of this paper is to study the present status of the

simple imperatives. Since the materials under investigation are rather limited, an exhaustive explication would be out of the question, but I hope it might be possible to look into some important phases of the matter.

2. Materials and Procedure

2. 1. Materials

The situations in which simple imperative sentences appear are conversations, so that the samples were collected from the plays written during these two centuries. The span of such a long period has seemed to be necessary if one is to conduct a diachronic study as well as a synchronic one. The selection of the works of particular periods was based on the social and cultural changes in England, for language is a mirror of the culture in which it is used. The data are from the following plays.

1. Before the Industrial Revolution

Richard B. Sheridan,

The School for Scandals (1777)

Oliver Goldsmith,

She Stoops to Conquer (1773)

) (upper-class plays)

2. Before World War I

Lady Gregory, The Rising of the Moon (1907)

J. M. Synge, Riders to the Sea (1904)

Stanley Houghton, The Dear Departed (1908)

) (one-act .
working-
class plays)

3. In the Period between the two World Wars

W. S. Maugham, Sheppy (1933, a working-class play)

idem , Our Betters (1923, an upper-class play)

4. Present Day

Peter Shaffer, Five Finger Exercise (1958, an upper-class play)

Arnold Wesker, The Kitchen (1960, a working-class play)

Edward Albee, The American Dream (1961, an American play)

William L. Clark, Spoken American English (1957, a conversation book, Advanced Course)

2. 2. Classification of Simple Imperatives

For the purpose of this paper I have adopted Mr. Kenzo Ito's sub-categorization,² which I have modified a little.

Types of Simple Imperatives

- | | |
|--|---|
| 1. <u>Go</u> . (pure imperative) | 2. <u>You go</u> . (with the subject) |
| 3. <u>Do go</u> . (emphatic) | 4. <u>Be sure ...</u> , <u>Mind ...</u> |
| 5. <u>Please go</u> . Go, <u>will you?</u> | 6. <u>Just fancy</u> . |
| 7. <u>Let me go</u> . | |

According to the sub-categories, I have enumerated the samples in the texts, and induced the conclusion from the statistics thereof.

3. Data

3. 1. Present Status of the Simple Imperatives

The Ratio of Imperatives

With a view to comparing the frequency of simple imperative sentences in each play, I have investigated the imperative ratio per one hundred sentences. Let us take the contemporary plays and look into their imperative ratios

'Five Finger Exercise' has 6.0 imperatives per one hundred sentences, 'The Kitchen' has 9.6, 'The American Dream' 6.0, 'Spoken American English' 4.6. The difference of the ratios among them is rather large, though the four plays were all written about 1960. 'The Kitchen', which has the highest ratio, is a play of kitchen workers of a big restaurant, where they work as busily as bees, giving orders and responding. In such circumstances, admittedly, the simplest and clearest way is required of expressing one's need to another. It is natural, therefore, that we should have the highest ratio of simple imperatives in that work. 'Spoken American English', which has the lowest imperative ratio, is a book designed for teaching English, so that stereotyped sentences appear repeatedly for the educational purpose. Naturally we have such a low ratio of imperatives in this book. The other two works show the average ratio of all the plays we have studied.

Kinds of the Imperatives

To compare the kinds of imperatives used in the four contemporary plays, I have examined the frequency of each type of simple imperatives in 2.2. The result shows that the type 'Go' (pure imperatives) appears most frequently of all the types of imperatives and its percentage is 77%. The rest (23%) covers all the other kinds. The frequency order among them is, first, the periphrastic imperative (let me ...), second, the imperative with the subject (You go.), and third, the imperative with 'please' or a tag question (Please go. Go, will you?). My expectation was that the last type would have a greater frequency, but the fact reminds us that the type 'Please go' is only one of the varieties that express

a request. Among the periphrastic imperatives, more than half are 'let's ...' type, and 'let him ...' type is the minority. Perhaps 'let's ...' is most needed as well as phonologically most economical. Moreover, it has simplicity and force. Just compare "Let's go, shall we?" with "Shall we go?", and we see how brisk and buoyant the former sounds.

The Differences of the Imperatives between Classes

It would seem — at least to the unsophisticated mind that the upper class people prefer more polite forms of expressions and the working class tend to use more direct ones. But is this really the case about the simple imperatives? As we have seen above, the comparison of 'The Kitchen' (a working class play) with 'Five Finger Exercise' (an upper-middle class play) certainly supports the naive view above. But we should notice that here are other factors like modern workshops and others also at work, so that it would be dangerous to draw so hasty a conclusion. For further comparison, I shall take up W. S. Maugham's two plays, 'Sheppy' (a working class play) and 'Our Betters' (an upper class play). Although the two plays have the disadvantage that they were written more than one generation ago, they have the advantage of being written by the same author. The percentage of simple imperatives is 5.3 in 'Sheppy', and 5.4 in 'Our Betters'. Here we can see practically no difference in the use of imperatives between them. Thus the imperative ratio depends not so much on the class difference as on the circumstances of the plays. The only prominent difference of simple imperatives between classes is that working class plays have more 'You go' type imperatives than the upper class plays, viz., 35

samples vs. 8 samples. This means that among working class people the type 'You go', which is used for emphasis or to indicate a contrast, is needed more than among upper class people, as is evident from the different circumstances of both parties.

3. 2. Diachronic Comparison

Ratio of the Imperatives

Here are shown the imperative ratios of all the works I have examined.

	Authors	Names of the Plays	Ratios
(1)	Sheridan	The School for Scandals	5.7
	Goldsmith	She Stoops to Conquer	6.0
(2)	Three One-Act Plays		7.2
(3)	Maugham	Sheppy	5.3
	idem	Our Betters	5.4
(4)	Shaffer	Five Finger Exercise	6.0
	Wesker	The Kitchen	9.6
	Albee	The American Dream	6.0
	Clark	Spoken American English	4.6
	Average Ratio		6.2

There are no discernible tendencies of increase or decrease of the imperative ratios. This shows that, as far as the frequency is concerned, the position of imperatives in the discourse has scarcely changed for the past two centuries. Thus, we can see no grounds for assuming that simple imperatives will disappear from the English language in the future.

Kinds of the Imperatives

Here we shall compare the eighteenth century dramas with the

contemporary ones to examine the differences in the kinds of imperatives used therein.

Group A: (The School for Scandals
She Stoops to Conquer

Group B: (The Kitchen
Five Finger Exercise

Although the plays of the two groups were written far apart in time, we find no corresponding difference in the kinds of the imperatives. Only two kinds of the imperatives are found rather different in frequency between the two groups. One is the imperative with the subject, 'You go', 2 to 24 in favor of the group B; the other is the periphrastic imperative to the third person, 'Let him come', 18 to 2 in favor of the group A, the eighteenth century dramas. The 'You go' type may be more necessary in the modern world, where people tend to do things in groups and the speaker often finds occasions to use the imperatives of this type to indicate a contrast. The 'Let him go' type seems to be a formal, or stiff expression.

Verbs Used in Imperative Sentences

My foregoing discussion has revealed that the frequency of the imperatives has changed very little for the past two centuries. Then, can we take this as an evidence to show that there has been no change? Today we have an impression that the verbs used in the imperatives are somewhat similar in kind. To answer the question above and to inspect whether the impression is a right one, I shall take up two plays 'She Stoops to Conquer' and 'The American Dream', and compare the verbs used in the imperatives in

them. These two plays are almost the same in length, the number of the simple imperatives of each play is 102 and 100, and the imperative ratio is the same, i. e., 6.0. In the older play 70 different verbs are used in 102 imperative sentences, while the modern American play has 40 different verbs for the 100 imperatives. This might mean that the variety of verbs in the imperatives and the circumstances in which they are used are more restricted today than two centuries ago. It is true that the comparison of this pair alone will not lead us to any definite conclusion, but we might take the result as an evidence to indicate a tendency in the historical changes of simple imperatives.

Imperative Verbs in a Conversation Book

With a view to investigating types of verbs used in the imperatives in Present-Day English, I shall take up 'Spoken American English' and classify the imperative verbs therein. They will be put in the five major groups as:

1. Say, Look, Come, See, etc. (a kind of interjection)
2. Come, Wait, Go, etc. (verbs indicating the movement
from one place to another)
3. Don't worry, Be careful, etc.
4. Believe me, Tell me, etc.
5. Excuse me, Don't mention it, etc. (idiomatic use)

In the book there are 57 imperative sentences, for which 36 different kinds of verbs are used. Only five verbs out of 36 are not included in the five groups above. Now is it too much to consider that today verbs cannot be used so freely in the imperatives? Of course, the fact that the text is a conversation book restricts the

validity of the conclusion from the data, but we might take it that the result shows a tendency in the English language of today.

4. Conclusion

Today is the age when everybody always goes forward, is always on the move, and always has something to do with others. Therefore in the circumstances like workshops, people tend to express their needs straightforward and to require direct responses from others, as we have seen in 'The Kitchen' in 3.1. When at home, people are relaxed and express their desires plainly, thus doing away with superfluous words. These phases of life will strongly contribute to the continuance, or rather strengthening of the use of simple imperatives

On the other hand, our time is the age of democracy, also. The ideal of democracy prevails throughout the world, so that people feel more reluctant to show their superiority over others in their face to face association. Thus they try to avoid imperative sentences as best they can, which are nothing but explicit expressions of one's predominance over another. The more civilized the world becomes, the more sophisticated will people grow. Language, then, will tend to be more indirect and to avoid imperative sentences.

The conflict of these two tendencies will lead the imperatives to a certain destination which the future alone will know. But as I have discussed already, the data show that simple imperatives have had the unchanged ratio in the discourse for the past two centuries, although the variety of verbs to be used in this form is getting

more restricted. I would rather think that the simple imperative, which was the oldest form in the history of the language and has been the simplest way of expressing human needs, will survive in the future.

notes

1. Kenzo Ito (伊藤健三), 心態の表現. (研究社, 1968), p. 5.
2. *ibid.*, pp. 4-8.