



University of Pennsylvania Working Papers in Linguistics

Volume 24 | Issue 1

Article 7

3-30-2018

General Prohibition: A New Type of English Imperative

Michael Donovan
University of Delaware

This paper is posted at ScholarlyCommons. <https://repository.upenn.edu/pwpl/vol24/iss1/7>
For more information, please contact repository@pobox.upenn.edu.

General Prohibition: A New Type of English Imperative

Abstract

This paper is an investigation of the properties of what I term the general prohibitive in English. This paper is an introduction to the distribution of general prohibitives, as well as a formal analysis of general prohibition in English. This is a new type of English imperative that has previously gone unnoticed. General prohibitives are used to express banned entities such as “No smoking!” or “No pets!” I will demonstrate that general prohibitives are directives and have nearly identical distribution with imperatives. I propose this is because a null imperative mood marker is present in general prohibitives, and that restrictions on imperative mood explain the restriction on general prohibitives. Additionally, the possibility of adding the word “allowed” to these construction overtly without any change in distribution or meaning leads me to include “allowed” as an adjectival passive explicitly in the structure. The interaction between this null imperative mood marker and a negative element in the clause (“no”, “only”) licenses general prohibitives and explains their syntactic distribution.

General Prohibition: A New Type of English Imperative

Michael Donovan

1 Introduction

This paper is concerned with a set of forms which I term general prohibitives. I co-opt the term *prohibitive* from the literature on imperatives (Zanuttini 1997, Aikhenvald 1999, and Xrakovskij 2001, among others) and apply it additionally to constructions like those seen below in (1). For the purposes of these authors and mine, a prohibitive is simply a negative directive. They can commonly be seen on public signs or notices.¹

- (1) a. No jumping on the sofa!
- b. No crying in baseball!
- c. No visitors past 10 p.m.!
- d. No spoilers in this thread!

The word “allowed” (or a synonym) can optionally be pronounced in every instance of general prohibition. The directive force of this expression makes it very similar to the negative imperative. However, general prohibitives differ from negative imperatives (e.g., “Don’t smoke!”) in that they do not take imperative morphology, lack 2nd person subjects and have no tensed main verb. The lack of a main verb is most obvious in (1c-d) above, where “visitors” and “spoilers” are prohibited without any overt verb expressed on the surface. Additionally, the form that negation takes with general prohibitives is “no,” as opposed to “not” in negative imperatives. This suggests that general prohibition is not simply an instance of constituent negation, as the form of constituent negation in English is “not.”

Searle (1976) defines directives as “attempts by the speaker to get the hearer to do something,” and so negative directives are attempts at the opposite, to get the hearer to *not* do something. I will abide by this definition throughout this paper. The types of prohibitives that I investigate here are *general* in the sense that their default interpretation is applicable to everyone in a given context (making them good candidates for street signs). The interpretation of general prohibitives like those in (1) above is that they apply to everyone in a discourse context as opposed to a subset of individuals in that discourse context. This contrasts with standard imperatives, which apply only to the addressee. General prohibitives appear to have a necessarily universal addressee, thus (1a) could reasonably be paraphrased as “No one is allowed to jump on the sofa,” or as “Nobody jump on the sofa!”

Although I coin the term “general prohibitive” here, closely related phenomena have received peripheral mention (though not extensive analysis) several times previously in the literature to my knowledge. Huddleston and Pullum (2002) mentions *verbless directives*, which include examples like (1a-d) above, but offers no analysis of their structure and simply notes their existence. Seiss (2008) notes the existence of general prohibitives with gerunds as the head noun such as “No swimming!” (she calls these “No DET-ing” type gerunds) but ignores the existence of “No + simple noun” such as “No sharks!” Hudson (2003) also mentions the existence of what he calls “No + gerund clause” and argues for mixed nominal and verbal properties for gerunds. In each of these cases, the main focus of their analysis is the distribution of the gerund phrase. English allows prohibiting bare nouns (1c and 1d) and there is no substantive reason to believe that prohibitives with gerunds and prohibitives with bare nouns are structurally or semantically different in any significant way in English.² This work will treat gerunds as NPs, and will consider them identical to bare

¹Some actual signs take imperative syntax, such as “Do Not Enter” The focus of this paper will be on general prohibitives of the form “No X!”

²There is, however, substantive reason to believe that they *can* behave differently in other languages. In Spanish, prohibition of actions require the infinitival form, and that form has negation preceding the infinitive (e.g., “¡No nadar!”). Prohibition of bare nouns has the noun preceding the negation, with a prosodic break (e.g., “¡Perros, no!”)

noun phrases, such as “tigers” in the prohibitive “No tigers!” The syntactic distribution of general prohibitives has not been substantively addressed in any of these works and the semantics are not addressed at all. This paper will therefore lay out the facts of general prohibition before proposing an analysis.

2 Analysis of General Prohibitives

I will lay out both the semantic and distributional facts about general prohibitives before providing my analysis. The semantic facts will lead me to conclude that there is an imperative mood marker present, which provides general prohibitives with their directive semantics and pragmatics. The distributional facts are that restrictions on general prohibitives are based on where imperative mood can appear (only with matrix clauses). The presence of imperative mood is incompatible with a tensed predicate, and the absence of tense marking causes a directive interpretation. Imperative mood, when combined with negation, provides the semantics of banning the nominal element in the prohibitive. Section 2.1 will discuss the semantics and pragmatics of the construction and Section 2.2 will discuss the syntactic facts.

2.1 Directive Semantics and Pragmatics

General prohibitives are directive speech acts (Searle 1976). The lack of a tensed predicate in general prohibitives correlates with directivity. When a tensed predicate is present, as in (2) below, a directive reading is impossible. Compare the directive reading seen in (1) to the following examples in (2).³

- (2) a. No jumping on the sofa is allowed.
 b. No crying in baseball is permitted.
 c. No visitors past 10 p.m. are admissible.
 d. No spoilers in this thread are acceptable.

The sentences in (2) are nearly identical to the sentences given in (1), but with the predicate “is allowed” (or a synonym) added overtly. Each of the examples in (2) has roughly the same meaning of its counterpart in (1) respectively. However, there is a significant pragmatic difference between the sentences in (1) and (2). The sentences in (1) have the added meaning of directivity on behalf of the speaker. Thus, “No jumping on the sofa!” is a command and is infelicitous in a context where the speaker is simply conveying knowledge about the state of the world. This directivity requires that the speaker is invested in the directive being carried out. (2), on the other hand, is perfectly compatible with an indicative context and dispassionately conveys the knowledge that the action is banned, but does not specify by whom. Evidence in support of the added directive force to the prohibitives in (1) but not the statements in (2) comes from the possibility to cancel the statements but not the prohibitives. General prohibitives can’t be canceled because they are directive speech acts, unlike their statement counterparts, as seen below in (3).

- (3) a. No jumping on the sofa is allowed, but we’re going to do it anyway.
 b. #No jumping on the sofa! But we’re going to do it anyway.

My conclusion is that imperative mood is present in (3b) but absent in (3a), and this mood is responsible for this difference in directivity. The core of this proposal is that the lack of a tensed predicate in the prohibitive part of (3b) forces a directive reading because of the added semantic force from imperative mood. This does not happen in the declarative (3a). This effect makes (3b) impossible to cancel, compared to (3a), which is cancellable. The lack of tensed predicates with imperatives is most likely due to a separate restriction requiring imperatives to be non-finite.

³For stylistic purposes, I have chosen to mark general prohibitives with an exclamation point and simple declaratives without. I believe the punctuation reflects the standard difference in prosody between statements and commands.

So long as the predicate is tenseless, these expressions receive directive interpretation. Another consideration related to this is that the word “allowed” (or a synonym) can always be added overtly to general prohibitives without changing their meaning or distribution at all, so long as tense is absent. When general prohibitives have the adjectival passive “allowed” added, they possess the same directivity and interpretation as when it’s absent (as seen in (1)).

- (4) a. No jumping allowed on the sofa!
 b. No visitors permitted past 10 p.m.!
 c. No tickets required.

The distribution of clauses with “allowed” expressed overtly (4a,b) is identical to bare general prohibitives (1). Note that when a “No + NP” phrase is paired with the adjectival passive “allowed”, the resulting utterance carries the pragmatic force of a directive (4a,b). When a different adjectival passive is present (e.g., “required”), the expression has the pragmatic force of a declarative (4c). The fact that “allowed” is possible in (4a,b) with directive reading and the same interpretation suggests that it has the same structure as the form that does not contain “allow” overtly.

I propose that “allowed” in this case is an adjectival passive⁴ that can function as the predicate of the subject “No + X” for general prohibitives. Thus, general prohibitives are actually instances of an entire clause that is marked with imperative mood. When “be” is deleted from this clause, it will provide a directive interpretation. The only way to provide a tenseless predicate in general prohibitives is to omit the verb entirely (e.g., *No smoking be allowed!). The tense is either vacant in this expression, or there is a “be” that is obligatorily deleted. These two analyses seem indistinguishable to me in this case. This adjunct is an overt realization of a deontic modal associated with imperative mood, rather than a specific lexical item. This is why “allow” and its synonyms can appear with directive force but no other adjectival passives can.

2.2 Syntactic Distribution

In this section, I propose that general prohibitives contain a subject of the form “No + X” with an optional adjectival passive modifier, spelled out as “allowed” or a synonym. This adjectival passive is not intended to be any specific lexical item, but is likely an overt realization of a deontic modal that is associated with imperative mood. This imperative mood imposes distributional restrictions on general prohibitives.

There is good reason to believe that the subject of standard imperatives is 2nd person, as seen below in (5), taken from Zwicky (1988).

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

Although Zwicky convincingly shows that the subject of standard imperatives is 2nd person, the subject of general prohibitives cannot be 2nd person, following the same tests that Zwicky (1988) used, seen below in (6).

- (6) a. No smoking in this restaurant! Actually, is there? / *are you?
 b. No hitting yourself / oneself!

The impossibility of 2nd person in tag questions (6a) and the acceptability of “oneself” in anaphoric contexts (6b) shows that there can’t be a true 2nd person subject in general prohibitives. The acceptability of “yourself” in (6b) is only due to the possibility of generic “you” in English, and does not represent 2nd person.

It’s also clear that standard imperatives and general prohibitives have different subjects with evidence from embedding. Although embedded imperatives are highly restricted, an example where an embedded imperative seems to be grammatical is the conventionalized idiom “break a leg”, which is typically limited to imperatives.

⁴I can’t offer a substantive analysis of adjectival passives here, for a more detailed discussion see Levin and Rappaport (1986) for a reasonable starting point on the topic.

- (7) a. ??I broke a leg.
 b. Break a leg!
 c. I told him to break a leg out there.
 d. *I told him to no smoking.

The construction “break a leg” is typically limited to imperatives (7a,b) but it seems to be permissible in embedded environments (7c). General prohibitives are not allowed in the same environment, however (7d). The acceptability of (7c) is likely due to PRO needing to be the subject of the lower clause. This position is available in standard imperatives, and this sentence is acceptable for this reason. However, this position is not available in general prohibitives.

I propose that the reason these tests produce different results for standard imperatives and general prohibitives is because the overt material in general prohibitives (but not standard imperatives) is the subject of a clause that has been elided. The elided section of the prohibitive provides it with its meaning.

This elided material has effects on the distribution of general prohibitives. There are several distributional properties of general prohibitives which are not immediately obvious from their surface structure of the determiner “no” followed by a noun. For example, two distributional properties of general prohibitives can be seen below in (8).

- (8) 1. General prohibitives cannot be embedded and can only appear in matrix clauses.
 2. General prohibitives are incompatible with past tense modifiers.

Any analysis of general prohibitives has to account for both the asymmetry in directivity between tensed and untensed predicates described in Section 2.1, and the distributional facts listed above in (8). Fortunately, both of the generalizations listed above in (8) fall out naturally from general prohibitives being imperative mood. If both standard imperatives and general prohibitives have an imperative mood marker, then it is plausible to expect the same restrictions would apply to both constructions. English imperatives resist embedding (Sadock and Zwicky 1985, Han 1998), and imperatives resist past tense modification crosslinguistically (Aikhenvald 2010). These crosslinguistic tendencies are not surprising, as imperative mood needs to dominate the entire clause as a speech act marker. Because of this, it can only be positioned in matrix clauses. Imperative mood is incapable of appearing in embedded positions. Although general prohibitives cannot appear in embedded environments (9a,b), their counterparts with the predicate realized overtly (9c,d) are grammatical in the same set of environments, as demonstrated below in (9).

- (9) a. *I believe no whistling (allowed) there.
 b. *The fact that no hats on the golf course (allowed) surprised me.
 c. I believe no whistling is allowed there.
 d. The fact that no hats are allowed on the golf course surprised me.

The ungrammaticality of (9a,b) is due to a restriction on where imperative mood can appear. Examples (9c,d) are grammatical because they are not imperatives. Embedded imperatives are highly marked cross-linguistically and have very limited distribution in English⁵ (Portner 2007, Aikhenvald 2010, Alcázar and Saltarelli 2014). Note that non-finite clauses are compatible with “believe” in (9) (e.g., “John believes Mary to be smart.”) showing that the restriction cannot be related to restrictions on non-finite clauses.

The restrictions on embedded imperatives in English can therefore be explained by specifying a requirement for imperative mood to only appear in root clauses, and not embedded clauses. If general prohibition carries the directive force of an imperative, and embedded imperatives in English

⁵Crnič and Trinh (2009) point out that embedded imperatives are possible under “say”. This is no problem for this analysis, as general prohibitives are also possible in this environment.

- (1) a. John said [call Mary]!
 b. John said [no smoking]!

are generally ungrammatical, it follows naturally that general prohibitives are ungrammatical in embedded positions. This follows the assumption, adopted here, that the imperative mood is identical in both cases. The distributional facts support this intuition. Note that these prohibitive meanings can be expressed in embedded environments without the directivity in (9c,d)

An additional semantic restriction of general prohibitives is that they are incompatible with past tense modifiers like ‘yesterday.’ Bare general prohibitives like “No tigers!” only have a present or future tense reading available to them, and are infelicitous or very odd with adjuncts that force a past tense reading. As with embedding, an overt predicate provides no pragmatic violation, as there is no directivity.

- (10) a. #No parking last year!
 b. No parking was allowed last year.
 c. No parking right now!
 d. No parking next week!

I have marked (10a) as infelicitous rather than ungrammatical because it is not a syntactic restriction that rules it out, but a semantic one. True past tense imperatives are unattested cross-linguistically (Aikhenvald 2010). The lack of past tense imperatives makes sense under Portner’s (2007) “To-Do List” model of imperatives, which posits that imperatives involve a request for the addressee to update their “To-Do List” with the meaning of the imperative. Under Portner’s model, it is intuitive that directives should be incompatible with events that have already taken place, as it is impossible to update your “To-Do List” with a past event. (10b) is perfectly acceptable in the past tense, showing that it is not a restriction on “allowed” but rather a co-occurrence restriction between past tense and imperative mood. The presence of imperative mood in (10a) causes it to be infelicitous, and its absence means that (10b) is felicitous. This restriction works the exact same way it works for syntactic imperatives (e.g., “#Eat yesterday!”).⁶

2.3 Structure

The fact that “allowed” can be overtly added into general prohibitives is a crucial insight into their structure. Without this insight, a reasonable starting point for the structure of general prohibitives could be a simple NP with no predicate at all. This approach is based on what appears on the surface of bare general prohibitives. Thus, one initially plausible “bare” structure for “No trucks!” is the structure below in (11).

- (11)
- ```

 NP
 / \
 Det N'
 No |
 N
 trucks

```

I consider the structure above in (11) to be a “null hypothesis” for the structure of the maximal projection of general prohibitives. This structure involves only an NP, with “no” as a determiner. The most obvious benefit to this analysis is that it doesn’t posit any additional structure to the prohibitive, so it’s a reasonable starting point.

One immediate problem for this analysis however is that it treats the structure for “No trucks!” seen above and the structure for “No trucks allowed!” as separate. This is undesirable because both constructions mean the same thing, have the same directive force, and have identical syntactic distributions. Because they are identical in every way, that should be represented in the structure.

Another serious problem is that a lone NP account provides no explanation of how general prohibitives obtain their imperative-like semantics. Having a bare NP as the structure allows for

<sup>6</sup>All of these past tense imperatives can become felicitous if you conjure a “time machine” context where you could reasonably command someone to do something in the past. This effect is identical for standard imperatives and general prohibitives.

flexible interpretations of possible predicates, yet the interpretations of “No + NP” is not flexible, but rigid. If general prohibitives are simple NPs, projecting maximally to an NP, then where do they get their directive semantics? It’s obvious that there’s something other than a simple nominal phrase to general prohibitives.

In order to obtain the right meaning, there needs to be some aspect of “allowance” represented in the derivation. This is because the only possible interpretation for general prohibitives is “Nobody is *allowed* to jump on the sofa.” This is unexpected in light of the fact that “No + NP” can take many predicates other than “is allowed” in standard declaratives.

- (12) a. No cash is required.  
 b. No greeting is necessary.  
 c. No iguanas live in my apartment.

If No + NP can take multiple predicates, it seems reasonable to assume that the lack of an overt predicate should be ambiguous between all of the possible predicates it could take. There might be certain readings that are preferred to be pragmatically enriched (the “allow” reading), but other readings should be contextually available. The fact that these are impossible strongly suggests that there is more material present than simply an NP, and that material represents the meaning of “allow”. Positing only an NP has no way to account for this fact. Thus, the simple NP hypothesis fails to adequately account for the semantics of the general prohibitives.

It’s reasonable, however, to consider that the complement ‘is allowed’ could just be conventionalized due to the overwhelmingly high frequency with which the “is allowed” predicate appears related to the other possible predicates. Such a consideration might favor not representing “allow” explicitly in the syntactic structure. If this convention was simply a matter of pragmatic enrichment, we could assume that the generalization about the “allow” interpretation of general prohibitives is based on a conventionalized pragmatic enrichment effect that was provided by the lack of context. In isolation, the default interpretation of “allowed” would not necessarily be surprising based on a frequency view. However, context cannot provide other predicates, no matter how logically salient they might be, as seen below in (13).

- (13) a. A: Is a textbook mandatory for class?  
 B: #No textbooks!

B’s response in (13) cannot be enriched to “No textbooks required!” even in a context where the meaning “required” would be felicitous and the meaning “allowed” would be infelicitous. The fact that context cannot override the conventional allow-predicate leads me to the conclusion that pragmatic enrichment is not the cause of the generalization about “allow” in general prohibitives. Context may be able to overcome conventionalized readings, but this type of effect cannot be the explanation for the meaning of general prohibitives. General prohibitives clearly do not get their semantics from contextual pragmatic enrichment.

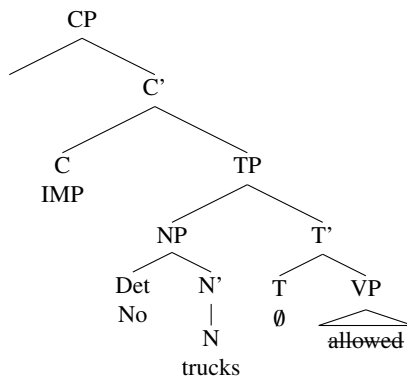
It is possible at this point to argue that the effect in general prohibitives could be explained due to a very strong conventionalized pragmatic enrichment effect, which is so strong that it overcomes all contextual clues. I can’t see a way to argue directly against this approach, but the difference doesn’t seem theoretically clear to me. One approach says that the predicate is present underlyingly and deleted. The other says that there is no predicate but that only one type of meaning (the allow predicate) can be pragmatically enriched by the construction, and that this enrichment occurs regardless of context. It’s more sound to have meaning represented in the structure if possible, and so I have chosen to represent “allow” as an adjectival passive explicitly in the structure below in (14).<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup>I assume IMP mood must dominate the rest of the structure, I place it on C here for convenience.



(14)



All of the distributional facts about general prohibitives and their semantic and pragmatic functions fall out from this proposed structure. Analyzing general prohibitives with this covert structure present provides several benefits. The first is that there is a good explanation for the pragmatic difference between general prohibitives and their counterparts with an overt predicate. This is explained if imperative mood is forcing the directive interpretation, which combines with negation to produce the meaning “not allowed”. So when general prohibitives surface, the only possible reconstructed meaning involves “is allowed” and not some other predicate. The interaction of the presence or absence of imperative mood derives the directive semantics of the construction. Additionally, imperative mood is incompatible with tensed predicates, explaining why tensed predicates can only have a statement interpretation, but untensed predicates have a directive interpretation. I have left the tense head null in the structure above, but “be” could also be obligatorily deleted.

When the “allowed” portion of the predicate is deleted, adjuncts are not deleted along with the VP (e.g., *No swimming in the pool!*). VP ellipsis can leave behind adjuncts (Lobeck 1995), and so I assume this “allow” deletion is standard VP ellipsis. This provides no problem following the standard view that VP ellipsis can only target non-finite clauses in English, as general prohibitives lack tense. Copula deletion is possible with adjectival passives in English. Simple “be” deletion is a phenomenon that can appear with these types of No + NP subjects and various past-participle predicates. In fact, “be” deletion can occur with other subjects in positive environments as well (15c).

- (15) a. No swimming allowed!  
 b. No tickets required.  
 c. Help wanted.

The same restrictions mentioned previously (no embedding, no past tense modifiers) also apply to instances of be-deletion with overt ‘allow’ (15a). ‘Be-deletion’ is not possible in embedded environments with directive interpretation, nor is it compatible with past tense modifiers. For these reasons, it is intuitive to treat both forms as identical at some level of representation. In the cases where “allow” is also deleted, the content is pragmatically recoverable based on the directivity.

Deleting ‘be’ removes any overt main verb from the clause and makes the clause non-finite. Thus, it is “be-deletion” that causes the directive interpretation of general prohibitives by removing tense specification from the clause. When “be” is deleted, the clause must be interpreted with directive pragmatics regardless of whether or not “allow” is present. “Allow” can also be elided as a case of standard VP ellipsis and can be pragmatically recovered. This expression is inflexible in its interpretation, suggesting that only “allow” has this capability among adjectival passive modifiers.

### 3 Outstanding Issues

#### 3.1 Some Additional Properties of General Prohibitives

Section 2 covered the facts about the distributional properties that fall out naturally from having imperative mood. This section ties some loose ends, because there are some additional properties of

general prohibitives that do not seem follow simply from imperative clause type.

In Section 2, I discussed the inability for general prohibitives to appear in embedded environments and their clash with past tense modifiers. I would like to add to those generalizations (which fall out naturally from imperative mood) with two new observations (3 and 4) in (16) below. I provide them in this section because their connection to imperative mood is not immediately obvious.

- (16)
1. General prohibitives resist embedding and can only appear in matrix clauses.
  2. General prohibitives are incompatible with past tense modifiers.
  3. **There is no direct positive counterpart to general prohibitives.**
  4. **General prohibitives require plural marking on the head noun, for count nouns.**

We have already seen that there are distributional restrictions on general prohibitives based on imperative mood. The restrictions listed in 3 and 4 above don't fall out obviously from this interaction, but I argue that they are entirely plausible based on other considerations. In the next two subsections I investigate conditions 3 and 4 in (16) in more detail.

### 3.2 General Prohibitives, not General Permissives

One seemingly bizarre distributional fact about general prohibitives is that they lack a positive counterpart. Indeed, this fact is why I termed this structure *general prohibitives* as opposed to *general directives*. Note the following asymmetries in (17a,b) and (17c,d) below. This fact does not fall out obviously from the interaction of imperative mood and predicates with “allow”, as imperative mood should be compatible with both positive and negative forms. The same restrictions are not present with tensed clauses (17c,d).

- (17)
- a. \*Swimming in the pool from 8am to 10pm!
  - b. \*Dogs in this apartment!
  - c. Swimming in the pool is allowed from 8am to 10pm.
  - d. Dogs are allowed in this apartment.

Directivity is only possible in these constructions when there is an interaction between imperative mood and a negative, prohibitive environment. They are impossible with a positive, permissive environment. (17a,b) cannot be interpreted positively as “swimming” or “dogs” being allowed. Positive environments are compatible with tensed “allow” as shown in (17c,d), but general prohibitives are not possible in this environment because it is positive rather than negative. If the interaction of imperative mood and the predicate are all that triggers prohibition, the results in (17) should be surprising.

There are positive imperatives of this type that involve “be” deletion, however. Certain small clauses can be interpreted with directive force, as seen below in (18).

- (18)
- a. Feet off the sofa!
  - b. Hands where I can see them!

I propose therefore that “be” deletion is the crucial driving force behind the directive interpretation of general prohibitives, considering that it is mandatory in every instance of general prohibition. The removal of a tense feature from the clause is what provide phrases with their directive reading, regardless of negation.

As for why (17a,b) are unacceptable, I propose that the lack of a permissive form represents an asymmetry in the distribution of negative imperative clause type in English. Typological facts about the morphological distribution of imperative mood suggest that it is possible for positive imperative clause types and negative imperative clause types to have different distributions. Zanuttini (1997) discusses the different distribution of true imperatives and suppletive imperatives in Romance languages. In the languages Zanuttini describes, true imperatives can only surface in positive contexts, and suppletive forms are required for negative imperatives. The following examples in (19), taken from Zanuttini (1997), illustrate this. Example (19a) shows that negative imperatives don't take imperative morphology in Spanish, example (19b) shows that they must take subjunctive morphology.

- (19) a. \*No habla!  
 NEG talk-IMP  
 ‘Don’t speak!’
- b. No hables!  
 NEG talk-SUBJ  
 ‘Don’t speak!’

Based on this, it is not implausible in English that the modal that licenses positive imperatives is not the same modal that licenses negative imperatives, and that only the negative modal this construction. Because this is an imperative construction, it’s plausible that this type of distribution asymmetry is at work.

Although there is a possible syntactic account of this that splits up positive and negative imperative mood, the simpler explanation may be to invoke functional pragmatic considerations. Following Portner (2007)’s To-Do List model of imperatives, a general prohibitive is a request for any possible addressee to not update their To-Do List with the material contained in the prohibitive. In the positive however, there is no request to update the To-Do List, because you would simply be stating what someone is allowed to do, but there is no specific request for anyone to actually take part in any activity. Understanding commands as involving a pragmatic To-Do List therefore provides a useful explanation for the asymmetry between positive and negative forms for these types of constructions.

### 3.3 Head Count Nouns Must Bear Plural Number Marking

One final restriction on general prohibitives is that they are required to take plural marking on their head noun, if that noun is count. The following in (20) below shows the ungrammaticality of singular subjects with general prohibitives. If the head noun is a mass noun, as in (20c), there is no restriction.

- (20) a. \*No dog in my apartment!  
 b. No dogs in my apartment!  
 c. No jello in my apartment!

This shows that general prohibition cannot simply be an interaction of determiner ‘no’, imperative mood, and “allow”, because (20a) should be grammatical under these considerations. Note that in typical declarative contexts, “no” can optionally take singular or plural number marking on the head noun with no obvious difference in meaning.

- (21) a. No iguanas live on Mars.  
 b. No iguana lives on Mars.

I propose that the reason that plural number marking is required on the head noun of general prohibitives is that they are *generic statements*. Cohen (2001) shows that both indefinite singulars and bare plurals can be generic in English (examples in (22) taken from Cohen (2001)).

- (22) a. A madrigal is polyphonic. (indefinite singular)  
 b. Madrigals are polyphonic. (bare plural)

However, indefinite singular generics have an additional restriction, which is that they must take predicates that are *definitional* in some way. When their predicates are not reasonably definitional, they are unacceptable, as seen below in (23) (judgment taken from Cohen (2001)).

- (23) a. \*A madrigal is popular.

Cohen’s restriction on indefinite singulars can be applied to general prohibitives. Because general prohibitives always take the predicate “allowed,” it is impossible for them to surface with singular number marking. Being “allowed” can never be the definition of anything, thus singulars are impossible with general prohibitives.

## 4 Conclusion

This paper has identified general prohibitives as a novel construction and provides an analysis. This analysis posits that general prohibitives have restrictions on their distribution which follow from restrictions on imperative mood. Additional restrictions fall out from typological facts about the difference between positive and negative forms in imperatives, and from restrictions on number marking in generic statements. I have laid out the problems for any analysis that attempts to analyze general prohibitives in this paper, so that analyses of this construction can be extended to other languages, or in different frameworks with English. This analysis has only included English, so a natural starting point for future analyses is how general prohibition works in other languages, which is outside the scope of this work.

## References

- Aikhenvald, Alexandra. 1999. Areal Diffusion and Language Contact in the Içana-Vaupés Basin, North-West Amazonia. In *The Amazonian Languages*, ed. R.M.W. Dixon and A.Y. Aikhenvald, 384-416. Cambridge, Mass.: Cambridge University Press.
- Aikhenvald, Alexandra. 2010. *Imperatives and Commands*. Oxford University Press.
- Alcázar, Asier and Mario Saltarelli. 2014. *Syntax of Imperatives*. Cambridge University Press.
- Cohen, Ariel. 2001. On the generic use of indefinite singulars. *Journal of Semantics*. 18:3, 183-209.
- Crnić, Luka and Tue Trinh. 2009. Embedding Imperatives in English. In: *Proceedings of Sinn und Bedeutung* eds. Riester, Arndt and Torim Solstad 13, pp. 113–127.
- Han, Chung-hye. 1998. The Structure and Interpretation of Imperatives: Mood and Force in Universal Grammar. Doctoral dissertation, University of Pennsylvania.
- Hudson, Richard. 2003. Gerunds without phrase structure. *Natural Language and Linguistic Theory* 21:579–615.
- Huddleston, Rodney and Geoffrey Pullum. 2002. *The Cambridge Grammar of the English Language*. Cambridge University Press.
- Kubota, Yusuke and Robert Levine. 2016. Pseudogapping as Pseudo-VP-Ellipsis. *Linguistic Inquiry*. 48:213-257.
- Levin, Beth and Malka Rappaport. 1986. The Formation of Adjectival Passives. *Linguistic Inquiry*. 17:623-661.
- Lobeck, Anne. 1995. *Ellipsis*. Oxford University Press.
- Portner, Paul. 2007. Imperatives and Modals. *Natural Language Semantics* 15(4), 351-383.
- Portner, Paul. 2009. *Modality*. Oxford University Press. (Series in Semantics and Pragmatics)
- Potsdam, Eric. 2007. "Analysing Word Order in the English Imperative." Imperative Clauses in Generative Grammar. ed. Wim van der Wurff, Wim. 251-272. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Sadock, Jerrold M. and Zwicky, Arnold M. 1985. "Speech act distinctions in syntax," in *Language Typology and Syntactic Description. Vol. 1: Clause Structure*, ed. Shopen, T. 155-196. Cambridge University Press.
- Seiss, Melanie. 2008. The English -ing form. In *On-Line Proceedings of the LFG08 Conference*. University of Sydney, Sydney. CSLI Publications
- Searle, John R. 1976. *A classification of illocutionary acts*. *Language in Society*, 5, pp. 1-23.
- Xrakovskij, Victor S. 2001. *Typology of Imperative Constructions*. München: Lincom Europa.
- Zanuttini, Raffaella. 1997. *Negation and Clausal Structure: A Comparative Study of Romance Languages*. Oxford University Press.
- Zwicky, Arnold M. 1988. "On the subject of bare imperatives." in *On Language: Rhetorica, Phonologica, Syntactica – A Festschrift for Robert P. Stockwell from His Friends and Colleagues*, eds. Duncan-Rose, C. and Vennemann, 437-450. T. London: Routledge.

Department of Linguistics and Cognitive Science  
 University of Delaware  
 125 E Main St.  
 Newark, DE 19711  
 donovanm@udel.edu