Person Restrictions in Tagalog Imperatives

Overview. This paper examines person restrictions in Tagalog imperatives and argues that they arise from how imperative force accesses person features on agents. Tagalog displays two morphologically distinct imperative types—bare imperatives and verbal imperatives—which differ systematically in person restrictions. We show that these restrictions follow from a structural difference: bare imperatives lack a functional layer present in verbal imperatives. This functional layer determines whether imperative force can access person features, affecting both illocutionary interpretations in matrix clauses, and information preservation in embedded contexts. The pattern demonstrates that person features in imperatives encode not just agent identity, but also speech act structure.

Empirical data. Bare imperatives restrict the intended agent to addressee: 1SG/3SG agents are impossible, and null agents default to addressee interpretation (1). 3PL is allowed only as an honorific towards the addressee (2).

(1) Kain ∅ / ka / kayo / *ako / *siya!
eat 2 / 2SG / 2PL / 1SG / 3SG
Only: '(You) eat!'

(2) Kain po sila!
eat HON 3PL
Only: '(You) eat!'

Verbal imperatives—those with voice morphology marking a privileged argument (the pivot)—allow agents of all persons. Agent voice (AV) imperatives require overt agents (3), while patient voice (PV) imperatives allow null agents that default to addressee (4).

(3) K⟨um⟩ain *∅ / ka / kayo / ako / siya / sila!
⟨AV⟩eat 2 / 2SG / 2PL / 1SG / 3SG / 3PL
'(You) eat!' / Commissive: 'I will eat!' / Optative: 'May s/he eat!'

(4) Kain-in ∅ / mo / ninyo / ko / niya / nila ang mansanas!
eat-PV 2 / 2SG / 2PL / 1SG / 3SG / 3PL PIV apple
'(You) eat the apple!' / Commissive: 'I will eat the apple!' / Optative: 'May s/he eat the apple!'

Crucially, non-addressee agents receive different illocutionary interpretations: first person yields commissive readings (speaker commitment), third person yields optative readings (speaker desire)[1].

These person-based interpretive differences extend to embedded contexts. Tagalog allows embedded imperatives under speech verbs, where felicity depends critically on person features. Inclusive 1PL *tayo*, for instance, requires that the current reporter was part of the original addressee set (5) and that the report's addressee is also included (6).

(5) Context: John told Mary "Kain tayo." (eat 1PL.INCL).
Alice overheard and reports to Bill: "Sabi ni John, kain tayo." (John said, eat 1PL.INCL)
Infelicitous; Alice was not originally addressed.

(6) Context: John told Mary and Alice "Kain tayo." (eat 1PL.INCL).
Later, Alice reports to Bill: "Sabi ni John, kain tayo." (John said, eat 1PL.INCL)
✓ Felicitous if John wanted Alice to invite Bill.
Infelicitous if John only wanted to invite Mary and Alice.

Meanwhile, honorific markers like *po* can be added or removed by the reporter, showing they belong to the current speech act rather than the embedded context (7-a) (7-b). Plain 3SG *siya* (7-c) is also infelicitous in reports, revealing that embedded imperatives must preserve information about the addressed group.

[1] Schachter and Otanes 1987 notes that there is inter-speaker variation in acceptability of non-second-person agents in these constructions without an explicit optative particle.

(7) Context: John told Mary, "Kain po sila." (eat HON 3PL, honoring Mary).
Later, Alice reports to Bill:

a. "Sabi ni John, kain sila." (John said, eat 3PL; 3PL = Mary)
✓ Felicitous; Alice is not honoring anyone.

b. "Sabi ni John, kain po sila." (John said, eat HON 3PL; 3PL = Mary)
✓ Felicitous; Alice is honoring *Bill*.

c. "Sabi ni John, kain siya." (John said, eat 3SG; 3SG = Mary)
Infelicitous; *siya* cannot encode addressee at all.

Analysis. We propose that the bare/verbal distinction reflects a structural difference: bare imperatives lack a functional layer F above VoiceP that hosts voice morphology and mediates pivot-oriented operations. Following extensive literature on Tagalog argument structure (Aldridge 2004,2012; Hsieh 2020; Chen 2025, among others), voice morphology is associated with functional structure above the agent-introducing VoiceP head. We remain agnostic about the precise identity of F, but propose it creates a domain where person features become accessible to higher operators.

This structural difference has direct compositional consequences. Following Portner (2007, 2018), imperatives denote properties added to To-Do Lists (TDL). We propose:

(8) **Bare imperatives** (no FP): [[IMP [VoiceP AGENT ...]]] is defined only if AGENT = addressee.
If defined: $\lambda w.P(w) \in TDL_{\text{addressee}}$

With no functional structure mediating between IMP and Voice, the imperative operator directly accesses the agent argument, enforcing a strict definedness condition that the agent must be the addressee (in line with Schwager 2006; Kaufmann 2012).

(9) **Verbal imperatives** (with FP): [[IMP [FP ... [VoiceP AGENT ...]]]] = $\lambda w.P(w) \in TDL_{\text{x}}$

This functional layer allows person features to be checked by the imperative operator: [+addressee] receives a directive interpretation, [+author] receives a commissive interpretation, while [-participant] receives an optative interpretation (cf. Zanuttini et al. 2012 on jussive subjects). The functional layer thus creates a compositional relationship between person features and illocutionary force: the same feature-checking mechanism that licenses non-addressee agents also determines whose To-Do List gets updated and what speech act type results. Person features thus become part of the imperative's semantic content, not merely pragmatic context. This predicts restrictions on embedding.

For embedded imperatives, following Deal's (2020) analysis of indexical shift, we propose that embedded imperatives preserve not just propositional content but also information about which person features are involved—that is, who was originally addressed. This explains why *tayo* (1PL.INCL) requires the reporter and the reporter's addressee to be part of the original addressee group (5). The inclusive features must be truthfully applied across both contexts.

Honorific markers like *po*, by contrast, are matrix-level speech act modifiers. This explains why Alice can add or remove *po* to honor her own addressee (Bill) rather than John's (Mary) (7). Meanwhile, the infelicity of plain 3SG *siya* in reports (7-c) reveals that embedded imperatives must preserve addressing structure, information that *sila* (which doubles as honorific 2P) preserves but *siya* lacks.

Implications. Functional structure determines whether imperative force can access person features for agent identity, affecting illocutionary force availability (matrix) and reportability (embedded). This analysis of the Tagalog pattern supports compositional approaches to clause types where syntactic structure constrains illocutionary force possibilities (Portner 2018; Zanuttini et al. 2012; Krifka 2014, among others), showing that syntactic architecture directly constrains what speech acts are performable, not just their felicity conditions.

References:

Aldridge, E. (2004). *Ergativity and Word Order in Austronesian Languages*. Doctoral dissertation, Cornell University.

Aldridge, E. (2012). Antipassive and ergativity in Tagalog. *Lingua*, 122(3):192–203.

Chen, V. (2025). The syntax of Philippine-type alignment: Insights from case-marking. *Natural Language & Linguistic Theory*, 43:1839–1898.

Deal, A. R. (2020). *A theory of indexical shift: meaning, grammar, and crosslinguistic variation*. Number 82 in Linguistic inquiry monographs. The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Hsieh, H. (2020). *Beyond Nominative: A broader view of A′-dependencies in Tagalog*. Doctoral dissertation, McGill University.

Kaufmann, M. (2012). *Interpreting imperatives*, volume 88. Springer Science & Business Media.

Krifka, M. (2014). Embedding illocutionary acts. In Roeper, T. and Speas, M., editors, *Recursion: complexity in cognition*, number 43 in Studies in theoretical psycholinguistics, pages 59–87. Springer, Cham Heidelberg.

Portner, P. (2007). Imperatives and modals. *Natural language semantics*, 15(4):351–383.

Portner, P. (2018). *Mood*. Number 5 in Oxford surveys in semantics and pragmatics. Oxford University Press, Oxford, United Kingdom, first edition edition. OCLC: ocn988167655.

Schachter, P. and Otanes, F. (1987). *Tagalog Reference Grammar*. University of California Press, Berkeley.

Schwager, M. (2006). *Interpreting Imperatives*. PhD thesis, Johann Wolfgang Goethe-Universität, Frankfurt am Main.

Zanuttini, R., Pak, M., and Portner, P. (2012). A syntactic analysis of interpretive restrictions on imperative, promissive, and exhortative subjects. *Natural Language & Linguistic Theory*, 30(4):1231–1274.