

# PROHIBITIVES: WHY TWO THIRDS OF THE WORLD'S LANGUAGES ARE UNLIKE DUTCH<sup>1</sup>

JOHAN VAN DER AUWERA

Center for Grammar, Cognition and Typology

University of Antwerp  
johan.vanderauwera@ua.ac.be

**Abstract.** Most languages of the world have prohibitive constructions that use a negative marker than is more or less dedicated to this construction, rather than a negative that also serves in declarative constructions. The explanation has to appeal to aspect. Declarative negation is inherently stative, but prohibition is inherently dynamic. The negative of the declarative is therefore not well suited to appear in prohibitives.

This is an exercise in “semantic typology”: it investigates a semantically interesting property of human language as such (prohibition) through the window of an analysis of a sample of the world’s languages.

## 1. Introduction

A prohibitive construction is a negative imperative construction, i.e., an imperative construction that appeals to the hearer(s) to establish or to maintain a negative state of affairs. It has been claimed that prohibitive constructions often do not use the negative marker found in negative declaratives. In section 2, I show that this claim is correct. In section 3, I offer a semantic explanation.

## 2. Languages prefer ‘prohibitive markers’

### 2.1. Prohibitive constructions and prohibitive markers

Let ‘prohibitive’ be the one word term for ‘negative imperative’. I will speak about both ‘prohibitive constructions’ and ‘prohibitive markers’. Let me explain the former notion first. A prohibitive construction is that construction, whatever its structure, that is conventionally used to express a prohibition. It can be illustrated with Dutch (1b).

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is based on van der Auwera (in print).

(1) a. Beweeg!  
move.IMP.2  
'Move!'

b. Beweeg niet!  
move.IMP.2 NEG  
'Don't move!'

c. Hij beweegt niet.  
he move.IND.PRS.3SG NEG  
'He doesn't move!'

In Dutch, the prohibitive construction is straightforward: it employs the same verb form as the one found in (positive) imperatives, and the negation (*niet*) is the one found used in declaratives (illustrated in 1c).

Mandarin is different in this respect. First of all, in declaratives Mandarin has a few sentential strategies, the three most common ones employing the markers *bù*, *méi* or *méiyóu* (examples from Li and Thompson 1981: 417-8).

(2) a.. 他 不 念 书.  
Tā bu niàn shū.  
3SG NEG study book  
'(S)he does not study.'

b. 他 没 有 开 门.  
Tā (méi)yǒu kāi mén.  
3SG NEG open door  
'(S)he didn't open the door.'

*méi(yǒu)* does not surface in prohibitive constructions, and neither does *bu*, at least not by itself. Instead we mostly find the dedicated markers *buyào* and *bié*. They are grammatical markers with just that function (*bié*) or with that function as one of its main functions (*buyào*) (examples from Li and Thompson 1981: 455, Yip and Rimmington 1977: 88).

(3) a. 动!  
Dòng!  
move  
'Move!'

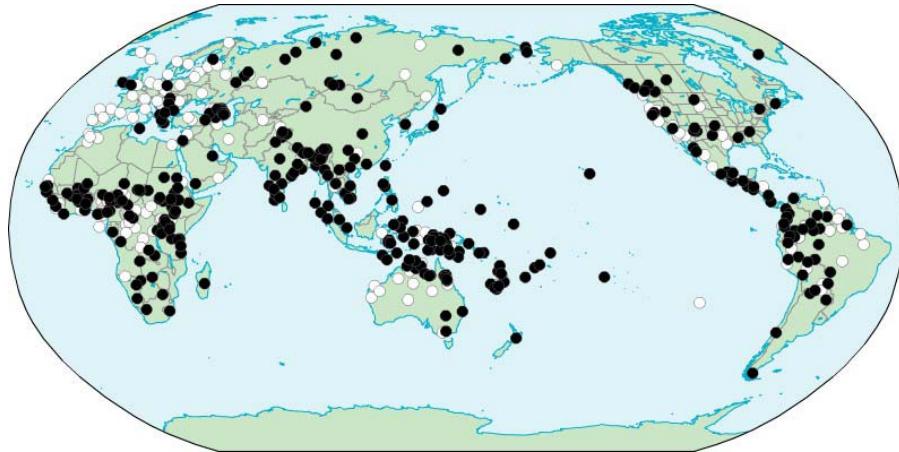
b. 别 / 不 要 动!  
Bié / Buyào dòng!  
PROH/PROH move  
'Don't move!'

The (degree of) dedication of the negative markers *bié* and *buyào* to the prohibitive construction will be honored with a technical term: I will call them 'prohibitive markers'.

## 2.1. A universal preference for prohibitive markers

It turns out that the Mandarin situation is more typical for the world's languages than the Dutch one. This has been pointed out before, since at least Schmerling

(1982: 202). The largest and most representative sample on which such claims have been based are those of van der Auwera and Lejeune (2005b). They looked at second singular prohibitive constructions of 495 languages. They concluded that 327 of those 495 languages have a more or less dedicated prohibitive marker as their only or main strategy. That we are dealing with a truly world wide phenomenon is suggested by Map 1 below, based on the map in van der Auwera and Lejeune (2005b: 292-3). There is at least one exceptional area, viz. Western Europe—an areal claim that has also been hinted at in the literature (since at least Sadock and Zwicky 1985: 175-177).



Map 1. Prohibitive markers in second person singular prohibitive constructions

- Prohibitive marker as unique or main strategy
- No prohibitive marker as unique or main strategy

### 3. Why do languages prefer ‘prohibitive markers’?

Explanations can be formal or functional. In generative quarters most work (by and inspired by Zanuttini 1997) does not directly address the preference for prohibitive markers, but rather the fact that in some languages the declarative negative marker does not combine with the imperative. This is due to the initial focus on Romance languages, in which the negative is unremarkable but the verb often has to be subjunctive (or infinitival).

(4) Spanish

a.	Canta!	b.	No cantes!
	IMP.2Sg		NEG sing.SUBJ.PRES.2SG
	‘Sing!’		‘Don’t sing!’

Of course, the generative work is relevant for my question too, for part of the

reason for the universal preference for a prohibitive marker might be the dislike of the combination of the declarative negative and the imperative.

Formalist explanations have tended to derive the unavailability of the combination of the declarative negative and the imperative from other properties of the declarative negative and the imperative. Relevant features have included (i) the position of the negative relative to the verb, (ii) the question whether or not the negative is a clitic, and (iii) the question whether or not the verb form used for commands is a dedicated imperative or whether it instantiates just one use of a multifunctional category, which is then said to supply “suppletive” imperatives. Though these factors may well be relevant for specific languages, as an explanation for the universal preference for prohibitives, they must be discounted. It can easily be shown that prohibitive markers appear independently of any formal and positional properties. There is also no dependence on whether or not the imperative is dedicated. This was a claim by Dooley Collberg and Håkansson (1999: 32), arrived at on the basis of their 15 language sample. I can replicate it on the basis of the descriptions in van der Auwera and Lejeune (2005a, 2005b). For 473 languages we had data on the dedicatedness of the second singular imperative and on the existence of a second singular prohibitive marker. Of these the majority have a dedicated imperative. But both in the subset with dedicated imperatives and the one without, prohibitive markers are preferred, and even in roughly the same proportion (see Table 1).

		Prohibitive marker	
		+	-
Morphologically dedicated IMP.2SG	+	236	131
	-	78	28

Table 1. The second singular morphologically dedicated imperative and the second singular prohibitive marker

What is it then that makes prohibitive constructions prefer prohibitive markers? I propose that we are dealing with an illocutionary garden path effect. For this I have to assume that the declarative negatives are the most frequent ones, i.e., more frequent than either imperative negatives or interrogative negatives, and that it is important for languages to make clear whether the direction of fit—to use a speech act term—is word to world (declaratives) or world to word (imperatives). If these assumptions are correct, then there is a certain risk that a occurrence of the negative marker that occurs in declaratives will initially be taken as a sign of a declarativeness, even when it turns out that the speech act is not declarative. Of course, the hedge of “a certain risk” is important, for quite some languages do take that risk.

To clarify this further, we can bring in considerations of aspect. As many linguists have remarked, also in typology (most recently Miestamo 2003: 185), it is a property of negative declaratives that they are inherently stative.

Positive declaratives, on the other hand, may be stative or dynamic. Consider the positive declaratives in (6a,c,e).

(6)	a. John was at home.	b. John wasnt at home.
	c. It rained.	d. It didn't rain.
	e. John ran away.	f. John didn't run away.

(6a) is stative and (6c) and (6e) are dynamic: (6c) is a process and (6e) is an action. But consider now their negations in (6b,d,f). All of these are stative: (6b) is of course just as stative as its positive counterpart. But (6d) and (6f) are stative now, the simple reason being that nothing happened, the process didn't materialize and neither did the action. I can therefore conclude that the most frequent use of the negative, that of the declarative negative, is stative. Or again, the most frequent use of the negative can be paraphrased with 'it is not the case that'. The negative imperative or prohibitive, however, is not stative. On the contrary, it is an appeal for action, either of discontinuing what is going on or of taking care that some new state of affairs does not materialize. This use does not support any 'it is not the case that' paraphrase at all. The appropriate paraphrase is rather 'let it not be the case that'. The negative of the prohibitive is thus crucially different from the most frequent use of the negative. There is thus—and I use a hedge again—a "certain need" for reflecting this difference in a direct way, most clearly so with the help of a more or less dedicated prohibitive marker.

What happens then in the languages that do use the same negative as the one they use in declaratives? I see at least three scenarios. First, the marker abstracts from the speech act type of the utterance. This is the case of Dutch *niet*. It is freely used in any type of speech act. Second, the marker is the declarative negative simply because the prohibitive construction is or was declarative too. Consider the Oceanic language Mussau-Emeria.

(7)	Mussau-Emeria (Ross 2002: 165)
	Karika u mene nama asi eteba o.
	NEG 2SG again eat taro SG that
	'You will not eat that taro!'
	'Don't eat that taro!'

Not only is the *karika* gram the one that we find in a declarative, the whole sentence allows a declarative reading, more particularly, a future one, meaning 'You will not eat that taro!'. This is actually a common situation and one could either say that the language in question does not really have a prohibitive construction but uses the negative future instead or that the pattern is vague between a declarative future and a prohibitive reading.

The third scenario is that of the Spanish subjunctive (or infinitive). In this case, the strategy is a conventionalization of the description of the content of the desired state of affairs. What one wishes when prohibiting the hearer not to sing is that the speaker would not sing—a subjunctive also in English—i.e.,

an unrealis state of affairs of no singing. In the case of the conventionalization of the subjunctive turn of Spanish, it must have taken place a long time ago, for this strategy has been around since the earliest documents of Latin. But it would not suffice to explain the Spanish subjunctive by merely saying that it is a relic from Latin. One must conclude that framing the prohibition with the indirect strategy of describing only the content of the prohibition must have the independently commendable effect of softening the prohibition or, to vary on Horn (1991: 97), of “cushion[ing] the iron fist” of prohibition “in the velvet glove” of the description of what is merely wished for.

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