“Suggestions in British and American English: A corpus-linguistic study”

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Structure of the talk

• Corpora in speech act research
  – Form-to-function vs. function-to-form approaches
  – Problems of precision and recall

• Suggestions in British (BrE) and American English (AmE)
  – Defining suggestions
  – Corpus approach
  – Results: Head acts and their modification devices

• Annotating corpora pragmatically?
  – Representativeness vs. ‘Traceability’
  – Functional ambiguity and speech act identification
Corpora in speech act research

• Speech acts are functional units which might be (closely) associated with certain surface realisation forms

• Indirect realisations pose a problem for corpus searches
  – Form-to-function approach often used in corpus linguistics problematic
  – Speech act research often takes a function-to-form approach

• Automated corpus searches can only be conducted if realisation forms for a speech act are known
  – Lexical markers (e.g. IFIDs, performative verbs)
  – Syntactic structures (e.g. compliment formulae, cf. Manes & Wolfson 1981)
Corpora in speech act research

• Even then, problems of precision and recall may occur (cf. Jucker et al. 2008, Jucker 2009)
  – Searches may produce functionally diverse hits which need to sorted manually (problem of precision)
  – Searches may not account for all instances of speech act in the corpus (problem of recall)

• Alternative: bottom-up approach (cf. Kohnen 2008)
  – Many speech acts do not occur highly frequently in conversations
  – Manual searches are “extremely labour-intensive” (Kohnen 2008: 295)
  – Problems of representativeness due to the limited size of the corpus
Suggestions in BrE and AmE

- **Research questions:**
  - How are suggestions realised structurally in the two national varieties of English?
  - Are there any differences in the head act and modification strategies used in the two data sets? Do their distributions differ?

- **Suggestions are speech acts**
  - which predict a future (cognitive) act of the hearer.
  - which have both a directive and a commissive force.
  - which the speaker believes to be in the interest of the hearer.

- **Over 60 realisation forms reported on in the literature**
Suggestions in BrE and AmE: Method

• Corpus approach with subcorpora of
  – the *Santa Barbara Corpus of Spoken American English* (SBCSAE)
  – the British component to the *International Corpus of English* (ICE-GB)
  – Size: approximately 200,000 tokens (casual conversation)

• Realisation forms reported on in the literature were used as search items in concordance searches

• Hits were filtered manually for the functional category

• Coding scheme by Blum-Kulka et al. (1989) was adopted
  – Head act (different levels of directness)
  – Downgrading/ mitigating modification
  – Upgrading/ aggravating modification
Suggestions in BrE and AmE: Results

- Only mild differences in head act forms (n BrE = 117, n AmE = 116)
Suggestions in BrE and AmE: Results

- Similar strategies, different distribution of modifiers

\[ (n \text{ BrE} = 190, n \text{ AmE} = 169) \]

![Bar chart showing the comparison between BrE and AmE in terms of syntactic downgraders, lexical/phrasal downgraders, supportive moves, upgraders, and supportive moves.](chart.png)
Suggestions in BrE and AmE: Results

• No significant differences in head act strategies

• Differences in the distribution of modification strategies
  – Overall number of modifiers higher in the BrE data set
  – Higher number for aggravating modifiers in the BrE group
  – Aggravated head acts also contain multiple mitigating modifiers

• Functional ambiguity of realisation forms
  – Most head act forms in suggestions can encode other illocutions
  – Suggestions and requests differ in function
    • Suggestions: Action proposed is in the interest of the hearer
    • Requests: Action proposed is in the interest of the speaker
  – Problem of identification in naturally occurring language samples
Annotating corpora pragmatically?

- Functional ambiguity and speech act identification
  - Identification criteria for different directive illocutions remain unclear
  - Research into identification of (directive) speech acts needed
  - Insights about speech act identification will make speech act annotation in corpora more reliable

- Dilemma in using corpora for speech act research
  - Automated searches allow for representativeness but may not trace all instances of a speech act in a corpus
  - Manual searches may be able to trace all instances but the size of the corpus can never be representative
  - Corpora annotated for speech acts could at least partially solve this problem
Thank you very much for your attention!
References


References


