Suggestions in British and American English:
A Corpus-Linguistic Study

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Abstract

This article examines the surface realisations of the speech act of suggesting in two national varieties of English, British and American English. More specifically, it analyses and compares the head act realisations of the speech act and its internal and external devices of modification across the two speaker groups. The study is based on corpus data retrieved in automated searches from two corpora of English. The analysis reveals that despite general similarities, the two data sets differ in frequency distribution of head acts and their modification. Furthermore, the results show that the surface realisations used to encode suggestions are functionally ambiguous in that they can also be used to realise other illocutions, such as requests or orders. The paper therefore calls for the inclusion of the hearer perspective in pragmatics research to fathom out how hearers are able to infer speaker meaning. Gaining knowledge about how intention is identified will also help to improve inter-rater reliability in coding data and annotating corpora for pragmatic units.

1 Introduction

The basic insight that speech is action has become the foundation for one of the most influential theoretic frameworks in pragmatics. Speech act theory originated in the rejection of the idea that language can be described solely on the basis of formal semantics. Even with a purely philosophical starting point, speech act theory was able to trigger enormous amounts of empirical research. For many speech acts, linguistic manifestations have been established and compared across cultures. While most illocutions seem to be to be universal, their linguistic manifestations might differ sharply across cultures. Differences in realisation form (such as diverging levels of directness) can have the potential to lead to difficulties in intercultural communication. But this is not only true for communication between speakers of different languages. It has also been found that speech acts may be realised differently in national or even subnational varieties of one language. Language users usually are unaware of such intralingual differences and often attribute pragmatic variation across varieties to character flaws in the individual speaker.

The present study raises and tries to answer the question if there are similarities or differences in the realisation of the speech act of suggesting in two national varieties of the English language: British English (BrE) and American English (AmE). While other speech acts, most prominently requests, compliments and compliment responses have been studied extensively by many researchers worldwide, little is known about how suggestions are realised in English. The only studies concerned with this speech act are situated in educational linguistics that use suggestions as a diagnostic means to investigate learners' pragmatic competence. In order to do so, these studies have predominantly made use of experimental methods or recordings of natural conversations in institutional contexts. Consequently, they cannot provide any information about how native speakers of English make suggestions in naturally

occurring casual conversations. In contrast to many studies on the realisation forms of speech acts, the present study does not make use of experimental data such as questionnaire material. The material analysed comes from two language corpora, the British component to the *International Corpus of English* and the *Santa Barbara Corpus of Spoken American English*. With their vast and growing amount of language material, corpora equip researchers with a valuable tool to study speech acts in large populations across language varieties.

2 Suggestions in English

2.1   Defining the function of the speech act

In one of the most influential classifications of illocutionary acts (Searle 1976) suggestions are defined as directive speech acts since they are attempts by the speaker to "get the hearer to do something" (Searle, 1979: 12). Searle claims that the illocutionary point can be realised with varying illocutionary forces, as "modest 'attempts' as when I (...) suggest that you do it, or they may be fierce attempts as when I insist that you do it" (Searle, 1979: 13). Suggestions are thus defined to be milder attempts to get a hearer to do what the speaker wants than other directive speech acts, such as requests or orders.

Defining suggestions as directive speech acts only has, however, triggered criticism from other researchers working in the speech act theoretic paradigm. Hancher (1979) argues that some speech acts have both a commissive and a directive illocutionary point and are thus hybrid speech acts that belong to more than one of illocutionary type as defined by Searle. He gives the example of invitations which Searle categorises as directives and claims that an invitation is successful not only on the grounds that the hearer appears at the event in question (and therefore complies with the action desired by the speaker). He argues that it is also necessary for the speaker to receive the person invited as a guest. In issuing an invitation, it is thus both the hearer and the speaker who have to fulfil a future action. Invitations are therefore "hybrid speech acts that combine directive with commissive illocutionary force" (Hancher, 1979: 6). Although he does not explicitly mention suggestions to belong to this hybrid category, it is easily conceivable that they also have a commissive directive illocutionary point (cf. Adolphs, 2008: 45). In suggestions, speakers can include themselves in the action proposed to the hearer, as seen in Example (1).

(1) SETH: Well, I mean -- <u>we</u> could put a floor r- .. floor register right .. along here (SBC 071)

This functional bipolarity of suggestions is also recognised in studies that are concerned with the forms and functions of speech acts but were not conducted within the paradigm of speech act theory. In their discourse oriented interactional grammar, Edmondson and House (1981) state that suggestions can include the speaker in a future joint action. The authors therefore distinguish between suggestions that exclude the speaker ("suggests-for-you") and suggestions that include the speaker ("suggests-for-us"). In a similar vein, Tsui distinguishes suggestions from requests in that a "request for action prospects only addressee action" (Tsui, 1994: 100).

In an alternative approach to classifying speech acts, Fraser (1974: 149) defines suggestions as speech acts in which the speaker "indicates his desire for the hearer to consider the merits of the state of affairs expressed by the proposition". Subtypes of the speech act class of suggesting include suggesting proper, imploring, recommending and advising. Suggestions are defined as speech acts that are always in the interest of the hearer. Fraser also claims that the action anticipated in requests and advice is not of the same kind. The action that the hearer is supposed to fulfil is rather a cognitive process than a physical action. The speaker wants the hearer "to consider the merits" of the action proposed. In Fraser's definition of suggestions the hearer has the option to conclude that the action proposed is not convergent with her own intentions.

The same position is proposed in Hindelang's (1978) comprehensive classification of directive speech acts. He defines suggestions as non-binding directives which do not put the hearer under the obligation to comply with the action proposed by the speaker. He subcategorises suggestions further into problem solving suggestions and proposals. While problem-solving suggestions are always task-related, proposals are not associated with a practical problem and come closest to suggestions as dealt with in this study.

The definition adopted for the speech act of suggesting in the present study is a combination of definitions reported on above. A speech act is understood as a suggestion when the following conditions apply:

– The speaker (S) wants the hearer (H) to consider the action proposed.
– S and H know that H is not obliged to carry out the action proposed by S.
– S believes that the suggestion is in the interest of H.
– S may or may not include herself in the proposed action.

2.2 Defining the form of the speech act

Insights about the linguistic forms that suggestions can take come from sources that are different in aim and methodological setup. Empirical investigations on suggestions have their origins predominantly in the field of interlanguage pragmatics in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts. In most of those studies it is not the speech act itself that is of interest for the authors but the learners' pragmatic competence. Suggestions only serve as a diagnostic means of identifying the degree of learner competence. Due to their research questions the vast majority of these studies made use of experimental data to measure learners' improvements after pragmatic construction (e.g. Martínez Flor, 2004) or compare learners' and native speakers' pragmatic competence (e.g. Rintell, 1979; Banerjee and Carrell, 1988; Koike 1994; 1996). Considering their didactic starting point, it is not surprising that in neither of these studies the speech act of suggesting has been studied systematically. The studies do, however, provide information about the linguistic forms that the speech act of suggesting may take.

A different source for information about linguistic surface structures of speech acts are communicative grammars that investigate both written and spoken language (e.g.

Edmondson and House, 1981; Leech and Svartvik, 1994; Carter and McCarthy, 2006). Overall, 60 realisation forms of suggestions were found in the literature (cf. Table 1).

Linguistic form	Source
Can't we	Edmondson and House, 1981
Can't you	Koike, 1994; Carter and McCarthy, 2006; Adolphs 2008
How about	Leech and Svartvik, 1994; Koike 1994; Carter and McCarthy, 2007; Adolphs, 2004
I (would) suggest	Edmondson and House, 1981; Leech and Svartvik, 1994; Martínez Flor, 2004; Adolphs, 2008
Let's	Sadock, 1974; Edmondson and House, 1981; Koike, 1994
Shall/ should we	Edmondson and House, 1981; Leech and Svartvik, 1994; Carter and McCarthy, 2006; Adolphs, 2008
We can/ could	Edmondson and House, 1981; Koike, 1994; Martínez Flor, 2004; Carter and McCarthy, 2006
What about	Leech and Svartvik, 1994; Carter and McCarthy, 2006; Adolphs 2008
Why don't we/you	Leech and Svartvik, 1994; Koike, 1994; Martínez Flor, 2004; Carter and McCarthy, 2006; Adolphs, 2008
You/we can/could	Leech and Svartvik, 1994; Koike, 1994; Martínez Flor, 2004; Carter and McCarthy, 2006

Table 1:   Overview of the most frequently cited linguistic forms realising suggestions.

It needs to be acknowledged that the different sources for linguistic forms differ in aims and approaches to obtaining the linguistic surface manifestations. While most of the didactic studies on suggestions are based on experimental data, the communicative grammars make use of 'field' data (cf. Jucker, 2009). While studies investigating speech acts usually take a function-to-form approach, corpus linguistic investigations make a form-to-function approach necessary. The differences between the approaches and the implications for studying pragmatic variables will be outlined in the following chapter.

3 Methodology

3.1   Speech acts and corpora

While corpora have predominantly been used in research on lexicography and grammar, they are gaining more and more importance in other linguistic disciplines such as pragmatics (cf. McCarthy and Carter, 2004). The use of language corpora in pragmatics, and more specifically in the investigation of speech acts, is, however, problematic to some degree. While the starting point in corpus linguistics is always a linguistic form that is to be searched for in a corpus, pragmatics often takes a functional perspective. Language functions, however, do not lend themselves to searches in language corpora per se. While many corpora available today are tagged

for parts of speech or even parsed for sentence structures, there are no corpora available that are tagged for speech acts. Consequently, in their study on compliments in the *British National Corpus* (BNC), Jucker et al. claim that speech acts "are not readily amenable to corpus-linguistic investigations" (Jucker et al., 2008: 273). The authors explain that speech acts are defined by their illocutionary force or their perlocutionary effect, neither of which can be searched for directly in a corpus. Speech acts can therefore only be searched for in language corpora when they appear in routinised forms or in regular combination with illocutionary force indicating devices. In the case of compliments, linguistic forms or formulae had already been established (cf. Manes and Wolfson, 1981) enabling Jucker et al. to trace the speech act in the BNC.

There are a number of speech acts and discourse features whose forms have either been investigated thoroughly in past research (as for compliments) or occur in a routinised form. In a contrastive study on thanking, Jautz (2008: 147) observes that expressions of gratitude are "highly ritualised formulae" that can be searched for easily in a corpus. With a list of forms expressing gratitude established in earlier research on thanking, Jautz conducts word searches in the BNC and the *Wellington Spoken Corpus* (WSC) and compares the head acts and modifiers used in radio phone-ins in the BrE and New Zealand English. In a study on listenership in everyday BrE and AmE discourse, McCarthy (2002) traces non-minimal response tokens in the *Cambridge and Nottingham Corpus of Discourse in English* (CANCODE). The selection of search items from a list of the 2000 most frequent lexical items in both corpora was based on the forms of response tokens established in earlier research. In a similar study, O'Keeffe and Adolphs (2008) rely on the forms established for response tokens in previous research for their corpus searches in the CANCODE and the *Limerick Corpus of Irish English* (LCIE). But even if formulae are available that can be used as search strings in the corpus query, problems of precision and recall may emerge. Jucker et al. (2008) note that searches for relevant patterns may retrieve large numbers of hits that are identical in structure but not in function (low precision). These extracts then have to be filtered manually for function and excluded if they do not realise the functional unit in question. This procedure, however, is only possible until the number of hits exceeds what is possible to analyse manually. Problems of recall occur both on the level of word queries and queries for syntactic strings. Word queries might not have a complete recall since typing errors or different spelling conventions (especially for minimal response tokens such as *uhunh*) prevent the items in the corpus from being found. Queries for syntactic patterns are even more prone to incomplete recall since it is impossible to account for all possible sequences when tagging or parsing a corpus (cf. Jucker et al., 2008).

An approach that tries to overcome these methodological problems in using corpora for pragmatic research is Kohnen's (2008) study on directives in the history of English. The author stresses that with automated searches alone, it is impossible to access all manifestations of a particular speech act in a past period. This argument is also valid when investigating a speech act synchronically that has not been studied extensively. Kohnen puts forward that even in those cases where formulae have been

established in earlier research, it can never be ruled out that realisation forms are not accounted for by the corpus searches. He argues that studies relying on forms established in earlier research cannot "exclude the possibility that some other manifestations of the speech act are hidden somewhere in the corpus" (Kohnen, 2008: 295). Consequently, the author starts from a different point of departure. His genre-based micro-analytic bottom-up approach comprises first a manual search of a corpus limited to one genre. Since the task is reported to be "extremely labour-intensive" (Kohnen, 2008: 296), the corpus for the initial selection of realisation forms must be limited in size. In a second step, this procedure is repeated for corpora of different genres before finally testing the manifestations established this way by searches in larger corpora of mixed genres. Since the initial corpus needs to be relatively small, Kohnen's approach cannot guarantee either that all possible realisation forms of a speech act can be found in corpora.

For the analysis of suggestions in the present study, a top-down approach was chosen due to time restrictions and the fact that the forms of suggestions have already been established in the literature. It is assumed that these realisation forms will represent the high frequency manifestations of suggestions. Indirect and low frequency realisation forms cannot, however, be guaranteed to be accounted for by the present study.

3.2   Data collection and coding

The data for the present study were collected using automated searches of two corpora representing national varieties of English, the *Santa Barbara Corpus of Spoken American English* (SBCSAE) and the British component to the *International Corpus of English* (ICE-GB) (cf. Section 3.3 for information on the subcorpora established for the present study). The realisation forms reported on in the literature (cf. Section 2.2) were used as search tokens. While for searching ICE-GB, the utility program *ICECUP* 3 was used, the SBCSAE was searched with the concordance sampler of *WordSmith Tools* 5.0.

All the hits were then analysed for function, excluding all tokens which were not identified as suggestions on the basis of the definitions illustrated in Section 2.1. The data sets gathered that way comprise 233 tokens of suggestions (117 tokens in the BrE data set, 116 tokens in the AmE data set). The coding scheme adopted in the present study is based on Blum-Kulka et al.'s (1989a) coding system developed for the comparison of two speech acts, requests and apologies, across different languages. It differentiates between the head act, internal modification and external modification. The head act is defined as "the minimal unit which can realize a request" (Blum-Kulka et al. 1989a: 275). Internal modification includes syntactic downgraders which "modify the head act internally by mitigating the impositive force" (Blum-Kulka et al. 1989a: 281) of the speech act by means of syntactic choices", lexical and phrasal downgraders, which in analogy to syntactic downgraders modify the head act internally by means of lexical or phrasal choices and upgraders. The latter are defined as "elements whose function it is to increase the impact of the request" (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989a: 285). Table 2 gives an overview of

the most frequently occurring modifiers found in the data.

   Due to the abstract definitions of head acts and modification, the coding system as proposed by Blum-Kulka et al. (1989a) can easily be applied to the analysis of illocutions other than requests and apologies.

	Modifier	Example
Mitigating	Conditional	*You **could** help it by...*
	Pseudo-cleft	***What I recommend you do Tony** is ...*
	Concluder	*so..., then..., well..., well then...*
	Understater	*a bit, to begin with, for the moment*
	Hedge	*sort of, something, like, somehow*
	Subjectivizer	*I think, I mean, I would say*
	Downtoner	*just, perhaps, at least, maybe, probably*
	Grounder	*You should go. **They keep saying where's Louisa***
	Specification	***I mean that would have to be moved anyway***
	Antecedence present	*We can get that out **if you want***
Aggravating	Repetition	B: *You should stay.* [...] B: ***You should stay.***
	Contradicting hearer	*We can get that out. **But I d I don't think**...*
	Consequences	*Otherwise you gotta come back and put the coil in*
	Intensifier	*I'd **highly** recommend...*
	Negative interrogative	*Well **can't you just** ring the the company direct?*

Table 2:   Overview of the most frequently occurring modifiers in the data sets.

3.3   Corpora used in the present study

For the present study, subcorpora from the British component of the *International Corpus of English* (ICE-GB) and the *Santa Barbara Corpus of Spoken American English* (SBCSAE) were chosen to examine and compare the realisation strategies used for the speech act of suggesting in BrE and AmE. ICE-GB includes 200 written and 300 spoken (and transcribed) text samples of about 2,000 words each, adding up to a total of around 1,000,000 words. In contrast to ICE-GB, the SBCSAE predominantly includes transcripts of casual conversations. The four parts of the corpus amount to approximately 249,000 words. The SBCSAE was sampled with the aim of providing a source of data for researchers "interested in the nature of spoken American English" (Chafe et al. 1991: 65) in descriptive, theoretical or pedagogical contexts. The language material in both corpora was sampled in the 1990s.

   From both corpora smaller subcorpora were selected that are highly comparable in terms of linguistic genre included and speaker demographics. The ICE-GB subcorpus used in the present study consists only of 100 transcripts of direct and telephone conversation. From the SBCSAE all scripted material such as lectures, sermons and transcripts from guided tourist tours were excluded from analysis, leaving a total of 50 transcripts. Since the individual samples of the SBCSAE are much longer than the text samples in ICE, each subcorpus has approximately the size of 200,000 words.

4 Results

The results reveal that there are only mild differences between the two national varieties of English. The analysis shows that both varieties use very similar head act super- and substrategies with approximately the same frequency. In the vast majority of cases, suggestions were realised by modal head acts (55.6% in the BrE, 61.2% in the AmE data set) or specific formulae (35.9% in the BrE, 37.9% in the AmE data set), which are syntactically fixed expressions closely associated with the speech act (such as *let's* and *why don't you*). With a proportion of 6.0% of all head acts in the BrE data (0.9% in the AmE data set) the superstrategy of performative utterances (such as *suggest* and *recommend*) was used only infrequently. The utterances *I'd if I were you* and *You'd (..) better* only occurred in the BrE data and accounted for only 2.6% of head acts. The differences in distribution in the two groups did not reveal to be of statistical significance.

Within the head act superstrategies, only a few substrategies were used with high frequency. The five most frequent substrategies in the data sets are presented in Figure 1 below. The remaining 13 substrategies in the BrE data set (11 in the AmE data) occurred with very low frequencies (n = fewer than four hits) in both data sets.
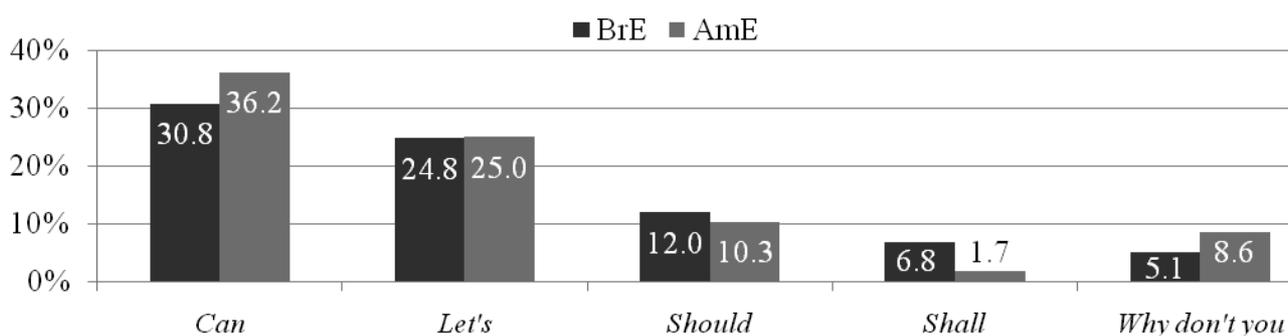

Figure 1: Distribution of the most frequent head act substrategies.

In the most frequent head act superstrategy of modals, some differences emerge in the BrE and AmE data sets. While both groups employed modal verbs of possibility most often (BrE 55.4%, AmE 59.2% of all modal head acts), British speakers showed a tendency to use modals of obligation more often than their American counterparts (44.6% in the BrE group, 36.6% in the AmE group). The usage of modals of obligation can be interpreted to be a more direct strategy in realising suggestions since the speaker imposes on the hearer's freedom of action more strongly.

The differences between the two groups become more pronounced when analysing the frequency and kind of modification used. Since modifiers can serve two different functions – downgrading or mitigating and upgrading or aggravating the head act – they were clustered for function in the present analysis. With 1.6 modifiers per head act, the British group overall used more modifiers than the American group (1.4 modifiers per head act). In both data sets, modifiers with a mitigating function were used in the vast majority of cases (cf. Figure 2). The British group, however, displayed a stronger preference for upgraders than the American group. The difference in frequency distribution was found to be statistically significant in

ANOVA testing (F (1.231) = 4.926, p < 0.05). The higher use of upgraders in the BrE group can be traced back to the more frequent occurrence of the negative interrogative structure. While studies on suggestions (Koike, 1994; 1996) define this structure as an aggravating device, it has been defined as a mitigating modifier in empirical investigations of requests in BrE and AmE (cf. Breuer and Geluykens, 2007). In their questionnaire-based study of requests, the authors find the negative interrogative structure exclusively in BrE requests. It is therefore questionable if the negative interrogative serves an aggravating function in suggestions while it serves as a mitigating device in requests. Since numbers of occurrences for negative interrogatives in the present study were very low, it would be necessary to explore the function of this form in BrE in a larger sample.
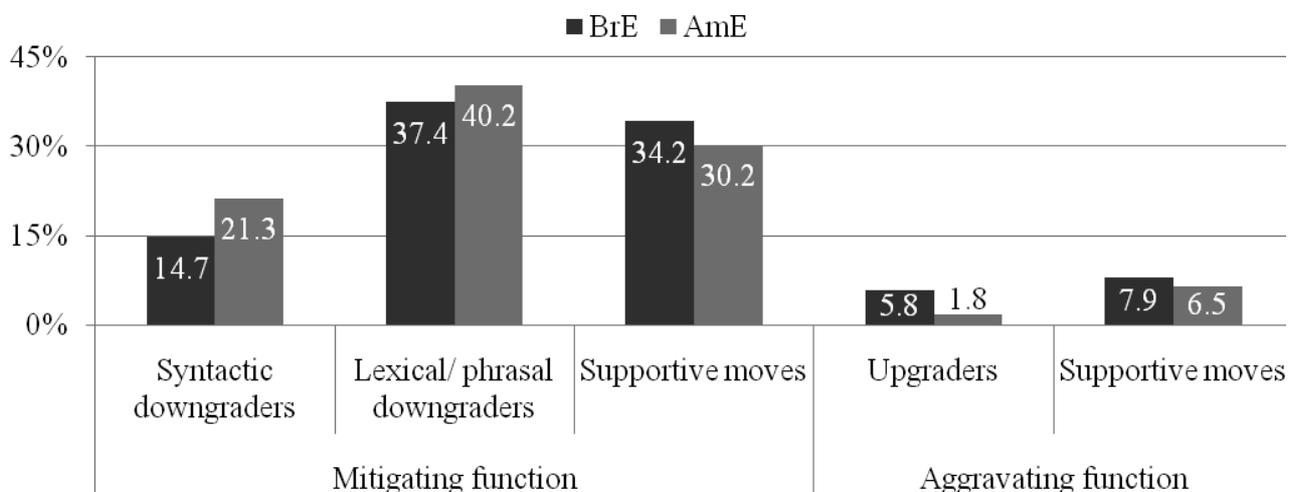

Figure 2: Distribution of modifiers in the data sets.

When analysing the distribution of modifiers among the different head act strategies, it becomes apparent that some head act strategies are more heavily modified than others at statistically significant levels. The choice of head act strategy is therefore an determining factor in the frequency of modifiers used. The most striking differences in distribution can be found in modal and specific formulae head act strategies. Even granted the fact that due to their rigid structure specific formulae are incompatible with syntactic downgrading, they still are combined with fewer lexical and phrasal modifiers and supportive moves relative to the other head act strategies. In this context, it is important to keep in mind that suggestions are speech acts which are uttered in the interest of the hearer. With this characteristic, they are thought to be less face-threatening than other speech acts with a directive force. In their programmatic work on verbal politeness, Brown and Levinson (1987) claim that speech acts in the interest of the hearer do not need to receive redressive action (e.g. mitigating modifiers) at all. With the low levels of modification, it can therefore be assumed that specific formulae are so strongly associated with the speech act of suggesting that they do not need to be softened in all instances. Since modal head acts are not only used to realise suggestions, speakers seem to find it necessary to combine them with mitigating devices to signal that their utterance should be understood as a suggestion and not as a more binding directive. This interpretation is

supported by the fact that the numbers of modifiers among requests in the same national varieties as examined in the present study are higher than for suggestions. For BrE requests, Breuer and Geluykens (2007) find a mean of 2.62 modifiers with a mitigating function per head act. A mean number of 1.9 mitigating modifiers was found for the American group. With 1.4 mitigating modifiers per head act in the British and 1.3 mitigating modifiers in the American group, the levels of modifiers with a mitigating function are therefore much lower for suggestions.

5 Discussion

5.1 Comparability of results: Implications of genre and method

The present study uses naturally occurring casual conversation as a basis for establishing realisation forms for the speech act of suggesting in two varieties of English. With this approach, it differs sharply from all other studies on suggestions. As pointed out in Section 2.2, most of these studies have made use of experimental data. There are, however, studies that have based their findings on recordings of naturally occurring talk (cf. e.g. Bardovi-Harlig and Hartford, 1990). But these studies also differ from the present paper in regard to the genre included. While the present study includes only recordings of casual conversation, Bardovi-Harlig and Hartford's (1990) study is set in an academic advisory context. Most of the studies employing questionnaires also use the context of academic advising more or less explicitly. Therefore, all of the studies on suggesting differ from the present study in the method of data elicitation, the genre included or both.

It is, therefore, difficult to compare the results of the present study to the findings of previous research. Since many studies differ from the present one in more than one variable, it is even more difficult to distinguish which differences can be accounted for in terms of methodology used or in terms of genre included. When comparing the number of realisation forms found in the literature with the strategies found in the present study, it becomes apparent that only a fraction of all these forms was employed by the speakers of the two data sets. While 60 realisation forms have been identified by various authors, only 18 strategies were employed in the BrE and 16 in the AmE data set. To discover if genre and the context of academic advisory session had an influence on the selection of realisation strategies by other researchers' informants, the realisation forms established were searched for in a specialised corpus to see if they are genre specific. The corpus selected for this attempt is *The Michigan Corpus of Academic Spoken English* (MICASE) which consists of spoken academic English only. This genre is further divided into different subgenres, such as lectures, meetings, office hours and advisory sessions. While those forms that were used frequently as realisation strategies for suggestions in the present data sets were also used frequently in MICASE, strategies that were not used at all in the present study could be found in academic contexts. Table 3 gives an overview of selected strategies which occurred in academic contexts only. The frequencies with which these strategies occur are, however, relatively low. It is unfortunate that Martínez Flor (2004) and other authors do not provide information of how frequently the realisation

strategies they identified were used among their informants. A quantitative comparison is therefore impossible.

Linguistic form	MICASE	ICE-GB	SBCSAE
Have you thought about...	3	0	0
It might be better to...	3	0	0
It would be a good idea to...	6	0	0
One thing you can do is...	1	0	0
The thing to do is...	2	0	0
There are a number of options that you...	6	0	0

Table 3:   Absolute frequencies of strategies used in academic advising contexts only.

The influence of methodology on the use of realisation strategies is less transparent. Questionnaire data has been reported to elicit rather the culturally expected forms of speech acts than the forms actually used (cf. Beebe and Cummings, 1996). In a comparison of DCTs and naturally occurring talk, Golato (2003) finds differences in the realisation of compliment responses in data elicited by DCTs and naturally occurring data. She reports that the use of the appreciation token *thank you* in combination with other strategies or on its own is much higher in the DCT data than in the natural data. The author argues that this finding can be attributed to social expectations. When filling in a written questionnaire, many informants provide the response they think is socially expected rather than writing what they would actually say in natural conversation. She also finds that both methods of data collection overall produced the same strategies of responding to compliments. The DCT data, however, differ from naturally occurring data in that participants produced more combinations of strategies. The responses were generally longer in DCTs. Golato explains this finding by the absence of an interlocutor in questionnaire settings and argues that speakers might self-select if no response comes from the interlocutor. This self-selection then causes speakers to produce more turns and therefore longer responses in questionnaires where no interlocutor is present. In a similar study on compliment responses in Mandarin, Yuan (2001) finds similar differences in length and number of turns. The author also accounts the greater length in DCT responses to the missing interaction between interlocutors.

Since none of the studies dealing with suggestions provide information about the frequencies of individual realisation strategies, it is not possible to detect if this also was the case for the studies in question. It is, however, easily perceivable that methodological differences also had an impact on the choice and kinds of realisation forms that have been established for suggestions so far.

5.2   Identifying functional units in natural conversation

Identifying functional units without standardized and distinctive surface manifestations in conversation – or more generally, in all kinds of non-elicited language material – proves to be problematic. The surface structures found for suggestions in the present study can also be used to realize other illocutions such as

requests or offers. This functional ambiguity of realization forms is even reflected terminologically in the head act realisation strategy "suggestory formula" in Blum-Kulka et al. (1989b). The authors state that requests may be realised by utterances "which contain a suggestion" (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989b: 18) to carry out the action longed for by the speaker. Suggestory formulae in requests are defined as strategies of conventional indirectness by the authors. Although the illocutionary point is not retrievable directly from the linguistic form, it is the conventionalized character of such utterances that makes them interpretable as requests by the hearer. Searle (1975: 76) suggests that some linguistic forms become "conventionally established as the standard idiomatic forms for indirect speech acts". While they keep their literal meanings, "they will acquire conventional uses as, e.g. polite forms for requests" (Searle, 1975: 76). Trosborg (1995: 201) specifies this function of suggestory formulae in that the strategy is employed when requesters test "the hearer's cooperativeness in general by inquiring whether any conditions exist that might prevent the hearer from carrying out the action specified by the proposition". The speaker is therefore able to make her request more tentative and "plays down his/her interest as a beneficiary of the action" (Trosborg, 1995: 201). The defining property of suggestions, i.e. the action being in the interest of the hearer, is therefore transferred to the speech act of requesting when using suggestory formulae. In employing this strategy, the speaker pretends that the action might also be in the interest of the hearer while in reality it is in the sole interest of the speaker. The use of suggestory formulae can therefore be understood as a strategy of conventional indirectness in requests, in suggestions proper, however, they are a means of literally and directly realizing the speech act.

The terminological confusion of illocutions is symptomatic for the focus on the speaker perspective in speech act theory or the empirical study of speech acts. Whereas the speaker perspective has been explored extensively for speech acts such as requests, apologies and compliments, the hearer perspective – or more specifically the question of intention recognition – has received noticeably less attention in speech act research. This lack of knowledge about how hearers are able to infer speaker meaning is not only regrettable from a theoretic point of view but also has implications for researchers tracing functional units in conversation. Until we know which factors (such as linguistic surface manifestation, context or cotext) are involved in intention recognition, we have to accept that identifying functional units in non-elicited language material is a more or less subjective matter which can only be partially remedied by including several researchers in the coding process and comparing inter-rater reliability.

One of the few noticeable exceptions from the lack of research into the hearer perspective is Herbert Clark's work on language perception. While Clark has investigated the hearer perspective for some illocutions (e.g. Clark and Lucy, 1975), or how common ground between interlocutors is established (e.g. Clark and Brennan, 1991), his research is not aimed at answering the questions whether (or how) very similar illocutions such as requesting, suggesting or advising are perceived differently by hearers in natural conversations. An interesting starting point for this

kind of investigation is offered by Thomas Holtgraves' (2007) studies in automatic intention recognition. Holtgraves finds that informants are able to activate metapragmatic knowledge when being confronted with samples of speech acts in authentic conversations. When manipulating these sets of speech acts linguistically and contextually, informants do not show metapragmatic activation. Unfortunately, Holtgraves uses only four linguistic variables that he systematically varies in different scenarios (switching tense/ subject, negating speech act and replacing original speech act with a different illocution). As valid as these variables may be for the activation of metapragmatic knowledge, they do not provide any exhaustive evidence as to the linguistic or contextual factors that are involved in identifying speaker meaning.

Research into how hearers are able to infer speaker meaning – or more specifically identifying different illocutions – is therefore crucial in aiming at a more objective and reliable approach to identifying functional units in non-elicited language samples.

6 Conclusion

The present study has compared realisation forms for the speech act of suggesting in corpora representing two varieties of English: British and American English. A correlation of head act strategy and modification devices showed that it is rather the most frequently used strategy than the most direct strategy that receives the highest levels of modification. This trend was observed for both varieties. Apart from modest preferences for one or the other head act or modification strategy, no major differences between the two varieties could be observed. Unlike other speech acts, suggestions might therefore not have a strong potential for intercultural misunderstanding. The different trends of realising suggestions should, however, be investigated in larger samples of conversation to confirm the present results.

The study raises, however, a more general question about different illocutions. Many of the realization forms for suggestions cannot be distinguished from the forms realizing other illocutions on the formal level. The question still remains unanswered how hearers are able to detect the speaker's meaning if linguistic forms can be used to realize more than one illocution. Given that the perception of the speaker's intention seems to play an important role in understanding how hearers comprehend discourse, it is essential to answer this question. When perception is to be investigated, methods are to be employed that are able to give insights into cognitive processes in the hearer. The pragmatic apparatus of methods needs to be supplemented with psycholinguistic methods to get a fuller understanding of how speech acts are produced, comprehended and negotiated between interlocutors. Pragmatics, therefore, needs to come together with psycholinguistics to answer the question of how illocution or speaker intention is understood by the hearer and on a more applied level with computational linguistics to discuss if and find ways of how functional units can be coded in language corpora.

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