‘Don’t tell a great man what to do’:
Directive speech acts in American and British English conversations

In his programmatic publication *How to Do Things with Words* John Austin (1962) estimates that there are between 1,000 and 9,999 different speech acts. Of these illocutions, only slightly more than a handful have been analysed systematically to date. The only directive speech act among those ‘prominent’ illocutions is the speech act of requesting, which, however, has been studied extensively over the last few decades. Whereas the study of requests originally had a sociopragmatic focus (e.g. Ervin-Tripp 1976) or was aimed at discovering the processes of interpretation involved (e.g. Clark & Lucy 1975), the centre of attention has shifted to studying the pragmalinguistic patterns of requests in cross-cultural, interlanguage and workplace contexts (cf. e.g. Blum-Kulka et al. 1989, Barron 2008, Vine 2009).

Despite the vast amount of literature published on requests (or maybe even because of it), other directive speech acts such as commands, orders, suggestions or advice have received considerably less attention. It is therefore not surprising that the similarities and differences between the various types of directives remain unclear to date. To avoid the focus on only one kind of directive and give a fuller picture on the whole class of speech acts, the present study makes use of an integrative approach that includes all directive speech acts found in the data sets.

The aim of the present poster is thus to explore how directive speech acts are realised structurally in naturally occurring conversations and how their surface manifestations differ across national varieties of English. The study can therefore be situated in the field of variational pragmatics (cf. Schneider & Barron 2008), in that it studies the effects of the macro-social factor region on language use. Whereas the vast majority of studies on requests (or speech acts more generally) was conducted on the basis of experimental data (most frequently elicited by production questionnaires), the present study makes use of field data which provide as basis not only to explore semantic formulae but also organisational aspects of speech acts (e.g. pauses or overlaps).

The study draws on transcripts taken from two corpora of English, the *Santa Barbara Corpus of Spoken American English* and the British component to the *International Corpus of English*. For both corpora, highly comparable subcorpora were compiled which contain approximately 200,000 words each and are composed of naturally occurring conversations only. Since functional units such as speech acts do not lend themselves to automated corpus searches, both subcorpora were searched manually for directive speech acts (cf. Kohnen’s 2008 micro-analytic bottom-up approach). The coding scheme adopted in the present study is based on a modified version of Blum-Kulka et al.’s (1989) coding system for requests which differentiates between head act and internal/external modification.


