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## A study of the language of advising: The verb *suggest*

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### Abstract

This study investigates the use of the lexical item, *suggest*, in the speech act of advising. Data from two large corpora, *SOAP Corpus* and *COCA*, are examined to check the frequency of *suggest* as a performative verb. It was found that the frequency depends not so much on whether it is from the spoken or written mode, but rather on the topic, speaker and context. *Suggest* was frequently used in introducing proposals, and this raises a question of whether proposals should be considered one type of advice-giving.

**Keywords:** speech act, advice, advising, suggest

## 助言の言い回しに関する考察： “Suggest”という動詞について

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## 1. Introduction

This paper examines the use of the word *suggest* in the speech act of advising. There have been many studies on the pragmatics of advising. They have generally been concerned with describing the linguistic realizations of advice-giving and explaining how these realizations relate to situational factors or to the need to protect the advice-receiver's face. The present study takes a different approach in beginning with a specific lexical item and investigating how it is used for carrying out the speech act of advising.

Diederich and Höhn (2012) pointed out that the verb *advise* is infrequently used in giving advice and suggest that this is due to its being rather explicit. They explain that speakers may prefer to use other, less explicit verbs in giving advice, and identify *suggest* as one of the verbs most commonly used. In this study I attempt to examine the use of *suggest*, focusing on its usage for the function of advising.

I shall begin by describing some previous studies which have investigated the use of specific words for advice-giving in Section 2. Section 3 provides a summary of the meanings associated with *suggest* from a survey of dictionaries. The main part of the study is in Section 4 which describes findings about the usage of *suggest* from an investigation of two large corpora. Finally, Section 5 presents a discussion of the findings and their implications for corpus-based study of speech acts.

## 2.0 Previous Studies

Advice-giving is a common speech act which occurs in a variety of contexts. Researchers have studied advice-giving as a type of social interaction and have described linguistic realizations of advice-giving in different situations (Limberg & Locher [eds.] 2012 is a collection of such studies). Giving advice can be threatening to the recipient's face, and a main focus of studies on advice-giving has been describing and explaining the linguistic means that speakers use to mitigate the potential face-threat. There are few studies that have investigated the use of specific words in advice-giving. The most extensive study of this type is that by Diederich and Höhn (2012).

Diederich and Höhn made a large scale study of the semantics and pragmatics of *advise* and *advise* using data from the *British National Corpus* (BNC). Their goal was “to show in what ways a corpus can give us additional information on these lexemes and whether a corpus can complement or challenge information we already know” (2012: 335). Additionally, they wished to see how the semantics and pragmatics of *advise* were related to its potentially face-threatening effect.

From a survey of dictionaries Diederich and Höhn found that there were several related meanings for *advise*, and that there were different frequency distributions for the different meanings in the corpus. They found that “[b]oth *advise* and *advising* are most frequently used with the meaning of opinion-giving and information-sharing by third-person advisors” (2012: 356) and that the use of *advise*

in performative utterances was rare. Comparison of different genres within the BNC revealed that *advice* and *advise* were infrequent in spoken and fictional texts, indicating that they are not common in speaking or in fiction writing. The corpus-based approach is particularly useful in identifying collocational patterns, and Diederich and Höhn found that *advice* occurs most frequently in verb phrases, especially with *give* or *take*.

Morrow (2017) made a small-scale study of the use of the verb *recommend* in advice-giving. *Recommend* was chosen as the focus of the study because it was the synonym which seemed closest to *advise*. Like Diederich and Höhn (2012), Morrow's study was also a corpus-based study and data was drawn from the *SOAP Corpus*, a 100 million word corpus comprised of transcriptions from American daily soap operas. The *SOAP Corpus* is intended to be representative of informal speech. Spoken data was used for this study as "spoken language seemed closer to the concept of speech act than written language" (2017: 28). Morrow found that *recommend* was not frequently used as a performative verb, and he attributed this infrequency to the fact that, like *advise*, *recommend* is explicit and potentially face-threatening. There was also a tendency for *recommend* to be used more in some registers than others; it was used more in connection with medicine and law than in other registers, and by speakers who apparently had an official role.

While *recommend* is the synonym most closely associated with the speech act of advising in terms of meaning, it is not frequently used. In the present study, I will examine the use of *suggest*, which is used more frequently than *recommend* or *advise*.

### 3.0 Meanings of *suggest*

*American Heritage Dictionary*, *Oxford Online Dictionary*, *dictionary.com*, and *Collins English Dictionary* all list five meanings for *suggest*. The following are those provided by *American Heritage Dictionary*:

- (1) To offer for consideration or action; propose
- (2) To express or say indirectly
- (3) To make evident indirectly; intimate or imply
- (4) To bring or call to mind by logic or association; evoke
- (5) To serve as or provide a motive for; prompt or demand

There are some minor differences in the ways the various dictionaries organize the definitions but, overall, they are very similar. All of the dictionaries begin with an entry similar to the first one above, suggesting that this meaning is, in some sense, the primary one. And all list meanings similar to those of (2), (3) and (4) above. *The New Oxford Thesaurus of English* provides four sets of synonyms for the

meanings associated with *suggest*. Each set is headed by a key synonym. The first is *propose*, which corresponds to meaning (1) above, the second is *indicate*, which corresponds to meaning (3), the third key synonym is *hint*, which corresponds to meaning (2), and the fourth is *convey*, which corresponds to meaning (4). While it is possible to identify different strands of meaning associated with *suggest*, in practice the boundaries between these meanings may sometimes be fuzzy and it may not always be possible to categorize an instance of usage as expressing one meaning and not others.

In this study I am interested in the semantic features of *suggest* which contribute to a speaker's choice to use this term when giving advice. Two of its associated meanings can be related to its use for this purpose: the meaning of proposing, as in (1) above, and the meaning of expressing or conveying something indirectly, as in (2) and (3) above.

#### 4.0 The use of the verb *suggest* for giving advice

According to the first definition for the verb *advise* in *Collins English Dictionary*, “If you advise someone to do something, you tell them what you think they should do.” For this meaning, four synonyms are given: *recommend*, *suggest*, *urge* and *counsel*. To examine how these lexical items are actually used and to investigate differences in their usage, we can turn to a corpus.

There are now several corpora besides the *British National Corpus* which Diederich and Höhn used for their study. Some of the newer corpora are larger and can furnish more data about the usage of less common lexical items. In this study, for my initial investigations I used the *SOAP Corpus*, a large corpus of spoken texts. I chose to use spoken data as it seemed closer than written data to the concept of speech act. The *SOAP Corpus* is comprised of 100 million words from 22,000 transcripts of television soap operas, and thus provides a valuable resource for investigating informal spoken language.

A cursory investigation of *advise* and the four synonyms showed that *suggest* was used much more frequently than *advise* or the other synonyms. Table 1 below shows the frequency of occurrence for the present singular form of each verb, and also shows the frequency of the lemma for each verb, that is, all the associated forms (e.g. for *suggest* this includes *suggest*, *suggesting*, *suggested*, *suggests*).

The verbs in Table 1 are used not only in advice-giving, but for other functions as well, such as

Table 1 *Advise* and synonyms in *SOAP Corpus*

Verb	Pres. Sing. Form	Lemma
<i>advise</i>	572	990
<i>recommend</i>	623	1058
<i>suggest</i>	3088	5960
<i>urge</i>	502	747
<i>counsel</i>	875	910

reporting what others have advised, and hence the frequencies above do not reflect how much these items are used solely for the function of advising. We need to probe further to see how much they are actually used for this function alone.

In sentences used to give advice such as, “I suggest you take an aspirin,” *suggest* is used as a performative verb. A performative verb is one which through its utterance enacts the action which it describes. Thomas (1995: 32–33) lists the requirements for a performative verb as having a first person subject, indicative mood, simple present tense, declarative form, and active voice. Using search tools, it is possible to identify occurrences of *suggest* which meet these requirements. In the *SOAP Corpus* there are 1665 instances of the phrase, *I suggest*, and 7 instances of *we suggest*. There are also many instances such as *I would strongly suggest* in which one or more words occur between *I* and *suggest*. If we include all the instances in which a first person pronoun (*I* or *we*) is followed by *suggest* with up to 3 intervening words, there is a total of 2,140 such occurrences in the corpus. Examination of concordance lines from the *SOAP Corpus* show that sentences with the phrase *I suggest* are indeed used for giving advice.

I had expected that advice sentences with *I suggest* would be used with higher frequency in spoken than in written texts. To check this I investigated the use of *suggest* with a first person subject (*I*) in the *Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA)*. It is composed of texts from five different genres: spoken, fiction, magazine, newspaper and academic. The search did not confirm my expectation that *I suggest* would be more frequent in spoken texts.

Table 2 Frequency of *I suggest* in COCA

	Frequency	Per million words
Spoken	315	2.88
Fiction	527	5.02
Magazine	448	4.07
Newspaper	378	3.57
Academic	661	6.39

These figures show that the occurrence of *I suggest* is less frequent in the spoken genre than in the other genres and that its frequency in the spoken genre is quite low. However, there is a considerable difference in the frequency of *I suggest* in the spoken genre of *COCA* and its frequency in the *SOAP Corpus*, which consists entirely of spoken texts. We can get a clearer picture by looking not only at the overall frequency for the spoken genre of *COCA*, but at the frequency of *I suggest* in the various sections that comprise it. There are nine sections in the spoken genre of *COCA*, and the frequencies of *I suggest* in those sections range from 1.23 to 5.76 per million words. On the other hand, in the ten sections of the *SOAP Corpus* the frequencies of *I suggest* range from 10.12 to 25.25 per million words. This shows some variation in frequency in the spoken sections of each corpus, and also a considerable

difference in frequency between the two corpora.

To find an explanation for the differences in frequency, I examined concordance lines from the two corpora. The spoken genre of *COCA* is comprised of transcripts of unscripted conversation from more than 150 television and radio programs from nine different television or radio networks (e.g. *All Things Considered* (NPR), *Newshour* (PBS), *Good Morning America* (ABC)). The *SOAP Corpus* is comprised of 22,000 transcripts from ten soap operas such as *As the World Turns*, *General Hospital* and *Guiding Light*. In the spoken part of *COCA* the data is organized into nine sections based on the media source from which they came. The section for ABC had 71 occurrences of *I suggest*, which was the most for any section. From a manual search of the concordance lines of those 71 occurrences, I determined that in at least 65 cases, *I suggest* was indeed used to make a suggestion. There were a couple instances in which it was not (for instance, when it occurred in a sentence fragment), and a few more in which it was not clear whether a suggestion was being made (e.g. "... I suppose it's going to disillusion some people if I suggest that all politicians lie at some time or other.") It was noticeable that in many cases *I suggest* was used to introduce a speaker's opinion or to propose an idea (e.g. "I suggest that the correlation between Buchanan's rise in the polls and their statements is absolute," or "There are several members of Congress, I suggest, that credible evidence exists that they may have broken the law.")

My initial motivation for investigating *suggest* was to see how it was used in giving advice. The use of *I suggest* to introduce an opinion or propose an idea can be seen as a form of advice-giving since it invites the listener to accept the opinion or idea being offered, but this usage is not a prototypical example of advising; it is not a case of someone telling someone else what they should do, as the *Collins Dictionary* stipulates. To look more closely at the use of *suggest* for advice-giving, I searched for *I suggest you* (e.g. "I suggest you pick a person who's successfully managed money.") This phrase was more clearly associated with advice-giving, and the difference in the frequency of this phrase in the *COCA* texts and the *SOAP Corpus* texts became larger. In eight of the nine sections of the *COCA* spoken genre the phrase *I suggest you* had a frequency of less than 1.0 per million words. In contrast, in the ten sections of the *SOAP Corpus*, the frequency of *I suggest you* was between 7.52 and 16.44 per million words. How can this difference be accounted for?

While both the texts in the *SOAP Corpus* and those in the spoken genre category of *COCA* are from transcripts of television or radio programs, there is a difference in the type of speech. On the website of the *SOAP Corpus* the texts are described as being representative of informal, daily speech. As for *COCA*, the texts which comprise it are also unscripted except for the use of some formulaic expressions. Nevertheless, there are differences. Whereas the topics in the *SOAP Corpus* tended to be common, daily, personal topics such as talk about relationships, the topics in the *COCA* transcripts were more often larger, impersonal, public issues, such as political elections. Also, the speakers who were identified in the *COCA* transcripts were often public figures who regularly speak in public and

could be expected to be able to adjust their speaking style to the more formal style associated with public discussion of serious topics.

Looking again at Table 2 about the distribution of *I suggest* in COCA, the figures indicate that *I suggest* is somewhat more frequent in the academic genre, though there does not seem to be a large difference in frequency of occurrence among the genres. However, further investigation showed that there is considerable difference in frequency of usage in the subcategories of the genres. The five genres of COCA are divided into 41 sections. In 37 of the 41 sections there were fewer than 10 occurrences of *I suggest* per one million words of text. The four sections that contained more than 10 occurrences per million words were (occurrences per million in parentheses): the editorial section of the news genre (38.69), the philosophy/religion section of the academic genre (20.92), the religion section of the magazine genre (12.64), and the humanities section of the academic genre (10.65).

In the editorial section, which was the section with the highest frequency of *I suggest* among the 41 sections of COCA, *I suggest* was widely used in sentences about action that should be taken (e.g. “I suggest reducing P. E. requirements to three days a week,” or “I suggest that those responsible for doling out the news be responsible and take a reality check.”) One of the main functions of an editorial is to offer considered advice about public issues. However, this is not a prototypical kind of advice-giving in that the advice is not directed at particular interlocutors. This is reflected in the fact that while *I suggest* frequently occurred in the editorial section, *I suggest you* did not.

Among the five genres of COCA, *I suggest* was most frequent in the academic genre. However, within the academic genre there was considerable variation in its frequency from section to section. While the phrase occurred fewer than six times per million in five of the nine sections (history, education, law/political science, science/technology and medicine), it occurred 10.65 times per million in the humanities section, and 20.92 times per million in the philosophy/religion section. Examination of concordance lines from texts in the philosophy/religion showed a marked tendency of writers to use the phrase to propose an idea or state an opinion (e.g. “In fact, I suggest that a moral rule or commandment is in reality a single-value pressure group, a verbal injunction to respect one specific value in our behavior,” or “Rousseau’s concern here is not, I suggest, with specific qualities of ancient versus modern languages as languages.”) It was used much less frequently to advise someone to do something.

*I suggest* was also relatively frequent in the genre of fiction. Although fiction is a written form, it often contains dialogue representing speech. In a sample of concordance lines from the fiction genre, *I suggest* occurred mostly in the quoted speech of characters, and in these cases *I suggest* was frequently used for the function of advice-giving (e.g. “Now if it’s all right with the rest of you clowns, I suggest we resume our search.”)

## Discussion and Conclusion

A quick search of the corpora at the beginning of the study confirmed that *suggest* is used more than *advise* or any of its main synonyms. However, examination of concordance lines showed that not all sentences containing *suggest* were being used for the function of advising.

The speech act of advising is typically associated with the use of a performative verb form and a first person subject. Therefore, I checked the occurrence of the phrase *I suggest*. Most sentences containing this phrase were in fact cases in which a speaker or writer was offering a suggestion. In many cases, the speaker or writer was proposing an idea or putting forth his or her own opinion. This could be considered advising in a broad sense though it doesn't fit the more common concept of advising as telling someone what they should do. However, it fits with the first meaning of *suggest* from the *American Heritage Dictionary*, which was "to offer for consideration or action: propose." This raises some pertinent questions for describing the speech act of advising: What is the relationship between making suggestions and advising? Many suggestions could be regarded as proposals. Making proposals seems a bit different from giving advice, but some proposals could be seen as advice-giving. Should proposals be considered a special case of advising? Are they two separate speech acts, or to what extent do they overlap? Another main implication of this study relates to the use of corpora to investigate speech acts and in a more general way to the classification of language data.

In this study, I started with data that consisted of transcripts of spoken language. I did so because spoken language seemed somehow closer to the concept of speech act and advising seemed more associated with speaking than with writing. However, this assumption was not validated. When I investigated the use of *I suggest*, a prototypical form for making suggestions, I found that in *COCA*, the frequency was lower in the spoken genre than in the other four genres. I also found considerable variation in the frequency of *I suggest* in the written sections of *COCA*, with some sections having a high frequency and others having a low frequency. And, comparing the spoken sections of *COCA* with the *SOAP Corpus*, there was again much difference in frequency. Examination of data revealed that although both sets of spoken data were unscripted and natural, they were often different in terms of topic (private topics or public issues), speakers (experts or non-experts), and context (the *SOAP* data was of private conversations, while *COCA* data was from public discussion). This demonstrates the point that it is important to make a fine-grained analysis in order to understand the use of particular lexical items. It is not sufficient to categorize language data simply as spoken or written: a more fine-grained classification is needed in order to see how a lexical item is used for functions such as in the speech act of advising.

The present study was limited in scope. It was confined to the use of verb forms and in particular to the use of the phrase, *I suggest*. A more wide-ranging study including noun forms such as *suggestion*, or *my suggestion*, could shed further light on the use of suggestions for advising.



This study, Diedrich and Höhn's (2012) study on *advise*, and my earlier study on *recommend* (Morrow 2017) dealt with specific lexical items. A similar corpus-based approach could be used to investigate the use of phrases and expressions associated with advice-giving such as, *you should*, *perhaps you'd better*, or, *if I were you, I would*.

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