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Examining the Language of Advice-Giving:
A Study of the Verb *Recommend*

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Abstract

This study is about the language used in the speech act of advice-giving. It deals with the use of one particular verb, *recommend*, in advice-giving in informal spoken English. Data comes from the SOAP Corpus and the study includes both quantitative and qualitative analysis, focusing particularly on the collocates of *recommend*, and what can be learned from them about the ways in which *recommend* is used in advice-giving.

Keywords: advice, SOAP Corpus, recommend

アドバイス提供における言語の検証
——動詞*Recommend*の研究——

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Introduction

Oscar Wilde once remarked that, "[t]he only thing to do with good advice is to pass it on. It is never any use to oneself." But the fact that recipients of advice may not find it useful does not stop people from giving advice to others. Indeed, advice-giving is a common speech act that speakers engage in regularly.

There are now many studies of the speech act of advice-giving (Limberg & Locher [eds.] 2012 is a collection of many recent studies). Most of them include analyses of the language used in giving advice, particularly how the advice is framed and expressed in order to mitigate the face-threat involved in giving and receiving advice. As advice-giving is potentially face-threatening to both the giver and receiver, those who give advice usually take care to frame their advice in such a way as to mitigate this threat. This ordinarily involves selecting indirect expressions and using circumlocutions such as hints which a listener may choose to disregard. In choosing expressions for giving advice, speakers consider various interpersonal and situational factors. The degree of social distance or intimacy between advice-giver and recipient is one interpersonal factor, and this in turn depends on other factors such as their relative age and social status. Situational factors include the setting and the social roles of the interlocutors. The language and culture in which the advice-giving occurs is relevant, and the topic of advice, whether it is a personal one or an impersonal one, a light matter or a serious one, can also influence an advice-giver's choice of words. Mode of communication is important, too; written advice may be phrased differently from advice given face-to-face. Thus, there are multiple factors that potentially influence the form and expression of advice, and most studies of advice-giving have been concerned with how these various factors influence the way advice is given.

Certain lexical items are characteristically associated with advice-giving, but in general, there has been rather less investigation of advice-giving from this angle. One important exception is the study of the lexemes *advice* and *advise* by Diederich and Höhn (2012). They examine the etymology, current definitions, collocations and distribution of meanings of these lexemes in the *British National Corpus* (BNC). The present study adopts a similar approach, investigating the verb *recommend* to see how it is used in advice-giving in spoken American English.

In the following sections I will discuss why I have selected this verb, the aims of the present study, the data and methodology used, and the results and implications for further study of lexical items associated with advice-giving. But first, I will briefly review Diederich and Höhn's (2012) study.

Advise and *advice*

Diederich and Höhn begin their study with an investigation of the etymology of *advise* and a discussion of how aspects of the original meaning have been retained and added to. They note that

advise is now used in several different but related senses. Based on a comparison of entries for *advise* in several contemporary dictionaries, Diederich and Höhn came up with a list of six current-day meanings and investigated how these meanings of *advise* were used in a large data corpus. They drew their data from the BNC which is a 100 million word corpus of spoken and written British English. This corpus was compiled between 1991 and consists of mostly written texts, but also contains spoken texts that have been transcribed. The written and spoken texts are drawn from a variety of sources so as to provide a representative cross-section of current language use.

Diederich and Höhn's (2012) study included both quantitative and qualitative analysis. In terms of quantitative results, they found differences in the frequency with which *advise* was used depending on genre. For example, in terms of occurrences per million words, they found that the lexemes *advise, advises* and *advising* occurred much more frequently in the written genres of Miscellaneous (46.9) and Magazines (35.8) than in the genres of Fiction (12) or Spoken (22.1). Qualitative analysis showed that there were also differences in the frequencies of the six meanings that they had identified for *advise*, and these differences were related to the genres in which *advise* was used. Diederich and Höhn also studied the syntactic patterns associated with *advise* and its frequently occurring collocations. In addition to *advise*, Diederich and Höhn investigated the noun *advice*, and made a similar quantitative and qualitative analyis of its frequency and use in texts in the BNC.

Diederich and Höhn 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) They observed that both lexemes were infrequent in spoken and fictional texts and suggested that, "... the referential explicitness of the two lexemes *advice* and *advise* may be one main reason why participants avoid their usage." (2012: 333) That is, rather than saying something like, "I advise you to ..." speakers preferred to couch their advice in more indirect expressions.

Diederich and Höhn's study illustrates the value of fine-grained analyses of lexemes associated with a particular speech act, in this case that of advice-giving. The present study takes a similar approach with the verb *recommend*, which is also associated with advice-giving. From this type of lexically-based research, we can expect to obtain a clearer understanding of how the speech act of advice-giving is carried out.

Data and method

To select the lexical items to focus on in this study, I searched *Collins English Thesaurus* for synonyms of *advise*. It lists 10 synonyms. The synonyms are categorized by their semantic and pragmatic closeness to *advise*. The two synonyms that are marked as closest are *recommend* and *suggest*. Other close synonyms include *urge* and *counsel*. In addition, there are six more lexical items that are less close to *advise*. These include: *advocate, caution, prescribe, commend, admonish* and

enjoin. Because of the limited scope of this study, I decided to investigate just one of the two closest synonyms, the verb *recommend*. In corpus linguistics, the term *lemma* is used to refer to all of the forms associated with a particular lexical item. For the lemma *recommend*, these included *recommends, recommended, recommending* and *recommendation*.

I checked an online etymological dictionary to find the etymology for *recommend*, and next consulted several contemporary dictionaries to see what meanings are associated with *recommend*. I then searched for *recommend* in the *SOAP Corpus*. This is an online corpus of spoken contemporary American English. It was developed and is maintained by Brigham Young University (BYU) and is available at their website, along with the BNC and several other corpora. The *SOAP Corpus* contains 100 million words and is comprised of transcriptions from a number of American daily soap operas. Thus, the language in this corpus can be considered representative of informal, spoken American English. I decided to limit the analysis in this study to spoken language because the scope of the study was limited and spoken language seemed closer to the concept of speech act than written language. The use of a corpus makes it possible to identify frequently occurring collocates and the syntactic patterns in which a word typically occurs.

Etymology and definitions

The Online Etymology Dictionary gives the following etymological information for the verb *recommend*:

> late 14c., "praise, present as worthy," from Medieval Latin *recommendare*, from Latin *re-*, here probably an intensive prefix, or else from a sense now obscure ... , ＋ *commendare* "commit to one's care, commend" ... Meaning "advise as to action, urge (that something be done)" is from 1746.

This etymology shows some change in the meaning between the 14th century and 1746. The latter meaning is substantially the same as meanings listed in contemporary dictionaries.

A survey of meanings associated with *recommend* in several contemporary dictionaries showed much similarity in the meanings among the dictionaries. *The Oxford Online Dictionary* gives two general meanings for *recommend*. The first is, "Put forward (someone or something) with approval as being suitable for a particular purpose or role." This general meaning is elaborated and exemplified in two subordinate entries: (1.1) "Advise or suggest (something) as a course of action," and (1.2), "Advise (someone) to do something." The second general meaning is, "Commend or entrust someone or something to (someone)." This meaning is designated as "archaic."

The Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English lists three meanings for the verb *recommend*:

(1) to advise someone to do something, especially because you have special knowledge of a situation or subject

(2) to say that something or someone is good, or suggest them for a particular purpose or job

(3) something has much/little/nothing to recommend it.

Note that (3) is less a description of the meaning than an illustration of usage. This meaning was not included among those in *The Oxford Online Dictionary*.

The *Collins English Dictionary* also provides three meanings for *recommend*:

(1) If someone recommends a person or thing to you, they suggest that you would find that person or thing good or useful.

(2) If you recommend that something is done, you suggest that it should be done.

(3) If something or someone has a particular quality to recommend them, that quality makes them attractive or gives them an advantage over similar things or people.

Meaning (1) from the *Collins* dictionary is similar to (2) from the *Longman* dictionary, (2) from the *Collins* dictionary is similar to (1) from the *Longman* dictionary, and the third meanings are similar in the two dictionaries. Also, the first general meaning from the *Oxford* dictionary corresponds to the first and second meanings in the other dictionaries. The *Longman* and *Collins* dictionaries do not include the third (archaic) meaning given by the *Oxford* dictionary. It is likely that this is because the *Longman* and *Collins* dictionaries are aimed at learners of English as a foreign language. Hence, they provide more information about the syntactic patterns in which *recommend* is used, and numerous sentences to exemplify its usage.

Overall, there seem to be three contemporary meanings and usages associated with *recommend*, as indicated by the entries from the *Longman* and *Collins* dictionaries above.

Searching the *SOAP Corpus*

As described above, the *SOAP Corpus* is a 100 million word corpus of contemporary spoken American English. The texts that comprise the corpus are transcriptions from ten popular American soap operas such as *Young and Restless* or *Bold and Beautiful*. BYU's website for language corpora provides a very useful interface tool for searching corpora. One can quickly and easily obtain frequency information about the occurrence of a lexical item or of its related forms (i.e. *lemma*) in a corpus or in a subset of a corpus. One can compare a word's frequencies in different sections of a corpus, for example, in spoken and written subsections. It is also easy to obtain information about a

word's frequent collocates, that is, words that are frequently used with a given word, and which usually contribute to its meaning. By looking at the words associated with syntactic patterns, one can also gain a clearer understanding of the syntactic patterns in which a given word is likely to occur. Statistical information related to a word's frequency is also available. Thus, using a corpus allows a researcher to obtain considerable information about a word's frequency and occurrence in syntactic patterns in a variety of texts.

As the frequency and patterning tendencies vary according to mode (spoken or written), genre, and other factors, it is important to explore a word's usage in each genre and to avoid overgeneralizing about its behavior in other genres. The present study is limited to the use of *recommend* in spoken contemporary American English.

Recommend and other synonyms

The *Collins English Thesaurus* lists ten synonyms for *advise*. Two of them, *recommend* and *suggest*, are designated as closest, two more synonyms, *urge* and *counsel*, are marked as close synonyms and six more synonyms are listed: *advocate, caution, prescribe, commend, admonish* and *enjoin*. From a search for the lemmas of these synonyms the following frequencies were obtained:

Table 1   Frequencies of synonyms of
advise* in the *SOAP Corpus

Synonyms	Frequency
advise	990
recommend	1,058
suggest	5,960
urge	747
counsel	910
advocate	254
caution	417
prescribe	444
command	71
admonish	21
enjoin	0

The figures in Table 1 indicate that *recommend* is indeed one of the most frequent synonyms of *advise* in the *SOAP Corpus*. Note that these figures are for the lemma of each lexeme. That is, the frequencies of all related forms are included in the figures. Thus, the figure for *recommend* is the total number of occurrences of *recommend, recommends, recommended* and *recommending*. A separate search for the noun *recommendation* showed 353 occurrences in the corpus.

Qualitative analysis and findings

Analysis of collocational patterns is a useful means of identifying the syntactic patterns in which a lexical item occurs. In looking at the verbs associated with the speech act of advice-giving it is necessary to determine to what extent a verb is actually used for advice-giving or how much it is used for other functions. It is clear from a cursory examination of concordance lines for *recommend* that *recommend* and its related forms are often used for functions other than actually giving advice. To qualify as a performative verb, that is, a verb which through its utterance enacts the action that is associated with its meaning, *recommend* would normally need to occur with a first person subject, that is, *I* or *we*. Thomas (1995: 32–33) summarizes the requirements for being a performative as having a first person subject, indicative mood, simple present tense, declarative form, and active voice. In order to ascertain how frequently *recommend* is used in performative utterances, one can begin by examining how frequently it occurs with a first person subject.

A search reveals that the first person pronouns *I* and *we* occur a total of 388 times as collocates within four positions to the left of *recommend*. *I* occurs far more frequently than *we*: 370 occurrences of *I*, as compared to only 18 occurrences of *we*. In terms of the position in which *I* occurs, there are 77 tokens of *I* in the position directly before *recommend* (e.g. *I recommend that* ...), 155 tokens in the second position to the left of *recommend* (e.g. *I highly recommend that* ...), 88 tokens in the third position to the left of *recommend* (e.g. *I really highly recommend that* ...), and 50 tokens in the fourth position to the left of *recommend* (e.g. *I would like to recommend that* ...). As for tokens of *we* to the left of *recommend*, there are 6 tokens in the position directly before *recommend*, 9 tokens in the second position, 3 tokens in the third position, and 0 tokens in the fourth.

Overall, we can see that there is a strong tendency for *recommend* to occur with one or more modifying expressions, rather than simply as, *I recommend* ... However, a cursory examination of concordance lines in which *I* or *we* occurs as a left collocate of *recommend* reveals that in many instances, *recommend* is not being used in giving advice, but rather to talk about the ability to make recommendations or what a speaker will or would do in a future or hypothetical case. For example, when *I* occurs in the second position to the left of *recommend* in the pattern, *I _____ recommend*, the lexeme which most frequently occurs between *I* and *recommend* is *can* (e.g. *I can recommend* ...). *Can* occurs 31 times in that position. But when I examined the 31 concordance lines containing *I can recommend*, I found only one instance in which it seemed to be used for giving advice: "I can recommend the crab cakes." In other instances, it was used to refer to a speaker's power, knowledge or other ability that enabled them to recommend something (e.g. "I can recommend a good lawyer for him.") Other frequently occurring collocates such as *could, will* and *could* are also used in expressions that have a function other than to give advice.

While Thomas' (1995: 32–33) definition of a performative stipulates that it have simple present

tense, I found that the progressive form, *recommending*, was also used to give advice in some instances. For example, in the following example from the *SOAP Corpus*, the speaker is using *recommending* to give advice: "However, in my research, I discovered that Newman Enterprises was missing over half of the market share. And we must do something to close the gap. I'm recommending a new line of fragrances." But more often, *I'm recommending* is used to report about a recommendation, as in the following example from the corpus: "And I'm recommending to the court that they lift your probation early for good behavior."

Another case in which a form other than *recommend* is used in advice-giving can be found in some utterances containing *recommends*. For example, in the following quote from the *SOAP Corpus*, a district attorney is addressing a judge in court: "Your honor, the people and the counsel for the defense have entered into a plea agreement. The commonwealth recommends a prison term of 2 1/2 to 5 years, all to be served during a period of probation, along with substantial community service." Out of 35 tokens of *recommends* in the *SOAP Corpus*, only 5 were used in actually making a recommendation.

To identify the cases in which *recommend* or *recommending* is actually used in giving advice, it is necessary to check concordance lines one by one. In carrying out this check, I examined all concordance lines for *recommends* and *recommending*. Both of them occurred less than 100 times in the corpus. I checked the concordance lines for all of the occurrences of *recommends* and *recommending*, and I checked the first 100 concordance lines for each of the other forms (*recommend, recommended* and *recommendation*). This line-by-line analysis showed that most tokens of all the forms were not used for giving advice. As noted above, out of 35 tokens of *recommends*, only 5 were used in performing the speech act of giving advice, and out of 87 tokens of *recommending*, only 22 were. Instead, *recommends* and *recommending* were more commonly used in sentences that reported or commented on a someone's advice (e.g. "But I can tell you that the baby is at risk no matter what treatment plan Patrick recommends."). I examined the first 100 of the 313 tokens of *recommended* and found that none of the 100 were used in actually giving advice. As for *recommendation*, in only 7 out of 100 instances was *recommendation* used in actually giving advice (e.g. "My recommendation is you might start thinking about a career change.).

Examination of collocates helps to clarify the ways in which a verb is used in giving advice. In the case of *recommend*, a search shows that there are 23 collocates that occur within 4 positions to the left or right, and which occur at least 5 times as collocates of *recommend* in the *SOAP Corpus*. The most frequently occurring collocate is *would*, with a frequency of 107. In addition, *-d,* the contracted form of *would*, is counted separately and has 32 occurrences, making it the third most frequent collocate of *recommend*. As might be expected, *highly* and *strongly* are among the top collocates with frequencies of 36 and 22, respectively. The relatively high frequencies of *attorney* (11), *doctor* (10), *sentence* (9), *doctors* (7), *judge* (7), *treatment* (6), *lawyer* (6), *dr* (6), *therapist* (5), and *procedure* (5) suggest that *recommend* is associated with the registers of law and medicine. This confirms a general impression

that I had from looking at concordance lines for *recommend*. Topics related to law and medicine are likely to be rather serious ones and not topics of ordinary conversation. This could account for the fact that although *recommend* and *suggest* are both close synonyms of *advise*, *recommend* is much less frequent than *suggest* in the *SOAP Corpus*. The usage of *recommend* seems to be more restricted to formal registers compared to *suggest*. To check this observation I did a search to identify the collocates of *suggest*. Only one of the law- or medicine-related collocates of *recommend* appeared among the 100 most frequent collocates of *suggest* (the shared collocate was *lawyer*). This is a possible explanation which remains to be corroborated by further study.

Conclusion

Investigation of the use of *recommend* in the *SOAP Corpus* has shed light on how this verb is used in the speech act of advice-giving in informal American English. *Recommend* is similar to *advise*; it is listed as one of the closest synonyms in *Collins English Thesaurus*, and the definitions for *recommend* indicate that it is similar in meaning to *advise* since both verbs involve telling someone what they should do. Furthermore, like *advise* it occurs much less frequently than *suggest*. Diederich and Höhn (1995) attributed the relative infrequency of *advise* to the fact that it made the advice-giving very explicit and potentially face-threatening, and therefore speakers tended to use alternate expressions. The same explanation is likely to obtain in the case of *recommend*. Analysis of concordance lines showed that *recommend* tended to be used for the registers of law and medicine and not much in other registers of the *SOAP Corpus*, which is comprised primarily of informal spoken English.

Although simple present tense is normally associated with the use of verbs in a performative way, my analysis revealed that the forms *recommends* and *recommending* were also used in giving advice, though only to a limited extent.

The present study was limited by being based on the use of *recommend* in the *SOAP Corpus* of informal spoken American English. Findings from this study cannot therefore be generalized to the use of *recommend* in more formal contexts, or in written language, or in dialects of English other than American English. Also, a comparative study is needed to see how the use of *recommend* is similar or dissimilar to *advise* and other synonyms that are used in the speech act of giving advice.

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