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A corpus pragmatic study

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Advice-giving and advice uptake in conversation: a corpus pragmatic study

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This talk presents the main findings of a multi-year project on advice in British English (BrE) conversation. Giving and receiving advice are sensitive undertakings since both the formulation of the advice and its uptake can affect the relationship between interlocutors. Despite a number of studies on advice-giving in institutional (e.g. Butler et al., 2009; Heritage & Sefi, 1992) and everyday conversation (e.g. Adolphs, 2008; Shaw et al., 2015), there has been to date no large-scale, systematic corpus study of the pragmatic and dialogic aspects of advice-giving and uptake across different contexts. Moreover, no studies have explored the motivations and mechanisms related to the development of advice constructions over time.

Our study used the London–Lund Corpora of spoken BrE, comprising the first London–Lund Corpus (1950s–1980s) and the new London–Lund Corpus 2 (2014–2019), to a) provide a comprehensive overview of the linguistic resources used for advice-giving and uptake in different settings over 50 years; and b) explain how these interact with temporal, social and dialogic factors. We extracted over 2,000 constructions and manually annotated them for formal, dialogic, and pragmatic features including the wording of the advice, its uptake (e.g. acceptance, rejection), the interlocutors' relationship, etc. Our analysis combined quantitative methods (conditional inference trees and random forests, suitable for this kind of data with a high degree of correlation) and close qualitative reading of example-rich extracts.

The preliminary results of this project are promising. Systematic corpus searches revealed that BrE speakers use a much wider range of advice constructions than reported to date, including very indirect constructions (e.g., sentence fragments). This said, there is also an increased preference in recent history for more explicit advice-giving constructions (e.g., imperatives). However, these lead to lower levels of acceptance, particularly with high-status advisers, reinforcing the complex nature of advising in conversation.

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