Requesting the Context: A Context Analysis of *Let* Statement and *If* Statement Requests and Commands in the *Santa Barbara Corpus of Spoken American English*

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Abstract

This paper identifies two requestive forms in the *Santa Barbara Corpus of Spoken American English*, *let* statements and *if* statements, and the contextual conditions—linguistic, pragmatic, discourse and social—that co-occur with these forms. The analysis reveals a complex interplay of linguistic forms and contextual factors. The variables of social distance, social power, contingency, entitlement and specific discourse functions all influence the forms a speaker chooses when requesting, but not at the same time for both forms nor in equal measures. Rather, two or three contextual features become more or less relevant at a time, creating a distinct profile for each form.

Key words: speech act, request, corpus, context

1 Introduction

Since Austin (1962) first coined the term 'speech act,' most theory and discussion of speech acts has focused primarily on indirect speech acts and the apparent mismatch between the form of a sentence and its function. That is, how and why do we understand *Can you pass the salt?* to be not merely a question of ability but primarily a request for action. This study focuses not on how it is theoretically possible to process a modal query as a request for an action, but rather on the relationship between the forms speakers use and the context in which those forms occur. In other words, given the range of possible forms for requesting, why do speakers choose the forms they do? In North American English, there are many linguistic forms that speakers can use to request. They may say

(1) Pass the salt.

(2) I need the salt.

(3) If you'd pass the salt.

(4) Would you mind passing the salt?

(5) I was wondering if you might be able to pass the salt?

(6) Hey, could you please pass the salt?

(7) Salt, please!

among many other options, or even use a non-verbal method, such as pointing at a salt shaker on the table. This paper is part of a larger study to empirically investigate what linguistic forms are used to make requests in naturally occurring spoken corpus data of North American English and to identify what contextual conditions—linguistic, pragmatic, discourse or social—co-occur with those forms. This paper will examine two syntactic categories of requestive forms found in naturally occurring spoken corpus data of North American English, *let* statements and *if* statements, and the context in which they occur.

While there have been some studies of requests in naturally-occurring spoken corpus data, most have examined British English corpus data (Aijmer 2006, Curl & Drew 2008, Craven & Potter 2010). One seminal study of directives in North America was done in 1976 by Susan Ervin-Tripp. Her small, hand-gathered corpus revealed six linguistic categories of forms speakers use to make requests. These particular forms corresponded with definite contextual and social features. For example, she found in an office setting, imperatives "were the normal form between those alike in rank and age" while for "those who differed [in rank], the hint, question directive, or imbedded imperative"[1] was used (p. 37). Besides speaker age and rank, she also found that features such as "territoriality, physical distance, the seriousness of cost of the service asked, and whether compliance may be assumed because of the type of service, normal roles, or power relations" were variables in distinguishing which requesting form is used (Ervin-Tripp

[1] Ervin-Tripp labels utterances such as *would/could/can/will you* + [verb] and *why don't* you + [verb] as embedded imperatives. There have been many other labels for this construction: "interrogatives with modal verbs" (Curl & Drew 2008), "mitigated yes-no interrogatives" (Aijmer 1996), among others.

1976:37). However, her study, with data collected in the 1960s and 1970s, is worth revisiting, not only to see whether fifty to sixty years later requestive forms have changed, but also to confirm her results with a larger data collection that includes speakers from across the country (see Ervin-Tripp 1976: 27). Finally, her analysis points to possible contextual variables, but is limited in scope, focusing on isolating the variables rather than examining in detail the range of contextual information co-occurring with the linguistic forms speakers use to request. The current study presents a systematic, quantitively-based investigation into what linguistic request forms in naturally-occurring, spoken, interactional North American English co-occur with particular features of the context. Curl & Drew (2008) have also noted a gap in our understanding of what forms speakers choose to make requests and why they choose those forms. They argue that attributing the variation in forms of requesting to general politeness theory is insufficient. First, Curl & Drew (2008) write that assessing the inherent politeness of "particular forms of words" is "based on intuitive judgments" rather than empirical evidence (p. 132). They cite Watts (2003), who shows that politeness is not inherent to particular forms, but that the politeness of certain forms can change depending on the interactional contexts in which they appear (Curl & Drew 2008:132). Second, they argue that politeness theory has been developed based on utterances "stripped of their interactional context" and it has been demonstrated clearly (Ervin-Tripp 1976, Watts 2003) that the politeness of an utterance must be studied and defined within its interactional context rather than with invented examples based on native speaker judgments (Curl & Drew 2008:132). Finally, their own study demonstrates that two ostensibly indirect forms, *could you* and *I wonder if you could*, have a "quite fundamental difference between the interactional circumstances in which speakers select" the two forms (Curl & Drew 2008:133-34). On the other hand, they note that two "putatively direct and indirect

forms *Would you* and *Could you*" occur in "precisely equivalent interactional circumstances" (p. 133). Their findings are corroborated in my study as well where I found no significant difference in the contexts where *could you* and *would you* occur. Instead of politeness or even social power, Curl & Drew (2008) argue from their British English corpus data that degree of contingency and entitlement can best account for the variation in forms that speakers use to request. These contextual categories echo Ervin-Tripp's (1976:37) findings that "the seriousness or cost of the service asked" and "normal roles" account for variation in requesting forms. However, the current study explores these ideas of contingency and entitlement in a more systematic way, to see how Curl & Drew's (2008) findings on contingency and entitlement could also account for the variation in request forms of American English.

In addition to refining our theoretical understanding of the production of requests, there are several very practical applications for understanding what forms speakers are actually using to request and the contexts that pattern with those forms. First, in recent years, the importance of having corpora tagged for pragmatic and contextual information, such as speech acts, has been widely acknowledged and attempted (Georgila et al. 2009, Wu, Yan & Lin 2002). In order to develop accurate automated tagging programs, it is important to know what forms speakers are using to perform speech acts, as well as what aspects of the context are relevant to a speaker's linguistic choice for a particular form. A pilot study of a smaller corpus, such as the one used for this study, provides a jumping off point for more complex analysis of speech acts in corpora. Finally, in second language acquisition, pragmatic competence has long been considered one of the most difficult, yet most important skills for non-native speakers of English to acquire (Kaspar 1997). A detailed, fine-tuned analysis of interactional data is necessary to determine what contextual factors motivate speakers to choose a particular linguistic form for requesting. In

addition, enough data needs to be examined in order to find patterns that may offer clues about how to identify the crucial pragmatic information in a given social or cultural situation. This study attempts to walk the fine line of both of these concerns, providing very detailed analysis of conversational data while gathering enough samples to reveal crucial patterns between context and linguistic form.

Considering the complexity of interactional data, it seems unlikely that only one contextual factor, such as degree of contingency and entitlement or social power levels, is responsible for the linguistic variation that speakers employ while requesting. So the current study is a context analysis that looks at not just one of these factors, but all of these, to identify how speakers' awareness of all of these aspects of the context—social power, social distance, contingency, entitlement and perhaps others—contributes to the linguistic choices they make in a given context. The results of this study suggest that speakers are motivated by a variety of contextual factors, including, but not limited to, the factors listed above. In addition, it seems that not all contextual factors may be relevant to speakers all the time. Rather, two or three factors become relevant at a time, indicating that speakers may draw on a limited range of contextual knowledge at one time.

2 Methodology

The data for this study comes from the *Santa Barbara Corpus of Spoken American English* (SBCSAE), which includes 60 recorded conversations, on average 15 minutes each and includes a variety of everyday situations, such as "face-to-face conversation,….telephone conversations, card games, food preparation, on-the-job talk, classroom lectures, sermons, story-telling, town hall meetings, tour-guide spiels, and more" (Du Bois et al. 2000-2005). The data is all spoken, spontaneous, naturally-occurring and interactional. In addition, the corpus includes important

meta-data about the context of the conversation and speaker information (gender, age, occupation, relationship with other speakers). The transcripts are free and available to download from the internet. To create the dataset, all directives, including requests and commands, were extracted from the corpus and hand-tagged for various contextual factors. This study includes both requests and commands, which have been defined following Tsui (1994), as an utterance that is a request (or command) for an action by the listener that benefits the speaker. 278 utterances that could be defined as requests or commands were identified and extracted from the SBCSAE. From the extracted requests and commands, ten general linguistic categories emerge: *if* statements, *let* statements, modal statements, *need/want* statements, imperatives, modal queries (*could you, will you*, etc), hints, reported *need/want* statements, reported imperatives, and reported modal queries. This paper will focus on just two of these linguistic categories: *let* statements and *if* statements.

In an attempt to discover what contextual features influence a speaker's choice of linguistic form, at least twelve coding categories were set up. Some of these are straightforward and others require more detailed explanation. As noted before, factors such as politeness, social distance, social power, contingency and entitlement have all been put forward as contributing to a speaker's choice of one linguistic form over another. The twelve initial categories chosen for this study are context type (Adolphs 2008), type of request, contingency (Curl & Drew 2008), entitlement (Curl & Drew 2008), speaker identity, social power relationship (Ervin-Tripp 1976), interaction type (Adolphs 2008), position in request turn (*e.g.*, initial, second iteration, third iteration, etc.), explicitness (Ervin-Tripp 1976), compliance and definite/indefinite object referenced. The following section gives a more detailed explanation of five of these categories that have turned out to be most relevant in the analysis of the forms presented in this paper.

2.1 Context Type

Adolphs (2008) explains how the *Cambridge and Nottingham Corpus of Discourse in English* (CANCODE) identifies five situational categories roughly corresponding to social distance. These context categories are intimate, socio-cultural, professional, pedagogic and transactional (Adolphs 2008). The categories, as developed for CANCODE, are defined by Adolphs (2008) and summarized here: an intimate context involves speakers who are either part of the same nuclear family or are very, very close friends that approximate nuclear family members—these are relationships in which the speakers are extremely comfortable with one another and in which their guard is completely down—; a socio-cultural context involves speakers who are friends or acquaintances and are interacting on a social rather than familial level; a professional context involves conversations between work colleagues; a transactional context covers most service encounters where typically the participants are strangers or only know each other because there is an exchange of services, goods or information between them; and, finally, a pedagogic context involves participants in a teacher-student relationship.

2.2 Contingency and Entitlement

While Blum-Kulka (1989) and Brown and Levinson (1987) note degree of imposition as an important factor for which requestive form a speaker uses, they do not provide a systematic way of coding this category. Instead, this study follows Curl & Drew (2008) by positing contingency and entitlement as key factors, which essentially captures the essence of imposition in a more precise way. Curl & Drew (2008:129) argue that "the request forms that speakers select embody, or display, their understandings of the contingencies associated with the recipient's ability to grant the request." In other words, speakers choose forms for requesting based on how difficult or unlikely the action being requested is (contingencies) and how strongly they feel the right to

make the request (entitlement). According to Curl & Drew (2008:147), contingency is the "conditions necessary for granting [the] request." Contingency is listener-focused, as Craven & Potter (2010) point out—it is the obstacles and conditions that the requester recognizes that the listener faces in order to comply with the request. Curl & Drew (2008:147) define entitlement as the degree to which the speakers "believe themselves reasonably entitled" to make the request. It is requester-focused because here the speaker focuses on the conditions which give the speaker the right to make the request (Craven & Potter 2010). Curl & Drew's (2008) definitions seem to capture with more theoretical preciseness Ervin-Tripp's (1976) observation that the difficulty of a task and how normal or expected the activity is in relation to previously established roles is a key variable in requesting. However, Curl & Drew (2008, p.135) "do not attempt [to hypothesize] about the psychological state of the speaker" or "claim access to speakers' inner mental state", as that would be impossible. Rather they "investigate what can be learned from the speakers' choice of linguistic expression," relying on what participants say to provide linguistic evidence for those contingencies or entitlements. In other words, they count contingency or entitlement in the context only when the speaker says something that relates to one or the other.

Although the current study draws heavily on Curl & Drew's (2008) definition and descriptions of contingency and entitlement, it also attempts to go a step further by not only identifying which requests indicate high or low entitlement and references to contingencies, but also quantifying the entitlement and contingency level. As Curl & Drew (2008) note, contingency and entitlement seem to be in reverse relation to each other. Where speakers feel a strong sense of entitlement, they are unlikely to refer to obstacles or contingencies that the listener faces. But where speakers do not feel a strong sense of entitlement, they are more likely to acknowledge those contingencies and attempt to mitigate them. Since the two are very closely

linked, this study seeks a way to quantify the level of contingency and entitlement, both separately and together as a single coding category. Therefore, for this study a coding system was created with a scale from 0 to 3 for both contingency and entitlement. An utterance is tagged with 0 when the speaker makes no reference to either contingencies the listener faces or no reference to his or her entitlement to make the request. If a speaker uses one linguistic strategy to refer to a contingency or entitlement, an utterance is coded with 1. Two strategies means an utterances is coded with 2, and an utterance is tagged with 3 when the speaker makes three or more references to contingencies or uses at least three linguistic strategies that orient to entitlement (or the lack of it). By adding the two scores together an utterance can have a possible score between 0 and 6, with 0 being a request where the speaker displays very strong entitlement (because he or she makes no reference to it) and displays very low contingency (because he or she makes no references to obstacles the listener faces). A request that has a total score of 6 is one in which the speaker demonstrates low entitlement by employing at least three strategies that would help to demonstrate his or her right to make the request and high contingency because the speaker uses at least three strategies to mitigate obstacles that might prevent the listener from complying. In terms of organizing the data, utterances with a contingency/entitlement level (C+E) of 0-3 are low contingency/high entitlement requests and utterances with a C+E level of 4-6 are high contingency/low entitlement. However, I will simply be referring to low C+E level (0-3) and high C+E level (4-6) requests. Like Curl & Drew (2008), I do not attempt to evaluate the full range of potential contingencies or entitlements within a given context or guess at a speaker's full mental state. Rather, the score is based only on what the requester actually says—overt linguistic forms that reference contingency or entitlement—either before, during, or after

the request. The following examples illustrate how this scale is applied to the corpus data.

Example (8) is a high C+E level request.

(8) Transcript[2] 7c[3]

1	MARY:	... (DRINK) (Hx)
2	ALICE:	**... I was gonna ask you and m=om,**
3		**too,**
4		**if you could um,**
5		**... take care of !Trace for a couple days next week.**
6	MARY:	... (TSK) Oh?
7		... What you got in mind.
8	ALICE:	... I need to get caught up on my work.
9	MARY:	... (DRINK) Wednesday I have an appointment at nine thirty.
10	ALICE:	... Mom's off,
11		isn't she?
12	MARY:	... Oh,
13		that's righ=t.
14		... That's right.
15	ALICE:	... Yeah I think that'd,
16		... I think that'd um,
17		... (TSK) work out,
18	…like if she had to go shopping or something maybe you could go with her,	
19		and help her with him?
20		... And !Nicky helps her .. with him a lot anyway.\0

Mary and Alice are sisters, and Alice asks Mary in lines 2-4 of Example (8) if she would babysit her child (Trace) the following week: *... I was gonna ask you and m=om, too, if you could um, ... take care of !Trace for a couple days next week.* Mary's response in lines 6-7 is not an immediate *yes* nor an emphatic *no*, but rather one of hesitancy to commit: *Oh? ... What you got in mind.* This hesitancy demonstrates an unstated contingency to the request—Mary's unwillingness to do what her sister is asking. Instead of directly telling Alice she doesn't want to comply, Mary provides a concrete obstacle in line 9: she has a previously scheduled doctor's appointment

[2] For transcriptions of conversations in this paper, I have used the transcription format of the original conversation provided by the *Santa Barbara Corpus of Spoken American English*, with one exception: I have deleted the column which gives the timing of the conversation and replaced it with line numbers for easier reference in the paper.
[3] The SBCSAE includes 60 transcripts numbered 1-60, so the number identifies which transcript the conversation comes from. In my personal coding of the corpus, I added letters to reference each request found in that transcript. So, for example, 7c means that this conversation is the third request in Transcript 7.

during (some of) the time Alice is requesting her babysitting services. Alice responds to both the stated and unstated contingencies with at least three strategies. First, she offers a solution in lines 10-11 to the stated contingency, saying ... *Mom's off, isn't she?* Since Alice has asked both her sister and mother to watch Trace, Alice proposes that their mother watch Trace during the times that Mary cannot. This solution keeps Alice's request viable and also has no contingencies since the mother is not present to object. Second, Alice downgrades the request in lines 18-19 to a suggestion that Mary help for a shorter time frame than the one Alice had originally proposed*:* *…like if she had to go shopping or something maybe you could go with her, and help her with him?* No longer is she directly asking *if you could*, but rather she is suggesting *maybe you could*. A suggestion does not require a specific response of compliance or refusal. The preferred response options for a suggestion are much more open-ended. The hearer can comply or refuse, agree or disagree or even choose not to respond at all. In other words, a non-committal response—which is what Mary has given to Alice—is a perfectly acceptable response to a suggestion. By downgrading to a suggestion, Alice is adjusting her expectations to the reality of the interaction and maintaining social harmony with her sister. She has also decreased the amount of time she is asking Mary to babysit—instead of *a couple days next week* (line 5) she is now only asking for Mary's time when their mother goes shopping. She has also now shifted most of the responsibility for watching the child to their mother. Alice's third strategy that addresses Mary's unwillingness to comply is to suggest that Mary's teenage daughter Nicky will do most of the actual babysitting work. She adds, *And !Nicky helps her .. with him a lot anyway* (line 20). By implication, Mary's unwillingness to help can have no basis: the request is now only for a very limited time period (while they are out shopping) and will require very minimal action by Mary herself because Nicky will do the actual difficult parts of babysitting. Thus by

employing three linguistic strategies to deal with contingencies—offering a solution to a stated contingency, downgrading the request to a suggestion and then offering an additional solution (that Mary's daughter help)—this utterance is tagged with a contingency level of 3.

Alice also negotiates the conversation by referencing entitlement. First, she prefaces the request with the past tense in (line 2) *I was gonna ask you*, which places a distance between the speaker and request itself. Second the request itself in lines 4-5 contains an *if* clause[4], *if you could um,…take care of !Trace for a couple days next week*, which displays a hesitancy to ask and an orientation to her lack of entitlement because there may be obstacles to the listener complying to the request. Alice's use of the hedge *if* and the hesitation with the filler *um…* contribute to communicating her hesitancy. Third, after Mary's first non-committal response, instead of literally answering Mary's question, *what you got in mind?* (line 7) with more details about the request, Alice follows up with a reason statement instead: *I need to get caught up on my work* (line 8). This *need* statement is a strategy for claiming entitlement in a situation where the speaker may not feel confident about it or feels the need to justify the request. In this case, Alice is justifying her request in light of Mary's hesitancy to commit. These three strategies (hedging the request with past tense and an *if* clause and justifying it with a *need* statement) give this utterance a low entitlement level of 3 and, combined with the contingency score, a total C+E level of 6.

[4] Here the *if* clause is a reference to the construction as a hedging device well-established in the literature (Fraser 2010), rather than to the name I've given this syntactical category. It should be noted that I am not arguing that *if* statement requests are all high C+E level requests because they contain an *if* clause. The *if* clause counts as only one reference to lack of entitlement. This request contains 5 other references to contingency and entitlement which place it in the high C+E category. Later analysis within this paper will discuss low C+E level *if* statement requests. Furthermore, this analysis codes the C+E level of a request based on what the speaker says before during or after the request, so it must include linguistic expressions the speaker uses within the request itself.

A requester who feels a strong sense of entitlement to make a request has no need to justify the request and thus does not reference contingencies or entitlement at all. Example (8) contrasts with (9), where a teenage boyfriend and girlfriend are studying math together.

(9) Transcript 9a

1	NATHAN:	... You can do it that way?
2	KATHY:	.. Mhm.
3	NATHAN:	... (BURP**) Let me see the pencil** (Hx).
4	KATHY:	... (H) But then,
5		I didn't get what she got.

In (9), Nathan requests a pencil from Kathy, saying *let me see the pencil.* In contrast to (8), there are no references to contingencies or to whether or not Nathan feels entitled to ask for a pencil. It is an easy, uncomplicated and even normal request to make when working on math problems with someone. The conversation immediately before and after his request is unrelated to his request. Because this request has no linguistic reference to contingencies or orientation to entitlement, it has a C+E level of 0.

2.3 Speakers

This is a descriptive coding category that identifies the role of the requester (speaker) and requestee (hearer), such as parent/child, husband/wife, teacher/student, friend/friend or customer/client.

2.4 Social Power Relationship

For each of the requests, the social power relationship exists between the participants is identified. For this category the relationship between the requester and hearer is tagged either as an asymmetrical social power relationship of high/low or low/high, or a symmetrical social power relationship of neutral. For example, a parent/child utterance is coded as high/ low, a child/parent as low/ high, and friend/friend or husband/wife as neutral.

3 Results & Analysis

The following section discusses the results from two linguistic categories: *let* statement and *if* statement requests. Neither of these linguistic forms are treated as distinct categories in Ervin-Tripp (1976). Rather, *if* statements are grouped within the "imbedded imperatives" category, which includes *would/could/can/will you* requests, and *let* statements do not appear in her paper at all (though she includes a "permission directives" category, which is most likely the category they would be placed in if they did occur in her corpus). However, by creating categories based on the linguistic forms of the utterances rather than on speech act categories (directives, permissives), it is possible to isolate these linguistic patterns and more easily identify what specific contextual categories are relevant to that form. At this point in the analysis, some of the contextual factors appear to be more relevant than others to the speaker's choice of linguistic form for a request. Social distance, contingency, entitlement, social power and specific discourse-functional categories explained more thoroughly below seem to be the key relevant contextual features for these two forms.

3.1 "Let" Statements

There are 18 *let* statements in the SBCSAE that are requests or commands from a speaker for an action by the listener. For *let* statements, the contextual factors that seem to be relevant are contingency, entitlement and social power. *Let* statements occur with very low C+E levels—all 18 have a total score of either 0 or 1. That is, the speakers make little or no reference to either their entitlement to make the request or contingencies that might prevent the hearer from complying. Second, all of the *let* statements are spoken by participants with high-low or neutral social power relationships. None occur in a low-high social power context. Table 1 illustrates this pattern.

Request Utterances	Con-text Type	CL[a]	EL[b]	Total C+E Level	Speaker / Hearer	Social Power Relationship
(BURP) Let me see the pencil	SC	0	0	0	boyfriend/girlfriend	neutral
Let's see all the bottles	SC	0	1	1	friend / friend	neutral
Let's see all the bottles	SC	0	1	1	friend / friend	neutral
Let me see	SC	0	1	1	friend / friend	neutral
Let's see how many bottles you got.	SC	0	1	1	friend / friend	neutral
Let me ask you one other thing	Trans	1	0	1	customer / sales clerk	neutral
let's all count together folks	Ped	0	0	0	teacher / children	high - low
let's behave like scientists	Ped	0	0	0	teacher / children	high - low
oh, let's not start	Int	0	0	0	parent / adult child	high - low
let's not start	Int	0	0	0	parent / adult child	high – low
Let me have this pen for a minute	Trans	1	0	1	bailiff / unknown	high - low
Let me see that please	Trans	0	0	0	judge / person in trial	high - low
Let me see that please	Trans	0	0	0	judge / person in trial	high - low
Well let me show you my barn. If you're interested?	SC	1	0	1	acquaintances	neutral
Let's us three get together	Ped	0	1	1	teacher / students	high - low
... Tell you what. Martin let's pull this down XXX	Ped	0	1	1	teacher / students	high - low
Let's give it a try	Ped	0	0	0	teacher /students	high - low
... Now let's throw it again, and not have to stop	Ped	1	0	1	teacher / students	high - low

[a] CL = Contingency Level [b] EL = Entitlement Level

Table 1. *Let* statement results in the SBCSAE with variables of context type, contingency/entitlement level, speaker/hearer identity and social power relationship.

In these requests with low C+E Levels, eight of them are requests for the hearer to pass or move a particular object that is in view.

(10) (BURP) Let me see the pencil

(11) Let me have this pen for a minute

(12) Let's see all the bottles

(13) Let me see

(14) Let's see how many bottles you got.

(15) Let me see that please

(16) Martin let's pull this down XXX

These objects include a pencil (10), pen (11), bottles (12) (13) (14), a document (15) or a piece of equipment (probably a mat) in a karate studio (16). The XXX in the transcript that follows the utterance in (16) indicates an undecipherable noise, most likely the sound of the hearer dragging the mat across the floor in compliance with the karate instructor's request. Other *let* statements are requesting a particular action from the hearer that is clearly conventional for the situation and not likely to be difficult or unpleasant for the hearer.

(17) Well let me show you my barn. If you're interested?

In (17) the participants are at a horse farm and the hearer has come to finish paying the speaker for a horse he has bought from her. The speaker's barns are presumably very close, most likely in sight, and thus her request to show off her barns to someone clearly interested in horses is a completely natural one. Though her barn is a much larger object than the pencil or pen in (10) or (11), it is still an object close at hand, and thus (17) seems to still follow the discourse function pattern of the others, requesting an object nearby.

The following set of *let* statements, while not asking for an object close at hand, all occur in pedagogical contexts where an instructor or teacher is introducing an action he or she wants the students to engage in for learning purposes.

(18) let's all count together folks

(19) let's (H) behave like scientists now

(20) Let's us three get together

(21) Let's give it a try

(22) Now let's throw it again, and not have to stop

These activities are conventional requests for the classroom context, such as counting (18), observing closely (19) and engaging in a karate move (20) (21) (22). Though *let* statements do occur in contexts besides the pedagogical (socio-cultural and intimate), the consistency of the form in pedagogical contexts suggests that it may be a conventionalized discourse strategy for introducing a new activity in a classroom. For instance, in (23) and (24), Nick, a karate instructor, uses the *let* statement fairly consistently to introduce a new move and then follows it with a succession of imperatives that guide the students through the move.

(23) Transcript 57j

1 NICK: ... Tell you what.
2 **... ~Martin let's pull this down XXX.**
3 ... Okay.
4 ... Alright?
5 **... ~Lug (Hx),**
6 **... Give a more upward**,
7 ... round pull.
8 ... From here.
9 **... Watch.**
10 I get s- (Hx) --
11 ... best- .. best way to do it is to feel it I guess.
12 **... Bend over.**
13 ... Alright,
14 I'm gonna come to here,

(24) Transcript 57k

1 NICK: ... and get the outside of his legs,
2 ... and I can make that a pretty throw.
3 ... Alright (Hx)?…
4 ... Let's give it a try.
5 ... Throw .. throw ~Bill again.
6 X: ... (Hx) ... (THROAT)
7 NICK: ... Now,
8 spring the hip.
9 BILL: ... (GRUNT)
10 ((FALL))

In Example (25) a museum worker is giving a science demonstration to a group of children. He also uses a *let* statement to introduce a new activity, as well as to focus the children's attention after they have been distracting him.

(25) Transcript 27a

1 PHIL: (H) you think,
2 .. well,
3 ... okay,
4 %w= th- th-,
5 (H) I'm glad I never saw d- Citizen Cane with you,
6 ... <VOX Rosebud is a sled VOX>.
7 (H) Okay.
8 Well,
9 @@
10 **(H) let's all count together folks,**
11 that wa=s,
12 AUD1:... One.
13 AUD2:[One].
14 PHIL: **[(H) very] good.**
15 **One balloon going into the (H) little container here.**
16 **And this would be,**
17 MANY: Two.
18 PHIL: (H**) two.**
19 **Ve=ry good counting there.**
20 **Two.**
21 **Excellent.**

Here the instructor's turn begins with him responding to comments from the audience that are unrelated to his teaching topic: *you think, .. well, ... okay, %w= th- th-, I'm glad I never saw d-Citizen Cane* [sic] *with you* (lines 1-5). He then uses the *let* statement to try to turn the focus of the students from *Citizen Cane* [sic] back to his teaching agenda and to get them contributing to his pedagogical goals. Throughout the transcript this instructor clearly struggles to keep the crowd in control, and this appears to be one of the linguistic techniques he uses to assert his power over the audience. In contrast to (23) and (24) where the karate instructor clearly has full cooperation from his students, Phil guides his audience through the counting activity with repetition and affirmation rather than imperatives. He repeats the numbers they say (e.g., *two,* line 18, 20) and then praises the audience's counting skills with *[(H) very] good, Ve=ry good counting there,* and *excellent* (lines 19, 21) Since the audience already knows how to comply with his request to count, he does not need to guide them through the move with imperatives as the karate instructor does. Though more data is needed to confirm if this is definitely a conventionalized pedagogical phrase, the fact that similar patterns occur in such disparate pedagogical contexts makes it likely.

Second, all of the *let* statements are spoken by speakers who are either at the same social power level or at a higher social power status. No *let* statement in the request corpus is uttered by a speaker of a lower social power status to one of a higher social status. This confirms that these utterances are better classified as directives rather than permission speech acts. A *let* statement spoken by someone of a lower social power status to one at a higher power status might reasonably be tagged as asking permission rather than a straightforward request. Examples (11) and (15) both occur in a courtroom and are spoken either by a judge to a defendant or witness for documents related to the case being decided (15) or by a court official to an unidentified person

(11). As noted above, examples (16), (18), (19), (20), (21), (22), (23), (24), and (25) are spoken by an instructor to students. The others occur between friends ((12), (13) and (14)) , or by a mother speaking to her adult daughter (see (26) below). In all of these contexts, the balance of social power is either equal or slanted toward the requester.

Let statements in this corpus fall into two general functional categories: asking for an object that is close at hand or introducing a new activity in a pedagogical context. However, there are two utterances that do not at first seem to fall into either of these two categories. Is this an anomaly? Or can they be explained in terms of the general functional profile already established for *let* requests? These two occur in an intimate context and are actually the same phrase repeated twice by the same speaker:

(26) Let's not start.

The utterance is spoken by a mother to her adult daughter while they are in the heat of an argument over how a particular past event unfolded. The daughter wants to describe in detail this past situation to the other family members that are present, but the mother does not want her to. So she tries to prevent the daughter from speaking on this topic by telling her, *Let's not start*. In terms of the action, this is a request to desist from an action (unlike the others). The daughter clearly does not want to stop talking about the issue, so the mother repeats the directive because the daughter ignores her and continues to discuss the topic. Eventually, the mother's directive to *not start* is ignored completely and the situation is fully discussed by everyone in the family. The choice of a *let* statement by the speaker in this context is consistent with the social power relationship status of the speakers and hearers in the rest of this corpus: the mother, who has a higher social power status, speaks to her daughter, who presumably is at a lower social power level. However, the daughter's age (23 years old) and strong assertion of the right to not comply

with the request may indicate that the actual balance of power between the two is closer to being equal than the mother would perhaps like it to be. Perhaps the mother recognizes that in this situation she is losing power (her desire to not discuss the topic) and reverts to a technique that is more likely to be used by a teacher or someone with higher social power as a strategy for asserting more power and an attempt to get the hearer to comply. It is, ultimately, an unsuccessful strategy; however, it demonstrates the creativity of language users to subvert conventional uses of language (such as the use of *let* statements in a pedagogical context) in order to achieve their goals. It also demonstrates the extent to which language users tap into conventionalized pragmatic knowledge and adapt it to a context that is constantly changing. As speakers interact with one another, the immediate relevant contextual factors are constantly changing, and speakers subconsciously adapt to these changes. Language users can respond to these changes not only with conventionalized pragmatic and semantic knowledge but also by creatively subverting and substituting conventions to achieve their goals.

In summary, *let* statements seem more likely to occur when speakers feel a strong sense of entitlement and consider the hearer to have few obstacles or contingencies that would prevent him or her from complying with the request. The speaker's sense of entitlement may come from the fact that the speaker is in a higher social power position than the listener, as demonstrated by a judge speaking to a defendant at a civil court or a teacher speaking to her students. Speakers may also consider the request to have few or no contingencies if they are requesting an object that is either close at hand (such as a pen or a document) or an appropriate and expected action for the context (such as requesting a group of children to count). Thus the contextual factors most relevant for *let* statements are contingency/entitlement levels and social power.

3.2 "If" Statements

If statement requests show a profile completely different from *let* statement requests. The most relevant contextual factors for this linguistic form are social distance (context type) and C+E levels. There are 11 *if* statement requests in the corpus. Seven of the *if* statements occur in transactional contexts. These seven all have lower C+E levels, from 1-3. The remaining four tokens include 2 intimate, 1 socio-cultural and 1 professional context type interactions. Unlike the transactional context requests, these all have higher C+E levels, between 4 and 6. The first half of this pattern is demonstrated in Table 2.

The utterances that occur in transactional contexts include a tour guide speaking to his tour group, a receptionist at a vet clinic on the phone, a moderator at a public lecture and a contractor and homeowner speaking to each other ((27)-(32), respectively). The requests these speakers make are simple to accomplish, ordinary and even expected for the context in which they appear.

(27) Okay folks, if you will please, take a look at this picture taken during construction

(28) Okay folks, if you will please, follow me now

(29) Okay, if you would, right up this stairway, when you get on the balcony, wait for me on the blue couches on the balcony please

In (27), (28), and (29) a tour guide is asking his group to do typical tour activities: look at an object of interest, follow him and take precautions while on the tour. There is nothing unusual or particularly difficult about these requests. In the same way, (30),

(30) If you want to let him know and then have him call me back

a request to relay information to the appropriate person, is a natural and expected request, since the person the receptionist at the veterinarian clinic is talking to is not the primary owner of the

Request Utterances	Con-Text Type	CL[a]	EL[b]	Total C+E Level	Speakers / Hearer	Social Power Relationship
If you -- if you go over and have a look at the dining room	Trans	0	1	1	contractor/ homeowner	neutral
Okay folks, if you will please, take a look at this picture taken during construction	Trans	1	0	1	tour guide/ tour group	high-low
Okay folks, if you will please, follow me now	Trans	1	0	1	tour guide/ tour group	high-low
.. Okay, if you would ,right up this stairway, when you get on the balcony, wait for me on the blue couches on the balcony please.	Trans	2	0	2	tour guide/ tour group	high-low
If you want to let him know and then have him call me back	Trans	1	2	3	vet clerk / client	neutral
... I'm wondering if=,.. you don't have a floor plan of the house	Trans	2	1	3	contractor/homeowner	neutral
So if you will ask your questions clearly, and please don't make them too long, s- --because I might forget,... the= beginning, by the [time I reach the end],	Trans	1	2	3	moderator for a public lecture /audience	high-low

[a] CL = Contingency Level
[b] EL = Entitlement Level

Table 2. *If* statement requests in the SBCSAE in transactional contexts and with low C+E levels

pet being treated. In (31) and (32), the speakers are a homeowner, Larry, and a contractor, Seth, who appears to be doing a quote for Larry on installing air conditioning in his home.

(31) ... I'm wondering if=,.. you don't have a floor plan of the house

(32) If you -- if you go over and have a look at the dining room

In (31) Seth asks Larry for a floor plan. The negative verb*, I'm wondering if you don't have* seems to be Seth's way of signaling his expectation that Larry may not be able to produce the desired object—in other words, he would like to have it, but he does not expect Larry to go to great lengths to get it if it's not easily available (which it happens to not be). In (32), Larry is asking Seth to look at his dining room. Again, in terms of the purpose for Seth's visit, it is a very natural, expected request. In all of these transactional contexts, the speakers seem to be using *if* statements as a way of hedging—showing politeness and respect as they make their requests. These participants have a wide social distance between them. There is essentially no previously established social relationship between the participants, and thus they are less likely to be direct and abrupt in their requests even though their requests are not difficult to comply with or unusual.

The *if* statements that occur in the non-transactional contexts follow a strikingly different pattern. First, they all occur between speakers who have a previously established social relationship and thus much closer social distance. They include a wife speaking to her husband, a request between sisters, two co-workers who are on the board for a community arts program, and a hostess speaking to a guest who is also a close friend. Second, unlike the transactional requests, these requests show higher C+E levels. That is, the speakers recognize and acknowledge various obstacles that the hearers face in complying. Sometimes the obstacle is simply the fact that the hearer does not want to comply for unexpressed reasons, or there are contextual factors that

make that compliance difficult or impossible. The speakers also express stronger need to justify their right to make the request, demonstrating that they feel a lack of entitlement to make the request. Table 3 illustrates this pattern.

Request Utterances	Context Type	CL[a]	EL[b]	Total *C+E* Level	Speaker/Hearer	Social Power Relationship
you know maybe if X> we could turn the spider plant around.	Int	2	3	5	wife/husband	neutral
... I was gonna ask you and m=om,too,if you could um, ... take care of !Trace for a couple days next week	Int	3	3	6	sibling / sibling	neutral
if we can.. If we can [3go ahead and3] carry on, ... at some point, you and I [I think], 2Because2	Prof	1	3	4	co-workers	low-high
If you can save the bag, .. you can .. turn it inside out and save it.	SC	2	2	4	hostess / guest & friend	neutral

[a] CL = Contingency Level
[b] EL = Entitlement Level

Table 3. *If* statement requests in the SBCSAE in non-transactional contexts and with high C+E levels

The high contingency and low entitlement of the *if statement* request with the C+E level of 6 has already been demonstrated in (8). While there is not space here to examine the others in depth, we will look at the request made by a wife to her husband to illustrate the high C+E levels of these requests. The request itself, *you know maybe if X> we could turn the spider plant around*, seems simple and straightforward, but the context reveals that is not the case.

(33) Transcript 34e

1	KAREN:	[Oh= well that's good].
2		... Oh=,
3		**... <X you know maybe if X> we could turn the spider plant around.**
4	SCOTT:	... Which one.
5	KAREN:	**... The one that just looks kinda decrepit.**
6	SCOTT:	... That one.
7	KAREN:	.. Yeah.
8	SCOTT:	... Maybe we could --
9		I think it,
10		... would probably do better,
11		if it got its babies trimmed off.
12	KAREN:	<P<**X I mean can it wait** X>P>?
13		**... I think we thought about doing that in the springtime,**
14		**... then I thought we'd replant them.**
15	SCOTT:	... Yeah,
16		but [I] think there's more babies than ... we need.
17	KAREN:	[Would] --
18		**... Yeah.**
19		**... And we've got three new babies that I could replant,**
20		**but I haven't,**
21		**... [already].**
22	SCOTT:	[Unhunh].
23		.. And that --
24		.. Yeah the --
25	KAREN:	(COUGH) (COUGH)
26	SCOTT:	The other plant over there is,
27		... has lots of babies,
28	KAREN:	... (Hx)=
29		... Oh=,

The wife, Karen, in making her request in line 3 to *turn the spider plant around* demonstrates a lack of entitlement by hedging it with *you know* and *maybe*, as well as using the *if we could* form (rather than a query, *e.g.*, *could you*). These modifiers allow the speaker to demonstrate that she is aware of possible contingencies. As in Example (8), the hearer's immediate response is noncommittal. He asks for clarification about *which one* (line 4) [*i.e.*, plant] she is referring to, rather than with a yes or no, or simply getting up and moving the plant. Karen responds to his statement with the specific information he is asking for, telling him in line 5, *The one that just*

looks kinda decrepit. There is an implied reason statement in this reply, which is a strategy to justify her request. She describes the specific object she is referring to as the *decrepit* plant, essentially saying that the reason that particular spider plant needs to be turned around is because it is decrepit and ugly, and she does not want it to be visible either to her or possible guests. Her strategies are soft power plays, rather than overt. Her husband's response is somewhat positive: *Maybe we could* (line 8). But he immediately presents a contingency*: I think it, ... would probably do better, if it got its babies trimmed off* (lines 9-11). Rather than fixing the ugliness temporarily by moving the plant, he would like to fix it permanently by cutting off the scraggly baby plants that are hanging on to the adult stems. Karen then responds to this contingency by offering a compromise— *I mean can it wait*—and a reference to a previously discussed mutual agreement about the plant: *I think we thought about doing that in the springtime* (lines 12-14). She agrees that his solution would fix the problem, but would prefer to wait until the spring before they trim the plant. Her query asking him to wait indicates that she was already aware that the plant needed trimming, but that she would prefer it to be done at a later time. In addition, all of these statements begin with hedging phrases, such as *I mean* and *I think*. Her final statement, *then I thought we'd replant them* (line 14), is both a concession and another implied justification statement. She concedes that they should trim the plant, but justifies her desire to wait so that the trimmed baby spider plants can be immediately replanted. The implication is that since it is not springtime currently, they will not be able to plant the babies; thus, the need for a temporary solution such as turning the pot a different direction. Scott counters her reason statement with an additional contingency (there's no need to wait until spring because there will be babies in the spring to plant, even if they cut them off now). Unlike Example (8), the requester does not follow up with another strategy nor does she simply change the topic of conversation. Instead, Karen

concedes to her husband's solution and essentially withdraws the request. She agrees with his statement that they have more baby spiders than they need (saying, *yeah*, line 18) and then offers additional evidence for this: *and we've got three new babies that I could replant, but I haven't already* (lines 19-21). Thus, the linguistic choices made during the request itself, with its hedging, two implied justification statements and concessions, demonstrate the speaker's awareness of contingencies and her less than strong sense of entitlement to make the request.

In summary, *if* statements in this corpus demonstrate two mutually exclusive patterns. First, they occur in transactional contexts with low contingency and high entitlement requests (*i.e.,* low C+E levels). In this group, the form itself seems to be a way for the speakers to hedge their conventional and easy requests. It may be a kind of politeness marker that marks the wide social distance between the participants. The second group occurs in non-transactional contexts with high contingency and low entitlement requests (*i.e.,* high C+E levels). In this case, the *if* statement itself is a hedging technique and perhaps a politeness marker as well; however, the speakers seem to be directly tapping into the semantic meaning of the phrase in a way that is distinct from the tokens that occur in transactional contexts. Thus for *if* statement requests, the relevant contextual factors are contingency/entitlement levels and social distance.

4 Conclusion

The paradigm for *if* statement requests—with relevant contextual factors of contingency/entitlement levels and social distance—contrasts with *let* statement requests, where the contextual factors of social power (only high-low or neutral) and contingency/entitlement (only low C+E levels) seem to be the more relevant factors. *Let* statements also seem to occur within definite functional contexts: requesting a visible object and introducing a new activity in

pedagogical contexts. Table 4 summarizes the pattern of relevant contextual factors for these two forms.

Requesting Forms	Social Distance	C+E Level	Social Power	Discourse Function
Let Statements		Low C +E Levels	High - Low, Neutral	Request visible object, Introduce new activity in pedagogical context
If Statements	Close Social Distance ⟶ or Wide Social Distance ⟶	High C+E Levels or Low C+E Levels		

Table 4. Summary of request forms *let* statements and *if* statements with relevant contextual factors

These results demonstrate that particular linguistic forms do seem to pattern with key socio-cultural and pragmatic contextual variables, and that it is most likely a range of factors, rather than a single factor of the context that influences what form a speaker uses to request. The contextual factors of social distance, social power, contingency, entitlement, and specific discourse functions such as introducing a new activity or requesting a visible object all influence the forms a speaker chooses when requesting, but not at the same time nor in equal measures. Rather, for each linguistic type, two or three contextual features become more or less relevant at a time, creating a distinct profile for each form. Though more data is needed to confirm these results, it appears that for American English, *let* statement and *if* statement requests cannot be explained strictly in terms of contingency and entitlement, as Curl & Drew (2008) demonstrate for the forms *could you* and *I wonder if you could* in their British English data. However, contingency and entitlement are still central to explaining linguistic variation in these request

forms, as they are the only contextual variables that are relevant for both *if* statement and *let* statement requests.

Although this study attempts to quantify some aspects of the context in which requests occur, it is, at its heart, a descriptive and qualitative study that explores the messiness of naturally-occurring spoken language in all of its complexities, in an attempt to tease out key patterns and strategies that speakers use as they interact with each other. It combines the qualitative methodology of Conversational Analysis (CA) with the more quantitative coding strategies of corpus linguistic analysis. The detailed, close analysis of natural conversations borrows from CA methodologies (though is not CA per se), while taking the results from that analysis and compiling them in a systematic way to find patterns follows corpus methodologies. This study shows the merit of combining both the qualitative description of the CA tradition and the quantitative methods of corpus linguistics to illuminate striking patterns worth exploring in more detail. In this initial stage of the project, the results reveal a complex interplay of linguistic forms and contextual factors, as speakers draw on a limited range of strategies to accomplish their communicative goals.

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