Local grammars of speech acts: An exploratory study

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Abstract

This study explores the possibility and the feasibility of developing a set of local grammars to account adequately for speech acts, exemplifying the exploration with a local grammar of request. It mainly aims to further speech act studies and to ultimately contribute to the on-going development of corpus pragmatics. Using a corpus compiled of transcripts of the sitcom *The Big Bang Theory*, instances containing conventionalised forms of request are first extracted and then manually examined to make sure that all the remaining instances express requests and thus qualify for further analysis. Functional elements (e.g. *Requester*, *Requestee*, *Requested action*) designed specifically for a local grammar analysis of request are proposed. The subsequent analyses lead to the identification of 10 local grammar patterns of requests. The study shows that it is promising, though at the same time challenging, to develop local grammars of speech acts. The opportunities and challenges of using a local grammar approach to account for speech acts are further discussed. Implications and applications are also briefly discussed.
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1. Introduction

Speech acts generally mean that in saying something we are also doing something (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969). Speech act theory has been gaining popularity since its emergence and can be said to be one remarkable breakthrough in both pragmatic research and language philosophy; however, this does not mean that it is without critiques (e.g. Stubbs, 1983; Flowerdew, 1990; Geis, 1995: 12–32). One criticism has been that ''despite the fact that the theory seems to emphasize language as social action, it has largely ignored actual language in use'' (Stubbs, 1983: 485). Stubbs (1983, 2014) thus argues that speech act studies should be grounded in attested language use, rather than on invented examples. Exactly, authentic language use plays an important role in language and discourse studies. The importance of authentic data in pragmatic research has in fact been increasingly recognised by pragmatists, which has led to the development of a new research trend that combines both corpus methods and pragmatic concepts. This trend of research is commonly referred to as corpus pragmatics (Adolphs, 2008; Jucker et al., 2009; Taavitsainen et al., 2014; Aijmer and Rühlemann, 2015).

This study is situated within this general field; specifically, it looks into speech acts from a corpus linguistic perspective. One significant difference between the present study and previous corpus investigation into speech acts is that this study does not attempt to identify or annotate what kinds of speech acts there are in a given corpus (e.g. Blum-Kulka et al., 1989; Leech and Weisser, 2003; Weisser, 2015); rather, it explores the possibility of using the corpus-linguistic notion 'local

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grammar' (see Section 2) to develop systematic and coherent descriptions of the realisations of speech acts, exemplifying the exploration with a local grammar of request.

Drawing on insights from previous studies (e.g. Searle, 1969; Bach and Harnish, 1979; Trosborg, 1995), request is defined here as an illocutionary act whereby a speaker addresses to a hearer that s/he requires some desired or intended action to be performed either for the benefit of the speaker, or the hearer, or both. The speech act 'request' is selected on three bases. First, it is performed on a daily basis and is a very complex phenomenon (Aijmer, 1996: 130). Second, since request is a face-threatening speech act and inappropriate performance of request may be perceived as rude or offensive, a systematic account of request would be of practical significance in that it can be used to instruct EFL learners to perform requests appropriately (Schauer, 2009). Third, expressions associated with request appear to be highly routinised, as has been shown in, for example, Aijmer (1996) and Usó-Juan (2010). This makes it possible to employ corpus investigation techniques to identify maximally instances of requests in corpora, as the greatest advantage of corpus search is to identify linguistic forms. The identification of requesting instances allows us to describe their regularities in use, which in turn contributes to a systematic and coherent description of request.

As noted in Garcia (2015: 31), "[o]f the specific types of speech acts ascribed to the directives category, requests are the most frequently mentioned, and probably the most frequently researched". Indeed, there has been a plethora of studies which have investigated the speech act of request (see, for example, Usó-Juan (2010) for a review). However, previous studies mainly focus on exploring request either from a cross-cultural perspective (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989; Wierzbicka, 2003), or within the field of interlanguage pragmatics (Achiba, 2003; Al-Gahtani and Roever, 2012), or in different contexts (Dixon, 2015; Park, 2015). It appears that, to the best of the author's knowledge, no study to date has attempted to account for the realisations of speech acts both functionally and grammatically. By 'functionally and grammatically', I mean that the elements used in the description should not only reflect the function of the corresponding linguistic form in social contexts, but also resemble traditional grammatical analysis, that is, the elements used can in a way be seen as analogies of traditional grammatical elements (e.g. subject, object).

The present study proposes a possible approach to bridge this gap. It explores the possibility and the feasibility of developing a set of local grammars to account for speech acts. The aims are twofold. On the one hand, it aims to extend local grammars to account for speech acts and thus to further speech act studies; on the other hand, it aims to show the diversity of approaches or perspectives (e.g. local grammar in this study) that are available to carry out corpus-pragmatic research and ultimately to contribute to the on-going development of corpus pragmatics.

Investigating speech acts from a local grammar perspective would be of both theoretical and practical significance. Theoretically, it offers a new approach for describing both functionally and grammatically the realisations of speech acts. Compared with traditional approaches to describing the realisations of speech acts, local grammars are more specific, more precise, and more consistent, as will be shown below. Further, local grammars of speech acts facilitate the establishment of the linguistic repertoire for performing one particular speech act. This has further pedagogical applications, in particular for the teaching and learning of how to perform socio-pragmatically speech acts in EFL contexts (Aijmer, 1996; Usó-Juan, 2010).

2. Local grammar

Local grammar is an alternative approach, as opposed to general grammars, to the description of language in use; it "seeks to account for, not the whole of a language, but one meaning only" (Hunston, 2002: 178). Initially, the motivation behind this approach is the realisation that even the most advanced parser cannot capture all the information in open-running texts, i.e. there are always 'leftovers'. The concept of local grammar is thus proposed by Gross (1993) to account for such linguistic areas (e.g. numbers, dates, names) that regular grammatical analysis could not cope with.

What is noteworthy is that the concept of local grammar is not only useful for dealing with those 'leftovers', but also for dealing with all areas of language in use. This has been extensively elaborated and exemplified in the work of Sinclair and his associates (Barnbrook and Sinclair, 1995, 2001; Hunston and Sinclair, 2000; Barnbrook, 2002; Hunston, 2003, 2011). The essential difference between Gross' concept of local grammar and the Sinclairian one lies in the role phraseological constructions play in linguistic description: phraseologies in the former are considered to be 'peripheral' whereas in the latter to be 'central' to the description and theorising of language in use. Provided corpus studies have shown that there is a phraseological tendency of language in use (Sinclair, 1991, 2004; Hunston and Francis, 1998, 2000; Hanks, 2013), it is arguable that the Sinclairian tradition of local grammar research would have much wider implications and applications. This paper thus draws on the Sinclairian concept of local grammar.

In the Sinclairian tradition, each local grammar deals with one meaning or communicative function only (e.g. evaluation, request). It takes into account the functions language fulfils in social contexts and therefore analyse each discourse unit in terms that are related directly to its discourse function. Put it another way, local grammar analysis involves the mapping of functional elements on to formal elements. This has also been discussed in, for example, Hunston and Sinclair (2000: 79) who note that "[t]he prospect of an alternative analysis based on a local grammar for each type of

Table 1
Local grammar analysis of evaluation[a] (Hunston and Sinclair, 2000).

it + link verb + adjective group + that clause			
		Evaluative category	**Thing evaluated**
it	seemed	important	to trust her judgement
it	was	wonderful	talking to you the other day
link verb + adjective group + to-infinitive clause			
Thing evaluated	**Hinge**	**Evaluative category**	**Restriction on evaluation**
People	are	slow	to learn
This book	is	interesting	to read
link verb + adjective group + that clause			
Evaluator	**Hinge**	**Evaluative response**	**Thing evaluated**
He	is	adamant	that he does not want to enter politics
Doctors	were	optimistic	that he would make a full recovery

[a] Constructions associated with evaluative meaning are in italics; and functional terms that are used in the local grammar analysis are in bold face.

sentence is that it will assign category labels that are far more transparent and trustworthy than the highly general ones''. In a similar vein, Bednarek (2008: 66) argues that ''[l]ocal grammar typically works with transparent category labels referring to functional categories that are characteristic for the area of language that is to be described''. For the purpose of illustration, some examples of a local grammar analysis of evaluation are given in Table 1.

Table 1 shows that local grammars analyse instances of evaluation in transparent and meaning-specific terms (e.g. *Evaluator*, *Thing evaluated*, *Evaluative category*), which in turn facilitates the establishment of a clearer connection between form and function. More notably, the use of transparent functional terms in local grammars indicates that the resulting description is 'real' functional and user-friendly (see also Hunston and Sinclair, 2000).

To date, local grammars have been applied to the study of, for example, the language of definition (Barnbrook and Sinclair, 1995, 2001; Barnbrook, 2002), the language of evaluation (Hunston and Sinclair, 2000; Hunston, 2003, 2011; Bednarek, 2008; Su, 2015), and disclaimers (Cheng and Ching, 2016). Furthermore, Warren and Leung (2016) recently extend local grammars to describe collocational frameworks. In general, what previous studies have shown is that local grammars can provide a more systematic and comprehensive description of one particular meaning/function or linguistic phenomenon, which indicates that local grammars can be an alternative, and an even more useful, way to account for language in use.

Summing up, local grammar deals with one meaning or function only and involves the mapping of functional elements on to formal elements. The emergence of local grammars has raised the question as to whether or not would it be feasible to propose a set of local grammars, with each of them accounting for one particular semantic or functional area, to complement general grammar descriptions. While Butler (2004: 158) has noted that ''rather than a single general grammar, we might end up with a set of local grammars for particular areas defined by their communicative functions in the discourse'', few studies have investigated empirically the possibility of doing so. Since speech acts are generalisations of communicative functions, it is arguable that investigation into local grammars of speech acts would offer important insights into the issue of developing a set of local grammars to account for language in use.

3. Corpus and methodology

The corpus used in this study is compiled of transcripts of the first seven seasons of the sitcom *The Big Bang Theory*. Transcripts of *The Big Bang Theory*, rather than conversations recorded in real contexts, are used for the reasons that TV language is itself of research interest (Bednarek, 2012, 2015) and is to a large extent similar to face-to-face conversations (though differences also exist) (Rey, 2001; Quaglio, 2009). In addition, the use of TV dialogue relates to the purpose of this study: it is not intended to tell us about how requests are typically made in casual conversations; rather, it aims primarily to test whether a local grammar approach to speech acts would work. Consequently, whether and to what extent is scripted TV conversation representative of real conversation would not be an issue.[1]

The corpus of *The Big Bang Theory* compiled (henceforward CBBT) comprises 159 texts and has 485,602 tokens. The corpus was then uploaded to Sketch Engine (Kilgarriff et al., 2004) for searching and retrieving instances of request. Sketch Engine was used because it allows us to retrieve all instances containing a given sequence and its variations by a single search of that sequence. For example, the search of '*I want to*' returns all instances containing both '*I want to*' and '*I wanted to*'. This is an advantage that other corpus tools (e.g. AntConc, WordSmith) may not have.

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[1] This indicates that contrastive studies on local grammars of request (and other speech acts) between scripted TV conversations and unscripted 'real' spoken languages are desirable.

Table 2
Conventionalised constructions associated with request.

	Conventionalised forms/sequences
Direct	*imperatives*
	you HAVE[a] *to-inf./must* VP[b]
	I/we WANT *you* to-inf.
	I/we WANT to-inf.
	I/we'd/would like to-inf.
	I/we wonder if you could VP
Indirect	*can/could/will/would you* VP
	would/do you mind VP
	can/could/may I/we VP
	would you like to-inf.
	would you like me to-inf.

[a] Capital letters are used to indicate lemmas (see Knowles and Don, 2004 for a detailed discussion of the concept 'lemma'). Put simply, a lemma refers to a set of lexical forms which have the same stem but differ in inflection; for example, HAVE includes *have, has, had*.
[b] VP stands for verb phrase.

One thorny issue of using corpus methods to investigate speech acts is that it is very challenging to identify instances of speech acts in corpora (see also Adolphs, 2008; Garcia, 2015). Speech act studies using corpus investigation techniques have usually taken conventionalised forms as a starting point; however, this method remains open to critique, one being that it cannot ''cope with the problems of the unpredictable and the hidden manifestations'' (Kohnen, 2015: 62). Furthermore, conventionalised forms may be frequently, but not always, associated with a specific speech act. This has also been pointed out by, for example, Rühlemann and Aijmer (2015: 10) who note that ''[f]or most pragmatic phenomena there is no one-to-one relationship between form and function'', and Garcia (2015: 47) who finds that ''there is no one-to-one correspondence between linguistic features and speech acts''. For example, one typical conventionalised form of request is *can you* . . ., but this form may also just be used to ask a question, as in *can you hear me*. This will be further discussed in Section 5.

One possible solution to this challenging issue which has been shown to be useful is to employ both computerised search and manual examination to identify instances of one particular speech act (Rühlemann and Aijmer, 2015: 13–14). While manual examination of the corpus search results is time-consuming and labour-intensive, this method largely guarantees the accuracy of the target instances that are to be analysed. This is the method that the present study adopts; that is, corpus searches are first performed to extract instances containing conventionalised forms of request in the CBBT; and the extracted instances are then manually examined to make sure that all the remaining instances have the illocutionary force of requesting and therefore qualify for further analysis.

The next question, then, is what the conventionalised forms of request are. As Aijmer (1996: 131) notes, it is in principle impossible to exhaust the linguistic expressions that can be used to make requests because language users can always think of new expressions to do so. In consequence, it is more feasible to focus on a set of linguistic forms that have been shown to be conventionalised and typical of request when performing the corpus search. Based on previous studies which have investigated extensively request (e.g. Blum-Kulka et al., 1989; Aijmer, 1996: 124–195; Usó-Juan, 2010), 11 constructions that have been widely accepted as conventionalised forms of request are summarised in Table 2.

Table 2 lists the conventionalised constructions associated with requests that are to be examined. At this point, it should be acknowledged that this of course is not a complete list of linguistic resources that can be used to make requests. However, it is confident that these forms would enable us to identify a considerable number of request instances, because these forms have been shown to be the routinised realisations of request. Furthermore, since the present study primarily aims to explore the possibility and feasibility of using a local grammar approach to account for speech acts, exemplifying the exploration with a local grammar of request, the inexhaustive identification of linguistic devices or instances that are associated with requests would not be a drawback.

4. Towards a local grammar of request

As noted earlier, local grammar analyses each linguistic element in terms that are directly related to its communicative function in social contexts. The following functional terms were thus tentatively proposed and succinctly explained for the subsequent local grammar analysis (see Table 3).

Table 3
Functional labels for a local grammar analysis of request.

Functional term	Explanation	Example
Requester	The one who requests, typically expressed implicitly in indirect request	e.g. ***I** want you to leave. Can you help?*
Requestee	The addressee to whom the request is directed to	e.g. *Could **you** drive me home?*
Intended action	The action that the Requester him/herself wants to perform	e.g. *I'd like **to propose a toast**.*
Requested action	The action that the Requester wants the Requestee to perform	e.g. *will you please **shut up**?*
Hinge	The formal element that links different elements	e.g. *you **have** to stop.*
Indicator	The formal element that signals a request is being made, usually present in indirect request	e.g. ***would you like** to join us?*
Mitigator	The formal element that mitigates the face-threatening act of requesting	e.g. *Could you **please** drive faster?*

Table 4
Local grammar analysis of imperatives.

Requested action
Take the cap off
Shut up

Just in case readers may wonder why just these terms, no more and no less, are proposed, it is necessary to point out that the working principle behind the proposal of these functional terms can be described in terms of 'Ockham's razor' which means that no more terms should be proposed beyond necessity (Encyclopædia Britannica). In addition, while the majority of these functional terms are self-explanatory and quite easy to understand, two aspects need to be elaborated on a little further. First, the distinction between 'Intended action' and 'Requested action' is made because the former relates to the Requester's intention (i.e. what s/he him/herself wants to do) and the latter to desire (i.e. what s/he him/herself wants the hearer to do). The distinction can be easily recognised with respect to the actor of the action – Requester is the one who performs an intended action whereas Requestee is the one who performs a requested action. Second, since request is a face-threatening speech act (Trosborg, 1995; Safont, 2008), it is common that the Requester often uses some strategies to mitigate the rudeness and/or impoliteness. 'Mitigator' is therefore proposed to analyse those linguistic elements (e.g. *please, just*) which help increase the degree of politeness when making requests.

The following demonstrates how instances of requests can be analysed using these functional terms from a local grammar perspective. Examples are given of each local grammar pattern; quantitative information is also given (except for imperatives) so as to provide corpus data for the discussion of the prototypicality of these conventionalised forms in making requests.

Imperatives are probably the most typical way to make requests. Such instances are easy to analyse from a local grammar perspective – they instantiate the local grammar pattern **Requested action**, as shown in Table 4. Quantitative information is not given of imperatives, because the CBBT has not been tagged in terms of mood and, consequently, it is very difficult, if possible at all, to quantify the occurrences of imperatives in the corpus.

The second construction to be discussed is '*you* HAVE to-inf./*must* VP'. Instances of this construction instantiate the local grammar pattern **Requestee + Hinge + Requested action**. 78 instances are found in the CBBT; and examples are given in Table 5.

The third conventionalised construction of request is '*I/we* WANT *you* to-inf.'; 60 instances are identified, instantiating the local grammar pattern **Requester + [Mitigator][2] + Hinge + Requestee + Requested action**, as shown in Table 6.

The next two constructions for making direct requests are '*I want to*' and '*I/we would/'d like* to-inf.' Instances of these constructions instantiate the local grammar pattern **Requester + Hinge + Intended action** (see Table 7). Differing from the first three constructions which are hearer-based (and thus the verb phrase or the to-infinitive clause is more plausibly analysed as 'Requested action'), the two constructions are speaker-based and the complementing to-infinitive clause expresses what the Requester him/herself wants to do. Accordingly, it is more plausible to analyse the complementing to-infinitive clause as 'Intended action'.

Studies have suggested that constructions '*I/we* WONDER *if*', '*I/we would/'d appreciate if you* . . .', '*I/we would/'d be adjective if you* . . .' can also be used to express request (Aijmer, 1996: 150). Indeed, all the three constructions have the

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[2] Element marked in square brackets is optional.

Table 5
Local grammar analysis of *you* HAVE to-inf./*must* VP.

Requestee	Hinge	Requested action
you	have	to check your message
you	must	leave
		Total: 70

Table 6
Local grammar analysis of *I/we* WANT *you* to-inf.

Requester	Mitigator (optional)	Hinge	Requestee	Requested action
we		want	you	to keep it
I	just	want	you	to relax
				Total: 53

Table 7
Local grammar analysis of *would/'d like* to-inf.

Requester	Hinge	Intended action
I	want	to show you something
we	want	to talk to you in private
I	would like	to propose a toast
we	'd like	to make an unscheduled space walk
		Total: 113

Table 8
Local grammar analysis of *I/we WONDER if* ....

Requester	Hinge	Mitigator (optional)	Hinge	Requested action
I	was wondering			if you could help me out
I	was	just	wondering	if you could talk to her
				Total: 15

potential to realise the illocutionary force of request. Surprisingly, however, no instances of the latter two were found in the CBBT, which may suggest that they are not the prototypical strategies that interlocutors would use to make requests in casual conversation. Another reason for this might be that these constructions are more likely to be used in situations where there are power differences between interlocutors or when addressing strangers. The lack of these constructions is then due to the fact that characters in the sitcom *Big Bang Theory* are constructed as equal and close. 15 instances of the construction '*I/we* WONDER *if*' are identified, which can be analysed as **Requester + Hinge + [Mitigator] + Hinge + Intended action** (Table 8).

The following five constructions are frequently used for indirect requests. Unlike those constructions discussed above, these constructions have an indicator that clearly signals a request is going to be made. For example, *can/could/will/would you* in the construction '*can/could/will/would you* (please) VP' often indicates that the speaker is making a request; these elements are labelled 'Indicator'. 238 instances of this construction are identified in the CBBT; these instances can be straightforwardly analysed as **Indicator + [Mitigator] + Requested action**, as shown in Table 9.

Table 9
Local grammar analysis of *can/could/will/would you (please)* VP.

Indicator	Mitigator (optional)	Requested action
can you	please	order a cocktail
could you	please	stop staring
will you		shut up
would you		let this go
		Total: 238

Table 10
Local grammar analysis of *would/do you mind* VP.

Indicator	Requested action
would you mind do you mind	returning that DVD giving me some advice *Total: 11*

Table 11
Local grammar analysis of *can/could/may I/we* VP.

Indicator	Mitigator (optional)	Intended action
can I can we may I could we	please	borrow that movie stop talking about this come in get a cup of coffee *Total: 261*

Table 12
Local grammar analysis of *would you like* to-inf.

Indicator	Requested action
would you like would you like	to go with me to join us *Total: 25*

Table 13
Local grammar analysis of *would you like me* to-inf.

Indicator	Requester	Intended action
would you like would you like	me me	to bring you some warm milk to play some Polish music *Total: 5*

Expressions starting with *do/would you mind* can also be used to make requests. Such instances instantiate the local grammar pattern **Indicator + Requested action**; examples are given in Table 10.

The potential of the construction '*can/could/may I/we* VP' in realising the illocutionary force of request is perhaps underestimated. The quantitative information obtained from the corpus investigation shows that this construction is used most frequently (261 instances) to express indirect requests in the CBBT. Instances of this construction instantiate the local grammar pattern **Indicator + [Mitigator] + Intended action**, as shown in Table 11.

Instances containing '*would you like* to-inf.' can as well be used to express requests. These instances typically instantiate the local grammar pattern **Indicator + Requested action**. Examples are given in Table 12.

Another conventionalised construction of request, which is similar to the one discussed above, is '*would you like me* to-inf.'; instances of this construction instantiate the local grammar pattern **Indicator + Requester + Intended action**, as shown in Table 13.

Tables 12 and 13 show that whether the Requester is implicitly or explicitly expressed makes some differences for the analysis. To be specific, it is more plausible to analyse the complementing to-infinitive clause as 'Requested action' if the Requester is expressed implicitly (Table 12), whereas the to-infinitive clause is more plausibly analysed as 'Intended action' if the Requester is expressed explicitly (Table 13). While the differences may not be easy to be captured in general grammar descriptions, the analysis shows that local grammars are relatively easy to do so. This indicates both the feasibility and advantage of using a local grammar approach to provide systematic and coherent descriptions of speech acts.

The above presents a local grammar of request developed by analysing conventionalised constructions of request. To give a clearer overview of the analyses, local grammar patterns and the corresponding conventionalised forms are summarised, ranked in descending order (see Table 14). Although the quantitative information of these patterns may differ from register to register and/or from language to language, it is reasonably confident that the majority of instances of requests found in any corpora can be analysed using these patterns.

Table 14
An overview of local grammar patterns of request.

Conventionalised forms	Local grammar patterns	No.
Imperatives	**Requested action** e.g. *Get out of my ER.*	N/A
can/could/may I/we VP	**Indicator + [Mitigator] + Intended action** e.g. *can we please move on?*	261
can/could/will/would you VP	**Indicator + [Mitigator] + Intended action** e.g. *will you please take that stupid hat off?*	238
I/we'd/would like to-inf. *I/we* WANT to-inf.	**Requester + Hinge + Intended action** e.g. *I'd like to place my order.*	113
you HAVE to-inf. / *must* VP	**Requestee + Hinge + Requested action** e.g. *you have to stop talking like that.*	70
I/we WANT *you* to-inf.	**Requester + [Mitigator] + Hinge + Requestee + Requested Action** e.g. *I want you to apologize to Leonard.*	53
would you like to-inf.	**Indicator + Requested action** e.g *would you like to explain to me …*	25
I/we wonder if …	**Requester + Hinge + [Mitigator] + Hinge + Requested action** e.g. *I was wondering if you could help me out with something.*	15
would/do you mind VP	**Indicator + Requested action** e.g. *would you mind giving me some advice?*	11
would you like me to-inf.	**Indicator + Requester + Intended action** e.g. *would you like me to help?*	5

It is now possible to draw some observations. Clearly, the analysis shows that requests are most likely realised indirectly, though the frequency of imperatives is unclear. This is not surprising, because, given that request is a face-threatening act, interlocutors would use all kinds of linguistic devices available to mitigate the rudeness, offensiveness, and impoliteness. Using indirect expressions is probably the most efficient way to do so. Secondly, corpus investigation into local grammars of speech acts provides quantitative information which enables us to discuss the prototypicality of the conventionalised forms that are used for one specific communicative purpose. In this case, the investigation shows that, putting aside imperatives, conventionalised forms such as *can/could/may I/we* . . . and *can/could/will/would you* . . . are the most typical realisations of requests; this is at least true in the CBBT. Furthermore, investigations into local grammars of speech acts would enable us to establish profiles of the conventionalised linguistic forms of each speech act. For example, the conventionalised forms and the corresponding local grammar patterns identified in this study contribute substantially to the repertoire of resources that can be used to make requests.

Most notably, the analysis has shown the potential of using local grammars to account for speech acts. It is indeed promising, though at the same time challenging, to develop a set of local grammars to provide comprehensive and consistent descriptions of speech acts. The possibilities and challenges are discussed in greater detail below.

5. A local grammar approach to speech acts: opportunities and challenges

The opportunities mainly include the following three aspects. First, local grammars can provide more systematic and coherent descriptions of speech acts. The development of local grammars relies heavily upon the analyses of a considerable number of instances associated with one particular meaning or function; the resulting description is therefore largely complete and comprehensive, as exemplified in the local grammar of request presented above. Although developing local grammars of speech acts one by one (i.e. with each accounting for one speech act) may indicate the loss of generalisability of the description, it is compensated for by the gains of cumulative coverage achieved by a set of local grammars. This ultimately contributes to the description and theorising of speech acts.

Second, local grammars facilitate the establishment of a clearer connection between form and function in social contexts. The local grammar analyses of request instances in Section 4 demonstrate that each conventionalised form corresponds to one particular local grammar pattern (see Table 14), which suggests that consistent mapping of functional elements on to formal elements is highly possible in local grammar descriptions. The consistency of the mapping further indicates that local grammars of speech acts are helpful for establishing the connection between linguistic forms and communicative functions.

Third, a thorough and in-depth investigation into local grammars of speech acts offers important insights into the general issue of how to reconcile corpus linguistics and pragmatics. The main difficulty of corpus-pragmatic research lies in how instances of a given pragmatic phenomenon can be maximally extracted using corpus investigation techniques. Phenomena such as pragmatic markers may be relatively easy to be dealt with because they have specific linguistic forms; however, other phenomena such as speech acts and politeness strategies pose serious challenges, since not all of them have fixed linguistic realisations. Investigation into local grammars of speech acts may shed light on how other pragmatic phenomena can be investigated from a corpus linguistic perspective. This is because the success of a local grammar of speech act largely depends on how comprehensive and complete the description is, which requires maximal extraction of instances associated with that particular speech act. Since the method of starting with conventionalised forms is only useful for extracting those speech acts whose realisations are highly routinised, researchers working on local grammars of speech acts thus have to explore and develop methods that can be used to extract instances of those speech acts which do not have fixed realisations. Such exploration can, arguably, also shed light on corpus investigations into other pragmatic phenomena. In this sense, it can be further argued that investigation into local grammars of speech acts would contribute to the on-going development of corpus pragmatics.

While local grammars provide us ample opportunities to further speech act studies in particular and corpus-pragmatic research in general, the challenges are enormous. The first and main challenge relates to the identification of speech act instances in naturally occurring texts, which has also been briefly discussed in the previous paragraph. Other researchers, for example, Adolphs (2008: 9) similarly points out that ''[o]ne of the main obstacles in analysing utterances function using a corpus-based approach is that we can search a corpus only for language forms, not for function'', and Rühlemann and Aijmer (2015: 13) further note that ''[c]orpus-based methods encounter problems with the identification and analysis of speech acts''.

Conventionalised forms can to some extent facilitate the identification of speech act utterances, as demonstrated in the present study; however, the major drawback of using conventionalised forms as the starting point to identify speech act instances is that ''the identification of speech acts . . . is limited to only the forms and phrases that the researcher predicts will carry pragmatic meaning and cannot account for the full range of linguistic forms that are possible, specifically those that the researcher has not predicted to include pragmatic meaning'' (Garcia, 2015: 29). Additionally, while corpus investigation techniques are useful for searching typical lexico-grammatical constructions that are associated with one particular speech act, corpus search may leave many other speech act utterances which do not contain such conventionalised forms undetected (Garcia, 2015: 47).

Moreover, even though corpus studies have shown that many speech acts have conventionalised realisations (Aijmer, 1996; Adolphs, 2008), the observation that there is no one-to-one correspondence between linguistic forms and speech acts indicates that it is very challenging to use solely corpus investigation techniques to identify speech act utterances in corpora. As discussed earlier, while the construction *can you* is conventionally used to make requests, it may as well just be used to ask a question, as in *can you swim/drive.* In a similar vein, Rühlemann and Aijmer (2015: 13) have noted that ''speech act words by no means always accompany the relevant speech acts''. This makes it inevitable to manually examine speech acts instances extracted by searching linguistic forms in a corpus. This is the main reason why many corpus studies of speech acts, including the present one, have used the method of combining both computerised search and manual examination. However, since manual line-by-line examination is time-consuming and thus may only be manageable for a relatively small amount of data, the usefulness of this method is limited. All these indicate that the difficulty in identifying speech act instances presents a critical challenge for research on local grammars of speech acts.

Another challenge relates to the functional terms used in local grammar analyses. As noted earlier, local grammars are in essence functional descriptions of language in use and thus use transparent functional terms to analyse instances identified. The challenge here is that it may be difficult to propose a set of analytic terms that researchers can generally agree with, because different researchers may well propose different terms to analyse the same speech act(s). This further makes it difficult to accomplish the task of developing a set of local grammars of speech acts that can both be used to account adequately for speech act realisations and be widely accepted.

The upshot of the above discussion is that, while the enterprise of using local grammars to account for speech acts is feasible, it is not without challenges. Local grammars are able to provide transparent, systematic and comprehensive descriptions of speech acts, which contributes substantially to further the investigation and theorising of speech acts. At the same time, a couple of challenging issues such as how instances of speech acts can be maximally identified in corpora and how the extracted instances can be consistently analysed using a set of generally agreed local grammar terms need to be carefully considered.

6. Conclusion

This paper has explored the possibility and feasibility of using local grammars to account adequately for speech acts. The exploration, exemplified with a local grammar of request, shows that it is promising yet challenging to develop local grammars of speech acts. To be specific, each local grammar deals with one particular speech act, which makes it

possible to describe fully that speech act under examination. Local grammar analyses each formal element in terms that are directly related to its discourse or communicative function; the resulting description is therefore transparent and real functional. The main challenge of developing local grammars of speech acts relates to the identification of speech act instances in naturally occurring texts. It seems that it is almost impossible to exhaust linguistic resources available to express one particular speech act, due to the creativity of both language and its users. This, on the one hand, requires us to further explore and generalise conventionalised forms of speech acts and to develop new methods which can be used to extract speech act instances in corpora. On the other hand, this indicates that compromise may be necessary. That is, it is acceptable to first develop local grammars of speech acts based on analysing speech act instances extracted by searching conventionalised forms. Extra local grammar analysis can be carried out whenever new expressions or forms are found. The local grammar patterns identified can then be added to complement the initial local grammars.

Research on local grammars of speech acts is not only beneficial to the on-going development of corpus pragmatics, work in this area would also have practical significance. Specifically, local grammars of speech acts can facilitate the teaching and learning of how to perform speech acts appropriately in EFL contexts. Usó-Juan (2010: 237), for example, has noted that "[r]esearch on the use of requests suggests that many learners have problems in performing this speech act in sociopragmatically appropriate ways". The reason may be largely, if not essentially, that there is no transparent and comprehensive description of the speech act 'request', which may also be the reason for the pragmatic failure of performing other speech acts appropriately. One possible solution suggested by Aijmer (1996: 30) is to explore "how to describe routines and their functional elements that are associated with one particular speech act, which would also be helpful for language teaching". As shown in the present study, local grammars are a useful way to describe the routines of speech acts, because local grammars use self-explanatory and meaning-specific functional labels to describe speech act instances and the resulting descriptions are straightforward and very learner-friendly. It is in this respect that it can be further argued that local grammar descriptions are of considerable significance in the teaching and learning of speech acts.

To conclude, functional-pragmatic theories of language and discourse (e.g. Searle's speech act theory) need to be grounded in authentic data and empirical linguistics (e.g. corpus research) needs to take into consideration the functions language fulfils in communicative contexts (cf. Stubbs, 2014). Provided each local grammar is in essence a functional description of one particular area of language in use and each speech act is concerned with one particular communicative function, research into local grammars of speech acts can be used as a heuristic to explore how functional-pragmatic and empirical approaches to linguistic description and explanation can be brought together. This would not only contribute to local grammars and speech acts research, but also to corpus linguistics, pragmatics, and corpus pragmatics in general.

Conflict of interest

No conflict of interest.

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