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## ***Let's*-imperatives in Conversational English**

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**Abstract:** This paper presents the results of a statistical survey of the ways in which *let's*-imperative sentences function in (American) English conversation. Unlike ordinary imperatives, imperatives with *let's* suggest a shared action by speaker(s) and addressee(s) and normally involve a verbal response indicative of agreement or refusal. However, notable exceptional cases have been noted (Biber et al. 1999: 1117, Huddleston and Pullum 2002: 936 fn., Collins 2004: 302). The present paper focuses on the following questions that remain unanswered:

- (i) How frequent is the “joint action” use of *let's*-imperatives in conversation?
- (ii) How frequent is the case of “action by just one” use, and whose action is more common, the speaker’s or addressee(s)’s?
- (iii) How frequent is the discourse-organizational use of *let's* as realized in the form *let's say* or *let's see*?
- (iv) How frequently are *let's*-imperatives actually followed by a verbal response?

While *let's*-imperatives have been extensively analyzed in both descriptive and theoretical terms, relatively little quantitative work has been conducted, although important exceptions include Aarts 1994, and, most notably, Collins 2004. On the basis of 133 tokens of *let's*-imperatives obtained from dialogues in four mystery novels, this paper reports the following findings: (i) the joint action use accounts for nearly 80 % of the data; (ii) when *let's*-imperatives suggest an action by just one party, the case of the addressee’s action is a great deal more frequent (14 out of 16) than the speaker’s; (iii) the discourse organizational use with the form *let's say* or *let's see* accounts for 9.9 % of the data (13 out of 133 tokens); and (iv) in only 31 % of the data were *let's*-imperatives followed by explicit verbal response. The last finding suggests that, contra Huddleston and Pullum (2002: 936), the case of response-less *let's*-imperatives is hardly the exception but rather the norm in actual conversation.

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### **1. Introduction**

This paper presents the results of an investigation into the ways *let's*-imperative sentences function in English conversation<sup>1</sup>.

*Let's*-imperatives are commonly defined as “first person inclusive imperatives (Huddleston and Pullum 2002: 936) or “first person plural imperatives” (Biber et al. 1999: 1117). Unlike

ordinary imperatives, *let's*-imperatives suggest a shared action by speaker and addressee(s), alone or with one or more others. However, it has long been recognized that the *let's*-imperative can be at times interpreted as proposal for an action either by the addressee(s) alone (Biber et al. 1999: 1117; Huddleston and Pullum 2002: 936 fn.; Collins 2004: 302) or by the speaker alone (cf. Huddleston and Pullum 2002; Collins 2004). Furthermore, according to the most recent and largest reference grammar book compiled by Huddleston and Pullum (2002: 936), *let's*-imperatives normally involve a verbal response indicating agreement or refusal. They remark, however, that there are “special” cases including expository directives in which no verbal response is involved.

While *let's*-imperatives have been analyzed both in descriptive (Davies 1986) and in theoretical terms (Clark 1993), relatively little quantitative work has been conducted. Important exceptions include Aarts 1994, and, most notably, Collins 2004. However, the following questions still remain unanswered:

- (i) How frequent is the “joint action” use of *let's*-imperatives in conversation?
- (ii) How frequent is “action by just one” use? And whose action is more common in this case, the speaker’s or addressee’s?
- (iii) How frequent is discourse-organizational use as realized in the form *let's say* or *let's see*?
- (iv) How frequently are *let's*-imperatives actually followed by a verbal response (of approval or refusal)?

These four questions are the focus of the present paper. On the basis of 133 tokens of *let's*-imperatives obtained from dialogues in fictive stories written by four contemporary American writers (cf. Takahashi 2007a and 2007b), this paper provides a statistical answer for each of these questions. It is reported that the joint action use of *let's*-imperatives accounts for 78.2 % of the data (104 out of 133 tokens) whereas the “action by just one” type 10.5 % (14 out of 133), and that when *let's*-imperatives suggest an action by just one, the case of the addressee’s action is far more common (14 out of 16) than the speaker’s action (2 out of 16). Furthermore, it is reported that the discourse organizational use of *let's say* and *let's see* accounts for 9.9 % (13 out of 133 tokens). Finally, it is only in 31 % of the data (41 out of 133 tokens) that *let's*-imperatives are followed by explicit verbal response (of either approval or disapproval). According to the data examined, contra Huddleston and Pullum (2002: 936), the case of response-less *let's*-imperatives is hardly special but rather the norm in actual conversation.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. The next section (section 2) briefly reviews previous observations and findings. Section 3 presents the results of analyses and section 4 discusses the findings made in section 3. Section 5 contains a conclusion.

## 2. Previous observations

*Let's* is by origin a second-person imperative (= *let us*). However, in present-day English, it is very much a pragmatic particle used for proposing a shared action by the speaker and addressee (Biber et al. 1999: 1117).

According to Traugott and Dasher (2002: 177), *let's* is more “subjective” in meaning than *let*

us, in that the speaker includes himself or herself in the exhortation, whereas it is more “intersubjective” as well, since the addressee is conceptualized as acting with the speaker. In addition, they note that the development of *let's* illustrates an often-attested pattern in semantic change: from content meaning (based on argument structure) to pragmatic procedural meaning, i.e. a shift from clause-level to discourse function.

Biber et al. (1999: 1117–1118) present a range of basic statistical facts about *let's*-imperatives. That is, the *let's* form is more than twice as frequent in American English than in British English, but the negative forms, *let's not* and *don't let's*, are infrequent. It is also reported in this book that the most frequent verb of *let's* is *see* in American English and *have* in British English, while *go* is second in frequency in both American and British English.

*Let's*-imperatives differ from ordinary imperatives in a couple of grammatical properties. First, no subject is allowed (\**You let's go*; compare the ordinary imperative *You let her go with you* (Huddleston & Pullum 2002: 934)). Next, there is no scopal difference between the negatives *Let's do not/don't* ~ vs. *Let's not* ~. Moreover, the form *will/won't you* is not permitted as Tag (Collins 2004: 302–303, 306).

*Let's*-imperatives subtly differ from imperatives with *let us* in semantic terms as well. According to a relevance-theoretic account (Clark 1993), the meaning of “*let's*-construction” is to “communicate that *P* represents a thought entertained as a description of a state of affairs which is potential, and desirable *from the speaker's point of view*” (Clark 1993: 191, italics original). By contrast, he defines the “*let*-construction” as “(to) communicate that *P* represents a thought entertained as a description of a potential and desirable state of affairs” (Clark 1993: 190). These two semantic analyses help explain, he argues, a subtle difference in acceptability judgment between ?*Let's make the tiniest mistake and he used to get mad at us* vs. *Let us make the tiniest mistake and he used to get mad at us* — example sentences from Davies (1986: 249–250)<sup>2</sup>. That is, the *let's*-construction encodes some meaning that is lacking in the *let*-construction; that is, the state of affairs described is desirable *from the speaker's point of view*. A similar observation, i.e. the difficulty of pseudo-imperative interpretation with *let's* is made in Huddleston and Pullum (2002: 939) as well. They state that *let's*-imperatives cannot express a conditional unlike *let*, hence a sentence like ?*Let's put up the price and they'll cancel the order* is incapable of conveying the opposite of what is expressed in the imperative (“If we put up the price they'll cancel the order, so let's not put up the price.”). By contrast, “open *let*-imperatives” are capable of behaving like a conditional as in *Let anyone question what he says and he flies into a rage* (Huddleston and Pullum, 939), which can be interpreted as “If you let anyone question what he says, he flies into a rage.”

Next, Huddleston & Pullum 2002 point out the following pragmatic functions of *let's*-imperatives that pertain directly to the aims of this paper. First, while directives in general involve the conception of COMPLIANCE, the following applies to *let's*-imperatives:

“Compliance normally involves joint action by speaker and addressee(s), alone or with one or more others. I commit myself to the action and seek your agreement. For this reason, a verbal response is normally expected, indicating agreement or refusal.”

(Huddleston and Pullum 2002: 936)

As an illustration, they provide the constructed example in (1) below:

(1) A: Let's go for a walk.

B: Okay, just let me put some shoes on./Not just now: I must finish this letter.

(Huddleston & Pullum's ex. 35)

They maintain that “The speaker’s attitude towards compliance can range from strongly wanting it (*Come on, let's get going; the bus leaves in five minutes.*) to merely accepting it (*Okay, let's invite Kim as well, if that's what you want.*)” (*ibid.*, 936). Huddleston and Pullum also address less prototypical cases as well. First, cases like expository directives as in *Let's consider now the effect of increasing the velocity* do not involve any verbal response because agreement is assumed (*ibid.*, 936). Second, in a special case where a *let's*-imperative proposes an action by just one, it is “typically the speaker” who is to carry out the action (*ibid.*, 936 fn. 21).

Collins 2004 is among the few corpus-based studies of *let*-imperatives. He analyzes both written and spoken data in British, Australian and New Zealand as well as American English and distinguishes three separate uses of *let* that are to be identifiable in imperative clauses. On this analysis, a sentence like *Let us finish this race* is three-way ambiguous, depending upon whether the word *let* is interpreted as a lexical verb (=“Allow us to finish this race, will you?”), “first person inclusive *let*-imperative” (=“Let's finish this race, shall we?”), or “open *let*-imperative” (=“I wish/hope that we may finish the race”)(Collins 2004: 300). Focusing on the last two uses of *let*, Collins came up with the following findings. First, the first person inclusive *let*-imperative, particularly, the variant with *us*-contraction (i.e. *let's*), has increased in popularity over recent decades, whereas open *let*-imperatives have declined in popularity over the same period. Second, the first person inclusive type is more than six times as frequent as the “open *let*-imperative” in the corpora examined and the variant with *let's* is vastly more popular in speech than in writing. Third, open *let*-imperatives are preferred in conservative and rhetorical texts (Collins 2004: 318).

Despite all these valuable insights and findings, the previous research did not provide a satisfactory answer for each of the four research questions enumerated above in section 1. In section 3 below, we closely examine the observations made by Huddleston & Pullum, based on analyses of a total of 133 tokens of *let's*-imperatives used in conversational American English.

Before moving on, two points need to be clarified. First, following Huddleston and Pullum (2002: 934–937), the present article treats the *let's*-imperative as a (special kind of) imperative throughout this paper — in stark contrast with Clark 1993, who classifies it as non-imperative and employs the term “*let's*-construction” instead. Moreover, the *let's*-imperative is analyzed here as a distinct construction from its “original” *let us* form. This is because *let's* and *let us* are both semantically and pragmatically dissimilar from each other in more than one way, although the two constructions share some grammatical properties (as illustrated above). In this respect, the present paper distinguishes itself from Huddleston & Pullum 2002 as well as Collins 2004, who both analyze the *let's*-imperative simply as a contracted alternative of an imperative with *let us*.

### 3. Results

This paper uses as data source the following four fictive stories: *The Sky is Falling* (Sidney Sheldon, 2000), *The Pelican Brief* (John Grisham, 1992), *Malice* (Daniel Steel, 1997) and *The Deception* (Barry Reed, 1997). I collected all the imperative utterances used in dialogues, because imperatives are more than five times more frequent in conversation than in writing (cf. Biber et al. 1999: 221).

I chose data from fictive stories because they provide a clear picture of contexts in which *let's*-imperatives are used as well as social relations between communicators. This information is crucial in classifying each token with accuracy. The dialogues involve a wide variety of social and power relations--among friends, family members, coworkers, school children, and even inmates, as well as between attorney and client, medical doctor/nurse and patient, teacher and pupil, parent and teacher, and specialist and client, among others. Furthermore, the data also include not only those from face-to-face conversation but also from telephone conversation. In this regard, while not being taken from the transcripts of spontaneous dialogues, I consider the data here represent a diverse, relatively unbiased sample of present-day spoken American English.

In the present data, imperatives with *let's* occurred 133 times, which was the most frequent imperative form, immediately followed by *tell* (105 times), *let* (105 times) and *look* (95 times). Table 1 shows the result. It lists the frequency distributions of "joint action," "action by just one" (Addressee(s) only or Speaker only), and discourse-organizational uses of *let's say* and *let's see*, respectively.

**Table 1: Frequency distributions of *let's*-imperatives' discourse functions**

TOTAL: 133 tokens	
Joint action:	104 (78.2 %)
Addressee(s) only:	14 (10.5 %)
Speaker only:	2 (1.5 %)
<i>let's say</i> (DO):	7 (5.3 %)
<i>let's see</i> (DO):	6 (4.5 %)

This table reveals the following points. First, the case of joint action use is predominant--104 out of 133 tokens (=78.2 %), whereas the action either by the addressee or speaker alone is infrequent (only 16 tokens (=12 %)). This result supports the common observation that proposal for joint action is the central function of *let's*-imperatives (cf. Huddleston and Pullum 2002, Collins 2004).

By contrast, *let's*-imperatives are used discourse-organizationally in a total of 13 tokens (9.9 %) — *let's say* in 7 tokens (5.3 %) and *let's see* in 6 tokens (4.5 %). In the rest of this section, we label the first three functions of *let's*-imperatives in Table 1 as Ordinary (=non-discourse organizational) Function and the last two as D(iscourse) O(rganizational) Functions.

#### 3.1 Ordinary (=Non-discourse organizational) functions of *let's*-imperatives

Given below are illustrations of the overwhelming majority (104 tokens) of *let's*-imperatives

suggesting shared action:

(2) Joint action usage

- a. “**Let’s** talk about women.”  
“No.” (*Pelican*, p. 101)
- b. He found Smith Keen outside the door.  
“**Let’s** go eat breakfast,” he whispered.  
“Sure.” (*Pelican*, p. 432)
- c. “Forgive me. I’ve been through a lot. **Let’s** order room service.”  
He nodded and smiled at her. “Sure. Anything you want is fine with me.” (*Pelican*, p. 252)
- d. “Seriously, Tom”—she reached for his arm—“I think I came across something you should know about. . .”  
“Look, Karen, **let’s** not talk shop. Sheridan’s obsessed with the case, not me. Right now, I’m concerned about a lovely Lebanese girl who’s got two kinds, happens to be an RN, and I think she kinda cares for me. (...)” (*Deception*, p. 200)
- e. “**Let’s** hope we both do the right thing,” Sheridan said. (*Deception*, p. 107).

Examples (2a) to (2d) represent a standard joint action use of *let’s*-imperative. The last example of (2e) seems to fit into a conventional phrase expressing a wish (cf. Collins 2004: 305).

Next, in less frequent cases where only the speaker or addressee(s) is to carry out the proposed action, it is predominantly the addressee(s) rather than the speaker who is/are to carry out the proposed action. The case of the addressee’s action accounts for 15 tokens but that of the speaker’s action only two. This result contrasts itself with Huddleston and Pullum’s remark to the contrary that the latter is more common (2002: 936 fn.). Let us look at each pattern in (3) and (4) below.

(3) Action by Addressee(s) only

- a. [In a press conference]  
Police Chief Burnett entered and walked to the front of the room.  
“**Let’s** have it quiet, please.” He waited until there was silence.  
“Before I take your questions, I have a statement to make...” (*Sky*, p. 46)
- b. “Sheridan,” Sexton said, his back still turned and his hands in a half surrender, “**Let’s** be reasonable. . . I was really trying to put Donna out of her misery (*Deception*, p. 408)
- c. “And the other thing I need are the negatives of the pictures you took. I want them back on Monday.”  
“Really now? And who says I took any pictures?”  
“**Let’s not play that game**,” she said quietly. “You took plenty of pictures while I was awake, and I heard the camera clicking and flashing while I was woozy. I want the negatives, Marcus.” (*Malice*, p. 199)
- d. “That figures, Charlie. There are no ties in a lawsuit. Someone’s going to win; someone’s going to lose. And we’re playing for a lot of marbles.”

- “Dan, **let's cut the bullshit**. What will it take to have Mrs. Di'tullio sign releases right here and now, before Mayan puts her through the shredder?” (*Deception*, p. 316)
- e. “I'm afraid Donna's care is going to be very expensive,” Anna DiTullio said timidly.  
**Let's not worry about that now**. The medical examiner ruled Dante's death accidental. Apparently, he fell asleep, went off the road, and crashed into a tree.” (*Deception*, p. 307)
- f. “Make it twenty million and we've got a deal.”  
 “Hey, Dan, what have you been smoking?” Finnerty gave a chortling laugh. **Let's get serious**. You tell me you'll accept two hundred thou and I'll have the check cut right away. Send it over with the releases. That's how much I trust you guys.”  
 “Charlie, I couldn't be more serious.” (*Deception*, p. 112)

In these examples, the *let's*-imperative proposes an action by the addressee(s) alone rather than shared action. To taken an example of (3a), the *let's*-imperative can be interpreted to mean something like “Could you have it quiet, please?” In (3e), the *let's*-imperative can be paraphrased as “You don't have to worry about that now” or simply “Please don't worry about that now.”

Given below are two (rare) cases in which the proposed action is meant to be the speaker's instead of the addressee's:

(4) Action by Speaker only

- a. Dr. Hirschberg turned to Kemal again. “Now, **let's** take a look at you, young man.” (*Sky*, p. 144)
- b. “Did you pick this place?” Grantham asked.  
 “Yeah. You like it?”  
**Let's** put it like this. We're trying to be inconspicuous, right?...” (*Pelican*, p. 153)

Note that the *let's*-imperative in (4a) and (4b) can be paraphrased into “Let me take a look at you” and “Let me put it like this,” respectively.

Biber et al characterize these non-prototypical uses of *let's* as “camouflaging an authoritative speech act as a collaborative one” (Biber et al 1999: 1117). By presenting the actual examples in (5), they explain, *let's*-imperatives like these are especially used by adults addressing children and sometimes by a specialist addressing an adult:

(5)a. <Teacher to Students>

You all have something to do for Ms.<name>? **Let's** do it please.

b. <Mother to Infant>

Ian, Ian, Ian, it's all right, **let's** wash your hands — Okay, okay, **let's** take your bib off —

c. <Medical Specialist to Adult>

**Let's** have a look at your tongue.

(Examples from Biber et al. 1999: 1117)



It is indeed true that some tokens of “non-joint action” *let’s*-imperatives do involve a power gap — police officer-reporters (3a) and doctor-child patient (4a). However, data suggest that this “camouflaging” function of *let’s*-imperatives is not necessarily confined to such narrow interpersonal relation. Rather, it is practiced a great deal more widely — even among social equals, involving attorney to doctor who is not his client (3b), coworkers (3c), attorney to attorney (cf. (3d) and (3f)).

### 3.2 Discourse-organizational functions of *let’s*-imperatives

Next, we turn to research question (iii). How frequent are *let’s*-imperatives discourse organizational in usage? As Table 1 shows above, this usage involving two set-phrases *let’s see* and *let’s say* accounts for 9.9 % of the data. In previous studies, *let’s see* is commonly described as a conversational filler to buy time while formulating an utterance or a “hedge” (Collins 2004: 311). Biber et al. (1999: 1118) analyze *let’s see* as signaling that the speaker is searching for information, for example attempting to retrieve some fact from memory. In fact, this was exactly the case in my data:

- (6)a. “There’s another Morgan in litigation, but he’s a partner and, **let’s see**, he’s fifty-one.” (*Pelican*, p. 344)
- (6)b. “But, you know, Terry, the St. Anne’s case is highly technical, and of course there’s a lot at stake. I think it calls for the judicial temperament and expertise of someone who has experience in these difficult matters, someone like, say, Judge Irving Samuels.”  
 “**Let’s see.**” Terrence consulted the court docket and turned a few pages. “Yes, Samuels. He’s sitting on criminal cases. But let me see what I can do.” (*Deception*, p. 271)
- (6)c. And..., I instruct the pilot to go to, **let’s say**, Chicago. Can he do that?” (*Pelican*, p. 417)

One subtle but notable difference between *let’s see* and *let’s say* is worth pointing out, however. Only *let’s (just) say* can be used to introduce a supposed situation as demonstrated below:

- (7)a. “You guys did pretty good, Danny. Those were the first two jailbirds this year who walked outta here on their own.”  
 “Well, **let’s just say** that justice prevailed — for a change.”  
 “Whaddya got in here so early in the morning?” The bailiff checked his watch: 7:45. (*Deception*, p. 80)
- (7)b. “**Let’s just say** I did.”  
 “Okay. He gave it to you?”  
 “Again, **let’s just say** I know it came from Sexton’s armory.” (*Deception*, p. 320)

In contexts like these, *let’s see* would be decidedly odd.

### 3.3 Frequency of *let’s*-imperatives involving a verbal response

In this subsection, we turn to research question (iv) presented in the introduction section.

We examine how frequently *let's*-imperatives are actually followed by a verbal agreement or disagreement.

First of all, I did find such examples as those in (8) as well as those in (2a-c) above -- examples conforming to Huddleston and Pullum's observation:

- (8)a. "Do you like banana splits?" she asked him casually, as she liked her ice-cream cone, and he smiled. ...  
 "Yes, I like banana splits," he said, with a grin.  
 "Why?"  
 "Me too. **Let's have one tomorrow.**"  
 "Okay. Can we go back now?" (*Malice*, p. 299)
- (8)b. "You were a delight, Tom," she finally said, "and they were ecstatic." She glanced back at her sleeping children.  
 "How about next Saturday? **Let's go down to Nantasket Beach.** It's supposed to be a great weekend."  
 "I don't think so, Tom." She shook her head. "Now don't get me wrong. ..." (*Deception*, p. 102)
- (8)c. Darby was opening the pizza box. "Looks like sausage and peppers."  
 "Can I still get laid?"  
 "Maybe later. Drink your wine and **let's chat.** We haven't had a long talk in a while."  
 "I have. I've been talking to your machine all week." (*Pelican*, p. 87)
- (8)d. "**Let's get drunk,**" he said.  
 "You're so romantic."  
 "I've got some romance for you."  
 "You've been drunk for a week." (*Pelican*, p. 88)

In all of the above, *let's*-imperatives receive an explicit agreement or refusal either directly or indirectly.

However, these cases are not as frequent as Huddleston and Pullum's account might imply. Look at Table 2.

**Table 2: Frequency distributions of *let's*-imperatives followed by a verbal response of agreement/refusal**

	<i>Sky</i>	<i>Malice</i>	<i>Pelican</i>	<i>Deception</i>	TOTAL
Total	20	12	52	49	133
Verbal res. involved	4	3	27	7	41 (30.8 %)
Verbal res. not involved	16	9	25	42	92 (69.2 %)

As evident from this table, it is only 41 tokens (out of 133) of *let's*-imperatives that are followed by explicit verbal response. In as many as 92 cases (=69.2%), no verbal response followed. Even if we exclude the discourse-organizational use of *let's see* or *let's say*, only 34.2% of *let's*-imperatives involved an overt response (41 out of 120 tokens). This result suggests that

contra Huddleston and Pullum (2002: 936), it would not be correct to say that *let's*-imperatives expect, or are followed by, a verbal response.

At least two distinct patterns can be identified in which no verbal response follows *let's*-imperatives. First, *let's*-imperatives are used to announce the addressee(s) about what and/or how the speaker is about to discuss with the addressee(s) in the next moment. In this pattern, *let's*-imperatives serve to help the addressee(s) prepare for what the speaker wants to communicate.

- (9)a. Gray threw the ticket on the floorboard. “**Let’s** talk quick. You said Sarge said the boys in the West Wing are talking about me. Right?”  
 “Right.” (*Pelican*, p. 296)
- b. Matt swallowed. “**Let’s** examine this. Suppose that Taylor Winthrop *did* make an enemy and was murdered — why would anyone want to wipe out his entire family?”  
 “I don’t know,” Dana said. (*Sky*, pp. 79–80)
- c. “Thank you, Father,” she whispered as she wiped her eyes and he smiled at her. He didn’t pry any further. He knew all he needed to know. ...  
 “Now, **let’s get down to business.**” His eyes were laughing again. “How soon can you start? We’re not going to let you get away from here that easily. You might come to your senses.  
 “Right now?” She had come prepared to work, if he wanted her, and he did. (*Malice*, p. 220)
- d. “Okay, **let’s** back up a bit. Did you always hold these group therapy sessions on the fifth floor of the Atrium during your tenure as chief of Psychiatry?” (*Deception*, p. 350)
- e. “Now, Dr. Sexton, **let’s** return to your doctor-patient relationship with Donna DiTullio.”... “Did you ever see Donna DiTullio play tennis, Doctor?”  
 “I believe I did.” (*Deception*, p. 355)

There appears to be a verbal response in examples like (9a), (9b) and (9c). However, as a matter of fact, this is not exactly the case. To take an instance of (9a), the addressee’s response “Right” is to the speaker’s message that immediately follows the *let's*-imperative “You said Sarge said the boys in the West Wing are talking about me. Right?” Quite analogously, the addressee in (9b) is responding with “I don’t know” to the interrogation “why would anyone want to wipe out his entire family?” The examples we have looked at in (4) above in section 3.1 also fit into this category. Just like (4), some of the tokens in (9) involve a social power gap — accuser to accused in a court setting in (9d-e), although this is not the case with examples (9a) and (9b).

In the other pattern, *let's*-imperatives tends to come at the end of verbal exchange to propose a reasonable course of action or decision considered final for both the speaker and addressee(s). In this case, compliance is taken for granted:

- (10)a. “... If he does anything like this again, I’m afraid I’ll have to —”  
 “I’ll talk to him. Thank you, Mr. Henry.”  
 Kemal was waiting in the hallway.  
 “**Let’s** go home,” Dana said curtly. (*Sky*, p. 41)

- b. [Clergyman to a young girl seeking help]  
 “Father, Tim,” he corrected her with a grin. “Miss Adams?”  
 “Grace.”  
 “**Let’s** go talk somewhere,” he said calmly, weaving in and out of half a dozen children chasing each other around the main lobby. (*Malice*, p. 216)
- c. “Hope you didn’t run into much trouble getting Monday off,” Sheridan said.  
 “We both have trouble getting Monday off, but **let’s** make the most of it.” (*Deception*, p. 107)
- d. “**Let’s get a few camera shots from down here**, Manny; then we’ll take the elevator to the fifth-floor passageway. Plenty of light in here. Don’t think you’ll need a flash. We don’t want to attract attention. And before we’re thrown out, **let’s map the scene** — the conference room where the group therapy took place, the doctors’ offices, the entire layout of the fifth floor. If someone interrupts you, tell them we’re from the construction crew.” (*Deception*, p. 24)
- e. Rachel suggested, “There’s a marvelous restaurant called the Straits of Malaya. It’s just two blocks off Dupont Circle.” She turned to Dana and asked, “Do you like Thai food?” *As if she really cares.*  
 “Yes.”  
 Jeff smiled. “Fine. **Let’s try it.**”  
 Rachel said, “it’s only a few blocks from here. Shall we walk?” (*Sky*, p. 27)
- f. “Would you like to see a Moscow night club?” Tim Drew asked.  
 “Sounds interesting.”  
 “Great. **Let’s** go.” (*Sky*, p. 287)

In many of these examples, there is a distinct power gap — mother to child (10a), clergyman to young visitor (10b), attorney to client (10c). However, this does not hold for examples (10e) and (10f) — dialogues between close friends.

Interestingly, no token of the case of “action by just one” involved verbal response — not only the action by the addressee(s) alone as in (3) but also the one by the speaker alone as in (4). In short, of 92 tokens of response-less *let’s*-imperatives, the one-party action type accounts for 16 tokens (17.4 %) and joint action for 76 tokens (82.6 %).

#### 4. Discussion

Analyses in the previous section have yielded the following distributional facts. First, not unexpectedly, among a total of 133 tokens of *let’s*-imperatives in conversation, the joint action use is the most frequent. This use constitutes 78.2 % of the data. The one-party action use (either by the addressee(s) alone or by the speaker alone) accounts for 12 %. Second, the discourse-organizational use of *let’s say* and *let’s see* constitutes 9.9 % of the data. In such a case, it would be safe to generalize that in conversation, *let’s*-imperatives *prototypically* propose for a joint action (nearly 80 %). In less prototypical cases (20 %), *let’s*-imperatives involve either an action by just one (around 10 %) or discourse-organization use (around 10 %). Finally, contrary to Huddleston

and Pullum, it is not common for *let's*-imperatives to be followed by verbal response of either agreement or disagreement.

The first and second findings are in general agreement with the previous descriptive accounts, but the third is not. What I find somewhat surprising is that among the “action by one” tokens, the case of the addressee’s action far outnumbered that of the speaker’s (15 vs. 2 tokens), despite Huddleston and Pullum’s account to the contrary.

What I find even more surprising is the result that in more than 60 % of the tokens, *let's*-imperatives are not verbally responded, pace Huddleston and Pullum. What is the motivation behind this tendency? One might contend that this is attributable to the nature of chosen data: dialogues in fictive Stories. Authors and readers assume them to be highly readable materials so that mundane and/or unimportant portions of verbal interaction tend to be left out. There is no denying that factors of this nature may influence the result. However, the data type alone does not explain everything, in that, as Toolan (1994) puts it, dialogues in narratives serve as reliable data source for linguistic analysis:

“Embedded in and contributory to a story, fictional dialogue is part of what author and reader take to be extremely tellable material. And it may well be designed (in ways that make it less like a transcript of ordinary talk) so as to enhance its ‘tellability.’ Nevertheless it seems incontrovertible that many crucial structural and functional principles are at work just as much in fictional dialogue as in natural conversation. It is hard to see how we could recognize and respond to the former as a version of the latter if this were not so.” (Toolan 1994: 2689).

Given this insight, the kinds of dialogues we have analyzed can be considered as mediated representations of actual conversations in important ways. I am therefore hesitant to conclude definitively that the third finding is mainly due to the nature of the data.

Genre differences across four stories also need to be called into question. In particular, *The Deception* exhibited quite a high percentage of response-less use of *let's* imperatives (85.7 % = 42 out of 49 tokens) if we compare that of *The Pelican Brief* (48 % = 25 out of 52 tokens)(cf. Table 2 above). I suspect that this result is in large part attributable to the fact that the great majority of dialogues in *The Deception* are technical in nature, involving specialists in highly specialized settings (such as law firms and law courts), in which communicators are comprised of attorneys (with clients and/or witnesses as addressees) and judges (with attorneys and/or witnesses as addressees), as well as doctors and nurses (with patients as addressees). In contrast, other stories such as *The Pelican Brief* contain far fewer technical dialogues. In fact, a large number of dialogues are non-technical in nature, involving coworkers, students, friends and lovers in a wide variety of non-specialized settings. It might be that *let's*-imperatives tend to be more orientational and/or decisive in highly specialized contexts and become less interactive accordingly. As a consequence, the addressees may feel they either do not need to respond or are not entitled to express their approval or disapproval.

## 5. Conclusion

The present paper has investigated into the ways in which *let's*-imperatives are used in American English conversation, on the basis of 133 tokens used in dialogues from four contemporary fictive stories.

We have come up with the following findings. First, the joint action use is predominant, accounting for a great majority of the data (104 out of 133 or 78.2 %). Next, the “action by just one” type accounts for 10.5 % (14 out of 133), and the case of the addressee’s action is far more frequent (14 out of 16) than the speaker’s action (2 out of 16). Third, the discourse organizational use of *let's say/see* accounts for 9.9 % (13 out of 133 tokens). Finally, *let's*-imperatives are not followed by any verbal response in nearly 70 % of the data (41 out of 133 tokens).

A great deal more data, particularly those from live conversations, need to be examined to test the general applicability of the findings we have obtained here. However, the results of the present paper at least imply that there may be some discrepancy between how *let's*-imperatives are generally taught in reference grammar books and how they are actually used in conversation.

## Notes

- 1 This is a revised and up-dated version of analyses of *let's*-imperatives conducted in Takahashi 2007a.
- 2 Clark finds both sentences unacceptable, but he admits that the sentence with a *let's* is definitely more unacceptable.

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