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# A Usage-Based Analysis of Imperative Verbs in English (1)

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## 1 Introduction

This paper investigates the ways in which English verbs are used in the imperative construction. Despite the impressive bulk of previous research on English imperatives conducted both within theoretical frameworks and reference grammar books, a few fundamental questions remain to be answered. What are the most frequent verbs used in the imperative construction? Are there any grammatical features if any unique to verbs used in the imperative construction. The aims of this paper are three-fold. First, to identify a class of verbs that occur most frequently in the English imperative. Second, to find a set of grammatical and/or discourse-pragmatic features characteristic of frequent verbs in the imperative construction. Third, to explain why verbs in imperative use behave the way they do.

This paper uses data source four fictive stories written by four different contemporary American writers, *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 tokens of the imperative utterance found in conversation, because imperatives are more than five times more frequent in conversation than in writing

(cf. Biber et al. 1999: 221).

I chose to employ data from fictive stories for the following reasons. First, the four stories contained a total of 1738 tokens of imperative utterances, and top three verbs occur more than 100 times. In this regard, the size of data is large enough to make a meaningful generalization. Second, four different sources constitute a representative corpus, where influence from stylistic preferences of individual writers can be avoided. Third, novels provide a clear picture of social and power relations between interlocutors, as well as contexts of situations in which a given imperative is uttered. This information is crucial in an interpretation of a given imperative with certainty. Fourth, the data contain 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, specialist and client, interviewer and interviewee, abductor and abductee, guard and inmate, among others. The samples also include not only those from face-to-face conversation but also from telephone conversation.

A carefully designed representative corpus is essential for studies of this kind. In particular, a representative corpus must pay equal attention to both size and composition. The data must be both large enough and diversified while at the same time they must be within a manageable proportion so that each sample can be carefully analyzed. Even though the samples in this paper are, strictly speaking, not “actual data” in that they are not taken from the transcripts of naturally-occurring speech, I consider they nevertheless represent a diverse, relatively unbiased sample of present-day spoken American English. In this regard, I agree with Asher and Simpson’s remark that dialogues in narratives are mediated representations of actual conversations (1994: 2689). So they write:

“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.”

(Asher and Simpson 1994: 2689)

I believe that the data used in the present paper are justifiable in terms of quantity, diversity and quality.

The next section (section 2) provides four tables illustrating the most frequent verbs used in each story, followed by one table summarizing the total number. Section 3 reports the syntactic and/or discourse-pragmatic patterns of four top most imperative verbs. Finally, section 4 discusses the implications of the present paper.

The main findings of this paper include the following. First, the English imperative is most frequent with the verbs *let's*, *tell* and *let* — more than 100 out of a total of 1738 tokens, followed by *look* (95 tokens). Other frequent verbs include *come*, *get*, *take*, *be*, *go*, *give*, *do*, *forget*, *listen*, *wait* and *make*. Next, four most frequent verbs exhibited the following grammatical features. (i) Simpler syntax (i.e. simpler argument structure) is preferred with *tell*, *let* and *look*; (ii) *let* and *tell* (in monotransitive syntax) strongly favor *me* as an indirect object; and (iii) interjectional use is frequent with *look*.

It is argued that many of these results are directly linked with the fundamental discourse-pragmatic functions of imperative utterances in

English. Included are “tact” (or politeness strategies), discourse organization/manipulation, as well as desirability to (or benefit for) the speaker and/or the addressee (cf. Searle 1969: 66-67, Wierzbicka 1991: 205, Sadock 1994: 401, among others). While it is true that the imperative can be imposing and hence impolite, two of the most frequent imperative verbs *let’s* and *let (me)* are strongly associated with “tact” (cf. Brown and Levinson 1987) — a pragmatic means for allowing the speaker to say what s/he wants to say or do what s/he wants to do with modesty and politeness.

## 2 What are the most frequent verbs in English imperatives?

The following tables 1 to 4 list 15 most frequent verbs in each story.

| Table 1: 15 most frequent imperative verbs in <i>Sky is Falling</i> :<br>(Out of 71 verbs; 309 tokens of the imperative) |           |       |    |
|--|-----------|-------|----|
| tell   | 20 tokens |       |    |
| let’s  | 20        | sit   | 11 |
| take   | 19        | wait  | 11 |
| go   | 19        | look  | 9  |
| come   | 17        | have  | 8  |
| let  | 17        | worry | 8  |
| be   | 15        | hold  | 7  |
| get  | 12        | make  | 6  |

**Table 2: 15 most frequent imperative verbs in *The Pelican Brief* :**  
(111 different verbs; a total of 555 tokens)

|       |                |        |    |
|-------|----------------|--------|----|
| let's | 52 occurrences |        |    |
| tell  | 42             | listen | 16 |
| get   | 27             | run    | 15 |
| look  | 27             | forget | 14 |
| come  | 23             | go     | 13 |
| do    | 21             | call   | 12 |
| give  | 21             | leave  | 12 |
| take  | 17             | let    | 12 |

**Table 3: 15 most frequent imperative verbs in *Malice* :**  
(67 different verbs; a total of 253 tokens)

|       |           |        |   |
|-------|-----------|--------|---|
| come  | 28 tokens |        |   |
| be    | 25        | forget | 9 |
| let   | 15        | take   | 8 |
| tell  | 15        | give   | 6 |
| do    | 13        | look   | 6 |
| let's | 12        | think  | 6 |
| get   | 11        | make   | 5 |
| go    | 9         | open   | 4 |

**Table 4: 15 most frequent imperative verbs in *The Deception* :**  
(151 different verbs; a total of 621 tokens)

|         |           |        |    |
|---------|-----------|--------|----|
| let     | 59 tokens |        |    |
| look    | 53        | have   | 15 |
| let's   | 49        | go     | 13 |
| tell    | 30        | listen | 13 |
| get     | 25        | keep   | 12 |
| believe | 23        | call   | 10 |
| take    | 23        | come   | 10 |
| give    | 17        | do     | 10 |

We come up with table 5 listing 15 most frequent verbs across 4 stories.

**Table 5: 15 most frequent imperative verbs in 4 stories :**  
(a total of 1738 tokens)

|       |                   |        |    |
|-------|-------------------|--------|----|
| let's | 133 tokens (7.7%) |        |    |
| tell  | 107 (6.2%)        | go     | 55 |
| let   | 103 (5.9%)        | give   | 47 |
| look  | 95 (5.5%)         | do     | 45 |
| come  | 78                | forget | 34 |
| get   | 74                | listen | 35 |
| take  | 64                | wait   | 29 |
| be    | 60                | make   | 22 |

We can learn at least the following points from table 5. First, the English imperative is most frequent with the verbs *let's*, *tell*, *let* and *look*. The first three verbs appeared in more than 100 tokens (out of a total of 1738), followed by *look* (95 tokens). The four verbs account for 25.2% of the entire data (438/1738). What merits attention here is the fact that *let* and *let's* are among the most frequent, despite the fact that the two forms are sometimes treated as special or somewhat atypical types of imperatives. Second, *tell* (communication verb) and *look* (perception verb) are also very frequent — more frequent than such basic physical (motion) verbs as *come*, *get*, *take*, *go* and *give*, which are commonly illustrated as standard imperatives in most reference grammar books.<sup>1</sup> Notice that other non-physical activity verbs appear in the list: *forget* (cognition verb) and *listen* (verb of perception and communication).<sup>2</sup>

What do these results imply? Recall that the imperative is typically treated as an utterance used to get the addressee to carry out some action. Thus Huddleston and Pullum (2002: 929) explain that “Whereas declarative clauses are prototypically concerned with the truth of propositions, imperatives are prototypically concerned with some future action.” While this is entirely true, the term “future action” should be taken in a more general sense. The rationale is that the verbs *tell* (communication verb) and *look* (perception verb) are very frequent, on the one hand and other frequent verbs listed above are used more often than not in a communicative, cognitive or discourse-interactive sense, on the other.

In section 3 below, we closely look at the grammatical patterns and discourse-pragmatic functions of top four verbs.

### 3 Syntactic and discourse-functional features of four frequent verbs

Below, I report the findings about *let's*, *tell*, *let*, and *look* used as imperative verbs.

#### 3.1 *let's*

Let me begin my discussions with first-ranked *let's*. *Let's* is sometimes described as a “first person inclusive imperative” (Huddleston and Pullum 2002: 936) or “first person plural imperative” (Biber et al. 1999: 1117). *Let's* is originally a shorted form of *let us*, which is a directive to the addressee to allow us to do some action. In semantic terms, Traugott (2002: 177) notes that *let's* is more “subjective” than *let us*, in that the speaker includes himself or herself in the exhortation. It is also more intersubjective (than *let us*), in that the addressee is conceptualized as acting with the speaker. She also observes that the development of *let's* demonstrates an often-attested pattern in semantic change—from content meaning (based in argument structure) to pragmatic procedural meaning, i.e. a shift from clause-level to discourse function (Traugott, *ibid.*)

Based on a comprehensive corpus-based survey, Biber et al. (1999: 1118) report the following findings. First, the *let's* construction is more than twice as frequent in American English than in British English. In addition, negatives, *let's not* and *don't let's*, are infrequent. Moreover, the most frequent verb of *let's* is *see* in American English and *have* in British English. *Go* is second in frequency in both American and British English. Biber et al. observe that *let's* in conversation is “an invariant

pragmatic particle introducing independent clauses in which the speaker makes a proposal for action by the speaker and hearer.” (Biber et al. 1999: 1117). In a similar vein, Huddleston and Pullum make the following observation:

“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 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 also add that “The force is thus of a proposal for joint action, which the addressee accepts or rejects. 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)

As expected, I do find in my data examples of *let’s* followed by the addressee’s verbal agreement, rejection, either direct or indirect, or somewhere between—examples conforming to Huddleston and Pullum’s description:

(2) 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)

- (2) 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)

- (2) 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)

- (2) 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)

However, these instances are not so typical as Huddleston and Pullum’s account might imply. *Let’s* imperatives are predominantly used without any expectation of a verbal response, much less with actual verbal agreement. In *Malice*, for example, *let’s* imperatives occur 12 times and only one instance involves a verbal response of either agreement or refusal. *The Deception* includes 49 tokens of *let’s* but only five involve

(expectation of) verbal response. In the majority of cases, *let's* imperatives serve other pragmatic functions. Let me illustrate some of them.

To begin with, *let's* imperatives are commonly used to give instructions to the addressee, with the addressee's compliance normally taken for granted:

(3) a. “**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)

(3) b. “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)

(3) c. “Now, **let's spend a few hours going over the questions you'll be asked at your deposition**. I know Mayan d'Ortega. She's the young lady lawyer who will be asking the questions. She's through, a tigress, really. It could get kind of messy. I know some things you were unaware of.” (*Deception*, p. 308)

In the following, the *let's* imperative is uttered to mark the end of the ongoing utterance or dialog, in addition to making a specific proposal or

suggestion:

(4) a. “Sounds great. **Let’s do that tomorrow.**” (*Pelican*, p. 356)

(4) b. “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)

(4) c. 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)

Above, the speaker of the *let’s* imperative does not seem to be expecting any verbal response from the addressee; rather, it is taken for granted.

In addition, the *let’s* imperative is frequently uttered to express an objection to the interlocutor’s general attitude or remark, whose content the speaker finds more or less inappropriate or unpleasant:

(5) a. “What you need is a good shrink, not a boyfriend.”

“Thanks for the advice. 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)

- (5) b. “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?”

“Oh, I thought it was going to be short and easy.”

(*Deception*, p. 316)

- (5) c. “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)

- (5) d. “Charlie, I appreciate what you’re trying to do for me, I really do, but let me give you a counteroffer.”

“What’s that, Dan?”

“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.” Sheridan held both hands up, spread his fingers, and pumped twice.

(*Deception*, p. 112)

In neither (4) or (5) does the *let’s* imperative necessarily propose “joint action” in the strict sense of the word. Instead, it suggests an alternative attitude or action (in its most general sense) to the addressee: the message is targeted more at the addressee.

Biber et al characterize some usage of *let's* as “camouflaging an authoritative speech act as a collaborative one” (Biber et al. 1999: 1117). They note that some *let's* imperatives are especially used by adults addressing children and sometimes by a specialist addressing an adult. They offered the following actual examples (Biber et al., *ibid.*):

- (6) 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)

However, as the examples in (5) above suggest, this “camouflaging” function of *let's* is not confined to such a narrow range of social relation involving a power gap; it is practiced far more widely—even among social equals.

Next, the two forms *let's see* and *let's say* need to be addressed. The two set phrases occur very frequently, serving as conversational fillers to buy time while formulating an utterance:

- (7) a. “There's another Morgan in litigation, but he's a partner and, **let's see**, he's fifty-one. (*Pelican*, p. 344)
- (7) 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)

- (7) c. And..., I instruct the pilot to go to, **let’s say**, Chicago. Can he do that?” (*Pelican*, p. 417)

*Let’s see* and *let’s say* here are both signaling that the speaker is coming up with specific information to share.<sup>3</sup>

One subtle but notable difference in discourse function must be pointed out between *let’s see* and *let’s say*, however. Only *let’s say*, not *let’s see*, can be used to introduce a supposed situation:

- (8) 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)

- (8) 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.

The frequent use of the inclusive form *let’s*, in which the speaker really means ‘you’ or ‘me,’ can be considered a politeness strategy in English, which Brown and Levinson classified as “strategy 12: Include both S and H in the activity” (1987: 127). The choice of this form allows the speaker to “call upon the cooperative assumptions and thereby redress FTAs (=face-threatening acts)” (Brown and Levinson, *ibid.*)

Finally, *let's* does not function as a “pseudo-imperative”—unlike *let* (see section 3.3 below). Huddleston and Pullum (2002: 939) observe that “1st person inclusives” are not used as a conditional and a sentence like *Let's put up the price and they'll cancel the order* cannot be used ... to convey 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.”). My data conform to Huddleston and Pullum's description. *Let's* imperatives do occur with an *and*-clause, but when they do, they are interpreted only literally—in terms of straightforward suggestion or exhortation rather than condition. Look at (9) below:

- (9) a. “Why not? **Let's finish lunch**, and I'll take you up myself.”  
(*Sky*, p. 213)
- (9) b. Dana's mind was racing. She turned to the crowd and smiled.  
 “I'll tell you what I'll do. **Let's go outside in the fresh air**, and I'll  
 give each of you an autograph.” (*Sky*, p. 360)

Dancygier (1998) suggests that the conditional sense of the “pseudo-imperative” construction such as *Open the door and I'll kill you* arises from the following three features, i.e. non-assertiveness (=potentiality), content-domain relation (causality) and iconic sequence of events (Dancygier 1998: 188-189).

However, it is argued in Takahashi (2004, chap. 4) that these three features alone do not suffice; one more feature must be added—the force of the imperative should not be too strong. This added feature explains why an apparent “pseudo-imperative” such as *Do come tomorrow and you can see our new house* (Bolinger 1977) fails to be conditional and hence reads more like a juxtaposition of two events, even though the sentence meets the three features of conditionality identified by Dan-

cygier. In my own terminology, the imperative utterance involving strong force (i. e. the prototypical imperative) does not fit into the pseudo-imperative or the left conjunct of “left-subordinating *and*” in the sense defined in Culicover and Jackendoff 1997 (Takahashi 2004, chap. 4). In short, *let’s* is not flexible with respect to the degree of directive force; it is confined to strong positive readings, although it is quite flexible in pragmatic function.

In summary, *let’s* is the most frequent verb used in the imperative construction. The *let’s* imperative does not as frequently suggest joint action as Huddleston and Pullum explain; nor does it necessarily expect a verbal response from the addressee(s). The *let’s* imperative can perform several other discourse functions. Included are giving instructions without seeking the addressee’s compliance and conveying an objection to the interlocutor’s attitude/remark, as well as suggesting an alternative course of action/behavior to the addressee. In addition, *let’s see* and *let’s say* also occur frequently as discourse markers, to buy time as well as signaling that the speaker is coming up with something specific to say. The use of *let’s* form, when the speaker really means ‘you’ or ‘me,’ is closely associated with a politeness strategy. By verbally stressing the cooperativeness of action, the speaker implies that he or she does not impinge on the addressee so as to preserve the addressee’s face.

Finally, *let’s* is restricted to strong positive readings. As a result, *let’s* does not occur in pseudo-imperatives.

### **3.2 tell**

Next, we move on to second-ranked *tell*, a verb which can be intransitive as well as monotransitive (i.e. used with one (indirect) object) and ditransitive (i.e. used with two objects). *Tell* is a verb used frequently not only

in imperative but also in non-imperative (i.e. declarative and interrogative) constructions. Quite unlike *let*, *tell* is a very frequent verb used in all clause types in conversation. In *The Sky is Falling* and *The Pelican Brief*, *tell* occurs 62 times as imperative, but 147 times as declarative and 20 times as interrogative. As I mentioned in footnote 2, *let* occurs very frequently in the imperative construction but infrequently in other constructions. In the same two stories, *let* occurs 29 times as imperative but only 9 times as declarative and only once as interrogative.

In his corpus data analyses of verbs and their argument patterns, Biber (2000: 295) makes the following observation concerning the syntax and discourse function of *tell* in comparison to *promise*. First, while the two verbs have identical grammatical potentials, *tell* is predominantly used as ditransitive, i. e. with an indirect object, both in academic prose (as in *The central mark tells us which region we are in*) and in conversation (as in *I'll tell you what it is, I told him it might need a new switch, or She would tell me*). In contrast, the predominant pattern of *promise* is monotransitive followed by a complement clause.

What about the verb *tell* in imperative use? First, *tell* occurs somewhat more frequently as ditransitive than as monotransitive. However, the difference in frequency is only subtle, suggesting that the monotransitive pattern of *tell* is relatively frequent in imperative use. While *tell* occurs with two objects in 59 out of a total of 105 tokens (56.2%), it occurs with one (indirect) object in 45 tokens (42.9%). In only one token did *tell* occur as intransitive (in the form *Do tell*).

Second, the imperative verb *tell* is very frequent with the combination *tell me*, while by contrast the combination *tell you/yourself*, which is structurally possible, is rare. In addition, the two transitive patterns of *tell* exhibit a sharp contrast in the kind of (indirect) object they take. In monotransitive syntax, *tell* occurs predominantly with *me* — in 33 out

of 45 tokens (73.3%); the rest occur with a third-person entity. Conversely, *tell* in ditransitive use occurs far less frequently with *me* — in only 13 out of 59 tokens (20%); the majority occur with a third-person object — in 46 out of 59 tokens (80%). Overall, the combination *tell me* accounts for 46 out of a total of 105 tokens (43.8%), and there was no token of the combination *tell you(rself)* in imperative use.

*Tell* in declarative use presents a very different picture. *The Sky is Falling* and *The Pelican Brief* contain 147 tokens of *tell* used in the declarative construction (68 in the former and 79 in the latter, respectively), in which the combination *tell me* drops to 27.2% (40 out of 147 tokens). Instead, the combination *tell you*, which is rare in imperative use, becomes frequent—58 out of 147 tokens (39.5%). Moreover, while the combination *tell me* in imperative use occurs predominantly as monotransitive but infrequently as ditransitive, this is not the case with declarative use. That is, in monotransitive syntax, *tell* occurs with *me* in only 10 out of 46 tokens (21.7%) and in ditransitive pattern, 30 out of 94 tokens (31.9%). In short, the strong preference of *me* as an indirect object, in addition to the increased frequency of monotransitive syntax, uniquely characterizes the imperative use of the verb *tell*.

Third, the form *tell me*~ in the majority of tokens (25 out of 33) serves to request the addressee for information, although it is fundamentally a directive. In this information-seeking function, *tell me* occurs in one of the following three patterns:

- (A) monotransitive: *tell me about NP* (11/25 tokens)
- (10) a. Tell me about your family. (*Malice*, p. 178)
- b. Tell me about your school. (*Sky*, p. 188)
- c. Tell me about Rachel. (*Sky*, p. 278)
- d. Tell me about the maps. (*Pelican*, p. 196)

e. Tell me about the car. (*Pelican*, p. 26)

(B) monotransitive: *tell me*+INTERROGATIVE (8/25 tokens)

(11) a. Tell me, honestly. Isn't that history more than you want to deal with? (*Malice*, p. 402)

b. Tell me, was Donna Ditullio agitated during the group therapy session, any inkling that she wasn't quite with it? (*Deception*, p. 64)

c. Tell me, have you noticed any cognition at all in your daughter, any tearing when you mention her name?" (*Deception*, p. 125)

d. Tell me, Vinnie, how did you narrow down the Smiths and Joneses? (*Deception*, p. 306)

(C) ditransitive: *tell me*+INDIRECT INTERROGATIVE (6/25 tokens)

(12) a. Please, tell me who Rupert is. (*Pelican*, p. 133)  
=> Who is Rupert?

b. Just tell me what you did with the brief. (*Pelican*, p. 135)  
=> What did you do with the brief?

c. Look, Darby, tell me where you want to meet right now, and  
(*Pelican*, p. 212)  
=> Look, Darby, where do you want to meet right now?

d. Tell me what he's doing. (*Pelican*, p. 394)  
=> What is he doing?

(e. Well, tell us what's happening. (*Sky*, p. 306))

Given all these, *tell me*~ can be considered a conventional means for allowing the speaker to obtain the type of information he or she needs directly from the addressee.

This does not mean, however, that the combination *tell me* is not used

otherwise. The following uses seem more directive, in that they cannot be readily paraphrased into interrogative sentences:

- (13) a. Anytime you want more, just tell me. (*Sky*, p. 36)  
b. When you're ready, tell me, and we'll shoot it. (*Sky*, p. 154)  
c. Why are we staying over on Monday? ... Don't tell me.  
(*Deception*, p. 161)
- (14) a. Tell me you don't believe what you're saying. (*Malice*, p. 162)  
b. Please don't tell me you have other plans. (*Sky*, p. 223)  
c. The next time I call, tell me something I don't know.  
(*Pelican*, p. 189)
- d. Tell me the truth. (*Malice*, p. 188)

However, these are relatively infrequent use of the imperative form *tell me* (~).

By contrast, *Tell X ~* is not an information-seeking speech act. It is a directive, urging the addressee to communicate, or not communicate, something (given as the direct object) to someone(s) (given as the indirect object):

- (15) IMPERATIVE *TELL X AS MONOTRANSITIVE*
- a. Tell no one about this. (*Sky*, p. 309)  
b. And tell Dan about the missing pathology report.  
(*Deception*, p. 202)
- c. Tell him to look it over when ... (*Pelican*, p. 112)
- (16) IMPERATIVE *TELL X AS DITRANSITIVE*
- a. ... don't tell them who you are. (*Malice*, p. 154)  
b. ... Tell them anything. (*Malice*, p. 154)  
c. Just tell him I'm taking a drive to the Cape. (*Deception*, p. 149)

- d. You tell the client what to do. (*Deception*, p. 213).
- e. Tell Samuels I have an emergency, that I'll explain later.  
(*Deception*, p. 403).
- f. Tell him I'll be right there, Olivia. (*Sky*, p. 231).

As I have mentioned above, the *tell X* pattern as in (16) above is a great deal more frequent in ditransitive pattern than monotransitive.

In summary, *tell* is a very frequent verb in conversation in all clause types. In imperative use, both monotransitive and ditransitive argument structures are frequent. Next, the combination *tell me* is very frequent especially in monotransitive pattern, though not frequent in ditransitive pattern. The combination *tell you* is rare in imperative use, although it is frequent in non-imperative use.

The strong attraction between *tell* and *me* (in monotransitive syntax) seems to reflect a fundamental discourse function of prototypical imperative utterances. An imperative clause is typically (though not necessarily) uttered to bring about some benefit for the speaker. Undoubtedly, obtaining the kind of information speakers need is one of numerous acts expected to benefit them. Because of its simpler syntax, the monotransitive *tell me* permits speakers to more readily obtain information they need directly from the addressee in conversational interaction. In such a case, there is no wonder that *tell me* has developed into a convenient set phrase to achieve this pragmatic goal most effectively with minimum processing costs (cf. Sperber and Wilson 1986/1994).

The rarity of *tell you* in imperative use seems directly associated with the semantic structure (and pragmatic function) of the imperative construction, which has “you” as its understood subject. In most circumstances, the action designated by an imperative is targeted at an entity/entities such as the speaker or a third-person entity, but not the

addressee.

### 3.3 *let*

Third-ranked verb *let* occurs 103 times in my data. *Let* originally means “allow” or “don’t prevent.” In my survey, *let* is frequent in imperative use but infrequent in other (i. e. declarative and interrogative) constructions—quite unlike *tell*. Only 9 tokens of *let* occur in declarative sentences in two stories (*The Sky is Falling* and *The Pelican Brief*), despite the fact that 29 tokens appear in imperative sentences. The interrogative use of *let* is even rarer — only one token in the two stories: *Can’t you \*\*\* journalists let the dead rest?* (*Pelican*).

I would like to begin by introducing previous findings. First, Stefanowitch and Gries (2003: 232-233) find that *let* is a verb most strongly attracted to the imperative construction, based on their collocation analysis of data from mainly the British component of the International Corpus of English (ICE-GB). What this means is that the verb *let* occurs predominantly in the imperative construction and seldom occurs elsewhere. In addition, *let* in imperative use occurs predominantly with *me*. Next, Huddleston and Pullum (2002) observe that there is a subtle but important grammatical difference between *let’s* and *let* imperatives; i.e. “open *let*-imperatives” behave like a conditional” (2002: 939). To put it differently, unlike *let’s*, the *let* imperative can fit into a “pseudo-imperative”:

(17) Let anyone question what he says and he flies into a rage.

(Example from Huddleston and Pullum (2002: 939))

Note that this sentence is construed to be near-synonymous with an overt

conditional such as “If you let anyone question what he says, he flies into a rage.”

To begin with, my data are generally compatible with Stefanowitch and Gries’s finding. That is, the combination *let me* occurs in 82 out of a total of 103 tokens (79.7%) of *let* imperatives. Here are some illustrations:

- (18) a. “... **Let me** give you some advice. Don’t go looking for trouble, or you’re going to find it. That’s a promise. I’m warning you to stay the hell away. ...” (*Sky*, p. 62)
- b. “He did,” Jack Stone admitted. “**Let me** tell you the good things first. More than any man I’ve ever known, Taylor Winthrop cared about people.” He paused. (*Sky*, p. 63)
- c. She yelled at him as he approached the Porsche.  
“Thomas! Please! **Let me** drive!” (*Pelican*, p. 11)
- d. “Stop that,” he said brusquely, and then narrowed his eyes as he leaned closer to her. “**Let me** put it to you this way, Grace. We go upstairs for an hour or two, and celebrate your birthday, or you’re out of a job as of this minute. ...” (*Malice*, p. 204)
- e. “You think I can get into the Ritz in this outfit?” He flicked his thumbs toward his sweater. “**Let me** go back and put on a jacket and tie.”  
“Nonsense,” she said, reaching over and clasping his wrist.  
(*Deception*, p. 62)
- f. “Are you asking me a question?”  
“**Let me** put it this way, Doctor. Are you a Roman Catholic?”  
“*Please!*” Mayan d’Ortega’s voice and look spewed indignation.  
“You’re not in front of a jury. Mr. Sheridan, **let me** be blunt. I’m going to object to this toro excremento, this bullshit!”

(*Deception*, p. 194)

- g. If he or his associate, Buckley, try to contact you or Dr. Lafollette or Dr. Puzon, **let me** know. I'd like nothing better than to see this guy removed from practice. (*Deception*, p. 184)

This pattern is predominant in each and every story — 10 out of 17 in *Sky is Falling*, 8 out of 12 in *The Pelican Brief*, 10 out of 15 in *Malice*, and 54 out of 59 in *The Deception*.

Second, the form *let me* functions as a discourse-organizational device by combining with a certain class of verbs. Huddleston and Pullum observe that *let me see* occurs quite often in conversation as “a conventional way of giving oneself time to think” (2002: 9379). In my survey, *let me guess* and *let me think (about it)* are also commonly used for this purpose. In addition, *let me tell you* also serves to organize discourse interaction in a somewhat different way:

- (19) a. “... We didn't know anybody was inside until later when we put down the fire and found the two bodies. That was a heartbreaking moment, **let me tell you**.” (*Sky*, p. 178)

- b. “How well do you know Sister Agnes Loretta?” Finnerty asked the monsignor.

“How well? What do you mean?” The monsignor's brow furrowed.

“Well, **let me tell you** that I don't think Sister was completely candid with us when I asked her concern for Donna DiTullio.”

(*Deception*, p. 189)

As these examples illustrate, *let me tell you* occurs both clause-initially and clause-finally.

Next, in the rest of the data, *let* occurs with a third-person object —

in 17 out of 103 tokens (19.4%)—except one token in which the verb occurs with *us*. In this “let X (X=third-person entity)” pattern, X is predominantly a pronominal—in 10 out of 15 tokens (66.7%), which means that X tends to encode old information:

- (20) a. “... Why don’t you show Kemal around? **Let** him become acquainted with some of his teachers.”  
“Certainly. This way, Kemal.” (*Sky*, p. 133)
- b. It rang again.  
“Mine,” Jeff said, “**Let** it ring.” (*Sky*, p. 139)
- c. “**Let** them wait. Let’s do a press conference at nine in the morning.” (*Pelican*, p. 50)
- d. “**Let** her calm down,” he said wisely, and Andrew looked at them and rolled his eyes. (*Malice*, p. 346)
- e. “Then don’t **let** anything stop you. You have a right to this. You’re good at what you do. ...” (*Malice*, p. 339)

Common nouns and proper nouns are infrequent—there were only 4 tokens:

- (19) a. “**Let** the dust settle.” (*Pelican*, P. 63)
- b. “**Let** Grantham dig and wish him the best.” (*Pelican*, p. ??)
- c. “**Let** the record reflect.” (*Deception*, p. 341)
- d. “Never **let** the client tell you what to do... Don’t even **let** the client in the cockpit! Got that! (*Deception*, p. 213)
- e. “... Don’t **let** fear take over our lives,” she said powerfully.  
(*Malice*, p. 339)

All this shows is that the imperative verb *let* strongly prefers *me* as its object and secondarily a third-person pronoun.

Next, no example was found in which the *let* imperative is immediately followed by an *and*-clause to imply condition. Note that in structural terms, the following examples appear to be “pseudo-imperatives”:

- (21) a. Norvell paused. “Okay. **Let me see Mr. Voyles, and I’ll call you back.**”  
“Thanks.”  
“No, thank you, Gray. This is wonderful. Mr. Voyles will be thrilled.” (*Pelican*, p. 399)
- b. “You’re going too fast, Darby. We look suspicious. Slow down. Look, this is crazy. **Let me make a phone call, and we’ll be safe and secure.**” (*Pelican*, p. 229)

In fact, they aren’t. It might be speculated that when the direct object of *let* is specific definite such as *me*, *him*, or *Gray* instead of indefinite (i. e. *anything*) in (17) above, conditionality is difficult to obtain.

In summary, the *let* imperative occurs predominantly with *me* (close to 80% of the data). Less frequently, *let* occurs with a third-person pronoun, and common and proper nouns are infrequent. Some uses of *let* imperatives are characteristically discourse-organizational — in particular, the forms *let me see*, *let me guess*, *let me think*, *let me say* and *let me tell you*, among others. In syntactic terms, the *let* imperative is potentially more flexible than *let’s*, in that it could be used as a conditional when followed by an *and*-clause. However, this pseudo-imperative usage seems rare in everyday conversation.

Why is the combination *let me* so predominant in the imperative use of *let*? Some scholars associate this associative pattern directly with the *let* imperative’s “desirability to the addressee” (cf. Stefanowitch and Gries 2002: 233). However, who actually benefits from the fulfillment of

the designated situation is hardly transparent in the majority of cases. I suggest instead that it is intimately associated with “tact” (or politeness strategy) (cf. Brown and Levinson 1987). The form *let me V* literally requests the addressee to permit the speaker to act the way denoted by *V*. In other words, in social interaction, *let me V* serves as a convenient linguistic device for allowing the speaker to act the way he or she wants while entrusting the addressee with the authority of permitting that particular action. In some contexts, of course, the choice of *let me V* is vital. To take an example of (18c), a woman is trying to drive her boyfriend’s car because his is completely drunk but insists he drive. Because the car is not hers, this woman feels obliged to seek the car owner’s consent by saying *Let me drive!* instead of *I drive!*, which would be equally capable of communicating her intension.

In the majority of examples, however, the motive for the choice of *let me V* seems more pragmatic than actual; it arises from considerations of politeness. For example, *let me be blunt* sounds far politer than *I need to be blunt*. Similarly, *let me give you some advice* (18a) sounds far more modest and condescending than *I want/would like to give you some advice*. The same account holds for the contrast between *Let me tell you the good thing first* (18b) vs. *I tell you the good thing first*, as well as *Let me go back and put on a jacket and tie* (18e) vs. *I need/want to go back and put on a jacket and tie*. Other examples include *Let me be perfectly straight, Tom*, *Let me demonstrate that ...*, *Let me see all the papers*, *Let me say at the outset that ...*, and *Let me make myself perfectly clear*, as well as *Let me finish*. Use of *let me V* in conversational interaction allows the speaker to act or talk his or her way while preserving a certain amount of modesty and politeness.

### 3.4 look

Fourth-ranked is a basic verb of perception, *look*. This verb occurs 95 times in four stories.

According to Stefanowitch and Gries (2003: 232-233), *look* is also a verb strongly attracted to the imperative construction; it is third-ranked in their list. In addition, they observe that *look* in imperative use is closely linked with desirability to the addressee as well as attention-directing or discourse-organizational function and that these features are shared by other perception verbs *see* and *listen* as well as a cognition verb *remember*.

My survey yielded the following results. First, *look* is used in roughly three ways in the imperative construction: as interjection (=attention signal), as a verb of perception, or as a verb of cognition.<sup>4</sup> Second, and somewhat unexpectedly, the use of interjection is most frequent — 70.5% of the data (at least 67 out of 95 occurrences), although there are some variations among four stories, 0/9 in *The Sky is Falling*, 17/27 in *The Pelican Brief*, 2/6 in *Malice*, and 48/53 in *The Deception*. This result suggests that there are individual variations in the use of *look* as an attention signal, so the investigation of a wider range of data is needed.

First, here are examples of interjectional *look* from four stories:

(22) a. “Private or government?”

A slight hesitation. “Uh, I’d rather not say.”

“Okay. **Look**, I’d rather be sleeping. Why, exactly, did you call?” (*Pelican*, p. 108)

b. “Come on, Darby! Give me a break! Thomas Callahan was my best friend. You’ve got to come in.”

“And what might that mean?”

“**Look**, Darby, give me fifteen minutes, and we’ll have a dozen agents pick you up. ...” (*Pelican*, p. 136)

c. “No. You know her, don’t you?”

“Maybe. Maybe not.”

“**Look**, what’s your name?”

“Show me a badge, and I’ll tell you my name.” (*Pelican*, p. 185)

d. “Well, what do you want from me? I’m not so sure I can help you....” Ted Marden was still defensive.

“I’ve already seen a psychiatrist who says it was gross negligence to hold a group therapy session up there at the Atrium, especially when three weeks before, my client had tried to do herself in.”

Ted Marden was still on guard. “**Look**, I don’t want to get involved. My law firm isn’t going to appreciate this one bit. ...”

(*Deception*, p. 43)

e. Sheridan and Mrs. Cooney were now on common ground.

“I’ve come a long way.” Sheridan shrugged.

“**Look**,” the nurse said, “Miss DiTullio is on the second floor. Let me call to find out if you can see her. She’s in a ward with three others—terrible cases. Perhaps we can draw a curtain.”

(*Deception*, p. 131)

f. “Can we meet, Mike? Say for a half hour or so? I’ll pay you for your time.”

“**Look**, where are you now?” (*Deception*, p. 167)

g. “Hey I told you, Dan. You mix with us, you’re in a dogfight. This is civil litigation. We don’t pitch underhand in this league.”

“**Look**, Charlie, the new law doesn’t go into effect for two more weeks. The loser pays might be the law in England, but we’re in Boston, not the Inns of Court.” (*Deception*, p. 135)

It is obvious that in these instances, the verb lacks much of its original perception sense, functioning more like an interjection. By saying *look*, the speaker is attempting to attract the addressee's attention s/he needs in conversational interaction. Biber et al. classify this use of *look* as an "attention signal" as one instance of *inserts* in conversation (1999: 93):

(23) Hey look - that's the way to do it. (Biber et al. 1999: 93)

In this regard, this usage classifies as just another instance of grammaticalization attested across a number of languages. That is, a basic verb of perception is repeatedly used in a specialized context, gradually loses its original sense and changes into an established closed class over time. It is interesting to note that in languages like Japanese, the corresponding imperative form *mite* (=“look”) lacks this function. Naturally, in one Japanese translation of *The Pelican Brief*, *look* in examples (22a), (22b) and (22c) above are expressed as either non-verbs “jituwa” (=“actually”), *iika* (=“ok?”) or a null form.

In the following examples, *look* is used more in terms of perception verb:

(24) a. “Glad you're back, Dana. We've missed you.”

“Glad to be back.”

“Well, **look** who's here. Did you have a good trip?” (*Sky*, p. 304)

b. He broke off as he saw the two women in the store start to exchange coats. He grinned. “Jesus, **look** what she's trying to get away with. They're swapping coats. What a dumb broad.”

(*Sky*, p. 362)

c. “Tell me, Thomas, and don't lie to your best friend, just **look** me in the eyes and tell me if you have succumbed to a state of

- monogamy.” (=12c) (*Pelican*, p. 102)
- b. “... Catch a cab and ride back to your car. Watch your rear.”  
“Are you serious?”  
“**Look** at this hair, Alice. Would I mutilate myself like this if I was playing games?”  
“Okay, okay. Then what?” (*Pelican*, p. 179)
- c. “I don’t sleep with my secretaries,” he explained, and then he grinned as he lay there. “Don’t **look** so worried. I have a new job in mind for you. ...” (*Malice*, p. 301)
- f. “Be careful, Grace. Be smart. **Look** around, trust you gut.”  
(*Malice*, p, 132)

As expected, however, there are not a few tokens that fall somewhere between:

- (25) a. Invariably, when the prospective parents saw Kemal, they would whisper, “**Look**, he’s got only one arm,” and they would move on  
(*Sky*, p. 37)
- b. “Can I have an autograph?”  
“More people were approaching.  
“**Look!** It’s Dana Evans.”  
“Can I have your autograph, Miss Evans?” (*Sky*, p. 360)
- c. The limousine was almost a mile from Lincoln Preparatory School when Jeff yelled, “**Look.**” Ahead of them in the distance, they could see smoke starting to darken the sky. (*Sky*, p. 391)

Here, use of *look* seems ambivalent at least between verb and interjection.

Just like the case of non-imperative constructions, some examples of *look* seem more cognitive than perceptive in interpretation:

(25) d. “I’ll tell you, Judy, I’m not exactly ecstatic.”

“**Look** at it this way, Tommy. You guys finally brought all defendants to heel. I’ll bet Charlie Finnerty isn’t doing cartwheels over the outcome. ...” (*Deception*, p. 416)

e. “I’ve read your motion, Mr. Sheridan. These things happen. **Look** at the O. J. case, the Menendez brothers’ trial. Just because a reporter puts a spin on a topic, that’s no reason to continue the case.” (*Deception*, p. 337–8)

f. “Be careful, Grace. Be smart. **Look** around, trust your gut ... go someplace, girl. Be someone. You can do it.” (*Malice*, p. 132)

*Look at it this way* in (25d) and *Look at the O. J. case* in (25e) can be interpreted as “Interpret it this way” and “Consider the O. J. case” respectively. Not surprisingly, some uses such as (25f) are ambiguous between cognition and perception sense as well.

In short, the imperative verb *look* appears frequently as an attention signal — as an instance of grammaticalization from verb to interjection. As a verb, *look* is commonly used in perception as well as cognition sense, a pattern observable in non-imperative sentences as well.

Stefanowitch and Gries (2003: 233) associate the high frequency of the verb *look* (and other perception verbs *see* and *listen* as well as a cognition verb *remember*) in imperative use with desirability to the addressee. While this may hold for its verbal use, the interjectional use seems to be tied more with the emotive and/or discourse-interactive functions of imperative utterances.

## 4 Conclusion and implication

This paper has featured a class of English verbs frequently used in the

imperative construction, by examining four modern American fictions written by four different authors. It zoomed on four most frequent verbs *let's*, *tell*, *let* and *look*, and closely examined the ways in which they are used in conversation.

The major findings can be summarized as follows.

In English imperatives:

- i) *Let's*, *tell* and *let* are most frequent (each more than 100 tokens out of a total of 1738), followed by *look* (95 tokens). Other frequent verbs include *come*, *get*, *take*, *be*, *go*, *give*, *do*, *forget*, *listen*, *wait* and *make*.
- ii) Simple syntax (i.e. argument structure) is preferred with *tell* and *look*.
- iii) *Tell* (in monotransitive syntax) and *let* strongly favor *me* as an (indirect) object. *Let me* accounts for 79.7% (82/103) of all tokens of *let*, and *tell me* (in monotransitive) 73.3% (33/45) of those of *tell*. Conversely, both verbs disfavor *you* as an object; there was no token of the combination *tell you* or *let you*.
- iv) Interjectional use is frequent with *look*.

I proposed the following explanations for the findings above:

- i) The notion of “(future) action” should be understood in a more general than a simple, physical sense. The nature of action is more often than not mental, cognitive and even discourse-interactive.

The high frequency of *let's* and *let* is closely associated in many cases with “tact” or politeness strategy (cf. Brown and Levinson 1987). By apparently suggesting joint action when ‘you’ or ‘me’ is actually meant, indirectness in personal reference gives the impression that the speaker is not too imposing in his or her speech acts.

As for *let*, see iii) below.

- ii) Simple syntax is directly linked with desirability to the speaker since this short form serves as an effective and cost-saving means (Sperber and Wilson 1986/1994) for gaining the information s/he needs directly from the addressee.

As for *tell*, see iii) below and as for *look*, see iv) below.

- iii) The high frequency of the combination *let me* is closely associated with “tact” but in a way subtly different from the case of *let’s*. This expression apparently asks the addressee for permission but in actuality allows the speaker to talk or act the way he or she likes while at the same time preserving a certain amount of modesty and politeness.

The prevalence of *tell me* is directly associated with desirability to (or benefit for) the speaker—a central pragmatic function of prototypical imperative utterances.

The rarity of *let you* and *tell you* in imperative use is linked with the semantic and pragmatic features of imperative utterances, which has ‘you’ as its understood subject. The target person (given as the indirect object) is in most circumstances either the speaker or some third-person entity, but not the addressee.

- iv) Frequent interjectional use of *look* is tied with the emotive and/or discourse-interactive function of some imperative utterances, a feature which did not receive a great deal of attention in previous research.

The above analyses show that there are differences in the syntactic properties of verbs between imperative use and non-imperative. There is some link between the grammar of imperative verbs and discourse pragmatics. The set of association patterns we have observed might reflect the fundamental discourse functions of imperatives as distinct from those of non-imperative constructions (i. e. declaratives and inter-

rogatives). It is expected that the preferred grammatical associations of verbs might vary a great deal depending on different clause types, which are directly linked with different discourse pragmatics.

There is a large literature in functional linguistics dealing with the interaction between argument structure and discourse pragmatics. Du Bois (1987), for example, proposed the notion of preferred argument structure in actual discourse, demonstrating that two constraints combine to define the preferred argument structure across languages: “avoid more than one new argument per clause” (=quantity generalization) (cf. Du Bois 1987: 819; see also Dixon 1972, Givón 1975, and Chafe 1987) and “avoid new actors” (=given actor generalization). Goldberg (2000) found that omission of the patient argument is possible when the patient argument is de-emphasized in the discourse. It is reported in Arnold et al. (2000) based on corpus and experimental studies that both newness and heaviness play a crucial role in the choice of the ditransitive over the dative pattern (see also Givón 1984 and Thompson 1990). In addition, research based on analyses of large electronic corpora has revealed a number of fundamental differences in the association patterns of verbs according to different constructions (cf. Stefanowitch and Gries 2003) as well as register variation—spoken vs. written, informal vs. formal, or conversation vs. academic prose (cf. Biber 2000, Bybee and Hopper 2001, Tao 2003, Iwasaki 2006, notably Biber et al. 1998 and Biber et al. 1999).

All these works convincingly demonstrated the importance of differentiating between studies of structure and studies of use, which ultimately supports the emergent (as opposed to autonomous) view of grammar (cf. Hopper 1998, Bybee and Hopper 2001). The central message is that rather than simply looking at what is structurally possible in a language, linguists must look at actual language use in naturally occurring discourse to achieve an in-depth understanding of grammatical structure

(Biber et al. 1998: 1, Hopper 1998). However, the association patterns of verbs according to **different clause types** have, for the most part, escaped the serious attention of researchers in this field. Studies of grammatical patterns of verbs in interrogative use, for example, are expected to produce very different results from those obtained here. The same may hold for verbs in declarative use. The imperative, the interrogative and the declarative clause are expected to impose different preferred argument structures upon verbs that enter into them due to their different pragmatic functions. I would like to close by stating that this is one fruitful area in which a usage-based study of language can be headed.

## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> To take an instance of *Oxford guide to English grammar* (Eastwood 1994: 31), the imperative is exemplified by the following sentences: **Come in**; **Read the instructions carefully**; **Do not remove this book from the library**; **Don't make so much fuss**; and **Do be careful** as well as **Get out your books, please**; **Just keep still a moment**; **Don't tell anyone about this**; and **Stop** (as a sign).

<sup>2</sup> It is interesting to compare the result in table 5 with that of Stefanowitch and Gries (2003), who conducted what they call “a collocation analysis” of a wide range of English constructions and words by using mainly the British component of the International Corpus of English (ICE-GB).

This study presents the following list of verbs (or “collexemes”) most strongly attracted to the imperative construction (*let's* is excluded from the analysis.) (*ibid.*, 232):

<Stefanowitch and Gries's 15 verbs most strongly attracted to the imperative construction>

- (1) let (2) see (3) look (4) listen (5) worry  
(6) fold (7) remember (8) check (9) process (10) try  
(11) hang on (12) tell (13) note (14) add (15) keep

This result was obtained by calculating the collocational strength (or degrees of attraction) between verbs and the imperative construction, in which Stefanowitch and Gries take into account four types of frequencies—not only the frequency of a given verb (=“collexeme (L)”) in the imperative construction (C) but also the frequency of L in all other constructions, the frequency of C with lexemes other than L and the frequency of all other constructions with lexemes other than L (Stefanowitch and Gries, 218).

Given this, the difference in the ranking of *tell* (and some other verbs) should not come as a surprise. Note that while *let* is first-ranked in Stefanowitch and Gries (2003) and third-ranked in my survey, *tell* is only 12<sup>th</sup>-ranked in the former but second-ranked in the latter. This is because the occurrence of *let* is not only very frequent with the imperative construction but also very infrequent with other constructions. Accordingly, the collocational strength between *let* and the imperative construction is computed to be extremely strong. By contrast, *tell* is frequent not only in the imperative construction but in other constructions as well (see section 3.2). As a natural consequence, the collocational strength between *tell* and the imperative construction ranks considerably lower than the case of *let*, despite the fact that *tell* is one of the most frequent verbs in the imperative construction in my data.

<sup>3</sup> According to Biber et al. (1999: 1118), *let's see* has an idiomatic status as an overture; its typical function is that of signaling that the speaker is searching for information, for example trying to retrieve some fact from memory.

<sup>4</sup> *Come on*, *listen*, and *believe me* are also commonly used as interjections in my data.

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