



## **Variation revisited: A corpus analysis of offers in Irish English and British English**

Barron, Anne

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ANNE BARRON (LÜNEBURG)

## **Variation revisited: A corpus analysis of offers in Irish English and British English**

A glance at any of the current textbooks or key descriptions of the varieties of English quickly confirms that investigations of variation across the Englishes have largely disregarded the study of language use. Instead, the concentration has been on the phonological, syntactic and lexical levels of language (cf., e.g., Bauer 2002; Hughes et al. 2005; Kortmann and Schneider 2004; 2008). Even those limited number of publications which do include a pragmatic perspective reveal this dearth of research, the sections on language use being in no relation to the remaining descriptions (cf., Jenkins 2009; Melchers and Shaw 2003; Wolfram and Schilling-Estes 2006). Indeed, this dearth of pragmatic research applies not only to the study of the Englishes, but also to the study of intra-lingual regional and social variation across languages in general (cf., e.g., Barron 2005a; Barron and Schneider 2009; Schneider and Barron 2008; cf. also Clyne 2006 and Márquez Reiter 2002; 2003 on regional variation). This paper sets out to revisit cross-varietal variation across the Englishes by concentrating on the level of language use, specifically on offers in Irish English and British English.

The focus on language use situates this study in the field of variational pragmatics. Variational pragmatics is a recently established area of investigation at the interface of pragmatics and modern dialectology. It is concerned with the systematic investigation of the effect of different geographical and social factors on language in (inter)action (cf. also Barron 2005a; Barron 2008; Barron and Schneider 2009; Schneider and Barron 2008; Schneider 2010). Five types of language variation are recognised to date in variational pragmatics, namely regional, socioeconomic, ethnic, gender and age variation. The present analysis, dealing with Irish English and British English is concerned with regional variation on a national level. Furthermore, five levels of analysis are identified in variational pragmatics, namely the formal, actional, interactional, topic and organisational levels. The present analysis deals with offers in Irish English and British English and is as such concerned with the actional level. On this actional level, the concern is with identifying the strategies (conventions of means) used to offer and also with ascertaining the linguistic realisations of these strategies (conventions of form). In the present paper, we focus on one particular offer strategy, namely the question future act of speaker strategy, and we investigate the conventions of form employed in its realisation across Irish English and British English. In this context, the focus is in particular on the modal verbs *shall* and *will* and their use in various genres and contexts. As regards methodology, variational pragmatics is an empirical field of analysis and one which follows the principle of contrastivity (cf. Barron and Schneider 2009, 429; Schneider 2010). According to this principle, it holds that that which is unique to a variety can only be identified via contrastive analyses across varieties. As

such, comparable data sets are necessary for any analysis in variational pragmatics (cf. Schneider 2010 on methodology in variational pragmatics). The present empirical study takes the comparable Irish and British components of the International Corpus of English (ICE) as its data source (ICE-IRE, ICE-GB respectively).

We begin with a brief overview of the nature of offers and a discussion of what is known of the role that the modal verbs *will* and *shall* play in offers in Irish English and English English. Following this, we turn to the corpus analysis at hand, and discuss the criteria used in the identification of offers in the ICE corpus. The ICE corpus itself is then sketched and the analysis of the question future act of speaker strategy presented. The paper closes with a discussion of the findings and considerations for further research.

## 1. Offers: A description

Offers, as Aijmer (1996, 189) claims, are "fuzzy" in nature. As such, it is little wonder that they have been the focus of much debate. While Searle (1976, 11) and Edmondson and House (1981, 49 *passim*), for instance, categorise offers as commissives given that they commit a speaker to some future course of action *x*, others, such as Hancher (1979, 6) stress the importance of the involvement of the hearer as well as the speaker. Hancher argues that offers not only require the speaker to honour his/her commitment vis-à-vis the hearer (Searle's commissives), but that they also involve the speaker's attempt to persuade the hearer to accept the offer in question in a more or less obvious manner. In other words, in offering, the speaker, Hancher suggests, attempts to get the hearer to declare him/herself able and willing to engage in the proposed action (Searle's directives). As such, offers represent "... hybrid speech acts that combine directive with commissive illocutionary force" (Hancher 1979, 6). Believing both illocutionary points to carry equal force, Hancher proposes a further category to Searle's taxonomy which he terms commissive directives. More recently, Pérez Hernández (2001) argues that the members of the commissive-directives category are not all commissive or directive to the same degree. Rather, she claims a continuum of speech acts between the two poles of prototypically commissive and prototypically directive. She argues that offers are closer to the commissive end of the continuum while threats are closer to the directive pole (2001, 78). Similarly, Wierzbicka (1987, 192), while agreeing that offers may be of a directive nature, believes that they are not necessarily so. She writes: "It is true that *offering* is often combined with attempts to influence the addressee's behaviour, but it doesn't have to be".

Offers have also been categorised as conditional speech acts. Wunderlich (1977, 30), for instance, proposes a class of conditional speech acts to which offers, as also warnings, threats, advices, extortions, negotiations and proposals, belong. Here, Wunderlich underlines that the execution of an offer is always conditional on the reaction of the hearer in which he/she indicates in some way whether he/she wishes the speaker to carry out the deed in question or not. Despite not always being realised using a conditional, Wunderlich (1977, 43) argues that offers have the standard form: "If you want it, I shall do *a*". For example, the offer, *Do you want a sandwich?*, can be said to have

the standard form, *If you want a sandwich, I shall make you one*. Leech (1983, 219) also uses the feature conditional/unconditional as one of a number of criteria to describe a variety of speech acts. According to his analysis, offers, like requests, are conditional speech acts, as "... *s* intends that the event will not take place unless *h* indicates agreement or compliance ..."

Offers are realised using a wide range of strategies (cf., e.g., Barron 2003; Barron 2005b for an overview). Schneider (2003, 183-185), building on Schneider (1980), identifies three main types of strategies for realising initiative hospitable offers, namely preference strategies, execution strategies and directive strategies. Preference questions, such as *Would you like some scotch?*, Schneider writes, point to the conditional nature of offers. They have the underlying pattern AUX *you* V NP?, with the auxiliary realised via *would* and *do* and the verb via *like*, *fancy*, *want*, *feel like*. Execution questions, such as *Can I get you a drink?*, on the other hand, underline the commissive nature of offers and have the underlying pattern AUX I V *you* NP?, with *may*, *could* and *can* being the auxiliaries employed, and *offer* and *get* the verbs used. Finally, offers of an imperative form, such as *Have a drink*, reflect the directive character of offers. We are concerned with the question future act of speaker strategy in the present paper. This conventionalised strategy, relates to the propositional content condition for offers, namely that the speaker predicates a future act *x* of the speaker. On the level of the super-strategy, it is a conventionalised execution strategy as it underlines the speaker's commitment to the proposed action *x*.

## 2. *Will and shall: Modality in offering across the Englishes*

Our starting point in this corpus analysis is a previous study conducted on offers in Irish English and in English English (Barron 2005b). In this study, which analyses empirical data collected by means of a production questionnaire, the offer predication strategy, question future act of speaker, was found to be realised in the Irish data using the conventionalised formula *will I VP?* This form did not occur in the English data analysed. A subsequent review of the previous literature supported these findings and revealed that the conventionalised formula *will I VP?* does not appear to realise an offer in British English. Coates (1983) namely, writing on the semantics of the modal auxiliaries based on an analysis of written materials from the Lancaster corpus – now superseded by the Lancaster-Oslo/Bergen corpus (LOB) – and of spoken materials from the Survey of English usage<sup>1</sup> (cf. Coates 1983, 1-2), notes that *will I* in the interrogative in British English has epistemic not root meaning.<sup>2</sup> She gives the example of the ambiguous utterance *will I get a cup of coffee?* (cf. Coates 1983, 188). Here, *get* may have either an agentive function, in which case it means *make*, or a non-agentive function, in which case it means *receive*. Coates notes, however that *get*, used with *will I*, in the interrogative in British English can only have non-agentive meaning, where it means *will I receive a cup of coffee?* This meaning is an instance of epistemic modal-

1 The Survey of English Usage is more widely known today as the London-Lund Corpus (LLC) (cf. UCL Survey of English Usage).

2 There are many different differentiations of modality (cf., e.g., Collins 2009, 2123). Coates (1983) operates in her analysis with a two-way distinction between epistemic and root modality.

ity, with the speaker questioning the addressee's knowledge in order to seek information about future happenings. On a pragmatic level, we have here a request for information. The agentive meaning of *get*, i.e. *make*, on the other hand, is not possible in this context in British English (cf. Coates 1983, 188). Hence, the following utterance *will I take you to the hospital?* collected in Barron (2005b) using a production questionnaire, would not be possible in British English since *take* is an agentive verb. The utterance was produced in a situation in which an accident concerning a bicycle and a car was sketched. Following the accident, informants were to create a dialogue in which the driver of the car (a priest) was to offer to bring the injured student to hospital (cf. Barron 2003, 335).

- (1) *Priest:*       **Will I take you to the hospital?**<sup>3</sup>  
*Student:*       No, I'm fine. Would you watch where you're going in future?

In the utterance *will I take you to the hospital?*, the speaker questions a future act of the speaker and so offers the student a lift by consulting the addressee's wishes. To sum up, Coates' research suggests that on a pragmatic level, the conventionalised formula *will I* in the interrogative may realise a request for information (when used with a non-agentive verb) in British English but not an offer. This is in contrast to data from Irish English.

In British English instead, *shall I* + agentive verb is used to consult the addressee's wishes in this way (Coates 1983, 188; cf. also Collins 2009, 138). In other words, the meaning of *shall I* + agentive verb is equivalent to other conventions of form to offer, such as *do you want me to ...?* or *would you like me to?* In this meaning, *shall* expresses the root meaning "addressee's volition" (cf. Coates 1983, 185, 188; cf. also Gotti 2006, 110). In pragmatic terms, the conventionalised pattern *shall I* + agentive verb has the force of an offer. Hence, the offer predication strategy, question future act of speaker strategy, is present in British English but it is realised differently than in the Irish English data mentioned above (cf. Barron 2005b), namely using the modal verb *shall* rather than *will*. An offer of coffee using this strategy would, thus, be realised by the form *shall I get a cup of coffee?* rather than *will I get a cup of coffee?* *Get* in both cases is an agentive verb meaning *make*.<sup>4</sup> In British English, the offer of help in (1) would take the form *shall I take you to hospital?*<sup>5</sup>

3 The use of the definite article with *hospital* in the present example is a feature of contemporary Irish English whereby the definite article is frequently used with nouns making reference to a non-specific entity. In Standard English, no article would be used (cf. Asián and McCullough 1998, 45; cf. also Amador-Moreno 2010, 32-33).

4 Interestingly from the point of view of varieties, Coates (1983, 188), referring to Brown and Miller (1975), notes that *will I* is acceptable with an agentive verb in Scottish English.

5 Indeed, the use of *will I* rather than *shall I* in the interrogative form in Irish English is suggested to relate to the tendency long noted in Irish English to use the auxiliary *will* in all persons when forming the simple future tense. In contrast, guides to Standard British English prescribe that *shall* be used in the first person (e.g. *I shall be in Dublin tomorrow afternoon*) and *will* in the second and third persons. In contrast, *will* in the first person and *shall* in the second and third persons form the emphatic future tense in Standard British English (e.g. *I will definitely be in Dublin tomorrow*). Hence, in Standard British English, *will* in the first person singular indicates volition (i.e. that the act will be carried out) rather than simple predication. In Irish English, in

Based on the above, it would seem, that *will I + agentive verb?* realises an offer in Irish English but not in British English. In addition, it would seem that the convention *shall I + agentive verb?* realises an offer in British English. The questions remain, however,

- a) whether *shall I + agentive verb?* is also a conventionalised offer strategy in Irish English
- b) whether *will I + agentive verb?* is not perhaps used in present day British English to realise an offer
- c) whether situational variation plays a role in the use of *shall I + agentive verb?* and of *will I + agentive verb?*

As regards a), the production questionnaire data analysed in Barron (2005b) did not include any instances of the form. However, the data were limited, including offers from twenty-seven informants in five offer situations. Further analyses are necessary. Question b) should be posed for two reasons: firstly, the data employed in Coates (1983) are from the 1970s in the case of the LOB corpus and starting in 1955 in the case of the Survey of English Usage (cf. UCL Survey of English Usage). Secondly, there has been an increase in the use of the modal *will* in recent times in British English and a decrease in the use of *shall* (cf., e.g., Gotti 2003, 295; Quirk et al. 1985). Indeed, Gotti (2006, 111) notes that "WILL is by far the commonest modal for the expression of futurity in English". Finally, question c) concerning the context of use of the conventionalised forms at hand must also be addressed. In what genres and situational contexts is *will I + agentive verb* in the interrogative or *shall I + agentive verb* in the interrogative employed?

### 3. Identifying offers in a corpus analysis

The use of electronic corpora for pragmatic research is a recent development, and one which stems to a large part from the use of corpora as a data source in historical pragmatics. Their use, and particularly the use of comparable corpora, has clear advantages for pragmatic research. Apart from providing a potential source of naturally-occurring discourse (cf. Geluykens and Kraft 2008, 94), they allow researchers to investigate a particular question in a wide variety of (comparable) genres (cf., e.g., Adolphs 2008, 87-88; Kohonen 2008, 309). Furthermore, they provide insights into the various situations in which a particular speech act is employed (cf. Schauer and Adolphs 2006, 130-131).

On the other hand, however, informants are often aware of being recorded. This is certainly the case in the International Corpus of English. Hence, the effect of the observer's paradox is unclear (cf. Geluykens 2007, 41; Geluykens and Kraft 2008, 99). Secondly, a lack of situational information means that the discourse may be difficult to

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contrast, the first person singular, *I will*, may be a marker of prediction without necessarily implying volition (cf. Harris 1993, 158; Trudgill and Hannah 2002, 102). Indeed, Amador-Moreno (2010, 44-45) notes that this feature of Irish English has been observed by many literary writers and used to caricature speakers of Irish English.

interpret (cf., e.g., Maynard and Leicher 2007). Thirdly, the development of pragmatic annotation is still in its infancy and the vast majority of all electronic corpora do not currently tag speech acts (cf. McEnery et al. 2006, 34, 40-41). Hence, pragmatic analyses of speech acts must start at the level of form (cf., e.g., Adolphs 2008, 9; Jucker et al. 2008, 273).<sup>6</sup> In other words, searches have to be carried out starting with the conventions of form, such as formulaic patterns or functional lexical segments.

The focus of the present analysis is on the question future act of speaker strategy, and in particular on the formal realisations of this strategy. The present analysis was conducted with the search strings *will I* and *shall I*. As the ICE-Ireland component is not tagged, no further POS-strings were employed. The analysis dealt only with initiative offers, i.e. with offers which form the first move in an offer sequence (cf. Schneider 2000, 295). Unclear categorisations were not included in the analysis (cf., e.g., also Maynard and Leicher 2007). In addition, reported offers were not coded since these may differ in the level of associated directness due to the fact that politeness rules are less important in reported speech and informational content and entertainment value instead more important (cf. Adolphs 2008, 54-55).

Form-based searches mean that recall errors are, of course, possible due to the presence of surface features, such as repairs or hesitation (cf., e.g. Jucker et al. 2008, 279; Jucker 2009, 1623). In addition, the hits include more speech acts than just offers. The search for *will I* in the Irish English data, for instance, yielded the utterance *what will I do with it* (s1a-059 glasses1) – a request for advice. However, the relatively limited nature of the ICE-corpus, only including one million words per corpus, reduced the number of possible precision errors. In addition, the following description of speech acts was employed in an effort to aid offer identification (cf., e.g., Jucker 2009, 1620; Leech and Weisser 2003 on the importance of such criteria). Three broad criteria were developed and used to identify an offer as such. These included:

#### A) Uptake (cf. Copestake and Terkourafi 2010)

Here, the hearer's response is taken as proof that the illocutionary force is recognised by the hearer (essential condition). So, for instance in example (2) below, the response *No no don't lock him* to the offer *Shall I lock him up* reveals that the hearer recognises the speaker's utterance as an undertaking by the speaker to lock up the dog (commissive aspect of offers) and also as an utterance demanding a response (offers as conditional speech acts).

#### B) Propositional content (cf. Copestake and Terkourafi 2010)

The propositional content is a further criterion which may be employed. Offers concern a future action *x* to be carried out by the speaker which requires some effort on the part of the speaker and which is assumed to be beneficial to hearer. In example (2) below, the verb *lock* is agentive and, thus, an action to be carried out by the speaker.

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6 A further option is to search for the relevant speech act verb, i.e. *offer* in the present case. Such a search yields, however, only performative and descriptive uses (cf. Jucker 2009, 1616; Kohonen 2009, 21-22; Taavitsainen and Jucker 2007, 112-114).

C) Further context (cf., e.g. Jucker et al. 2008, 282-283)

The surrounding context *Sorry I'm not a great lover of dogs* reveals that the speaker assumed the future action offered to be of benefit to the hearer (cf. propositional content).

#### 4. Offering in English: A corpus analysis of regional variation

The data for the present study were drawn from the British and Irish components of the International Corpus of English. Each corpus includes a total of one million words of spoken and written data. The data were gathered in the early 1990s with the exception of some telephone recordings made in the Irish data in 2002 and 2003. All speakers are educated speakers of English over the age of 18, where educated is defined as having at least a high school education. The ICE corpus may be described as a comparative corpus (McEnery et al. 2006, 47-48) as it was specifically designed to allow for comparative studies of the varieties of English, all components of the corpus being guided by a common design structure.

The Irish component of the ICE is divided into two sub-components, the first covering the Republic of Ireland (ROI), the second the North of Ireland based on the hypothesis that political borders influence language use (cf. Kallen and Kirk 2008, 3-4). The present analysis only focuses on the data from the Republic, not only due to the possible political influence but also, and more importantly, due to the fact that the origins of the English spoken in the North of Ireland differ broadly from the origin of Southern Irish English. While also influenced by the English of England (although not very importantly), the Northern variety also bears traces of Ulster-Scots and Mid-Ulster English (cf. Adams 1977, 56-57; Trudgill and Hannah 2002, 99).<sup>7</sup> A weighting was introduced to account for this focus.

The British component was compiled at the Survey of English Usage (SEU), University College London. The speakers of the British component of the ICE were born in England, Scotland or Wales except for a minority of cases where the informants were born elsewhere but moved to Britain early in life (cf. UCL Survey of English Usage). In addition, a limited number of speakers were exposed to continued influence from other cultures via a parent with a different mother tongue (e.g. a speaker with a Spanish father). These minority cases were excluded from the present analysis. The ICE corpora do not generally include details of age, gender or social class (cf. Mair 2009, 10), and this was also the case for the British and Irish components.

The present analysis focuses on the genre of face-to-face conversation in the first instance. These texts are a sub-group of private spoken dialogues. In the Republic of Ireland sub-component, this meant focusing on 45 texts (94,579 words). A close in-

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7 As Kallen and Kirk (2008, 99-100) note, the political divide does not coincide exactly with the linguistic divide in Ireland. Indeed, given the fuzziness of the dialect boundaries, these are extremely difficult to define. The focus in the present analysis on the Republic of Ireland data is, thus, an approximation. Counties, such as Donegal, Cavan and Monaghan, belonging to the Republic might better be treated with the Northern component given that they, as well as the six counties of Northern Ireland, belong to Ulster, a historical province.



spection of the data revealed that the face-to-face component of the British component posed some difficulty in comparability. Unlike the Irish component which included only non-official conversations, the British face-to-face conversation component also included face-to-face conversations of an official nature. In order to ensure comparability, only non-official conversations were analysed. In other words, conversations, such as service interactions, were excluded in which professional roles may have influenced language use. The British sub-corpus, thus, amounted to 57 texts (116,179 words). A weighting ensured comparability between both sub-corpora.

Table 1: Use of the question future act of speaker strategy and its conventions of form in the ICE-IRE (ROI) and ICE-GB corpora

	ICE-IRE (n=46)	ICE-GB (n=65)
Question future act of speaker strategy	10.9% (5)	9.8% (6)
realised via:		
<i>will I</i> + agentive verb?	100% (5)	-
<i>shall I</i> + agentive verb?	-	100% (6)

Table 1 shows the overall use of the question future act of speaker strategy in both sub-corpora given as a percentage of the total number of initiative offer strategies established via a corpus analysis of the data (cf. Barron 2010). As mentioned above, the figures for the question future act of speaker strategy are based on a search of the corpora for the forms *shall I* and *will I*. The weighted figures for the use of *will I* + agentive verb? (IRE: 5, GB: 0) and for the use of *shall I* + agentive verb? to realise an offer are also given (IRE: 0, GB: 6). The percentages displayed for the use of *will I* + agentive verb and *shall I* + agentive verb are given as a percentage of the total number of the modal verbs *will* and *shall* used to realise a question future act of speaker strategy. In other words, of all the question future act of speaker strategies employed in the British data, all took the form *shall I* + agentive verb? In Irish English, by contrast, all realisations of this same strategy were of the form *will I* + agentive verb? This difference was statistically significant ( $p=0.002$ , Fisher's exact test).

Examples of these conventionalised patterns include:

- (2) Conventionalised offer taking the form *shall I* + agentive verb?

A> Sorry I 'm not a great lover of dogs

**B> Shall I lock him up**

A> No no don't lock him

(ICE-GB s1a-052)

- (3) Conventionalised offer taking the form *will I* + agentive verb?

<C> <#> Do you would you like some tea

<A> <#> Yes please yeah <{> <[> <#> I think it 's made actually <#> Yes please </[> if you would

<C> <#> <[> **Will I pour out your water** </[> </{>

<C> <#> Will you hand me your cup

(ICE-IRE s1a-073 politics)

The quantitative findings reveal that the question future act of speaker strategy is employed in both varieties. However, the conventions of form to realise this strategy reveal variety-exclusive pragmalinguistic variation. They confirm that *will I + agentive verb?* is employed in contemporary Irish English face-to-face conversation but not in British English face-to-face conversation to realise an offer. Furthermore, they support the hypothesis that *shall I + agentive verb?* is employed in offers in British English but not in Irish English face-to-face conversation.

A qualitative analysis of the data did not reveal any situational variation. As far as was possible to judge given a lack of situational information (cf. above), all of the situational contexts in which the formulae *will I + agentive verb?* or *shall I + agentive verb?* might be classified as situations, in which the face-threat to the hearer or speaker was relatively low. They included, among others, an offer to stop a tape recorder, an offer to lock up a dog and an offer to get a poster. The only noticeable difference was that the Irish question future act of speaker offers included hospitality offers of drinks, whereas the British offers did not. However, this trend may relate not to the strategy *will I + agentive verb?* but rather to a stronger tendency in the Irish culture relative to the British culture towards issuing hospitality offers (cf. , e.g., Barron 2010).

In addition to this analysis of face-to-face conversation, the range of remaining genres in the ICE-corpus was searched to establish whether the pattern *shall I + agentive verb?* might be found to realise offers in different genres of the Irish English ROI corpus. The genres included, for example, social letters, business letters, telephone conversations, oral legal presentations, parliamentary debates, legal cross-examinations, business transactions, broadcast news, broadcast talks, spontaneous commentaries, press editorials and student essays. However, no instance of this conventionalised offer pattern was found. In contrast, there were three instances of *shall I + agentive verb?* in the remaining genres in the British corpus – two in the spoken business transactions genre and one in the novel and story genre. The pattern *will I + agentive verb?*, did not realise any offers in any of the remaining ICE-genres for British English.

## 5. Outlook

The present study in variational pragmatics looked at offers in Irish English and in British English, and in particular at formal realisations of the question future act of speaker strategy. A corpus analysis of the British English and Irish English (ROI) components of the International Corpus of English confirmed that this strategy is employed in both varieties and that the conventionalised pattern employed to realise the strategy, namely *AUX I + actional verb?* is common to both varieties. However, the modal verb employed differs. *Shall* is exclusively used in British English and *will* in Irish English in this offer strategy in the genre of face-to-face conversation and indeed in all other ICE genres.

Despite these rather unambiguous findings, further corpus analyses should be conducted given the limited size of the ICE-corpus. In particular, the Cambridge and Nottingham Corpus of Discourse in English (CANCODE), part of the Cambridge International Corpus (CIC), and the Limerick Corpus of Irish English (L-CIE), might be em-

ployed as the latter corpus is designed based on the CANCODE corpus (cf. Barker and O'Keefe 1999; Cambridge University Press). In addition, the information provided in the CANCODE and the L-CIE corpora on the relationship between the speakers should be of particular value for an in-depth situational analysis.

In addition, certain questions remain open. A study by Barron (2010), for instance, suggested that the offer situations included in the ICE-corpora – and it is suggested in many corpora – are characterised by a low degree of face-threat. Hence, it is possible that *shall I + agentive verb?* might be employed in Irish English in situations requiring a higher degree of internal mitigation. If so, then this would point to a different politeness value for *shall* in the Irish and British cultures. Further research is required to address this question, possibly in the form of multiple choice questionnaires and/or metapragmatic data (cf. Kasper 2008).

A further possibility which might also be looked into is the possibility that the use of *shall I + agentive verb?* shows socio-economic variation. The ICE corpus includes educated speakers of Irish English. It is, however, unclear what sectors of society these speakers are from. A matched guise experiment would aid in addressing this question.

Finally, we return to the broad framework of variational pragmatics. This study has addressed the actional level from a formal perspective across regional varieties of English. A contrast with further regional varieties, and particularly with Scottish English, would be especially interesting, given the presence of the common Gaelic language and the fact that the conventionalised pattern *will I + agentive verb?* has also been noted to have root modality in this variety (cf. footnote 4). To conclude, we close with a call for further research in variational pragmatics on further speech acts, on further levels of analysis, in further regional varieties and on further aspects of variation.

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