

## Kibbitzer 5

# Making suggestions in MICASE

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In the *ESL Teaching Materials* section of this website, Rita Simpson offers some useful materials on "Soliciting and Giving Advice". In this kibbitzer, we focus on the forms that making suggestions take in the MICASE corpus, and offer a few preliminary thoughts as to how these expressions may relate to the type of suggestion being made.

## A. Suggest/Suggestion

Let us start, obviously enough, with the verb *suggest* itself and its associated noun *suggestion*. After all, there are about 250 instances of the former and more than 50 of the latter in the 1.7 million word corpus. However, only about 20% of these 300 or so tokens are actually used **to make suggestions**. Rather, they are more often used to report earlier ideas or findings or, sometimes, suggestions (as in 3) below):

- 1) Pufendorf *suggests that*, we owe obedience to God
- 2) James, as I *suggested* to you was from, the old money
- 3) also another *suggestion* that, that we had is my internship right now, um is at a summer camp

or to solicit suggestions...

- 4) i want to take something else with economics, *what do you suggest?*
- 5) *if you guys have any suggestions*, i'm happy to entertain them

In fact, using this verb (or noun) to actually make suggestions is quite uncommon: Here are the basic figures, plus a single example in each case.

I suggest	18 tokens ( <i>i suggest</i> that you construct a table)
I would suggest	19 tokens (but what <i>i would suggest</i> is, set up an Excel sheet)
I'm suggesting	5 tokens (i mean <i>i'm suggesting</i> that you do that)
suggestion	4 tokens (in your case, <i>my suggestion is</i> to look at, community colleges)

Clearly, we have to look elsewhere for other ways of offering suggestions.

## B. Why don't you/why don't we...?

There are over 70 instances of using *why don't you* and about 50 of *why don't we* to make suggestions. (The other, and much rarer function is to raise a rhetorical question in class, as in "why don't we get the stability at just one?") So, this form is more common than using the lexeme suggest. Here are some examples:

- 6) so *why don't you* add a line in there...?
- 7) *why don't you* grab a chair and join us?
- 8) *why don't you* look it up, find out?
- 9) *why don't you* zip through this introduction?
- 10) *why don't we* make copies for Tuesday?
- 11) *why don't we* take a five-minute break?

As these examples clearly show, the *why don't you/we* forms tend to be used when what is being suggested is simple, straightforward, and not particularly onerous, as in "why don't you grab a chair and join us?" This structure then seems to be used for "easy" suggestions.

So what about "trickier" suggestions?

## C. you might wanna/want to

This way of making suggestions is also quite common with about 90 examples, with another 14 examples of *you may wanna/want to*. Consider the following:

- 12) *you might wanna* talk about this difference...
- 13) *you might wanna* make this, one paragraph
- 14) so *you might wanna* think about German..
- 15) and since you missed some stuff *you might wanna* do all the homework
- 16) *you might wanna* check with your T-A about this
- 17) uh i think *you might want to* probe a little deeper into this.

As you can see, these appear to be somewhat more serious and time-demanding suggestions; they are also "modest" and polite in form. It is not surprising then that they are most often used by graduate instructors or staff (such as advisors) when talking to students. However, it can also be (occasionally) used by a student to an instructor for "simple" suggestions:

- 18) Instructor: Can you see that?  
Student: *You might wanna* lift it up a little higher.

Since this structure is already "polite" (at least in the sense it gives the recipient some apparent-if illusory-room for maneuver), it is not often hedged. However, there are a few exceptions, as in:

- 19) you might *just wanna like* again *sort of* draw out some conclusions from this *a little bit*. (our emphasis)

## D. how about/what about...?

It turns out that these two structures are rarely used for making suggestions, but are rather instructor devices for eliciting student response:

- 20) *how about* any other ideas you can think of?
- 21) *how about* this? transitive?

In fact, there are probably less than twenty obvious suggestions with *how about/how 'bout*:

- 22) *how about* two o'clock?
- 23) uh *how 'bout* maybe uh, is it okay maybe you could send it to CAEN account?

This last one is particularly interesting in that the speaker sets about making the suggestion in three ways!

## E. what if you/what if we...?

Although in MICASE most hypotheticals of this nature are used by instructors either rhetorically or, as in the first part of D. above, to elicit student response...

- 24) *what if you* couldn't meet that deadline at five?
- 25) *what if you* need a reflection across the line Y equals three? how are we gonna write that?

some 15 of the 50 tokens of this construction are in fact suggestions:

- 26) *what if you, what if you* looked at an A paper, you know a paper that he gave you an A on and compared it to the, paper that he gave you the D on?
- 27) *what if you* turned it off and started all over?

## F. you + modal auxiliaries

Using *you plus could, might, can, should, or need to* is certainly the most common way of making

suggestions. However, these forms are very difficult to analyze pragmatically. We can illustrate this with these four examples of *you need to*:

- 28) because you *need* nucleic acids to make the disease grow
- 29) but i think you *need to* again analyze this a little bit more
- 30) you *need* half an hour to get there yeah?
- 31) anybody else, *need* a handout? you *need* one as well?

Item 28) is an impersonal statement about what might be needed; item 29) would indeed seem to be a suggestion, while the last two are best understood as simple questions. It is particularly difficult to separate out suggestions from advice, directives, and requests (although this last is often signaled by the conditional *if*):

- 32) so *if you could* take out your list of terms...
- 33) I was just wondering *if you could* raise your hands if you're here

And in the following series we see the same "suggestion" phrased in three different ways (made to an instructor who was having difficulty with the overhead projector):

- 34) the bulb is probably out.
- 35) do *you suppose* it's the bulb?
- 36) if we looked at the bulb *we might be able to* tell, if the filament was uh...

Detailed analysis of *you* plus modal will have to wait for another time.

## G. Maybe?

Without hedging or softening, the *you + should/need to* construction tends to sound a little too direct, harsh, or judgmental. However, this is easily remedied by inserting a mitigating term; *maybe* seems to serve well in this capacity:

- 37) there's a lot of sciences *maybe you could* take astronomy or
- 38) but you wanna *maybe you could* do it in terms of questions
- 39) you know *maybe you should* maybe think about\_ so organizational studies might be a nice complement for you
- 40) *maybe you need to* add extra things, to get those probabilities

Also, phrasing suggestions as questions can mitigate (soften) them:

- 41) *could you* guys actually um, go to a, *like* check these out and go to a table?

Or try a combination:

- 42) *could you maybe* push that up
- 43) *could y- could you* mail it to her *or something*?

## H. Concluding remarks

There are a couple of pointers in this kibbitzer for new arrivals at US universities:

- 1) Friendly, simple suggestions to friends and colleagues can be expressed by the *why don't* structure, as in: Why don't we meet after class?
- 2) More onerous suggestions to friends and colleagues (or to students if you are a TA) can be expressed by the *might wanna* form:

You might wanna check that out with the professor.

- 3) Suggestions to those in positions of higher status are not lightly made and are better formulated as polite requests. So, rather than saying:

Professor Lee, I would like to suggest that we have an occasional review session,  
opt for:

Professor Lee, I was just wondering if we could have an occasional review session sometime?

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