



# Gender and Olds' Advice in Written Signs: A Pragmatic Study

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## ABSTRACT

Giving advice refers to an attempt by the speaker to express what the addressee should do in a particular situation or what is good for him/her. It is also a feature of making social relations and communications move smoothly and become stronger. The current study aims to investigate the strategies of the speech act of advice by old females and males for the younger generation in written signs. Comparison is made between old females and males regarding their pragmatic use of advice and the way they are manifested in expressing gender identity differences. The sample of the study consists of (30) written signs of advice divided equally between the two gender groups. Hinkel's (1997) classification of the strategies for perceiving the speech act of advice is adopted to code the data of the current study. The results show that females' advice-giving strategies are more varied than males although the two gender groups rely heavily on one basic strategy. Besides, age, as another social variable, appears to have a major role in shaping the strategy used by old people in giving advice and that gender identity is best reflected in lexical choices of emotional words, especially by females.

**Keywords:** Speech act of advice, written signs, gender, identity, age.

## Introduction

Successful communication requires the knowledge of the socio-pragmatic components of language and interaction. These two components imply that language does not occur in isolation. It is used in context and social situations. This brings about the interface of pragmatics and sociolinguistics. The former refers to the study of language use in context while the latter captures the study of language use in social settings (Min, 2019). Researchers position sociopragmatics on the more social side of pragmatics, standing in contrast to the more linguistic side. It is focused on the construction and understanding of meanings arising from interactions between language and socio-cultural phenomena (Culpeper, 2021). It is centrally concerned with situated interaction, especially in local, meso-level contexts (e.g., frames, activity types, genres). It often considers norms emerging in such contexts, how they are exploited by participants, and how they lead to evaluations of (in)appropriateness.

The speech act theory is originally initiated by Austin (1962) and then developed by Searle (1969). The theory deals essentially with the linguistic functions performed by human utterances, stating that when we speak, we perform several acts such as stating, directing, accusing, advising and informing among others (Searle, 1969). The speech act is classified into three distinct types: the locutionary act, the illocutionary act and the perlocutionary act.

This study investigates the written signs published on social media platforms which, by and large, receive considerable attention from the public. The theme of advice refers to the good intention of the speaker trying to express what the addressee should do in a particular situation or what is good for him/her (Martinez-Flor, 2003). Giving advice is related to people who are superior, not in social or economic status, but rather in their behaviour, experience and knowledge which best suits the sample under study based on their old age. The present study fills a gap in pragmatics literature because it investigates the use of the speech act of advice by old people directed to the younger generation in written signs, which has not been conducted before.

## Theoretical background

### The speech act of advice

Speech act theory, as introduced by the British philosopher J. Austin (1962), is one of the basic components of pragmatics. The theory is derived from the basic notion that language is used to perform actions. For Austin, when one uses language, he/she does things such as advising, suggesting, refusing, etc. The theory of speech acts describes how this is done. Thus, Austin (1962) defines a speech act as "the

act of uttering a certain sentence in a given context for a determined purpose." At first, Austin highlights the distinction between constative and performative utterances. The former are utterances which describe things existing in the world or state facts about them. The latter are utterances the production of which performs an action. He further states that while speaking a speaker performs three acts simultaneously. These are a locutionary act which is the act of producing sounds and words with their referential meaning. An illocutionary act is an act of doing something by saying something, thus, it is the act which results from the illocutionary act. A perlocutionary act is an act of causing a certain effect on the hearer and others, such as convincing, persuading, etc.

In an attempt to bridge certain gaps in Austin's theory of speech act, Searle (1969) offers considerable modifications to the theory. He proposes a set of conditions governing the successful production of acts which are called felicity conditions and distinguishes five major classes of speech acts; assertives, expressives, declarations, directives, and commissives. Each of these classes constitutes a host of other sub-acts which can be distinguished from each other by their felicity conditions.

Advice can be defined as an utterance that encourages the hearer or advisee to take a particular action (Searle, 1969). Advice is used in social interaction to solve some problems or prevent some unwanted conditions in the future. Social variables such as the closeness between advisors and advisees commonly affect the choice of advice types and strategies. Usually, people advise their close friends differently from how they do to their distant friends. They tend to be direct and convince their close friends to do their advice. They also do the same way to addressees whose power is lower than theirs, such as their juniors on campus or their younger siblings (Al-Shboul and Zarei, 2013). However, giving advice can be a complicated act because there is no one wants to be told what to do.

Searle (1969) defines advice as "telling you what is best for you". Following this definition, advice must belong to the directive category of speech acts. As a directive act, the speaker wants his/her advisee to do something, which makes the speech act of giving advice in the same classification as suggestion and recommendation. Likewise, Advice is considered to benefit the hearer rather than the speaker. It is about what is best for the advisee. Brown and Levinson (1987) discuss that the speech act of advice is potentially a face-threatening act since it places the hearer into the position that he/she is asked to do something and limits the hearer's freedom of action. This puts the speaker or advisor into a position of authority and power, which may lead them to impoliteness. Advice in social interaction can be delivered in several ways and determine a person's level of politeness. They can be examined for their degree of directness.

Hinkel (1997) presents a modified typology of Blum-Kulka, House, and Kasper's (1989) Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Project. Hinkel states that there are three types of strategies used to indicate advice. These strategies include direct, conventionally indirect and indirect strategies. Direct advice is a pragmatically transparent expression which is classified into four different realizations: imperatives as in "Study", negative imperatives as in "Don't go out until late", declarative sentences with should or ought to as in "You should study more for that exam", and declarative sentences with performative verbs as in "I advise you to study more." In this case, the verb 'advise' and the noun 'advice' as in "My advice to you is...." are used. The second type of strategy, that is indirect conventionalized strategies, includes three linguistic realizations: conditional as in "If I were you, I would study", probability "It might be better for you to study hard", and specific formulae. Finally, the third type of advice, indirect non-conventionalized acts, includes those hints in which the speaker's intentions are not made explicitly as in "You want to pass, don't you?"

**Table 1: Hinkel's (1997: 11-12) Advice Strategies**

Type	Strategy	Structure
Indirect	Hints	You want to pass, don't you?
Con conversationally indirect	Conditional probability	If I were you ... It might be better for you
	Specific formulae	Why don't you ...? Isn't it better for you?
Direct	Imperative Negative imperative	Be careful Don't worry
	Declarative	You should .... You ought to ....
	Performative	I advise you to ....

On the other hand, gender is considered a social factor that affects many sides of individuals' actions and self-recognition (Lips, 2001). For Wardhaugh(2010), gender is a cultural construct while gender identities, like other aspects of identity, may change over time. West and Zimmerman (1991) talk about 'doing gender,' that is, the idea that gender is not something we *have*, but something we *do*. The view of gender adopted in this study is an informational (content-based) one, drawing correlations between gender and various word classes.

Among several studies of different speech acts, advice is underresearched from a pragmatics perspective. It has not been examined thoroughly but in a limited number of studies. It has been studied in different languages and cultures such as Kuo (1996) who examines gender and differences in advice giving and how gender can be an influential variable in terms of the happening of advice-giving and its form and style. Hinkel (1997), in another cross-cultural study, investigates the differences in the production and perception of advice-giving. The results of the study reveal that native speakers favour direct and hedged advice notably more than do non-native speakers when responding to DCT situations. Al-Shboul and Zarei (2013) study the differences in capturing the suitability of giving advice in English among Iranian Persian English as foreign language (EFL) male and female students. The researchers use Hinkel's (1997) Multiple Choice Questionnaire (MCQ) to collect data from the participants. The findings of the study show that the two participating groups' perceptions of social distance in the situations with peer acquaintances and instructors are different.

As the previous studies have shown, the speech act of advice may differ according to several social factors including gender. Moreover, it can be seen that the major number of studies that have been conducted on the speech act of advice do not focus on gender as a main macrosocial variable. Therefore, it seems to be helpful to examine the differences in the perception of the speech act of advice-giving between females and males native speakers with old age which provide a major felicity condition for the acceptance of advice as a speech act. Similarly, elicitation as a technique used in all the studies reviewed above is abandoned in this study, providing authentic data, in an attempt to address the speech act of advice from, a relatively, new perspective. Thus, this study adds more to the literature of research findings available via examining a new context not investigated before (i.e., Olds' context in written signs). This study aims at identifying the pragmatic strategies used by old females and males in performing the speech act of advice in written signs and highlighting the role of gender identity differences in indexing different themes via language choices. The present study addresses the following research questions:

- 1- What are the pragmatic strategies realized in the speech acts of advice by old females and males in written signs for the young generation?
- 2- To what extent is the selection of strategies different between females and males?

3- How do gender differences influence the choice of linguistic forms when giving advice?

**Methodology**

**Data collection and analysis**

This study examines (30) written signs of ‘Advice for Young/er Generation’, published on the social media platforms of two American institutions, namely; St. Clair Nursing Center, and Birch Creek Senior living. The data include (15) signs for old females and (15) signs for old males whose ages ranged from 76-100 years old. The participants are basically Americans and native speakers of English. The written signs of this study represent a recent social practice through which older people (females and males) are requested to give advice to the young generation. They are written on boards, having the advice and certain other information about the adviser such as his name and age, with an image of her/him carrying the board. This practice is thought to be first published on the social media platform of St. Clair nursing center a couple of years ago.

The analysis conducted in this study is divided into two levels. The first is pragmatic, designed to answer the first two research questions through the analysis of strategies of the speech act of advice in the selected written signs, following Hinkel’s (1997) framework provided above. The second level of analysis is a sociolinguistic postmodernist one, addressing the third research question and following Ochs’s (1992) view in determining the role of indexicality in mediating gender identity and the choice of linguistic forms. The analysis at the two levels takes the micro-macro form since it is purely linguistic-pragmatic in the first and informational sociocultural in the second.

**Results and discussions**

Table (2) sums up the major information provided in the written signs under study. The data comprises (30) pieces of advice, divided equally between males and females. Each piece of advice has some details of its producer, his/her name, age, and the advice itself. The majority of the advice is in the direct imperative form, reinforcing the basic requirement for advice production, that is the superiority of its producer over its receiver. Similarly, the use of advice by the two gender groups agrees with Hinkel’s (1997) findings that native speakers tend to prefer direct strategies in giving advice.

**Table 2: Description of participants**

Gender	Name	Age	Advice
Females	Eunice	81	Don’t swear and respect your mother and father
	Natalie	99	Always be happy with yourself and others
	Lois	93	Try to love not to hate
	Doris	87	Life is hard, don’t give up
	Louise	76	You will be my age pretty soon
	Lavretta	100	Life goes better if you always having fun
	Jean	85	Be kind to everybody
	Millie	92	Don’t smoke
	Gwen	81	Prayer, patience and well doing
	Myrtle	81	To remember all, to get home on time, to stay with the family
	Alice	94	Smile and the world smiles with you
	Marie	90	Be fair with one another
	Edna	81	You do not always need to in such a hurry

	Rosina	87	Don't hurt people, help them
	Marion	88	Don't get old
Males	Charles	91	Save your money
	Bert	78	Work hard, study
	Cliff	89	Work hard and behave
	Terry	89	Don't take yourself too seriously
	Fred	84	Live a good clean life
	John	90	We should all agree to disagree
	Dace	88	Try to stay out of trouble
	Richard	85	Find a woman with money
	Bob	91	Find someone to love and keep on loving them
	Les	94	Make sure you are financially stable
	John	83	Take hold of every opportunity given to you
	Richard	85	Also, don't be a packer fan
	Michael	81	Work hard, play harder, see the twin towers
	Gail	77	Work hard
Max	97	Be honest, love your mother, work as hard as you can	

As far as the first research question is concerned, Table (3) shows the pragmatic strategies realized in the speech act of advice performed by old females and males in written signs for the younger generation. The analysis also included a separate category for those advices, if any, which are not accounted for in the framework adopted.

**Table 3: Males and females' pragmatic strategies of the speech act of advice**

Type	Strategy	Females	Males
<b>Indirect</b>	Hints	3 (20%)	-
<b>Con conversationally indirect</b>	Conditional probability	1 (6.6%)	-
	Specific formulae	-	-
<b>Direct</b>	Imperative	5 (33.3%)	12 (80%)
	Negative imperative	5 (33.3%)	2 (13.3%)
	Declarative	-	1 (6.6%)
	Performative	-	-
<b>Other strategies</b>		1 (6.6%)	100%
		100%	

Focusing on answering the second research question, older people male use different strategies with apparent different frequencies. The dominant strategy used by both groups is the direct one. It represents 66.6% and 80% of women's and men's advices respectively. Within the direct strategy, the imperative sub-strategy is the major and most frequent in old males' advices while in women it is similar in frequency to the negative imperative sub-strategy. Other direct strategies (declarative and performative), which do not mean to express obligation in its highest sense over the receivers of advice, are only marginally used in this context by old males and do not occur at all in the advices of old women. As indirectness and hedging are expected to appear more frequently in the advices, especially of females, as compared with previous studies (Kuo, 1996; Hinkel, 1997; Al-Shboul&Zarei, 2013), the high rate of direct strategies in this context may be interpreted in light of two reasons: the first is the old age of the



advisers which gives them a sense of power in the relation with younger advisees, while the second is the mode of interaction which is written in this context, offering no direct audience or advisees who are absent in the interaction.

However, females show a relatively high degree of variability in the use of advice strategies as one-third of the sample is manifested by employing indirect strategies for expressing the speech act of advice (conventional and conversational). The distribution of indirect strategies is still there in females' advices. About (26.6%) of the female strategies are indirect ranging between (20%) for hints (mild ones) and (6.6%) for conditional probability which can also be regarded as a mild hint. For men, indirectness and hints seem to be of no use, preferring to express advice in a direct imperative way. The qualitative analysis also shows that the female-male samples do not differ considerably in the use of (specific formulae) strategy and direct (performative) strategies where they are not used at all.

One of the significant findings in relation to age is that while previous studies have shown relatively high rates of the two indirect strategies, for old females and males, the situation is highly different. Indirect strategies appear only in less than one-third of old females' uses while they are completely absent in old males' uses. This finding might be interpreted in light of the age of the participant selected for this study, as older people tend to be directly due to the relative space of authority available to them because of their old age. Similarly, the unified situation for this study may be the reason behind sticking heavily to only one major strategy as compared with other studies (Farashaiyan and Muthusamy, 2016; Martinez-FLor, 2003) in which multiple situations are available for participants.

Hence, the results and their discussions, regarding the pragmatic part of the analysis, show the existence of cross-gender differences between the two groups included in the study (females and males). Similarly, and to some extent, they also show the strategies employed in expressing the speech act of advice by old people and how the strategies used encompass certain considerable differences with previous studies conducted for younger people.

With regard to the third research question, this study has shown that men and women differ in their use of the speech act of advice. The notion of 'indexicality' is highly relied upon as "the process by which particular ways of using language point towards culturally recognizable identities" (Jones, 2016, p. 213-14). For Ochs (1992), indexicality mediates the indirect relationship between a given linguistic feature and the category of woman. Henceforth, Table (4) shows the role of emotion as indexical in linking the linguistic features, distributed according to word classes, with the gender identity of females as compared to males.

**Table 4: Words related to emotions in old females' signs**

<b>Word class</b>	<b>Expressions as indexicals</b>	<b>Frequency females</b>	<b>Frequency males</b>
Verbs	love, hate, respect, get home, remember, smile, hurt	9	3
Nouns	mother, father, family, home, patience, prayer, fun, age	8	0
Adjectives	happy, hard, kind, fair, old	5	2
Adverbs	-	0	0

Within the (15) advices performed by old females, expressions related to emotions, family and social relations, and fun appears in (22) instances. For old males, only (5) instances appear to be in use. This considerable difference confirms the traditional view of the makeup of a female's sociocultural identity which seems to impose itself regardless of age as another social variable that might affect both the identity and the use and choice of language. The reverse is true for the nature of males' identity as

expressions related to emotions, family, relations, etc. appear only marginally in the data under analysis. Shimanoff (1985) shows no differences regarding emotional expressiveness between males and females in verbal communication. This insight seems to be non-identical to the context of the situation under analysis, and females are explicitly expressing emotional themes within their advice, unlike males' advice which gives the emotional side only a peripheral role. Therefore, it is inescapable that emotional expressiveness is manifested in females' speech, especially if the talk is related to advice-giving.

To get an insight into the gender identity of males in relation to the themes used by females, word classes of their advices are also analysed. What is seen to be of frequent use in men's advice openly suggests themes like work, money, and living, reflecting men's life interests. Table (5) below traces the distribution of such topics as indexicals of linguistic features of male's identity in relation to females.

**Table 5: Words related to work and living in old males' signs**

Word class	Expressions as indexicals	Frequency males	Frequency females
Verbs	work, save, take, live, try, find	12	1
Nouns	work, save, take, live, try, find	12	1
Adjectives	money, life, trouble, opportunity, packer	8	1
Adverbs	seriously, financially	2	0

As compared with old females, the frequency of work-money-living indexicals in old males' advice is considerably high. Themes, which are traditionally attributed to males' language like sex, taboo words, strength, directness, and force, are not explicitly used in this context. Age may have an intricate influence on the absence of such topics and expressions. Similarly, the restricted context of use with only one speech act to be taken into consideration is another factor that must not be neglected in this respect. However, it seems that old males' speech has its own characteristics and necessarily themes which are totally different from those of old females and which, in turn, reflect the impacts of sociocultural backgrounds in shaping gender differences.

To this end, the expression of feelings stands as a basic potential difference between the two gender groups in this study. Emotions in females' advices and living and working for male's advices may seem to be radical and drastic in the lens of postmodernist philosophy and feminist theory as females have the full opportunity to work and search for the living, yet, the sociocultural imprints are deeply manifested in the analysis of older people advices as these individuals are expected to be experts in life experiences, fully aware of their personal affairs, highly dynamic in their linguistic use, and, of course, having determinate realization for their gender identity.

**Conclusion**

This study investigated the sociopragmatic differences in advice-giving between old females and males in written signs for the younger generation. The results and discussions shed light on the different perceptions of advice-giving across genders. Although marginally stated, old females' advices are more varied in the use of strategies than males who basically stick to only one main strategy. In compliance with gender, another macro social variable, which is age, appears to have its own imprints in shaping the strategies employed in expressing the speech act of advice whereas a low rate of indirectness and hedging are exploited in the data analysed which could be attributed to the old age of advisers that offer them a sense of social power. Concerning gender identity, it is best represented in this kind of data since the selection of words uncovers the difference in the male-female identities. Emotional words of different categories that are related to themes of love, family, kindness, and fun are explicitly and frequently



manifested in old females' advices, reflecting the traditional view of the emotional construct of women's speech. On the other hand, words of different categories which are related to themes of work, living, and earning money are frequent in men's advices, which in turn, reflect the identity makeup of males.

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