
THE STRUCTURE OF ‘I WANT YOU TO+V’ IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE CLASSROOM**Petranka Ruseva**Shumen University, Dobrich College Republic of Bulgaria petranka.ruseva@shu.bg

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Abstract: Along with the well-know imperative structure there are other possibilities to make students bring about the actions necessary for the course of the lesson. One of these options is the use of the ‘I want you to+verb’ structure. It is sometimes defined as a phrase. In general, the appropriateness and advantage of using it lies primarily in making teachers’ language more diverse. The structure is considered from several points of view depicting it structurally, semantically and pragmatically. The possibilities to form negatives are discussed. Semantically the structure has to do with imperatives. And pragmatics is concerned in terms of use in the corpus. Also some references are made to the idea of Blum-Kulka who names the structure among ‘Want Statements’ along with another form closely related to it. These Want Statements are recognized as some of the most direct examples of the nine suggested request categories and at the same time among the least polite in the same group of nine. In terms of different subcategories of illocutionary acts the structure allows several uses. A polite way of making a request with *want* is by asking a question. This has to do with indirect speech acts and the expected answer does not concern the desire of the students but bringing about an action in conformity with the requirement. In addition to requests the verb *want* can well serve to introduce instructions, commands, and even advice. A lot of other phrases can be listed as synonymous but the ones coming really close to *I want you to+v* are *I would like you to*, *I expect you to* and *I prefer you to*. There are some others also mentioned in the paper. The examples found in BYU-BNC prove the preference of native speakers to turn to *I want you to+verb* occasionally in their speech. As a part of the spoken varieties (interviews, meetings, lectures, consultation, broadcast documentary, etc.) and the written varieties (newspapers, school essays, advertisement, biographies, etc.) the *want*-structure in the corpus in spoken classroom language is represented by 9%. There in 39% of the cases the verb that comes most frequently after it in infinitive is *do*. Nevertheless, it can be argued that a variety of verbs co-occur. Both state verbs and action verbs prove to be possible to accompany the structure but the latter predominate, as it might be expected. The practical usefulness of drawing attention to the *I want you+verb*-structure is directed to English language teachers. As the author’s observation in primary school classroom shows the prevalence of the imperative structure in teachers’ language in classroom management, the paper addresses those of them who would like to make their instructions, commands, etc. more diverse in structure. Thus it would help in a way reflect part of the authentic diversity of the English language.

Keywords: classroom language, I want you to+verb, structure, corpus.

1. INTRODUCTION

The importance of diversity in teachers’ language is undeniable since the language they use in classroom management in the course of the lesson can contribute significantly to the foreign language acquisition by the students and hence to the practice in real everyday situations or as Hughes (1981:7) puts it “many classroom management phrases can be transferred to ‘normal’ social situations”. In this sense the pattern ‘I want you to+verb’ can be considered a suitable option. Structurally it can be viewed as suggested by Hughes (1981: 16) as the verb *want* + object + infinitive. Young (1980: 140) observes that there are different patterns that *want* occurs in (e.g. ‘I want you to go, ‘I want you sitting quietly’). The negative form requires *don’t* preceding the verb (e.g. ‘I don’t want you to spend too much time on this’). The other option of leaving the verb positive and using *not* after you is not discussed although the differences in the use are highlighted with the verbs *like* and *expect* (e.g. ‘I wouldn’t like you to do this exercise in a hurry’ and ‘I would like you not to keep interrupting’). Another similar structure with *want* is with an object and a past participle. It occurs in positive and also in negative, as in ‘*I want the whole approach changed.*’ and ‘*I don’t want you hurt.*’ (Sinclair et al. 1990:170).

Palmer (1990: 25-26) makes an explicit statement that *want* has no place among modals or semi-modals, though he mentions authors who have a different point regarding *want* as ‘marginal’, or referring to “‘boulomaic’ modalities”, etc. Watts (2003: 191) defines *want to* as a ‘quasi-modal structure’. Whichever of these views we take, it seems less significant compared to the issue about their semantics which is of greater importance in our context. Therefore, it is worth highlighting what Palmer (1990) says in this connection. Even supposing that *want* is not formally a modal

verb, he admits that it is semantically similar to *will* and *be willing to*. It is semantically that the structure in question is related to directives since it can be viewed as a declarative functioning in a similar way as imperatives (Han 1998). Another interpretation bringing the imperative and this declarative even closer is presented by Petrova (2008: 128) who relying of Wiezbicka (1972, 1985) attributes various meanings such as «I want you to do X», «I want you to cause X happen», «I want people here to do these things (X)», «I want you to cause X for me», «I want you to say what you think about it» to the speech acts expressing inducement. Structurally, imperatives seem to be more concise, while ‘I want you to’ is more explanatory.

Although the focus here is on a different issue, it is worth mentioning that in terms of pragmatics, an interesting point concerning sincerity is made by Condoravdi and Lauer (2012) who underline that it is impossible for the speaker to lie using an imperative while compared to *I want you to+verb* a negative response might be expected on the part of the addressee who is possible to express distrust and disbelieve the sincerity of the addresser assuming that he/she is being lied to.

2. DIRECTNESS, POLITENESS AND ILLOCUTIONARY ACTS

As indirectness is to a large extent associated with politeness, it can be considered that ‘I want you to’ is obviously direct and hence impolite. Yet ‘indirectness does not necessarily imply politeness’ (Blum-Kulka 1987: 131). Directness conforms to authority of the speaker over the addressee. Clark (1979: 433) points out that examples such as ‘*I want you to loan me \$100*’ do not give options for the addressee and the imposition of authority is clear enough. Focusing on the relationship between indirectness and politeness, Blum-Kulka (1987) suggests nine categories – Mood Derivable, Performative, Hedged Performative, Obligation Statement, Want Statement, Suggestory Formulae, Query Preparatory, Strong Hints, and Mild Hints. She examines one illocution, i.e. requests. One of the examples of Want Statements is the *want*-phrase that the present paper is focused on. In her experiment she builds up two scales, the first one shows the results concerning directness and the other one – politeness. In terms of directness Want Statements take the fourth place, which puts them among the direct ones, but yet not that direct since they are almost in the middle, following Mood Derivable, Obligation Statements and Performatives. Imperatives are the most direct ones and according to the Politeness scales they are the least polite. Above them on the politeness scales are Obligation Statements, preceded by Want Statements. These observations of Blum-Kulka order Want Statements among the three least polite, and present *want*-phrases as relatively direct among the examined nine request categories in English. As there are three cases of meaning, and the most significant one, perhaps, states that ‘the speaker means what he says, but also means another illocution with different propositional content’, Braver (2007: 1) makes it explicit that ‘I want you to do it’ is both a statement and a request where the ‘illocution is the same as the original proposition’. Although it is as if evident that the phrase is direct and does not have any intricate hidden message that the addressee will have to make enormous efforts in order to understand, I guess that in the context of classroom language it should not be treated as impolite. Teachers are in authority to ask students do different tasks and this structure might be considered rather neutral as regards politeness. Nevertheless, Clark recognizes (2006: 570) ‘I want you to do A’ as a request. This interpretation of hers is applied to very young children in her aim at answering the question whether they ‘focus first on forms and later on uses, or [...] they acquire both together as they master a first language’ (Clark 2006: 262). Papafragou (2000: 3) treats ‘I want you to play on the train.’ the same way, i.e. as a request. But there are also other possibilities for the use of *want*. The phrase can be used as a language of organization and more specifically in giving instructions. This is the sense in which Hughes (1981:9) gives the example ‘I want you all to join in’. In *Collins Cobuild English Grammar* (Sinclair et al. 1990) *want* is suggested as a less polite and more direct substitute of *would* in giving instructions and making requests. The same structure is recognized to introduce commands (Hughes 1981: 16) as in ‘I want you to finish this off at home’. Condoravdi and Lauer (2010: 8) go even further to suggest sentences that can be used to perform a variety of types of speech acts. Below are some of their examples which I find appropriate for this context. The kind of relationship between the speaker and the hearer is pointed out in the parentheses and the information contributes to the correct choice in order to decide between the different types of speech acts.

a. [Mother to child]

I want you to clean your room before playing. (COMMAND)

b. [Doctor to patient]

I want you to take these pills for a week. (ADVICE)

c. [Affirming an offer]

No, really, I want you to take the last cigarette. (INVITATION)

d. [Among collaborators]

I want you to write this up before our next meeting.(REQUEST)

e. If it is that important to you, I want you to go. (CONCESSION)¹⁴⁴

The very short literature review shows the acknowledged variety of speech act types concerning the want-structure, i.e. commands, requests, instructions, advice, invitation and concession. These possibilities are examined in BYU-BNC spoken classroom language, but not all of them occur.

3. BYU-BNC_SPOKEN_CLASSROOM LANGUAGE

Brigham Young University – British National Corpus (BYU-BNC) is an enormous online corpus where the spoken language part includes varieties such as interviews, oral history, meetings, lectures (e.g. on politics, social science, commerce) consultations, broadcast documentaries, conversations, public debates, unclassified, etc. and the written one comes from newspapers, law, religion, school essay, advertisements, instructionals, biographies, Hansard extracts, fiction, etc. The focus in this paper is on the spoken part and on classroom language in particular. In this very context the want-structure is represented by 9% among all other varieties of both spoken and written language. In 39% of the cases the verb that comes most frequently after it in infinitive is *do*, e.g. (1). Nevertheless, it can be argued that a variety of verbs co-occur.

(1)BYU-BNC_2911_JAA_S_Classroom: **I want you to do** a diagram like this.

Another of the most frequent verbs is one of the mental activity verbs, also called verbs of cognition, the verb *think*, e.g. (2).

(2) BYU-BNC_2911_JAA_S_Classroom: no, on your bottom (pause) eyes closed. (pause) **I want you to think** about the sounds you heard.

Both state verbs and action verbs prove to be possible to accompany the structure but the latter predominate significantly. *Have* can be used dynamically as in *have a look*, see (3):

(3) BYU-BNC_53_JJR_S_Classroom: Look at the diagram and then try the exercise. **I want you to have a look** at that diagram and read it to yourself quietly now.

In terms of types of speech acts the corpus with spoken classroom language offers mostly examples of instructions. The clauses including want-phrase are instructions in 75% of the cases, 8% are commands, 5% warnings, and 2% requests. There are other cases left out, for example where the want-phrase is embedded and the clause does not fit any of the types.

A good example of an instruction is (4):

(4) BYU-BNC_47_JAA_S_Classroom: I should get twenty two different diagrams. When you've done that **I want you to look at this**. If you want to colour the planets, do

In the following example from the corpus the clause with *want* conveys the meaning of a command:

(5) BYU-BNC_18_F7R_S_Classroom: Right, let's have you quiet again then, shh (pause) shh, **I want you to listen** (pause) shh, I want you to listen (pause)

The next example might be interpreted as a warning, but it could be a piece of advice of a teacher to one or more students as well:

(6) BYU-BNC_55_JJR_S_Classroom: I know what was going wrong (...) with you the mistakes. **I want you to pay attention**. Then you can get a chance to do it again

The occurrence of *please* has a decisive role in understanding the clause of (7) as conveying a request:

(7) BYU-BNC_14_F7K_S_Classroom: Just a minute John, right Michael **I want you to read yours through once more for me please**.

The variety of meaning can be conveyed in a variety of ways. Some possibilities are suggested below.

4. OTHER VERY SIMILAR PHRASES

Curme (1931) argues that nouns, adverbs, prepositional phrases, etc. serve as imperatives. As there is a similarity in meaning of imperatives and 'I want you to', it could be suggested that this statement justifies the assertion for such terse expressions to be synonymous with the examined structure, too. Nevertheless, they are only mentioned since their complete examination is beyond the scope of this paper. There are also other possibilities such as the phrases *I prefer you*, *I wish*, *I suggest you*, etc. The examples given by Blum-Kulka (1987: 133) as Want Statements, i.e. 'I would like you to clean the kitchen.' and 'I want you to move your car.', evoke the assumption about the resemblance between the two phrases. One more near equivalent can be supplied. According to Hughes (1981) the verbs *like*, *expect*, *prefer* and *insist* can introduce commands. As the last one of them is either used with gerund or

¹⁴⁴ As some of the examples are omitted, those that are quoted are marked differently. The original number is a-g, and here are included a-e where b. and d. are omitted for having a structure a bit different from the one examined in this paper.

in ‘That + verb phrase’, we could interpret it as a deviation from the pattern that all the rest of the three verbs follow the same way that *want* does, i.e. object+ infinitive. Quite similar is the situation with the verbs *wish* and *suggest*. But it is not only the verbs that can be used as synonyms in our case. A whole clause can serve the same purpose. As Hughes suggests (1981: 18) ‘[w]ant and like used in questions also express requests:

Would you like to write that on the board?

Do you want to try the next one?’

5. CONCLUSION

I definitely agree with Hughes’ opinion that ‘the classroom can provide opportunities for the pupil to hear genuine uncontrolled language used for genuine communicative purposes’(Hughes 1981:7). But to make it true for our classrooms, teachers should try to benefit the variety of structures that native speakers use. The structure of ‘I want you to+verb’ that is paid attention to in this paper is only one of the options. The examples given from BYU-BNC prove the involvement of the structure in the English language on the whole and in spoken classroom in particular. It can be considered a real possibility to bring in on the one hand, authenticity and on the other, escape from the prevailing power of the imperative structure in classroom. As the author’s observation in primary school classroom leads to the conclusion about the preponderance of the imperative structure in teachers’ language in classroom management, the paper addresses those educators who would like to make their instructions, commands, etc. one step more diverse in structure. Thus it would help in a way reflect a small part of the authentic diversity of the English language.

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