

ADVICE IN INSTRUCTIONAL TEXTS: A COMPARISON BETWEEN ENGLISH AND SPANISH

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1 Introduction

Instructional texts are those which provide directions for some procedure, such as the use of a device. Such texts include a wide range of semantic functions, including *directives* to perform actions, *warnings* to avoid actions or states, and *informatives* providing, for example, description of parts, manufacturer contact details, etc.

Murcia & O'Donnell (2002) described a corpus study of instructional texts in terms of the types of the semantic functions used, and their supporting elements (purpose, manner, location, etc.). In this paper, we will focus on the directive elements in instructional texts, or what we call *advice* (since these elements advise the user to perform some action). We will explore the variety of forms used for advice expressions, and try to motivate the choice between these forms in terms of situational factors which make one form more appropriate than another.

If one is to translate instructional texts between English and Spanish, one needs to understand that direct translation is not always appropriate. Each culture makes different assumptions as to how advice should be given (directly or indirectly). We will present a corpus-based comparison between the two languages.

We will restrict the study to a type of instructional texts called "consumer product instructions": written directions for the use of a consumer product (such as a fridge, a coffee maker, etc.). These instructional texts come in all shapes and sizes (from small leaflets to large booklets), and can be divided into various parts: body text, organising features (titles, tables of contents, captions, etc.) and diagrams.

In consumer product instructions, advice usually involves the performance of a procedure involving the product (e.g., installation, use, cleaning, storing). Sometimes the advice is more indirect, e.g., obtaining spares, contacting company. All of these directions are typically given as a list of actions to perform. Note however that such directives do not constitute all of instructional texts, which can also provide warnings and information, as well as organising features. A small example of an instructional text is shown in figure 1.

How to use Chopsticks:

1. Place stick between thumb and index finger and rest on third finger of right hand.
2. Place second stick above first stick between thumb and index finger. Rest on second finger with points together.
3. Move top stick up and down by raising second finger.

Figure 1: Instructions for using chopsticks

2 The Corpus and Methodology

This study is based on a corpus study of 7 instructional texts in English and 6 in Spanish (accounting to around 7,600 words in each language). All the texts collected were written in the original language and vary in size, product and manufacturer.

Once the texts were collected, they were scanned into the computer and coded using the Systemic Coder (software for assigning features to text segments, see O'Donnell 1995). The texts were segmented into organising features (titles, tables of content, etc), speech acts and supporting elements, and each segment was then coded for its sub-type and in terms of form.

Deep vs. Surface function: The coding of speech act (semantic function) was problematic in some cases, where the writer packages one type of speech act in an expression which looks like

that of another. For instance, a warning can be packaged as a positive action: “keep the cord out of the water”. The more congruent form would be to use a negative imperative (warning): “do not allow the cord to enter the water”.

Similarly, there can be a cross-over between directives and informatives. The author can say: “Press the red button to start the engine”, or “the red button is used to start the engine”. A warning can also be encapsulated as an informative: “Smoking can cause cancer”.

We thus make a distinction between the ‘deep’ and ‘surface’ function of an utterance. The deep function regards the speaker’s underlying goal: does the writer in writing her text intend the user to perform an action, avoid some action, or just be aware of some fact? The surface function regards the actual form of the expression: is the writer telling the user to do something, not to do something, or just informing? For the study, we used the deep function in the classification of advice, that is, we look for the writer’s intention.

Distribution of advice: The analysis resulted in 1,680 segments for English and 1,009 for Spanish, of which advice accounted for 412 segments in English and 229 for Spanish. In English, advice accounted for 58% of the speech-acts but only 46% in the Spanish corpus. Spanish texts included more informatives.

3 Forms for Expressing Advice

In both English and Spanish, advice forms can be divided into those which use a simple clausal structure (e.g., a simple imperative or declarative) and those which depend on some form of projection (e.g., “it is necessary to do X”). We will consider the simple ones first.

3.1 Simple forms

In most cases, advice is expressed in a simple clause of some kind, such as an imperative, a declarative clause, or (in the case of Spanish only) with the infinitive. We coded advice using the network in figure 2. Examples of these forms are shown in Table 1.

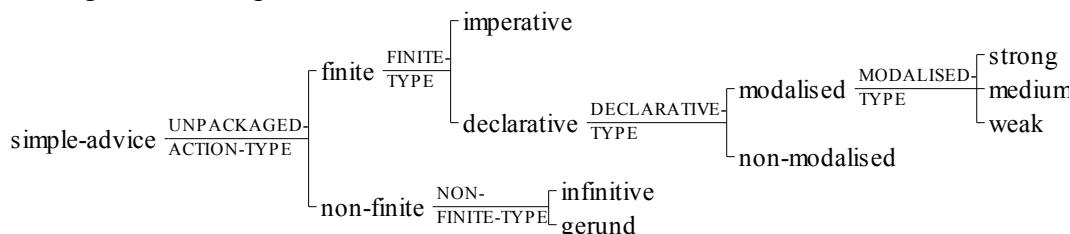


Figure 2: Coding options for simple advice

	English	Spanish
imperative	<i>Switch off mains supply</i>	<i>Lea estas instrucciones</i>
declarative: non-modal	<i>The zero is set by rotating the top of the body</i>	<i>Ahora retiraremos la tapa del fundidor</i>
declarative: modalised	<i>The bowl should be washed after use</i>	<i>Las piezas esmaltadas deben lavarse con agua jabonosa</i>
gerund	<i>Place the correct weight on the centre vent, <u>pushing down</u> until a slight click is heard</i>	<i>gire el regulador de temperatura <u>ajustándolo a la posición deseada</u></i>
Infinitive	<no cases>	<i>Lavar bien la parte interna</i>

Table 1: Examples of simple advice

The non-modalised declarative is quite rare in English (only one example in our corpus), but more common in Spanish (28 examples). The one English case, shown in the table, is an example of using a seeming informative to perform a directive function. Technical writing guidelines often recommend the avoidance of this form for advice, since the user may not realise it represents an action he needs to perform.

Spanish has two ‘imperative’ forms: the true imperative which matches the English one, and an additional infinitive form. The main difference is that the imperative makes the agent clear (the reader), while the infinitive does not. For this paper, we will treat these two forms together.

With regard to the imperatives, two special cases need to be discussed:

- **Ensure:** Both English and Spanish exhibit advice of the form “Ensure <state>” (e.g., *Ensure the device is plugged in*). “Make sure” and “check” also occur. In Spanish: *Asegúrese de la colocación de dicho TAPON*. These cases correspond to some degree to the simple imperative form, although the advised action is fairly abstract: ensuring that some state comes about or is maintained (rather than to perform an action).
- **Use:** Both languages allow a form “use X”, sometimes “use X to do Y”. Now, this on the surface looks like an advised action, possibly modified with a Purpose. However, at a deeper level, the main clause expresses the instrument, and the “to do Y” adjunct is in fact the specification of the action. The totality is still advice, but its classification as to form is difficult.

3.2 Forms expressing the social roles of the participants

The expression of advice occurs in a speech situation where the writer believes that performing the recommended action is *beneficial* to the user. The writer thus acts in an *advising* capacity to the user (who is intended to be the reader). The writer is thus the Advisor, and the reader is the Advisee and Beneficiary.

In advising an action, the writer can choose to make either of these situational factors explicit. In the simple forms of advice, the advising function is left implicit. Making the social factors explicit results in a complex syntactic structure:

- *Advisor/Advisee:* The writer can make explicit that the speech-act is one of *advice*: both the advisor and the advisee can be explicit, as in *We advise you to ...*, although this is rare. Sometimes, only one of the roles is provided (e.g., *We recommend ...*; *You are advised ...*) Sometimes both roles are implicit, suggested only by the verb: *It is advisable to ...*
- *Beneficiary:* The writer can make explicit that the action is for the benefit of the user, e.g., *It is in your interest to ...*

The typical choice is to realise the action as a dependent clause. The projecting clause can be either *verbal* (*We recommend you to do x*) or *adjectival* (*It is advisable to do x*). Table 2 shows examples for English and Spanish. An alternative form nominalises the action, placing it in the Subject position. The process is then realised as the verb or as an adjectival attribute, e.g., *Cleaning is recommended*; *Use of distilled water is advisable*.

	English	Spanish
Advisor/Advisee (i) adjectival proj.	<i>It is advisable to erase the Mercury authorisation code number</i>	<i>Es aconsejable poner el termostato en la posición SUPER-FRÍO/MAXIMO</i>
(ii) verbal proj.	<i>It is recommended that the bowl is washed before use.</i>	<i>Recomendamos desconectar la toma de corriente eléctrica</i>
Beneficiary	<i>It is in your interest to retain the receipt</i>	<i>Es conveniente limpiar los casquetes y quemadores</i>

Table 2: Examples of advice with explicit social roles

The Spanish “es conveniente” (see Table 2) has more implication of desirability than English “it is convenient to”. We suggest that this phrase would be more correctly translated as “it is in your interest”.

One other interesting case occurred in the corpus: *We would ask you to carefully read the instructions*. Here, the writer is representing the manufacturer, who is to some degree legally responsible for the device, in terms of warranties and lawsuits. The manufacturer thus benefits from proper reading of the instructions, and thus uses this polite indirect form which is unlikely

to occur in instructions, since, where advice is for the benefit of the user, politeness is not necessary.

3.3 Forms expressing the importance of the action

The actions in instructions can range from highly important, down to mere options. In the strongest cases, not performing the action might result in damage to the device, or to the user. Language provides various mechanisms for expressing the importance of the action in advice. Later, we will discuss this in relation to the simple forms of advice. Here we will introduce some forms which make importance explicit.

The same options seem to be available in both English and Spanish. There is a cline from medium to high importance. Examples are shown in table 3. Low importance is not included here, since this category is realised by possibility of action and we treat these as informatives, not as advising action. While verbal projections were possible for the social role cases, here the only form is the adjectival. As before, nominalisation of the process in Subject position is also possible: *Close supervision is necessary*.

Importance	English	Spanish
High	<i>It is necessary to follow a basic haircare routine</i>	<i>Es necesario girar el mando</i>
Medium	<i>It is important that the machine is always supervised</i>	<i>Es muy importante que el enchufe de red tenga toma de tierra</i>

Table 3: Examples of advice with explicit importance

In our corpus there is only one contextual element made explicit at a time. We do not see: *we advise that it is necessary to...* We seem to have the option to add only one explicit message to an action.

4 Contextual motivation of forms

For the most part, advice is realised in simple forms (English: 95%, Spanish: 89%). The action itself is what is important. The nature of the speech-act as advice, the benefit of the action to the user, and the importance of the action, can all be taken for granted, allowing the user to focus on the actions to be performed.

Imperatives: The imperative (including the Spanish infinitive form) is the most frequent form for advice (83% of advice in English, 60% in Spanish). These forms can be considered impolite in some contexts, but are acceptable in instructional texts because the reader understands that the action is for their benefit. What is important to the reader is the specification of the action, and politeness would just make the text unnecessarily complex. In Spanish, the choice between imperative and infinitive can be partly motivated by tenor: the infinitive is more impersonal (it doesn't suggest the agent, while the imperative does).

Modalised Declaratives & Importance Projections: The imperative implicitly assumes a high degree of obligatoriness of the action (at least within the bounds of any condition or purpose associated with it). If the writer wishes to express a lower level of obligation, she needs to use an alternative form. This could involve a declarative form, with a modal verb “should”, or an adjectival projection, such as “it is important to ...”. The declarative modal form is almost as simple as the imperative, and thus does not distract from the action as much as the projecting form. Use of an adjectival projection allows the writer to be more explicit as to the type of obligation: advisability, importance, necessity, etc.

The writer might also wish to stress the importance of an action if it has higher than normal importance, e.g., the non- or mis-performance of the action could damage the device or user. In such cases, use of the declarative with “must”, the adjectival “it is necessary ...”, or their Spanish equivalents, are possible.

Non-modalised Declaratives: these forms are used very rarely in our English corpus to express advice (1 case), but more commonly in our Spanish data (26 cases). Now, most of the Spanish cases are from one text, which is instructing women on how to use a wax melter. They are nearly all 1st person plural (e.g., *tomaremos el cable negro* ~ we will take the black wire). This strategy is also used in guiding students, and in the context of adults seems patronising.

Gerund form: Those gerunds in our corpus which were expressing advice were always co-occurring actions, as in *position the arrow in line with the mark, keeping the cover level*. They not only direct an action, but also constrain a previous action.

Explicit Advice/Benefit: The writer's role as Advisor and the user's as Beneficiary can be assumed from context, and do not normally need to be stressed. The explicit marking of an action as advisable or beneficial to some degree marks the action as optional: an imperative is to be obeyed, but a recommendation can be accepted or not. The writer is thus to some extent marking the relative lack of obligatoriness of the action.

These forms might also be used by writers trying to motivate users to perform optional actions. Rather than just saying "it is important to do it", the author is offering an argument why they should do it: because we as experts think it is best for you.

5 Conclusions

This paper explores a corpus of instructional texts in English and Spanish, in an attempt to chart the range of forms for expressing advice in instructional texts. Firstly, we argued that one needs to classify speech-acts in terms of deep-function rather than the surface appearance, as it is the writer's intention that is important, and not the form used to express it.

We have described the variety of forms used in our corpus for expressing advice, including simple forms (such as imperative, declarative or non-finite clauses), but also projecting forms which make explicit the advisability of the action, the benefit for the user, or the importance of the action.

We have shown that the most normal way to express advice is via an imperative (or the Spanish infinitive which functions similarly), and that switching to the other forms is motivated in various ways in reference to the pragmatic environment of advice (i.e., to the context of production). We have in some places shown where Spanish and English differ.

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