

# I Need Out Because He Wants In the House:

## The Subject Pronoun in *need* and *want* Phrasal Constructions<sup>1</sup>

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### Introduction:

- In some dialects of American English, the following sentences are acceptable:
  - The dog wants in. (*want* + prepositional adverb)
  - He wants off the horse. (*want* + prepositional phrase)
  - I need out. (*need* + prepositional adverb)
  - She needs on the bus. (*need* + prepositional phrase)
- Other dialects of American English require an infinitive verb between the verbs *want* and *need* and the prepositional adverb or prepositional phrase (e.g., *I need to go out.*)
- Studies on the geographic distribution of *want* + prepositional adverb/phrase and *need* + prepositional adverb/phrase have found these constructions to be commonly used in the Midland dialect area (see Fig. 1) and recent work suggests that these constructions are spreading to other dialect areas (e.g., Kurath 1949; DARE; Benson 2009 & in progress).
- The disparity in usage patterns within the Midland dialect area and in the spread of various forms of these constructions to other areas suggest that other linguistic factors, in particular, syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic factors may be playing a role in their distribution.



Figure 1. General Dialect Area Map of the United States (Labov et al. 2006)

### Research Objective:

- In this project, which is part of a larger project examining syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic factors affecting *want* + prepositional adverb/phrase and *need* + prepositional adverb/phrase, we explore the role that one syntactic factor, namely subject type, plays in the widespread distribution of these constructions in written sources.
- More specifically, we investigate the frequency of different types of subjects and subject pronouns (e.g., *I*, *he*) and the role they play in the acceptability of the four broad types of these constructions: *want* + prepositional adverb (as in 1), *want* + prepositional phrase (as in 2), *need* + prepositional adverb (as in 3), *need* + prepositional phrase (as in 4).

### Methods:

- From July-December 2008, we compiled a corpus of examples of *want* + prepositional adverb/phrase and *need* + prepositional adverb/phrase by doing an extensive search of American English sources on-line, including print media, books, websites, and open blogs.<sup>2</sup>
- Our corpus consists of 247 examples of *want* + prepositional adverb, 276 examples of *want* + prepositional phrase, 66 examples of *need* + prepositional adverb, and 103 examples of *need* + prepositional phrase.
- The data in our corpus are compared to the frequencies found in the *Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA)*, which we use as a baseline for "General American Usage."

#### Footnotes:

<sup>1</sup> We gratefully acknowledge the resources provided by the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs in the form of a Faculty/Student Research Collaboration Differential Tuition Grant, the English Department, as well as the printing resources provided by Learning and Technology Services and the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire's Differential Tuition program.  
<sup>2</sup> We owe a debt of gratitude to Michael J. Fox, Michelle Hazard, Graeme Lewis, and Heidi Kraemer for their help gathering examples for our corpus.

#### Selected References:

Benson, Erica J. 2009. *Everyone wants in: Want* + prepositional adverb in the Midland and Beyond. *Journal of English Linguistics* 37.1: 28-60.  
 Davies, Mark. *Corpus of contemporary American English*. Brigham Young University.  
 Kurath, Hans. 1949. *A word geography of the eastern United States*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.  
 Labov, William, Sharon Ash & Charles Boberg. 2006. *Atlas of North American English*. Berlin: Mouton.

### Subject Type: *Want* Constructions compared to General American Usage (COCA)

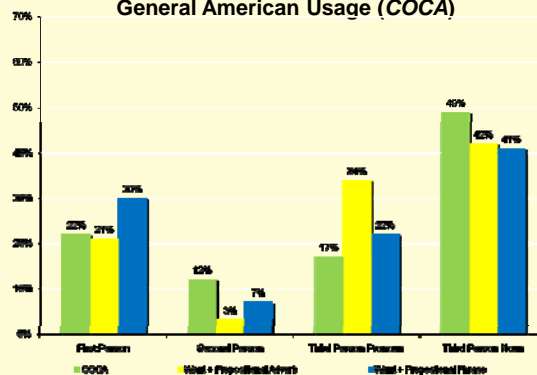


Figure 2. Subject type in *want* + prepositional adverb and *want* + prepositional phrase compared to General American Usage (COCA)

- In our corpus, the *want* + prepositional phrase construction shows a higher percentage of 1<sup>st</sup> person (pronoun) subjects (i.e., *I*, *we*) than in the *want* + prepositional adverb construction and in general American usage of 1<sup>st</sup> person subjects with *want*; see Fig. 2.
- Overall, 2<sup>nd</sup> person (pronoun) subjects (i.e., *you*) with *want* were less common than with other subject/pronoun types; however, this may be due to our focus on written language.
- Of all subject types, 3<sup>rd</sup> person subjects are the most common of all subject types and among those, nouns are more common than pronouns (i.e., *he*, *she*, *it*, *they*); see Fig. 2.
- Interestingly, the *want* + prepositional adverb construction shows a remarkably higher percentage of 3<sup>rd</sup> person pronoun subjects than the *want* + prepositional phrase constructions and the general American usage of 3<sup>rd</sup> person pronoun subject with *want*; see Fig. 2.

### Subject Type: *Need* Constructions compared to General American Usage (COCA)

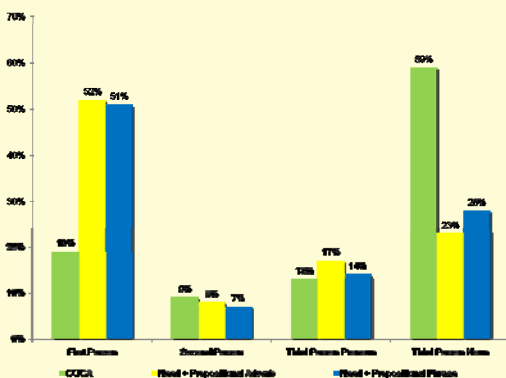


Figure 3. Subject type in *need* + prepositional adverb and *need* + prepositional phrase compared to General American Usage (COCA)

- Most remarkable in Figure 3, is the switch from a higher percentage of 3<sup>rd</sup> person subjects (especially noun subjects)—both in general American usage and as compared with the *want* constructions in Figure 2—to 1<sup>st</sup> person (pronoun) subjects (i.e., *I*, *we*) of *need* + prepositional adverb and *need* + prepositional phrase.
- The 2<sup>nd</sup> person (pronoun) subjects (i.e., *you*) and 3<sup>rd</sup> person pronoun subjects (i.e., *he*, *she*, *it*, *they*) in *need* + prepositional adverb and *need* + prepositional phrase constructions are essentially equal with general American usage (COCA); see Fig. 3.

### Singular vs. Plural Subject: *Want* Constructions compared to General American Usage (COCA)

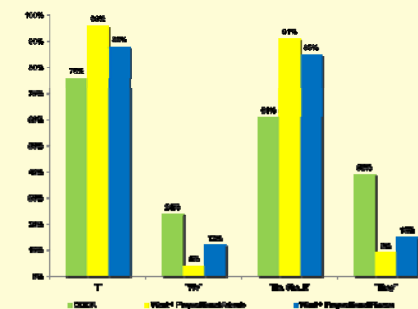


Figure 4. Singular and plural subjects in *want* + prepositional adverb and *want* + prepositional phrase compared to General American Usage (COCA)

- With 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> person pronoun subjects, the singular forms (*I* & *he*, *she*, *it*) are strongly favored over the plural forms (*we* & *they*) in the *want* constructions far exceeding the general American usage of singular pronoun subjects in the 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> person in COCA; see Fig. 4.
- It was impossible to distinguish 2<sup>nd</sup> person singular and plural pronoun subjects (i.e., *you*) in the *Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA)*, so we haven't reported on those.

### Singular vs. Plural Subject: *Need* Constructions compared to General American Usage (COCA)

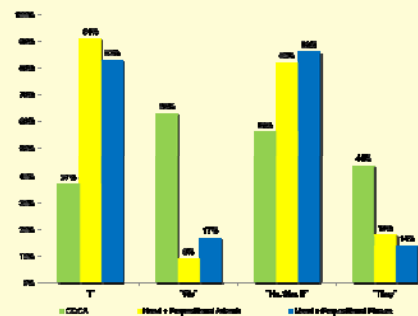


Figure 5. Singular and plural subjects in *need* + prepositional adverb and *need* + prepositional phrase compared to General American Usage (COCA)

- Like the *want* constructions (in Fig. 4), the *need* constructions, shown in Figure 5, favor singular pronoun subjects in the 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> person (*I* & *he*, *she*, *it*) over the plural pronoun subjects (*we* & *they*) in stark contrast to general American usage in COCA.

### Discussion & Conclusions:

- Overall, *want* + prepositional adverb and *want* + prepositional phrase show similar distribution patterns by subject type as general American, with slight increases in *want* + prepositional phrase in the 1<sup>st</sup> person and *want* + prepositional adverb with 3<sup>rd</sup> person pronouns.
- More striking, however, is that in *need* + prepositional adverb and *need* + prepositional phrase, 1<sup>st</sup> person subjects (*I*, *we*) are favored over other subject types.
- Perhaps most notable is that all four types of constructions strongly favor singular pronoun subjects over plural pronoun subjects (in contrast with general American usage).
- As a result of these differences in distribution by subject types, we might expect to find: (1) greater acceptability of *want* + prepositional phrase, *need* + prepositional adverb, and *need* + prepositional phrase with 1<sup>st</sup> person subjects (rather than 2<sup>nd</sup> person (pronoun) subjects (i.e., *you*) and 3<sup>rd</sup> person ) and (2) greater acceptability of all four constructions with singular subjects (rather than plural subjects) in all dialect areas and especially in those to which these *need/want* constructions are spreading.