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## Suggestions in digital discourse: The case of MOOC reviews

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## ABSTRACT

This study examines the speech act of suggestions in digital discourse through linguistic and functional approaches and explores how suggestions are performed along with co-occurring discourse-pragmatic particles, supporting moves, and aspects in their propositional content. More specifically, this paper presents findings regarding the speech act of suggestions in MOOC reviews as a recent and emerging genre of digital discourse. Embracing a discourse analytic perspective, this study indicates how suggestions are situated within the context they are used, and their multi-functionality is evidently relevant to the linguistic choices and supporting moves by MOOC learners, going beyond the utterance level meaning. Additionally, suggestion head acts involve certain aspects of online courses or their experience where learners often express their expectations or opinions for improvement. Overall, this study contributes to speech act research in digital discourse and provides insights into the use of suggestions in the discourse of MOOC reviews.

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## 1. Introduction

Suggestions as one type of speech acts in pragmatics are ubiquitous in our everyday communication, by allowing us to accomplish various social acts to maintain our interpersonal relationships and construct multiple identities. So far, suggestions have been studied in pragmatics from various perspectives including interlanguage and cross-cultural pragmatics (Li, 2010; Martínez-Flor, 2005), variational pragmatics (El-Dakhs and Ahmed, 2024), a cognitive pragmatic perspective (Li and Liu, 2023), corpus pragmatics (Jiang, 2006; Reinhardt, 2010) and relational work (Çiftçi, 2015). Additionally, there is a wide range of linguistic repertoire for realization of suggestions in different contexts (Martínez-Flor, 2005). For example, they can be an integral part of relational work between university students and their instructors and contribute to a co-constructed stance act in an academic setting (Çiftçi, 2015, Çiftçi and Vásquez, 2020). In addition to linguistically multiple ways of making suggestions, it is possible to observe various functional components of this abundantly used speech act in our everyday interactions. Yet, how suggestions are used in digital communication has not been examined and requires close scrutinization to better understand and situate their linguistic and functional features specifically in digital contexts.

In this study, I investigate suggestions in MOOC reviews as a rapidly emerging mode of digital genre where learners or users<sup>1</sup> with diverse backgrounds willingly and publicly share their subjective opinions and experiences of taking online course. MOOC reviews are important to examine as they represent a growing and unique form of both positive and negative

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<sup>1</sup> The entities of learners and users are used interchangeably throughout the paper.

evaluative feedback from learners in digital learning environments. Therefore, it is highly likely for these reviews to involve suggestions as they serve as a powerful means for learners to express opinions, share emotions, and critically reflect on their online course experiences.

Social factors predominantly impact speech act performance relying on the content and purpose of the situation, expectations, interlocutors' own sociocultural understanding and practices, and type or degree of their relationship (Sarıç and Çiftçi, 2018). Similarly, how suggestions are realized and how their meaning is situated within the context of MOOC reviews are also closely tied to various social factors too. Some of these possible factors relevant to the distinctive context of these online course reviews would be the learners themselves and their motives or drives for writing a review. Research shows that a significant portion—nearly half—of MOOC participants hold at least a bachelor's degree and are generally well-educated (Deng and Benckendorff, 2017). Their educational background or expertise and subject area they are interested in might be important in how these MOOC learners perform suggestive acts in their course reviews. Additionally, they might demonstrate specific characteristics compared to other groups of individuals who write reviews. MOOC learners, for instance, possess several personal and social motivations for taking these online courses, such as personal interest and curiosity (Barak et al., 2016), socializing and professional networking (Bulger et al., 2015), and learning more or improving resumes (Li, 2015). Therefore, this study closely scrutinizes suggestions from MOOC learners as an integral part of such evaluative discourse where these reviews will often involve MOOC learners' own learning experiences with their expertise, subjective opinions, and possibly delivery of their expectations accordingly.

From a methodological perspective, former research on suggestions adopts a diverse set of data sources. These primarily include discourse completion tasks (DCTs) or multiple-choice data (Bu, 2011; Hinkel, 1997; Matsumura, 2001), oral or written questionnaires (Koike, 1996), role plays (Li, 2010), corpus data (Jiang, 2006; Reinhardt, 2010), and naturally occurring interactions (Çiftçi, 2015, 2019). Thus, researchers exhibit tendency to utilize both elicited data and instances of authentic discourse along with various data analytic approaches. While DCTs, for example, usually require a deductive coding of a list of semantic formulas, corpus-based or discursive data involves a more co-constructed or socially situated analysis of suggestions in the ongoing interactions.

Informed by discourse analytic approaches and research on digital discourse (Gee, 2014; Vásquez, 2022), this study explores suggestions in digital communication as very little is known about how they are used in such digital discourse. Through an iterative analysis of the data, my goals have been not only identifying the linguistic choices in suggestions but also understanding their functional elements in relation to the context they are used. This allows researchers to uncover other pragmatics-related particles that repeatedly co-occur with suggestions. I also uncover supporting moves introducing and/or following suggestions in MOOC reviews as these are inextricably linked to the cohesive construction of suggestions in discourse. Finally, in our everyday communicative acts, whether offline or online, it is highly crucial to understand the content and purpose of our messages for a smooth flow of our interactions. However, much focus has been given mostly to the linguistic resources or a list of semantic formulas in speech act research so far. Therefore, this study is also highly important for our understanding of which aspects of MOOC courses are tackled in suggestions in the learner reviews by examining the propositional content of this speech act. To do so, the following research questions have been addressed in this study.

1. What are the linguistic choices in suggestion head acts in *Coursera* reviews?
  - a. What are the most frequent mood types and typical syntactic forms in suggestions?
  - b. What other linguistic and functional elements co-occur in these head acts?
2. What are the supporting moves initiating or following suggestion head acts? How do they function in relation to suggestions?
3. What aspects of the courses do these suggestion head acts address?

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Defining suggestions as a speech act

Suggestions are historically categorized under speech acts and directly interrelated with pragmatic competence. Speech acts as one of the most comprehensive area of pragmatics are aptly rooted in speech act theory, a seminal work by two philosophers, J. L. Austin and J. R. Searle back in 1960s. Among the three levels of speech act analysis (Austin, 1962), the illocutionary act as the functional aspect has received the most pervasive interest in previous research in this strand. While communicating, speakers are involved in many social acts and want to realize certain functions by their language use including, but not limited to, suggesting, complaining, promising, refusing, requesting, apologizing, and so on. And such illocutionary act or force is mostly possible to be expressed in myriad ways of linguistic choice. Additionally, speech acts of suggestions, advice, requests, commands, orders, and questions are further categorized into directives where the speaker tries to make the hearer do something (Searle, 1969). That is, in using a directive, the speaker conveys their intention for the addressee to take a specific action (Allot, 2010; Cutting, 2008; Huang, 2007) and the speaker's goals is ultimately to get the hearer to do a future action.

Although directives involve various speech acts, suggestions are different from other speech acts in this category. A salient justification for this premise is that suggestions involve a lower weight of imposition, and its illocutionary force is relatively weaker especially when compared to other directives such as requests and orders (Koike, 1994; Li, 2010). They are considered nonimpositive directives whereas requests and orders belong to the impositives. Such a distinction asserts that the speaker is the mere beneficiary in impositive speech acts as in orders and requests whereas nonimpositive directives, as in suggestions, refer to the acts where the proposed action or its result is supposed to primarily benefit the addressee (Çiftçi, 2015; Martínez-Flor, 2010).

As a common type of directives, suggestions are typically considered a complex speech act for some reasons. First, it is necessary for the speaker to abide by certain conditions in performing this speech act (Koike, 1994). While suggesting, the speaker is conscious or mindful of a problem and thus performs a suggestive act. As discussed earlier, the speaker also reckons on the idea that her/his suggestion will be beneficial for the addressee or audience to solve the problem. Another condition is that a suggestion or the proposed action often arouses either a positive or negative response when it is received, which largely relies on how the speaker conveys his/her suggestion (Martínez-Flor, 2010). Second, like any other speech act realization, numerous social factors influence the linguistic performance of suggestions (Çiftçi, 2015). These social factors include, but not limited to, the characteristics of the interlocutors (e.g. gender, age, and social status), the type and urgency of the proposed action, the speaker's need for the action to be taken, the degree of imposition, level of formality/informality and the context of speech event. Consequently, all these social variables are reflected in the speaker's linguistic choices as they interact with each other in social interactions in a complex way.

Suggestions are also essential for understanding everyday communicative practices and a closer scrutiny into the speech act of suggestions within a particular community is important for many reasons. First, considering the discourse of MOOC reviews, suggestions are highly likely to manifest in abundance as the primary function of writing a review is to provide evaluative feedback by learners regarding their sheer experience of taking an online course. Second, suggestions in MOOC reviews in this study are crucial to display the intricacies of how digital learners use certain linguistic choices for giving suggestions and actualize certain pragmatic functions. Finally, it is also anticipated that many social factors in the context of MOOC reviews (e.g., learners' specific purposes and expectations, social status, educational background, the topic or content of the course(s) they have taken, and so on) will probably influence how they make suggestions whilst also evaluating their digital learning experience and offer subjective opinions.

## 2.2. Previous research on suggestions: context, strategies, and function

A bulk of previous studies on suggestions have been conducted in academic contexts, such as advising sessions (Bardovi-Harlig and Hartford 1990, 1993), academic writing tutorials (Thonus, 1999), study group interactions (Jiang, 2006), and office hours (Çiftçi, 2015; Jiang, 2006). These earlier studies examine suggestions and relevance of social status typically in interactional and naturally occurring data framing the face-to-face contexts mostly as institutional discourse. Drawing on linguistic and pragmatics perspectives, former research operationalizes social status or power distribution through nativeness and nonnativeness in English and the interlocutors' institutional roles, such as an advisor or professor and a student, a tutor and tutee for asymmetrical power relations, and student-to-student interactions in study groups for egalitarian status. Conducting a corpus-based study on suggestions in office hour interactions between professors and students, and study group interactions among students, Jiang (2006), for example, demonstrates that the semantic formula *Let's ...* is equally used by both students and professors while performing suggestions in office hours and study group interactions. Yet, they signal different functions as a joint action in the student-to-student study groups whereas hearer-oriented suggestions imply an inclusive or less authoritative attitude in office hours between professors and students.

In Bardovi-Harlig and Hartford (1990, 1993), for instance, advising sessions between graduate students and the faculty advisors at a university in the US are analyzed from an interlanguage pragmatics perspective. The communicative goal of these advising sessions between native speaker advisors and native/nonnative speaker graduate students is to decide the students' class schedules for the upcoming semester at the university. Embracing a longitudinal approach to their analysis of pragmatic change throughout academic advising sessions, Bardovi-Harlig and Hartford (1993) examine both early and later advising sessions and demonstrate that nonnative students have acquired some pragmatic competence throughout advising sessions by performing increase in their acceptance of the advisor's suggestion. Likewise, Thonus (1999) explores tutor dominance in 16 academic writing tutorials regarding the role of tutor and tutee gender, language proficiency, and the interaction of these variables. Focusing on frequency of directives, directive type, and mitigation strategies, the study shows that these features of tutors' speech remain relatively constant in their interactions regardless of gender and language proficiency, implying a prevailing impact of institutional context. Overall, these empirical studies on suggestions in academic contexts highlight the role of status regarding interlocutors' linguistic choices or semantic formulas and appropriateness or status-congruency mostly from interlanguage and cross-cultural pragmatics approaches (Martínez-Flor, 2005).

Regarding suggestion strategies, it is important to refer to directness/indirectness and mood types to better understand the subtleties of examining suggestions in real communicative events (Çiftçi, 2015). In general, directness and indirectness in suggestions, like other speech acts, is related to the amount and degree of linguistic effort put into the utterance until we infer its meaning or illocutionary force. In imperatives, for instance, it is much easier to immediately derive the illocutionary force from the linguistic structure (e.g. *provide more information* or *include recent content*) whereas our understanding of a

hint as a suggestion is typically linked to the specific context where it is produced. Therefore, the mood types are related to the directness or indirectness of the illocutionary force depending on the linguistic choices to make suggestions.

Similarly, being intertwined with directness and indirectness, the identification of suggestions by mood types offers three major syntactic categories of imperatives, declaratives, and interrogatives, or the grammatical form of the verb carrying the illocutionary force as a suggestion (Çiftçi, 2015; Koike, 1994; Li, 2010). Although imperatives and interrogatives are structurally obvious, declaratives include a wide array of linguistic choices such as performatives (e.g., *I suggest* or *my suggestion is*), modals and semi-modals, *want/need* statements, *Let's*, formulaic utterances (e.g., *if I were you*), pseudo cleft (e.g., *What you need to do is*), extraposed to (e.g., *it is very easy to*), hints (e.g., *The problem is that you're not arguing*), and so on. For example, imperatives directly convey the meaning or illocutionary force of a suggestion, but interrogatives are by nature indirect forms. Additionally, deciding directness/indirectness in declarative forms of suggestions may not be as apparent as these two syntactic categories. That is, a performative utterance *I suggest* would be direct with a higher degree of imposition when compared with a hint under the very same category.

In a similar vein, Martínez-Flor (2005) provides an elaborated taxonomy of suggestions drawing on an underlying premise that various linguistic resources can be used to perform suggestions. Drawing on previous research on cross-cultural and interlanguage pragmatics, the proposed taxonomy of suggestion strategies is categorized into *direct*, *conventionalized*, and *indirect* forms. In *direct* suggestions, the speaker plainly states what she/he means, and these involve performative verbs (e.g., *I suggest* or *recommend*), a noun of suggestions (e.g., *My suggestion is*), imperatives (e.g., *Try taking another course*) and negative imperatives (e.g., *Don't take it*). As for *conventionalized* forms of suggestions, this group provides a wider range of strategies, such as interrogative forms, expressions of possibility/probability (e.g., *You could/may/might*), suggestions through *should* and *need*, and the conditional. The third group of suggestions is *indirect* strategies with impersonalized expressions (e.g. *A good idea would be ...*) and hints (e.g. *I've heard that ...*) in which the tangible intention of the speaker is not clearly stated. Such indirect forms do not demonstrate the suggestive force in the utterance but require the addressee to infer the proposed suggestion or action.

### 3. Method

The corpus for this study consists of 1000 reviews for a set of MOOC courses offered by *Coursera*. The data comes from a larger corpus of 73,921 reviews that was collected in December 2023 as a part of an institutionally funded research project using purposeful sampling strategies (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). MOOCs are digital learning platforms which have been around for at least a decade especially in business sector. *Coursera* as a leading xMOOC platform with over 97 million users offers more than 3000 courses, including 300+ certified programs through its strong global partnerships with universities to provide a wide variety of subject offerings (Wei and Taecharungroj, 2022). While compiling the larger corpus in 2023, four major subject areas on *Coursera* were included, such as arts and humanities, business, physical science and engineering, and health. The filtering options for *Coursera* user reviewers included rating categories from 1 to 5, most helpful or most recent, and all learners and completers. For this research project, all rating categories have been included with around 500-1000 reviews per course to keep a balanced amount of positive and negative comments as it is typically the case to see mostly 5-starred or 4-starred reviews on such digital platforms. For example, on *Coursera*, approximately 80 % of the reviews belonged to these two highest rating categories at the time of data extraction. Other filtering options were decided as 'most recent' and 'completers' as the recency and experience in all stages of the course by completing it were other criteria in sampling. Only the publicly available reviews on *Coursera* website were collected and kept without any information about the MOOC learners or reviewers.

As for the dataset of reviews in this study, almost equal number of reviews for each rating category were randomly selected and examined regardless of the subject area or course types. My assumption for including all rating categories was that reviews with higher rating might tend to involve lower instances of suggestions as this speech act typically require awareness of a problem or need by the speaker (Koike, 1994; Çiftçi, 2015). A total of 1000 reviews were approximately 32,745 words where the longest review consisted of 706 words in total. The data analysis of these reviews was done manually on an Excel sheet by reading through the reviews iteratively and cross-checking the codes in a comparative manner, which also ensured credibility or internal validity of data analysis. My approach, for instance, involved a manual analysis process, where I have systematically coded the data and added annotations for each code, specifying the relevant linguistic features and their associated pragmatic functions. Also, my interpretations were empirical based on the linguistic choices and features in the review data, and representative examples were presented along with the fine-grained linguistic analysis in this study. Both deductive and inductive data analysis procedures were implemented while identifying the suggestion head acts and supportive moves or strategies in the reviews. For deductive identification of head acts, I utilized comprehensive lists of semantic formulas in previous research (Çiftçi, 2015; Martínez-Flor, 2005) and compared my codes with suggestion strategies in these studies to further warrant credibility of my analysis. Once suggestion head acts were coded, a closer examination of surrounding context within the focal review discourse was employed for an inductive analysis of supporting moves, discourse-pragmatic features, and aspects of propositional content in each head act.

Finally, one of the dynamic aspects of using digital data for research purposes has been ethical considerations for more than a decade (Markham & Buchanan, 2012). Although it is not possible to obtain informed consent while using online data (Jin and Tay, 2025) and *Coursera* publishes reviews publicly allowing to extract them through API, I have been quite mindful of privacy and confidentiality of reviewers without keeping any specific information. Embracing the statements and ethical

guidelines by Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR) (Franzke et al., 2019), I have adopted a process-oriented approach, which requires a “reflection on own research practices and associated risks and is continuously discussed against the accumulated experience and ethical reflections of researchers in the field and existing studies carried out” (p.4). That is, it has been “a contextualized process of decision-making” that is not just a matter of initial periods of research design but a genuine practice of ethical literacy throughout the entire process (Tagg and Spilioti, 2022). Being exempted from the top-down procedures of the institutional review board has never prevented me to minimize harm and protect privacy of the users by only focusing on and keeping the textual data without any explicit identity information. Regarding the publicity of the data, such platforms ultimately make user reviews available to other users and the reviewers acknowledge that their posts will be public by agreeing to write a review for the apps they use. Finally, as stated earlier, our data does not involve any human subject but texts without any sensitive content about the reviewers.

#### 4. Findings

The data analysis indicates that 110 reviews include suggestion head acts with a total of 158 instances. Regarding the first research question, learners’ suggestions in *Coursera* reviews heavily rely on declaratives with the use of modality (N = 112) including past/present modals and semi-modals. The suggestions also involve performatives (N = 25) and imperatives in several instances (N = 21). As illustrated in examples 1 to 4, modals such as *should*, *could*, and *would* have been commonly used in present and past forms. In example 5, we see a very typical performative verb *recommend* that is often preferred in suggestion head acts. Finally, an imperative form with the verb *try to* is presented in example 6. Whereas directives, more specifically modals, contribute to indirectness in these suggestions by relatively mitigating the illocutionary force in the head acts, performatives and imperatives present more direct suggestive acts in *Coursera* reviews. These most frequent mood types and linguistic forms typically appear in the data as follows:

- 1) This **should not** be a application requirement to a school for any reason.<sup>2</sup>
- 2) The content **could have been** taught at a slower and understandable pace.
- 3) Such bugs **should be** resolved before going public with a course like this.
- 4) I **would have liked** to have heard less of telling stories and more focus on communication.
- 5) I **recommend** you do not pay for this course.
- 6) **Try to** make the MOOC little more interesting.

As for the second part of the first research question, suggestion head acts typically co-occur with other linguistic components, including conjunctions, conditional *if* clauses, and various stance verbs or expressions with specific pragmatic functions. The conjunctions *and* and *but* are the two repeatedly used particles in suggestion head acts (N = 26 and 13 respectively). In example 7 from a review of a communication skills course, the conjunction *and* connects two sentences with the same subject *the use of threats*, where the first sentence introduces a subjective opinion, and the second one offers an explicit suggestion with the negative form of modal *should*. It could also be stated that this first sentence appears to have a mitigating role by prefacing the suggestion after *and*. Similarly, *and* in example 8 from a review of project management course functions as a connector for the two different suggestion head acts in sequence (e.g., *I would suggest making video classes a bit longer ... and I would integrate more topics*).

- 7) In my opinion the use of threats is a last resort **and** should not be encouraged except in extreme circumstances.
- 8) I would suggest making video classes a bit longer with more technical knowledge **and** integrate more topics.

In the examples from reviews of courses on indigenous history and Korean language below, the use of *but* offers suggestions as contrasting information that somewhat diminishes the propositional content of the initial positive statements. In example 9, for instance, *but* serves to acknowledge the value of what is offered while simultaneously introducing an indirect suggestion (or a hint) by prefacing an expression of a personal preference for something more substantial or enhanced. Thus, the reviewer suggests that certain areas of the course (e.g., depth of content and expertise of speakers) could have been enhanced although the information provided is satisfactory. Likewise, example 10 starts with a positive statement about the course having a promising beginning, and then *but* introduces an unmet expectation, suggesting that *the course should have built up a meaningful conclusion and some real issues*. Finally, in example 11, we see a typical use of *if* clause (N = 18) embedded with a suggestion head act, where a specific condition or scenario involving absolute beginners to the [course name] is initially established to tailor a recommendation based on that condition mentioned earlier. The emphasis on *BEGINNER beginner* in the conditional clause demonstrates that the upcoming suggestion applies to those who are very new or completely unfamiliar with the course content, possibly lacking any foundational knowledge. The main clause where a suggestion is located implies that *trying to find some additional resources* would probably be beneficial.

<sup>2</sup> The original reviews are kept and presented as they are in the examples from the data including typos or any linguistic variations.

- 9) Lots of great information **but** I would have preferred more depth and more experienced guest speakers.  
 10) It was a good start to a very complex topic; **but** it should have built up to a meaningful conclusion and some real issues.  
 11) **If** you're a BEGINNER beginner to the Korean language & still want to do this course, I would highly recommend trying to find some additional resources.

Stance verbs or expressions (N = 20), such as *I think*, *I believe*, *I feel*, and *I wish*, appear to be other co-occurring linguistic and functional elements in my dataset of Coursera reviews, and thus perform several specific functions related to the explicit suggestions that follow. The examples 12 to 15 come from reviews of indigenous history and graphic design courses. In example 12, for example, the stance particle *I think* softens the following propositional content by framing it as an opinion rather than a directly stated suggestion about adding more quizzes to the course, which makes the suggestion head act more palatable and less forceful. Similarly, *I believe* in example 13 is used to assert the speaker's belief that *there should be more required assignments instead of the optional ones*. With a slightly stronger conviction when compared with *I think*, this stance expression introduces the suggestion head act by grounding it in the reviewer's value or belief system. The use of *I feel* in example 14 introduces an affective positioning, indicating that the suggestion to reduce peer reviews is framed by personal feelings or preference for the current situation of the peer review. Finally, *I wish* in example 15 expresses a desire or regret about something that is lacking in the course taken by the reviewer, specifically regarding *the composition of images and texts*. This stance verb is also used to present a suggestion for the course content and materials in a wistful tone.

- 12) **I think** it would be more beneficial if you could have more little quizzes along the way.  
 13) **I believe** there should be more required assignments instead of the optional ones.  
 14) **I feel** the peer review should not be there so much.  
 15) **I wish** it would've had more information about composition of images and texts.

To answer the second research question, I examined the supporting moves initiating or following suggestion head acts. The following Table 1 below indicates the number of reviews where each supporting move is observed out of 110 reviews in total. As can be seen, the most prevalent supporting move is Statement of a Problem, which is identified in 25 reviews. This is followed by Expressions of Feelings/Expectations in 11 reviews and Positive Sentiment in 10 reviews. The supporting moves such as Statement of a Reason/Justification (9 reviews), Personal Experience/Narration (8 reviews), and Negative Sentiment (8 reviews) also frequently accompany suggestions in Coursera reviews. Less common yet notable are the two supporting moves of Criticism/Warning and Comparison, appearing in 7 and 6 reviews, respectively. Finally, a range of additional supporting moves—including acknowledgments, opinions, facts, needs, or goals—occurs in 6 reviews.

**Table 1**  
Supporting moves for suggestion head acts.

Supporting Moves Initiating/Following Suggestion Head Acts	Number of Reviews
Statement of a problem	25
Expression of feelings/expectations	11
Positive sentiment	10
Statement of a reason/justification	9
Personal experience or narration	8
Negative sentiment	8
Criticism or warning	7
Comparison	6
Other (e.g., acknowledgement, opinion, fact, need, goal, etc.)	6

The statement of a problem, which serves as both an initiating and a following move in the examples below, showcases how this supporting move generally frames the subsequent or previous suggestion act. In example 16 from an indigenous history course review, for instance the reviewer highlights the absence of accessible contact links as a potential logistic or interface problem that directly impacts learner experience. This problem statement (*there are no links to contact Coursera to find out where this is or how to get it*) then leads into the suggestion act with a modal and performative verb (*I would recommend taking the course but without paying for a certificate*). Here, the problem, which is bluntly expressed as the absence of contact information, helps formulate the suggestion with a sense of caution and potentially signals dissatisfaction or frustration. The following move (*but without paying for a certificate*) of the suggestion head act reflects a conditional endorsement, emphasizing the course's value while simultaneously offering a plain warning for the additional purchase of certification.

- 16) [...] There are no links to contact Coursera to find out where this is or how to get it. **I would recommend taking the course** but without paying for a certificate [...].

The problem statement in example 17 below centers on the misalignment between the difficulty level of the course questions and the instructional language, as the reviewer explicitly notes in the utterance *many questions were difficult to answer because of the disconnect in language*. This problem is expressed as a follow-up statement of a concern for the suggestion act in the previous utterance (*the questions themselves can be improved to match the language provided in the course work and reading material*). In this case, the statement of a problem provides further confirmation and justification of the suggestion by pointing to a specific gap in course design related to language and materials in it. Both examples reveal how statement of a problem reinforces suggestions by legitimizing the need for change or proposed action.

- 17) [...] **The questions themselves can be improved to match the language provided in the course work and reading material**; many questions were difficult to answer because of the disconnect in language.

Expression of feelings/expectations in example 18 below serves as a foundation for the learner's suggestion that is previously presented in example 11 too. The expression of expectation (*I was expecting for a course*) and feelings (*quite stressful & frustrating*) offers an explicit mismatch between the learner's assumptions and the course content, which is also communicated to other prospective beginners through the following suggestion act. By making a boosted suggestion for beginners regarding additional resources (*I would highly recommend*), the learner once again acknowledges the course's limitations and provides a practical solution in the propositional content of the suggestion head act.

- 18) [...] I was expecting for a course teaching a language that uses a character-based alphabet [...] As an absolute beginner, this has made the course quite stressful & frustrating, [...] If you're a BEGINNER beginner to the Korean language & still want to do this course, **I would highly recommend trying to find some additional resources** [...]

Positive sentiment below (*It is truly the fundamentals, a base to start*) is used to establish a generally favorable view of the course content before the reviewer shifts to a suggestion. The choice to preface the subsequent suggestion head act with positive sentiment also mitigates or softens the imposition of negative stance in the propositional content regarding peer review.

- 19) It is truly the fundamentals, a base to start or explore graphic design. I feel **the peer review should not be there so much** [...]

Statement of a reason/justification can be evidently seen in example 20 below, which also showcases how such supporting moves are used in the surrounding context of learners' suggestions. In this example, the digital learner systematically outlines reasons for their dissatisfaction along with a detailed justification to frame overall negative positioning and evaluation in the entire review. By providing a sequential list of reasons, the reviewer also strengthens the credibility of their evaluation and situates the suggestion (*the course would be enhanced significantly by using videos*) within a logically constructed argument.

- 20) There are several reasons why I rated this course as being poor. First, the presentation style does not make use of the capabilities of the medium [...] **The course would be enhanced significantly by using videos** [...] My second reason is that the material is presented in a very superficial manner. [...]

Personal experience or narration of the learner in example 21 (*I just started the course (finished the first two modules) and [...] found myself re-reading the information*) is one of the discourse-level supporting moves and creates a sense of immediacy and relatability in the following review. By sharing their learning process, the Coursera learner sets the scene and contextualize the suggestion head act (*it would be more beneficial if you could have more little quizzes*) that communicates a potential solution derived directly from their personal interaction or genuine experience with the course.

- 21) I just started the course (finished the first two modules) and [...] Found myself re-reading the information and picking the best answer. Also I think **it would be more beneficial if you could have more little quizzes along the way** [...]

Negative sentiment as another supporting move for suggestions in reviews is typically enacted as seen in the two examples below. In example 22 from a graphic design course review, *super basic stuff* is a blunt negative evaluation that indexes the learner's unmet expectation regarding the density of the course content, or lack thereof. This move also functions as an initiation for the upcoming suggestion head act (*I think it could be condensed*), implying that the material could be streamlined. In example 23, negative sentiment is expressed with the Coursera learner's subjective evaluation and disalignment with the level of objectivity in the course, which also constitutes the subject of the subsequent suggestion of a necessary clarification right at the beginning of the course (*this should be made clear from the start*).

22) Super basic stuff. I think **it could be condensed**.

23) [...] This course is far from objective, and **this should be made clear from the start**[...]

Criticism and warning appear in the examples below with their idiosyncrasies as supporting moves for the focal suggestions in the reviews they are produced. In example 24, the learner first suggests removing optional assignments by using the common modal verb *should*, which is prefaced and mitigated by using the affective stance marker *I think*. Then, the reviewer ironically expresses a preference for professional feedback (*I wouldn't mind getting feedback*), subtly critiquing the course's structure (*if they are available*) despite the initial suggestion. In example 25 from a review of a food and health course, we first see a performative act where the reviewer does not recommend the class and the illocutionary force in this suggestion is softened up with modal verb *would* and adverb *personally* for a subjective opinion. Later, the reviewer uses an attention getter (Çiftçi and Vásquez, 2020) as a bold statement for a cautionary alert (*Beware!*), intensifying the tone of the subsequent warning statements as a supporting move for the preceding suggestion and warning prospective students about potential misconceptions in the course content. These explicit and direct warnings also establish a strong evaluative stance supporting the suggestion formerly made and influence the overall tone of the review(er) by presenting caution as a responsibility to future learners.

24) [...] and I think that **there should be no optional assignments in the class**. [...] I wouldn't mind getting feedback from a professional graphic designer though if they're available. [...]

25) [...] **I would personally not recommend this class** and [...] **Beware!** Medics are NOT health experts, they are disease experts! It is NOT the same thing!

Comparison, as the last specific category of supportive moves, operates as a basis for evaluating the course in the following example from a well-being course review. By positioning the course within the broader context of *Coursera's* offerings (*Like many of the Coursera courses I've taken*), the learner broadly highlights a perceived lack of quality in structural organization of the course. This comparison serves as a supporting move by prefacing the learner's suggestion for resolving *such bugs* prior to public release serves and thus frames the suggestion as part of a broader negative evaluation, aligning the learner's experience with generalized expectations of *Coursera* courses.

26) [...] Like many of the Coursera courses I've taken, things are disjointed and not well coordinated. **Such bugs should be resolved before going public with a course like this**.

These supporting moves for suggestions as discourse-level strategies demonstrate how *Coursera* learners use various linguistic and pragmatic moves to craft and situate their suggestions. Each supporting move serves to contextualize, justify, or emphasize learners' recommendations, highlighting their priorities and expectations for course improvement within the platform.

Finally, as for the third research question, the suggestion head acts have addressed multiple aspects of the courses taken by the reviewers. The content aspect seems to be the top one by being referred in 49 % of the total suggestion head acts (N = 76/155). This is followed by materials and techniques/activities with 21 %, assignment and grading/assessment with 15 %, and finally other aspects (e.g., payment, instructor, technical) with 13 % regarding the suggestion head acts (respectively N = 32/155, N = 23/155, and N = 20/155). The examples 27–31 from reviews of multiple courses showcase how suggestion head acts refer to these aspects in their propositional content.

27) [...] It was a good start to a very complex topic; but it should have built up to a meaningful conclusion and some real issues. **(content)**

28) [...] I would prefer more exercises and increased difficulty. **(techniques/activities + content)**

29) [...] The reading was sufficient for me—however I would have liked more challenging material [...] **(materials)**

30) [...] One final suggestion is that you would show the correct answer once you have gotten the results. [...] **(assessment and grading)**

## 5. Discussion and conclusion

This study has demonstrated that suggestions online in MOOC reviews, more specifically in the context of *Coursera*, are mostly constructed in the semantic form of declaratives involving typical use of modality in the suggestion head act (Çiftçi, 2019), which is to some extent followed by performative and imperative suggestions in reviews. These declarative and other forms in suggestions also co-occurred with certain linguistic particles offering a range of functions, such as mitigating, introducing suggestions in sequence, framing suggestions as contrasting information or unmet expectations, presenting a condition where the suggestion applies to a specific group of audience, softening the propositional content, asserting the learner's belief to introduce a suggestion, constructing affective positioning through feelings, desire, and regret. These findings imply that *Coursera* learners writing reviews prefer to stay mostly indirect and use a variety of suggestion strategies

with multiple functions while offering what to do and even how to do it regarding their subjective experiences, expectations from the MOOC course(s) they take, and evaluations based on their personal experiences.

Additionally, this present study has indicated that suggestions take place with a set of supporting moves in the discourse of *Coursera* reviews. These namely encompass statement of a problem, expression of feelings or expectations, positive sentiment, statement of a reason or justification, personal experience or narration, negative sentiment, criticism or warning, and lastly comparison. It is interesting that the most frequent supporting move is statement of a problem, which indicates a tendency of making suggestions when *Coursera* learners find something problematic and that they do express the problem explicitly. This also directly resonates with the operational definition of suggestions in previous research (Koike, 1994; Çiftçi, 2015). Finally, this study has also revealed that *Coursera* learners make suggestions on various aspects of the course they have taken and these mainly relate to content, materials and techniques/activities, assignments, assessment and grading. It appears that *Coursera* learners especially prioritize digital content they interact with while taking a course as this has been the focus of nearly the half of the suggestion head acts.

From a methodological perspective, this present study contributes to our understanding of suggestions and speech acts within a unique and emergent context. Adopting a discourse approach to the analysis of suggestions in MOOC reviews offers many possibilities of the link between form and function of a suggestion as a social act and how its meaning is situated in the broader context of a review as well. Unlike the overwhelming focus on taxonomy-based analysis in earlier research on suggestions (Martínez-Flor, 2005), this study showcases that suggestion head acts are complex in nature and consists of various discourse-pragmatic features. Regarding the first research question, suggestion head acts typically involve sequential, contrastive, conditional, and affective information along with the most frequent linguistic particles that are being used. Likewise, a discourse level analysis of suggestions allows us to go beyond the utterance level understanding and uncovers how supporting moves have also evidenced their multi-functionality while prefacing or following the suggestion head acts in the reviews. As indicated through second research question, such a multi-functionality includes, but is not limited to, framing the suggestion, offering further confirmation, justification or reinforcement, providing basis for a boosted suggestion, mitigating or softening, strengthening the credibility, expressing immediacy and relatability of a suggestion, implying subjectivity and disalignment, and indicating a preference, critique, warning, and comparison.

As for pedagogical implications, this present study introduces preliminary insights into the aspects of suggestions by analyzing their propositional content in digital learner reviews. These aspects reveal what areas of courses are thought to be improved or changed by *Coursera* learners. The content quality, as being the most frequently mentioned aspect in suggestion head acts in my dataset, seems to be fundamentally crucial to the *Coursera* learners. It is interesting to note that learners are usually explicit in what needs to be improved in such digital learning platforms and courses. Similarly, the aspect of materials and techniques/activities tend to appear in the propositional content of suggestions from the reviewers as either unmet expectations or areas to be improved for the prospective course offerings. Finally, suggestion head acts are also constructed on the aspects of assignment and grading/assessment, and slightly other aspects like payment, instructor, and technical issues. For instructional design purposes or pedagogical concerns, this analysis of aspects in the propositional content of suggestions are conducive to efficiency of online courses offered by digital learning platforms especially when considered that millions of people are now using such contexts with concrete expectations or purposes and paying for a quality learning experience.

It is important to articulate that this study is limited to the context of *Coursera* reviews that are publicly available for a set of courses and subject areas. A corpus of MOOC reviews involving various digital learning platforms can be examined in a comparative manner regarding the speech act of suggestions and how they co-occur with other discourse-pragmatic functions. As the analysis of co-occurring linguistic/functional elements and supporting moves of suggestions in this study indicates, such digital reviews are rich in language use. Thus, it seems imperative to investigate suggestions along with other speech acts or communicative acts and discourse strategies. This will allow us to better understand the subtleties of such an emerging digital genre as a type of evaluative feedback. Considering that speech act including suggestions are traditionally studied as separate entities, it would be meaningful to analyze discursive construction of online suggestions in relation to other discourse features as potential contribution to research in this strand. Additionally, this study has examined publicly available reviews as the main textual data source on the *Coursera* website without any information on the learners. Yet, it is highly crucial to highlight that MOOC users might have diverse backgrounds and expectations using different digital platforms. Therefore, prospective research on suggestions and other pragmatics-related features in discourse could be explored by also involving data set on specific learners or collecting background information on their profiles.

### **CRedit authorship contribution statement**

**Hatime Çiftçi:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Validation, Supervision, Software, Resources, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization.

### **Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest.

## Declaration of competing interest

I have nothing to declare.

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## Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

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