Let and *let's*[1]

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1.   Introduction

There are three uses of *let* that can be identified in imperative clauses. Consider a constructed example ambiguous between the three types:

(1)   Let us finish this race!

On the interpretation "Allow us to finish this race, will you?", (1) has *let* as a lexical verb (whose distribution is not limited to imperative clauses; cp. *He always lets us finish*). On the interpretation "Let's finish this race, shall we?" (1) features a special, grammaticalised use of *let* found only in imperatives where it is followed by addressee-inclusive *us* (normally contracted to *'s* except in formal styles). On the interpretation "I wish/hope that we may finish the race" we again have the special grammaticalised *let*, this time used with optative force, and more commonly followed by an NP with third person reference. Following (Huddleston and Pullum 2002:924-5) I shall refer to the constructions associated with the latter two interpretations as respectively 'first person inclusive *let*-imperative' and 'open *let*-imperative'.[2] This paper examines the syntactic and semantic properties of the two types of *let*-imperative, paying attention to how they differ from those of ordinary imperatives with lexical *let*, using data drawn from a collection of written and spoken English corpora totalling almost ten million words.[3]

Widely discrepant analyses have been applied to the *let* of *let*-imperatives. Some (Costa 1972; Ukaji 1978) have treated it as ordinary lexical *let*, an analysis which fails to explain not only the ambiguity of a sentence such as (1), but also such distinctive syntactic properties as the potential contractibility of *us* to *'s* (which is not permissible in ordinary imperatives). For others it is an auxiliary (Seppänen 1977; Tregidgo 1982; Potsdam 1998), an analysis which fails to explain the use of operator *do* in negatives such as *Don't let's fight*. For others (Quirk et al. 1985) it is an imperative marker, an analysis for which the accusative form of any pronominal NP following *let* is a potential embarrassment (but see Section 4 below for arguments that this NP is analysable as subject of the following verb).

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[2] The term '*let*-imperative' is applied by Clark (1993) and Potsdam (1998) to ordinary imperatives with lexical *let*.

[3] The written material comprised seven standard one million-word corpora: the Brown University Corpus ('Brown') and Freiburg Brown Corpus ('Frown') representing American English, the Lancaster-Oslo/Bergen Corpus ('LOB') and Freiburg LOB Corpus ('FLOB') for British English, the Australian Corpus of English ('ACE'), the Wellington Corpus of New Zealand English ('WC'), and the Kolhapur Corpus of Indian English ('Kol'). The spoken corpora used were the 500,000-word London-Lund Corpus of Spoken British English ('LLC') and Bergen Corpus of London Teenage Language ('COLT'), the one million-word Wellington Corpus of Spoken New Zealand English ('WSC'), and the 600,000 words of spoken texts from the Australian component of the International Corpus of English (ICE-AUS). All of these corpora are available on a CD-ROM distributed by the ICAME organisation <icame@hit.uib.no>, except for ICE-AUS. For kindly granting me access to ICE-AUS, held at Macquarie University, I wish to thank Pam Peters.

As Davies (1986:247) remarks, the source of much of this confusion is "a certain lack of correspondence between form and interpretation" resulting from the failure of syntactic change to keep pace with semantic change. Certainly, the process of grammaticalisation undergone by imperative *let* appears to have advanced further for some speakers than others. For those who produce sentences of the type in (2) and (3), the fact that the *'s* could not be replaced by *us* suggests that *let's* has been reanalysed as a single word, one functioning merely as an imperative marker or particle, with *you and me* as subject of *go* in (2) and *me* as subject of *sit* in (3).

(2)   "Soon as we send them on their way and make camp, **let's** you and me go for a walk down by the Snake - all by ourselves". [Brown N13, 2][4]

(3)   oh Elli look **let's** me sit opposite you [COLT]

Even more telling evidence for such a reanalysis is offered by sentences such as *Let's don't forget* (an example discussed in Quirk et al. 1985:830, who characterise it as "esp AmE"), insofar as *don't* cannot be used in the complement of a catenative verb, at least without a subject (Huddleston and Pullum 2002:935).

2.   First Person Inclusive *let*-imperatives

2.1   Addressee-inclusiveness
First person inclusive *let*-imperatives prototypically involve a proposal for shared action by the speaker and addressee(s), and in some cases by others as well. The speaker expresses commitment to a certain action and attempts to obtain the agreement of the addressee(s). It is this addressee-inclusiveness that clearly differentiates members of the present class from superficially similar ordinary imperatives with *us* as object of lexical *let*, as in (4), where the reference of *us* is exclusive of the addressee (the sense is "tell us"):

(4)   The same standard will apply with regard to other amendments. Therefore, **let** us know which are the amendments before the House. [Kol H20, 158]

The addressee-inclusive reference is often contextually reinforced, as in (5) (by the quantifier *all* and reciprocal pronoun *each other*):

(5)   The priest says: "**Let** us all offer each other the sign of peace". [FLOB K19, 134]

The corpora contained some non-prototypical cases where the reference was not inclusive of both speaker and addressee(s). In (6) the reference of *'s* is just to the addressee(s) (notice that *will you?* would be possible as a tag), while in (7) it is exclusive of the addressee(s).

(6)   "**Let's** go child! God will punish you." [FLOB K25, 168]

(7)   **let's** give you some more [LLC S2.7, 783]

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[4] The location of each example cited from the database is indicated in square brackets by means of three pieces of information: the corpus, the text category, and the line number (except for ACE, which has word rather than line numbers) in the written corpora/tone unit number in LLC. Unfortunately text category and line number information was not available for COLT or WSC.

In such cases there is a display of solidarity by the person in authority, with *let's* achieving a more 'democratic', less authoritarian, tone than would an ordinary second-person imperative. As Ervin-Tripp (1976:48) observes, the effect is to generate an implication of "pseudo-participation", thereby minimising the potentially face-threatening nature of the directive act.

2.2   Grammatical Properties
First person inclusive *let*-imperatives exhibit a number of distinctive grammatical properties.

2.2.1 *Us*-contraction
Whereas in ordinary imperatives with *let*, with *us* as object, the *us* cannot be contracted to *'s* - as in (4) above (**Let's know* ...) - in first person inclusives *us*-contraction is possible, and in fact usual. An overwhelming 96.9% of the 703 tokens in the spoken corpora were contracted, and a more modest 61.6% of the 593 tokens in the written corpora. It can be safely inferred from these figures that *let us* tends to be more formal than *let's*. In an example such as (8) *us*-contraction would have the effect of introducing a distractingly casual tone.

(8)   Socialism, I grant, has a definite place in our society. But **let** us not complain of the evils of capitalism by referring to a form that is not truly capitalistic. [Brown G22, 83]

2.2.2 Obligatory Subjectlessness
Whereas, as noted above, ordinary imperatives can have *you* as subject, *you*-insertion is not possible with first person inclusives (thus for example the insertion of *you* in (5) would result in ungrammaticality: **You let us all offer each other the sign of peace*).

2.2.3 Verbal Negation
A distinctive feature of first person inclusive *let*-imperatives is that they can be negated either with *do not/don't* as in (9), or with just *not* as in (10), without any scopal difference (whereas in ordinary lexical *let*-imperatives with *let* there is a semantic difference between these: *Don't let Ann go* versus *Let Ann not go*).

(9)   oh God don't **let's** go into that Ann [LLC S2.7, 645]

(10)   **Let's** not go all mopey. [FLOB K2, 12]

2.2.4 Interrogative Tags
The addressee-inclusiveness of *us/'s* in the present construction is reflected in the fact that, unlike ordinary imperatives which are normally tagged by *will you?* or *won't you?*, these are tagged by *shall we?* or *will we?* (there were no tokens with *will we?* in the corpora) as in (11):

(11)   So **let's** get to the point, shall we? [FLOB N29, 86]

2.3   Illocutionary Meaning
Finally, consider the illocutionary function of first person inclusives. Though they are often subsumed within the general class of directives (e.g. by Searle 1977:35), it is argued by de Rycker (1990:7) that they are "at best only marginal members of the directive class".

According to de Rycker they represent hybrid speech acts, "assertive directives", which involve not just directive force but also the assertive force of a suggestion. Whether or not we accept the notion of hybridity, it is certainly the case that first person inclusives are associated with a range of illocutionary forces. In addition to their use as collaborative suggestions for joint future action, they may operate (as we have already seen in the case of (6) and (7), and in (12) below) as thinly veiled directives with *let's* used as a mitigating expression to "sweeten" the threatening nature of the act (Wardhaugh 1985:168-9).

(12)   "**Let's** get on wi' t' game, then," Mick demanded.
        [ACE R13, 2678]

At the other extreme we may note cases which express little more than a wish that a particular outcome may be achieved, as in (13):

(13)   **Let's** hope we come to a safer place. [Brown N21, 58]

3.   Open *let*-imperatives

3.1   Reference of NP
The open sub-class of *let*-imperatives is sometimes referred to as "third person imperatives" (e.g. Tregidgo 1982), and it is certainly true that the most common type of reference is third person (accounting for 83.6% of tokens), as in (14) - (17).

(14)   **Let** them not be afraid to endure hardness, if such exists, and show a good example. [LOB B27, 114]

(15)   **Let** every policeman and park guard keep his eye on John and Jane Doe, lest one piece of bread be placed undetected and one bird survive. [Brown B19, 134]

(16)   Henceforward you are to be known as Joseph the Prince! **Let** cymbals sound and gongs strike! [Frown K25, 164]

(17)   But **let** it be clearly understood, the secret is inviolable. [ACE R02, 321]

However the corpus yielded a number of first person examples as well, as in (18) and (19).

(18)   "**let** me live the life of a libeller, and let the name of libeller   be engraven on my tomb!" [FLOB F30, 104]

(19)   The Lincoln and Jefferson memorials are rather bleak. (...) **Let** us, like the French, have outdoor cafes where we may relax, converse at leisure and enjoy the passing crowd. [Brown B17, 173]

It is even possible, according to Huddleston and Pullum (2002:925) to find examples with *you*, but the constructed example they provide is of somewhat marginal acceptability (*Since you did most of the work, let you receive the credit*) and my corpora yielded no examples of this type.

3.2   Grammatical Properties

3.2.1 Similarities to Ordinary Imperatives

In terms of its grammatical properties this class is less sharply distinguishable from ordinary imperatives with lexical *let* than are first person inclusives (whose property of *us*-contractibility clearly distinguishes them not only from ordinary imperatives, but also from open *let*-imperatives). Note the impossibility of *us*-contraction in the following open *let*-imperative:

(20)   if the government has money to give them, just **let** us have it in Scotland [LLC S11.5, 234]

Open *let*-imperative are similar to first person inclusives in a number of respects. They do not permit the insertion of *you* as subject (e.g. for (14) above: ?*You let them not be afraid*). They do not permit *will/won't you* as tag (e.g. ?*Let them not be afraid, won't you*). There is no scopal difference between negatives with *do not/don't* and those with *not* (*Let them not be afraid* is semantically equivalent to *Do not let them be afraid*, and (21) below is equivalent to *Let it not hurt*).

(21)   "Oh please don't **let** it hurt," she said in a low, trembling voice. [Frown L20, 137]

One archaic negation pattern found only with open *let*-imperatives involves positioning of the negative before rather than after the NP (*let* + NEG + NP ...), as in:

(22)   **Let** not a few misguided and disgruntled sections of society imagine that they can hold the rest of us law abiding citizens to ransom. [Kol A10, 640]

3.2.2 Stative VPs

One feature of open *let*-imperatives which differentiates them, relatively rather than absolutely, from both first person inclusives and ordinary imperatives is their readier tolerance of stative VPs. Stative VPs are generally possible with ordinary imperatives if an agentive construal is possible, as in:

(23)   Don't **let** it show that you're angry or that you're ruffled [WSC]

However such an agentive construal is not required in the case of open *let*-imperatives, as in:

(24)   Sometimes at night he prayed, "When I wake up tomorrow, **let** me remember my real name." [LOB N25, 57]

In view of this non-requirement of an agentive construal, it is not surprising that passive VPs occur more commonly in open *let*-imperatives than in the other two constructions, as in:

(25)   if they no longer minister to the needs of a continually evolving humanity, **let** them be swept away and relegated to the limbo of obsolescent and forgotten doctrines. [ACE D17, 3484]

3.3   Illocutionary Meaning

Central members of the optative class have an interpretation which clearly distinguishes them from the other classes. Here there is no direct appeal to some addressee(s) to comply with a directive; rather, the propositions expressed by open *let*-imperatives define a

situation or event which the speaker simply hopes for, presents as desirable, concedes to be advisable, etc. Open *let*-imperatives are often roughly paraphraseable by the modal *may* as used in wishes, especially in formulaic, archaic examples of the type in (26):

(26)   For those who put their trust in Him he still says every day again: "**Let** there be light"! [Brown D07, 127]

Alternatively, the force may be 'deontic-assertive' rather than optative, a paraphrase with *should* being more appropriate than one with *may*, as in (27) (where, as is often the case, the imperative clause occurs as the apodosis in a conditional construction):

(27)   If Congress wants to displace the states from areas which they have customarily occupied, **let** it do so knowingly and explicitly. [Brown J43, 112]

Open *let*-imperatives are commonly used when there is no specific addressee, as in (15) and (16), or when the addressee is not present in the context of situation, as in (28).

(28)   The rest of the town awoke to the thunderous crash and the great shout, as if with one voice, the men cried in righteous fury. "**Let** the Yank bastard fix that bloody lot for you!" and stumbled off to fall dead asleep in their beds.
       [ACE P15, 2896]

The addressee may furthermore be represented by an abstract noun - and thus an entity strictly incapable of actualising a potential situation - as in (29), or may even be left unexpressed via the selection of an agentless passive construction, as in (17) above:

(29)   If Ward is indeed innocent, **let** British justice at least have the decency and the mercy to allow her home for Christmas. [LOB B13, 177]

Not surprisingly, open *let*-imperatives are commonly found in 'interior monologue', or 'stream of consciousness' writing, where clearly the addressee cannot be present and the speaker can only represent the action as desirable (not demand that the addressee realise it), as in:

(30)   He passed the receptionist in the outer office, muttering, "I've got to go out for a little while". **Let** her call Crosson if she wanted to, **let** Crosson raise the roof or even call him, he didn't care. [Brown L13 64,64]

3.4 Semantic Indeterminacy
Open *let* is subject to a good deal of semantic indeterminacy. For example, when the following NP is *us* there may be indeterminacy with a first person inclusive interpretation, as in (31). Here the situation wished for by the speaker is one whose possible actualisation he has little control over, the reference of *us* is very general, and a paraphrase with *should* could be supplied. At the same time, however, the possibility of contracting *us* to *'s* (albeit with a concomitant decrease in formality) attests to the co-presence of the first person inclusive sense.

(31)   "**Let** us have a full inquiry into the cost of drugs and the pharmaceutical industry."
       [LOB A01, 216]

4.   Grammatical Analysis: Implications of Findings

What are the implications of our corpus-based findings for the grammatical analysis of the constructions under investigation? Consider firstly *let*-imperatives of the first person inclusive type. As already noted in Section 1 above, the continuing process of grammaticalisation that the *let* used in this construction is undergoing has given rise to divergent patterns in contemporary English. In order to particularise these divergent patterns, Huddleston and Pullum (2002: 934) distinguish two varieties: 'Dialect A' is the more conservative dialect which does not accept examples like (2) and (3); 'Dialect B' is the less conservative dialect which does accept such examples (though perhaps not all Dialect B users would accept (3) and not all would accept the *let's don't* negation pattern referred to in Section 1). In Dialect B, since it is not possible for *'s* to be replaced by *us*, *let's* is analysable as a single phonological and morphological unit, with the following NP functioning as the subject of the verb which follows that NP.

In both dialects, Huddleston and Pullum argue, *let* has diverged sufficiently from the ordinary verb *let* meaning "allow" for us to claim that it has been bleached of its propositional content and serves merely as a marker of illocutionary meaning. In their view, however, the dialects differ in their syntax: in the more conservative Dialect A, even though *let* is conceded to be partly fossilised in its syntax "there is no compelling reason to suggest that there has been a reanalysis of the syntactic structure. The data are compatible with an analysis where *let* is still a catenative verb." (p.935).

It may alternatively be argued that the data are compatible with an analysis where *let* has relinquished its status as a catenative verb in Dialect A as well. In ordinary imperatives the NP following *let* serves as its object, and the facts of negation suggest that we have a bi-clausal structure (consistent with the analysis of *let* as a catenative lexical verb). By contrast in first person inclusives it is no mere coincidence that there is no possibility of inserting *you* as subject NP before *let*, because the subject slot (namely, that following *let*) is already filled. That there is no understood *you* as subject as in ordinary imperatives is further confirmed by the impossibility of selecting *will/won't you?* as closed interrogative tag. By contrast, the selection of *shall/will we?* as tag suggests that the *us/'s* of first person inclusives, despite its accusative form, is analysable as subject of the following verb, rather than object of catenative *let* (insofar as the NP in interrogative tags cannot be an object: **Help us quit, will you/*we?*). Finally, if *let* were a catenative then it should be possible to negate just its infinitival complement. However, as we have seen, this is not the case: there is no scopal difference between the two negation patterns (*don't let's* and *let's not*).[5]

With the *let* of open *let*-imperatives there has also been a semantic bleaching: *let* serves merely as an illocutionary marker, rather than contributing any lexical content to the proposition. Again, however, we find that syntactic change has lagged behind semantic developments, resulting in a partially fossilised construction whose syntactic structure lends itself to alternative interpretations. Here the dissimilarities with ordinary imperatives with *let* that might incline us towards a reanalysis-interpretation are even fewer than in the case of first person inclusives. Open *let*-imperatives resemble first person inclusives in disallowing *you*-insertion and in the absence of any scopal distinction between the two negation patterns, but they do not permit interrogative tags of any type.

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[5] Rodney Huddleston (pc) argues, in defence of the position adopted in Huddleston and Pullum (2002) with respect to Dialect A, that: tag-selection is determined by semantic, or rather illocutionary compatibility rather than syntactic rule; lack of negative scope contrast is again a semantic matter; and obligatory omission of the subject reflects syntactic fossilisation, which does not in itself imply reanalysis.

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