Who wants in on this linguistic analysis?

Lane Fischer

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Who *wants in* on this linguistic analysis?

Lane Fischer¹*†

**Abstract**
This paper brings together previous research on the Midland English dialect region construction *want + [intransitive preposition]* heretofore referred to as the *wants in* phenomenon. I will build on past research of *wants in* and present its construction, background, sociolinguistic relevance and will then present further questions I have about the construction, my hypotheses on these questions, and results from my own intuitions as a speaker of the Midland dialect and a linguistic survey. With reference to a similar Midland construction, *need + [past participle]*, I ultimately propose that although these two constructions share many of the same syntactic restrictions, *wants in* is a separate construction that follows an alternative verb hierarchy.

**Keywords**
verb + intransitive preposition — Midland English — syntax

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1. **Introduction**

1.1 **Construction**

The *wants in* construction is exemplified by (1a), which can be seen as a counterpart of standard English (1b). Context is important in understanding what meaning this sentence is trying to convey. It is common for the *wants in* construction to be used in shorter, around four word, phrases in reference to a broader context that would be realized through one’s presence in a situation such as (1a). But, as we will see, this construction can be paired with additional, unreduced clauses to expand on contextual such as why the dog wants to go inside:

(1) a. The dog *wants in*.
   b. The dog *wants to come in*.

The first portion of this construction is a verb. Acceptable verbs used in *wants in* express a desire or requirement for an event to take place. The most commonly attested verbs in this

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¹Thank you to Raffaella Zanuttini, Chris Geissler, and Jim Wood for introducing me to the study of linguistics and the morphosyntactic feature *wants in*. With all of your help during the Grammatical Diversity in U.S. English course, I was able to learn about a feature of my own dialect that I would have otherwise overlooked. I would also like to thank Larry Horn and Oliver Shoulson, who also helped direct my research and composition of this paper through its revisions. I greatly appreciate all of your guidance and expertise!
construction are want, need, and like (Murray and Simon (2006); Benson (2009); Edelstein (2014)). Other verbs that express desire like wish or requirement such as must have not been found to function acceptably in this construction. The second portion of this construction is an intransitive preposition (Huddleston and Pullum 2002:287). Acceptable prepositions used in this construction express the direction or location in which the subject desires or requires to move. Examples of previously studied prepositions include in, out, off, on, up, down, etc. (Murray and Simon (2006); Benson (2009, 2012)).

1.2 Wants in and needs washed
Wants in follows a similar structure as the more widely researched construction needs washed. Both constructions use the same three verbs, expressing desire or requirement, followed by a single preposition or participle, expressing what precisely is wanted, needed, or liked. Examples of each verb used in both of these constructions are given in Table 1. Because these two constructions are similar, I will be using some of the research on needs washed to guide my analysis and construct my hypotheses of wants in.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>verb</th>
<th>verb + [intransitive preposition]</th>
<th>verb + [past participle]</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>want</td>
<td>The baby wants up.</td>
<td>The baby wants held.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>need</td>
<td>The dog needs out.</td>
<td>The dog needs washed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>like</td>
<td>The cat likes under: [a bed]</td>
<td>The cat likes petted.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Wants in and needs washed

1.3 Concrete versus abstract motion
Another aspect of the wants in construction to highlight is the difference between what Benson (2012) calls concrete and abstract motion. She describes concrete motion as something physical happening in the visible world, such as going somewhere—see (2a), where the cat needs to physically move. Abstract motion, she describes, is something metaphorical, not occurring in the physical world—see (2b), where the child does not need to be physically placed in the daycare, but rather on a roster of some form that appears to be full:

(2) a. The cat needs in. (Benson 2012:233)
    b. The daycare is full, and my child needs in. (Benson 2012:233)

In her study, Benson (2012) found that abstract motion examples were used more broadly across the United States, while concrete motion examples were more limited in appearance and were primarily found in and near the Midland region. As time moves forward, it appears that acceptability for this construction may spread further into bordering dialect regions.

2. Background

2.1 Midland English
The Midland is a region of eastern and central United States detailed in Figure 1. For years, many researchers believed the region to be a transition zone between Northern and Southern American

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1Another verb that is often acceptable in this construction is would love (Wood et al. 2020:172–184). For example: *After spending all day inside, the children would love out.*

2This result was later corroborated by an additional study by Reimink (2016).
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English dialects, but as we will see current researchers have begun to find features of the Midland Region that are not shared by northern or southern speakers, or have originated within the Midland region. Murray and Simon (2006) describe the verb wants in as a diagnostic feature of Midland English. A more recent study, however, found that wants in has begun to spread into the North and South (Benson 2009). Moreover, this construction with the verb need (instead of want) followed by an intransitive preposition, needs in, has shown a similar robustness in the Midland region, while spreading north and south (Benson 2012). In contrast, this construction with the verb like, followed by an intransitive preposition, likes in, has not been studied in as great detail as wants in and needs in, due to its general lack of documented use.

2.2 Scottish and Irish Influence
Many syntactic features of Midland English can be traced back to Scottish and Irish immigration into the region (Benson 2009, 2012). Figure 3 details which of the wants in and needs washed verbs have originated from Scots-Irish English. We can see that one example, needs in, is not found in Scots-Irish, but appears to have instead originated within the Midland region of the United States itself. Benson uses this information to argue that needs in is a feature constructed in the Midland with indirect influence from Scots-Irish English, confirming her hypothesis that the Midland region is not a transition between the North and South, but rather a dialect region of its own, with its own morphosyntactic features.

Figure 1. Midland Dialect Region. Source: Murray et al. (1996), adapted in Benson (2009).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>wants washed</th>
<th>needs washed</th>
<th>likes washed</th>
<th>wants in</th>
<th>needs in</th>
<th>likes in</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>United States ✓</td>
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<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canada ✓</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scotland ✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
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<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ireland ✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Primary Usage of Verbs
3. Sociolinguistics

3.1 Stigmatization
The *wants in* construction is used broadly across different social groups. It can be used in both formal and informal speech, though favoring more casual circumstances. It is used across all socioeconomic classes, genders, and age-groups (Benson 2009, 2012). For these reasons, particularly socioeconomic status, this construction is not stigmatized. Therefore, many people who use this feature are unaware that others may find it unacceptable. I myself was unaware that this feature was unacceptable for some individuals until I began this linguistic research.

4. Questions and Hypotheses
All of this research, along with my own intuitions as a speaker of this construction, has led me to ask several questions in order to better understand when and how *wants in* can be used in speech. I will be presenting these questions, along with my hypotheses in this section.

4.1 Purpose Clauses and Non-volitional Subject
The first question that arises concerns how many similarities *wants in* shares with *needs washed*. How do their syntactic properties compare? The two properties analyzed here are the construction’s ability to host purpose clauses and the subject’s ability to be nonvolitional—both of which are acceptable for the *needs washed* construction. I hypothesize that *wants in* and *needs washed* share both of these properties. I believe that these two constructions have a similar use (to express the desire, of either subject or speaker, an event to occur) and are constructed similarly (a verb expressing desire or necessity of an event + a preposition/participle describing the event that may transpire). Because these two linguistic features share this same blueprint for construction and express a similar message, I believe if one of those features, *needs washed*, can host purpose clauses and nonvolitional subject, the other feature, *wants in*, will host them as well.

4.2 Intransitive Prepositions
The second question that comes up concerns the acceptability of prepositions that may be used in the *wants in* construction. Can some prepositions be used more freely than others? I hypothesize that the more directional motion is associated with the preposition, the more acceptable it becomes. I have come to this conclusion based upon my own intuitions about *wants in* as well as reflection on the purpose of prepositions in the construction, which are to express either physical or metaphorical motion.

4.3 Verb Hierarchy
The third question also comes in reference to *needs washed*. (Edelstein 2014:246–251) proposed that needs washed follows the hierarchy shown in (3a).

(3) a. need > want > like Edelstein’s proposed *needs washed* hierarchy (2014)
    b. want > need > like my proposed *wants in* hierarchy

What this reveals is that speakers of this construction first have to accept *need* before they can accept *want* and must accept *want* and *need* before they can accept *like*. I hypothesize that the *wants in* construction does not follow this same hierarchy, but rather the hierarchy shown in (3b). I come to this conclusion based upon previous research. Most of the research on this construction
centers around the verb want. Therefore, I place it in the top position of the hierarchy. I place need in the second position also because it is a generally new construction that was not original in the Scots-Irish dialect, making it less acceptable than want. Lastly, I placed like in the final position of the hierarchy—following the research and conclusions produced in the Edelstein proposal.

5. Methodology

5.1 Personal Observations
For the first two questions I will be using my own intuitions as a speaker of Midland English to reach my conclusions. These hypotheses would be difficult to test in a short online survey. I also spoke with friends and members of my family to gauge their intuitions on the limits of this construction as well.

5.2 Linguistic Survey
For the final two questions, I put together a linguistic survey consisting of 15 test sentences, 15 pilot sentences, 15 control sentences, and an array of background questions. The respondents were asked to rank each sentence on a scale of 1–5, one being totally unacceptable, and five being totally acceptable. The full survey can be found in the appendix of this paper. With the test sentences, I aimed to answer the hierarchy question. I did this by using the same sentence, while only swapping the verb in the sentence as shown in (4):

(4)  
   a. Molly wants in, but the door is locked.  
   b. Molly needs in, but the door is locked.  
   c. Molly likes in, but the door is locked.

For the remaining questions in the survey, I used the pilot sentences to gather some additional information on other syntactic features characteristic of the Midland region. Finally, I used the control sentences to ensure those surveyed understood the scope of the survey and what was being asked of them. I put the survey together using Qualtrics and utilized social media, as well as family, friends, and peers to spread the survey so as to get a broad range of submissions.

6. Results and Observations

6.1 Purpose Clauses
The first syntactic property I will look at is the availability of purpose clauses. A purpose clause is a to-infinitive phrase that conveys the purpose of an action (Maher and Wood 2011). Examples of this use in the needs washed context are taken from the YGDP website and are shown in (5):

(5)  
   a. The new set still needs washed to kill germs.  
   b. Your brain needs fed to work out.  
   c. He wants cuddled to go to sleep.

After looking at these examples, I was able to construct similar sentences with the purpose clause that I, as well as family and friends, found acceptable. These examples are shown in (6):

(6)  
   a. The dog wants out to chase the rabbit.  
   b. Dad needs in to warm up.
c. The baby wants up to give you a kiss.

These examples make it clear that \textit{wants in} shares with \textit{needs washed} the ability to host a purpose clause.

\textbf{6.2 Non-volitional Subject}

The second syntactic property I analyze is the volitional subject. Volitional means acting according to one’s own desires or will. On the basis of the acceptability of sentences in (7), Edelstein (2014) concluded that the subject does not need to actively desire what is being portrayed in the sentence—even in the case of verbs \textit{want} and \textit{like}:

\begin{enumerate}
\item That doctor of hers wants reprimanded for missing that one!
\item All kids want told off from time to time.
\item [a particular plant . . .] is easy to grow, except that it ‘likes watered every day,’ adapted from (Murray and Simon 2002:41)
\end{enumerate}

The doctor probably doesn’t have a desire to be reprimanded, the kids probably don’t have the desire to be told off, and plants cannot have active human desires. Rather, this points to the general necessity for these events to occur. Using these same principles, I was able to construct the sentences in (8) with the \textit{wants in} construction that I, as well as at least some other speakers (there may be inter-speaker variation), find acceptable:

\begin{enumerate}
\item She must really want off since she’s breaking the rules. [a swing]
\item But when it gets cold out, the plants need in.
\end{enumerate}

The girl probably does not want off the swing, nor can plants desire to come inside. Again, these examples make it clear that \textit{wants in} also shares the ability to have a non-volitional subject, even in the cases of \textit{want} and \textit{like}. As mentioned above, these non-volitional situations convey necessity. In (8a), because the girl is breaking the rules, it is becoming necessary for her to get off the swing. In (8b), because the plants may suffer or die in the cold, it is necessary for them to be brought inside.

\textbf{6.3 Range of Available Prepositions}

To test the acceptability of prepositions, I consulted other speakers of this construction that I know personally. To test the prepositions, I came up with simple, skeleton phrases that we could then plug the prepositions into such as “He/She wants ____”, “The dog/cat needs ____”, “They like ____”, etc. If I and other speakers could then come up with a context in which this phrase could be acceptably used, then we considered the prepositions acceptable under the construction. I’ve placed these into the “Yes” category in Table 3. If the preposition was found unacceptable, it was placed in the “No” category. If the general consensus of the group was undetermined—some felt it might be acceptable, some felt it might not be acceptable—they were placed in the “Maybe” category. After this exercise, I conclude that, generally, prepositions that convey a more directional motion are more acceptable. This is to say that a subject often appears to have a starting position, from which it directionally moves to an ending position, for example, a dog being \textit{out} and wanting \textit{in} or a child being \textit{down} and wanting \textit{up}. This could also be applied to an abstract example of an individual wanting their child \textit{in} at a daycare as opposed to \textit{out}. An additional category of acceptable prepositions would include \textit{by}, \textit{through}, \textit{around}, and \textit{round}. Rather than describing the directional motion from a starting and ending position, these prepositions are describing spatial
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>Maybe</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>above, below, up, down, in, out, inside, outside, over, under, on, off, around, round, past, by, near, through, behind, across</td>
<td>between, opposite, beyond, along throughout, within, without, about, after, before, since</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3. Preposition Acceptability.

orientation with respect to a fixed object—such as a person one needs to squeeze by or a tunnel one needs to pass through. A further analysis could be done to determine if some speakers accept both directional and spatial prepositions, while others only accept directional prepositions within this construction—and whether a hierarchy exists between these two categories.

6.4 Verb Hierarchy
The linguistic survey I conducted received 67 responses, 49 of which I used in order to gain a better understanding of who uses this construction as well as the acceptability of the three verbs. I received submissions spanning 14 states with respondents’ ages ranging 18–75 years. To test my hypothesis on the verb hierarchy, I took an average of each sentence’s acceptability ratings according to the survey respondents. This data is detailed in Table 4: To further look at the orientation with respect to a fixed object—such as a person one needs to squeeze by or a tunnel one needs to pass through. A further analysis could be done to determine if some speakers accept both directional and spatial prepositions, while others only accept directional prepositions within this construction—and whether a hierarchy exists between these two categories.

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Table 4. Survey Results

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3Upon reflection, it may also be beneficial to test would like in place of like such as The dog is barking and would like out. This variation, while dissimilar in construction, is semantically more similar to the verbs want and need, and may illicit alternative findings.
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acceptability Rating</th>
<th>Verb</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4.17</td>
<td>want</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.93</td>
<td>need</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.01</td>
<td>like</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5. Verb Averages

(9) a. want > need > like  
    b. want > like > need

hypothesized hierarchy

hierarchy based on survey results

An explanation of this could build off of the reasoning for my own hypothesis. Because needs in is a relatively new construction (as discussed in section 2.2), its usage seems to be less frequent than like in the hierarchy. Another assessment of the data may also reveal that under some contexts, certain verbs are more acceptable than others. To determine if these acceptability ratings are more than just a result of random chance, a statistical experiment could be done by resampling the data, revealing if the average ratings are statistically significant. Along with this, a further look into individual respondent variation may also help in providing an explanation for the hierarchy found in this survey, as well as an explanation for the varied acceptability hierarchies within each set of test sentences.

7. Conclusions

In this paper, I discussed a range of properties of the wants in construction. I have also discussed how this construction is formed and where it is used. I used my own intuitions along with input from friends, family, and peers to find that wants in shares the syntactic properties of needs washed and establish which intransitive prepositions can be used in this construction. Finally, through a small-scale linguistic survey I was able to collect some preliminary data that points to a hierarchy that is similar, but distinct from the needs washed construction, indicating that wants in is a construction that stands on its own. To learn more about this morphosyntactic feature, a larger scale survey would need to be distributed in order to confirm the preliminary results of the hierarchy. In addition, further research could be done to collect additional data on the acceptability of prepositions. Finally, it would be interesting to explore what other syntactic properties characterize this construction and further differentiate its constraints from those of needs washed.

References


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