This study examines intra-lingual pragmatic variation in service encounters in two regions of US Midwest English (Indiana & Ohio). The framework of Variational Pragmatics (Barron & Schneider 2009; Schneider 2010) was adopted to examine intra-lingual pragmatic variation in these varieties with regard to the sequential structure of requests for service (actional [request for service] and interactional levels [request-response sequence]). Following previous research in service encounters in commercial settings (Aston 1988; Callahan 2009; Kerbrat-Orecchioni & Traverso 2008; Merritt 1976; Placencia 2008), this study focuses on the transactional dimension with regard to pragmalinguistic variation of the customer’s request for service and the clerk’s response. And although phonological and grammatical variation has been examined in Midwest Engishes (Ash 2006; Fogle 2008), little has been done at the pragmatic level in these regions. The present study contributes to the field of intra-lingual pragmatic variation by examining the structure of requests for service in two varieties of Midwest English.

The natural data for this study were audio-recorded in two regions of Midwest English, namely, Indiana (Bloomington) and Ohio (Cleveland) at the deli section of two supermarkets (20 hours [10 hours in each deli]). The 400 interactions (200 in each setting) were analyzed according to the request type (direct or conventional indirectness [substrategies]), internal modification (conditional, politeness forms, hedges) and the sequential placement of the request (Blum-Kulka, House, & Kasper 1989).

Results show similarities and differences in the realization of requests for service in each region. Both groups displayed pragmalinguistic variation in the use of nine request strategies (imperative, conventional indirectness, I want, I need, I’d like, I’ll take/get, how about, let me get, and elliptical or verbless requests). Although conventional indirectness was the most frequent strategy for a request for service in both regions (e.g. can I get...?), a higher degree of directness was noted in the Ohio data by means of ‘imperative’ and ‘I need’ requests. The requests in the Indiana data were frequently realized by means of ‘elliptical’ and ‘I’d like’ requests. Offers to taste product on the part of the clerk were more frequent in the Ohio data (e.g., do you want a slice?). Further, a higher degree of tentativeness in the requests for service (internal modification) predominated in the Indiana service encounters, while greeting sequences were more frequent in the Ohio data. These regional differences are discussed with regard to the socioeconomic levels in each region, politeness orientations, and the frequency of interaction in each setting.

Finally, the concept of the pragmatic variable (Cheshire 2005; Schneider 2010; Terkourafi 2011) will be addressed to examine variation at the pragmatic and discourse levels. Variation by gender in the context of service encounters will be discussed with regard to the presence and contributions of both the customer and the vendor.