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It's only Human…

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1. Introduction

Learner corpora have generally been subjected to two main types of study – error analysis, where 'mistakes' are marked up by category and then quantified, and comparative analysis, where the frequency of particular features is compared with the frequency of those features in native-speaker corpora. Like errors, such frequency differences are generally interpreted in negative terms, as is clear from the terms 'overuse' and 'underuse' used to describe them. The implication is that the learner should at all times attempt to conform to native-speaker norms, in relation both to individual occurrences (errors) and to general tendencies (frequencies).

In this paper I want to question this focus on native speaker norms in learner corpus analysis, since it ignores a range of factors which – from a teaching and learning perspective – are I think of equal if not greater importance. Since much learner discourse can be seen as successful in achieving its communicative aims, I want to argue that we need to approach learner corpora with other instruments than red ink, ceasing to evaluate difference in purely negative terms.

2. A Corpus analysis of error

Since we are talking about corpora, let me outline the terms of the problem by examining the verb which (etymologically) underlies the lemma *ERROR* in a native-speaker reference corpus, the BNC

XML edition (BNC-XML 2007). The verb lemma *ERR* is relatively rare in the BNC, occuring only 236 times overall. A few of these are clearly tagging mistakes – the CLAWS C5 tagger appears insufficiently versed in P.G. Wodehouse, idiosyncratic abbreviations, and acronyms:

(1) Bertie: Splendid! (Looks puzzled) Err, what is it Jeeves? (B38: 1653)

(2) Curr Errs (Mandatory Input/Display Field) (HWF: 11243)

(3) Emissions of carbon dioxide and nitrogen oxides from lorries can only be cut by reducing the demand for road freight and not just by improving their fuel consumption, according to the consultants Earth Resources Research (ERR). (J3H: 747)

After removing such spurious hits, along with a handful of misprints, we are left with 205 occurrences from 155 texts. Nearly half of these occurrences (89) come from written academic prose:

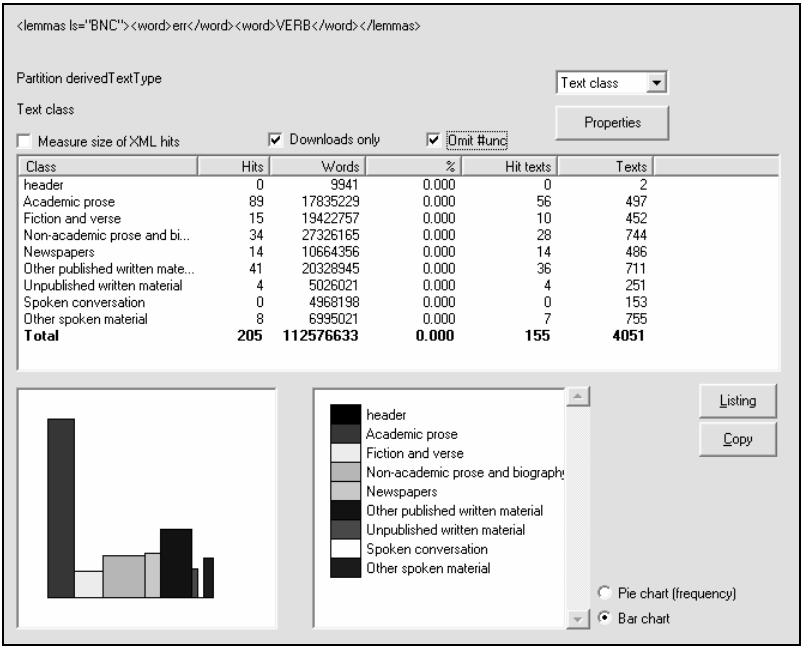

Figure 1. Distribution of ERR in the BNC.

Let us start by looking at these 89. The majority come from legal texts, where they concern appeals:

(4) the judge had erred in law in holding that the court had no jurisdiction to make any order under section 238 of the Act of 1986 against the bank (FD8: 99)

The collocation *ERR IN LAW* occurs 25 times, where those who err are judges, justices, courts and tribunals. A further 46 cases refer to judicial error where *IN LAW* is left implicit:

(5) the judge had erred in finding that the removal of the child by the mother was not wrongful within the meaning of the Convention on the Civil Aspects of International Child Abduction (FDL: 36)

The dominant use in academic prose (71/89) is thus in reference to errors by judges. Among the remaining 18 cases we find references to errors by experts in other fields:

(6) In the light of this fact it seems possible to suggest that those authors who subscribe to the former view do so because in later times it would have been only in the rarest of circumstances that one would have held the kadilik after the kazaskerlik. It seems likely, in short, that they have erred through applying principles which are valid for a later period but were not yet operative in the time of Molla Husrev. (H7S: 7-8)

(7) Adam is known to be broadly correct in stating that Harald exercised some kind of power in Norway, but obviously errs in having Hiring rule all England. (HXX: 137)

(8) It seems that Beccaria did not often err, in his balancing of contradictory requirements, in favour of the rights of the individual against the achievement of effective deterrence via symbolic representation. (CRX: 99)

(9) Editors, like scientists, are human and do err. (FT3: 1598)

Overall, those who err are experts – the judges, not the judged. In this sense, to err would seem to be a prerogative not of language learners, but rather of those language teachers and corpus analysts who judge their work!

In the academic prose examples we also find a second use of *ERR*, in collocation with *SIDE* – '*ERR* on the side of subst' and '*ERR* on the adj side':

(10) The therapist should always err on the side of caution; the hypotheses set up are merely shrewd guesses. (EB1: 163)

(11) We should err on the side of restraint, rather than of excess. (GVJ: 570)

(12) Television companies may prefer to err on the safe side rather than to put their profits at risk by incurring sanctions of this order. (J78:401)

What is interesting about this use is the collocates of *ERR – CAUTION/THE CAUTIOUS SIDE, SAFETY/THE SAFE SIDE, GENEROSITY/THE GENEROUS SIDE*. When used with *SIDE*, *ERR* appears to have a positive semantic prosody (in Louw's terms: 1993) – to err in this sense is a sensible or praiseworthy strategy:

(13) In general, wherever the officer believes a case to be one which may come to his supervisor's knowledge, it is appropriate to err on the side of caution, to 'go by the book' and protect himself from criticism. (FA1: 1627)

Enough to remind us that learner errors may have a salutary strategic basis!

If we turn to non-academic and miscellaneous published writing, where there are 75 occurrences of *ERR*, we find a not dissimilar picture to that in academic prose. In addition, however, we also find a religious or moral sense, which has heavily negative overtones:

(14) It was a question that troubled Saint Augustine: 'Whence is evil? Why then doth the soul err which God created?' (ACA: 266)

(15) the words of the Anglican matins are made to allude heavily to Grimes's troubles at almost every point: "we have erred and strayed from thy ways" just as Ellen notices the tear in the apprentice's coat (J55: 381)

It is this moral condemnation which seems to have transferred itself to the erring learner in learner corpus analysis. Yet the corpus also reminds us that a learner-centred approach should not

morally condemn the one who errs, nor indeed the procedure which generates the errors:

(16) there exists in man's nature an undying capacity to break through the barriers of error, and to seek the road to truth' (*Pacem in Terris* 158). This leads to the distinction between the error (always to be rejected) and the one who errs (always to be respected), and the idea that even 'erroneous' systems can have 'good and commendable elements' (159). (CRK: 637)

Should we not then seek out the "good and commendable elements" in erroneous language use?

3. From *ERR* to ELF: an historical digression

My appeal for a different approach to learner error is not just etymological. I already hear voices protesting that a corpus-based approach cannot assume that *ERROR* has the same uses and meanings as *ERR* (though see Williams' theory of dynamic resonance: Williams 2005). The point I want to make is that in the study of learner error we have in our turn erred – as Pit Corder observed nearly forty years ago:

> I suggest it is misleading to refer to the idiosyncratic sentences of the second language learner as deviant: I also suggest that it is undesirable to call them erroneous as it is to call the sentences of a child erroneous, because it implies wilful or inadvertent breach of rules which, in some sense, ought to be known. (Corder 1971: 18)

Corder's work was seminal in the subsequent development of interlanguage studies. These focussed on the entire production of learners, not just on their errors. An interlanguage was seen as a systematic language variety to be analysed in its own right and with its own dignity, and not just as a collection of unfortunate deviations from native-speaker production. The attitude to learner data which Corder espoused was essentially a neutral one, stressing that the learner's production should not be judged negatively just because it is different. The rise of communicative approaches to language teaching gave a further boost to this change in attitude: it saw a shift in focus from linguistic systems of usage to more pragmatic perspectives of use – how learners do things with words using the

foreign language – and began to examine the strategies they (and their interlocutors) adopt to achieve goals of communication and of comity, notwithstanding their limited shared linguistic resources (Aston 1988).

Such a viewpoint provides a focus on success in learner discourse, not merely on failure. It allows us to see error as potentially strategic. And even though much of the literature on interlanguage pragmatics looked at misunderstandings and "communication failure", it also highlighted the extent to which learners and their interlocutors can successfully avoid and overcome such failures, by adopting. strategies which are often different from those employed by native speakers. Thus in a survey of this literature, Kasper noted the tendency for learners "to use more transparent, complex, explicit and longer utterances than NS in comparable contexts, and to favour literal over non-literal interpretations" (1997: 350) – in other words, to err on the side of clarity. I recognise this tendency when I write in Italian, where I tend to be more verbose than I am in English, or than an Italian native speaker might be. It's a strategy I consciously adopt to make sure I am understood – erring on the side of comprehensibility at the price of being over-explicit, over-literal, and over-repetitive. But at the same time I try to throw in the odd joke to show I am aware of what I am doing (non-native speakers frequently treat their non-nativeness as an interactional resource in this way, see Aston 1993; Park 2007).

This perspective is not dissimilar from ones in recent ELF (English as a Lingua Franca) studies:

> Some tend to approach the description of ELF data more through the lens of familiar ENL forms, essentially asking, "How do ELF speakers differ from ENL speakers?" [...] Others conceive of ELF differently ... essentially asking "How do ELF speakers communicate? What seems important/useful to them?" (Seidlhofer *et al.* 2006: 10)

As in interlanguage studies, in other words, we find approaches which focus on the formal characteristics of the linguistic system and its differences from the native-speaker (ENL) system, alongside approaches which focus on its functional characteristics – how learners and ELF users do things with words, and how these differ from native-speaker uses. These differences are not formulated as under/overuse with respect to ENL norms. Rather they are seen as

due to differences in usage (interlanguages and ELF are seen as distinct linguistic varieties in their own right), and to differences in the use made of those systems by successful users (ENL and ELF speakers employ distinctive strategies).

What does this mean for the analysis of learner corpora? It implies that we should not just mark up errors, but also communicative successes – the things we put big ticks against when marking learner essays, rather than underlining or crossing out. Similarly, we should be prepared to view differences in frequency from native-speaker discourse as potentially positive factors. While it is a perfectly valid research exercise to compare native and non-native discourse for the purpose of establishing recurrent differences, we need to do so without assuming that the native speaker constitutes a communicative ideal with respect to which non-native performance should be judged. Thus we should jettison such terms as 'error', 'underuse' and 'overuse', which are far too value-laden (Leech 1998).

Let us take some instances from the literature. Cock *et al*. (1998) found that in speech learners used far fewer 'vagueness tags', such as *AND SO ON*, than native speakers did. Is this relative "underuse" necessarily a bad thing? Vagueness would hardly seem a merit in terms of Grice's maxims (1967) – though it may be one from perspectives of politeness and interaction management. In another study, Martelli (2007) notes how, in comparison with native speaker data, there would appear to be

> a tendency among learners to produce fewer collocations than native speakers and to overuse a small number of collocations, especially if these combinations are very frequent in English or similar in structure to collocational patterns in the L1. (Martelli 2007: 36)

But can we be sure that learners would necessarily do better in communicative terms by producing more numerous and varied collocations, any more than we can be sure they would do better to use more 'vagueness tags'? In his discussion of a study of lexical density by Ringbom (1998), Cobb (2003) makes a very similar point:

> It is plausible that repetition of high frequency items and failure to nuance common notions may well account for the sense of vagueness that native speakers find in advanced learner writing. Admittedly, the evidence is merely correlational: there is vagueness,

> and there is overuse of high frequency lexis, but no causal connection is actually established. The next step in the research agenda is presumably experimental hypothesis testing. Here, for example, Ringbom might have gone on to empirically test teachers' vagueness ratings against learner texts of varying lexical density [...] (Cobb 2003: 400)

Cobb is here calling for the use of subjective ratings by teachers of the communicative effectiveness of the discourse. And if what is at issue is communicative success, should we really assume that native-speaker student essays, such as those used for comparison in the ICLE[1] project, constitute a model to imitate? The error in comparing non-native and native speaker production lies in assuming that the latter is intrinsically better, so that any qualitative or quantitative difference is by definition to be evaluated negatively.

We can only overcome this problem if we evaluate success as well as failure – trying to identify what is effective and right, as well as what is ineffective and wrong. Our teaching experience should surely tell us that focussing solely on error will encourage students to adopt avoidance strategies, and discourage them from taking risks – hardly a good context for learning. Our analyses of learner discourses should show how and where they work, not just how they don't: and what is right is what works in that context, regardless of whether or not it conforms to typical native-speaker performance.

If I may be excused a further comparison *en passant*, I believe we can see a similar difficulty in the area of translation studies. It has been claimed that translations into a given language are systematically different along a number of quantifiable parameters from texts written directly in that language (Baker 1993). As with learner corpora, evaluation is usually implied – the assumption being that translations into a language should resemble original texts in that language, and are to be judged negatively insofar as they differ from them. But again, this assumes that all original texts are perfect, which they clearly are not. If we turn for a moment to consider translation as a real-world process, we can immediately see that it is mainly a matter of editing, with the aim of – if anything – bettering the communicative effectiveness of the original text. If by

[1] International Corpus of Learner English.

any chance a translator takes on the text I have produced here, I sincerely hope that they will make it communicatively more rather than less effective than the original, reducing its vagueness, repetitiveness and general lack of argumentative clarity. And I will only judge it a good translation if they succeed in doing so!

4. A Possible moral for learner corpora

To sum up, what is missing in most studies of learner corpora is an evaluation of language use – how pragmatically effective is this text as discourse? Most teachers would, I think, prefer an interesting essay which argues a point in an effective manner, to a mundane one which is free of formal errors. The computer, of course, cannot make such judgments reliably (as users of style-checkers know to their cost). But humans can, and do. I would like to see learner corpora which, as well as marking up orthographic, lexicogrammatical, collocational and stylistic errors in the text, also included metadata regarding the communicative and comitive effectiveness of the discourse – its interest, insightfulness, clarity, coherence, reader-friendliness, seductiveness/annoyingness – along with suggestions for its improvement. Unlike an error-based approach, such reader reactions, being subjective, require analyses of a qualitative nature:

> In the first case, the focus is more on a (quantitative) analysis of forms, whereas [in] the second, it is more on a (qualitative) understanding of processes – allowing, of course, for any amount of gradation and interaction between the two. (Seidlhofer et al 2006: 10)

To arrive at a more quantitative understanding of processes, we will require multiple readers, multiple comments, along the lines suggested by Cobb (2003).

To put it another way. Computer programmes may be able to analyse the formal properties of text,[2] but they do not realise that

[2] Computers can identify much non-standard spelling, some non-standard grammar, and they can count such features as lexical and collocational frequencies, lexical density, sentence and paragraph length. There is little else: even reliable part-of-speech taggers have yet to be developed for learner and ELF corpora. And all these numbers are uninterpretable for significance without an adequate analysis of their variability and distribution in large numbers and varieties of texts.

text as discourse. They do not reproduce the step-by-step interactive negotiation which the reader engages in. Unlike computational analyses, reader's reactions often cannot be matched precisely to particular segments of the text. They involve a different kind of scope – referred not to a static, clearly-identified piece of the text, but to the reader's experience up-to-now in realising that text as discourse, in an interaction which may be smooth or laboured, enjoyable or frustrating. The reader is in the first place a participant in the discourse process.

In the second place, however, the critical reader is also an observer of that process, concerned to establish how her/his reactions are brought about, how communicative success is achieved and why communicative failure occurs. This is not always easy: as an observer, the reader has to make hypotheses as to the writer's communicative intent, in illocutionary and perlocutionary terms, in order to evaluate the discourse process as strategic action. Corder (1971) suggested that translation of the learner text into the source language might help provide contextual information to infer the interlanguage user's intentions. Others have suggested that we should interview the learner in order to understand what was meant and hence to evaluate the strategies employed (MatteBon 2007).

5. Conclusion

I want to thank Micia Prat Zagrebelsky for two brief discussions which prompted me to put pen to paper on these matters (or at any rate finger to keyboard) – and to add that responsability for the limited results here is wholly mine. It has not been my aim to propose a formal schema for marking up and analysing learner corpora, but simply to suggest directions in which I feel we should be moving. Currently, I would argue, we are looking at a tiny (and biased) subset of what we ought to be looking at. We ought to be engaging in and looking at discourse, not just text, and we ought to be looking at success, not just at failure. This implies, I have tried to suggest, a rather different approach to difference and to error – as a final glance at *ERR* in the BNC may serve to remind us:

(17) 'Anybody can make a mistake. To err, it's only human. I can forgive them for that. (AM4: 597-9)

As well as being human, to err can also be a good idea in learning terms:

(18) Err towards brevity: you want to leave people wanting more, so that they ask questions.(CEF: 2329)

Consequently, as judges of learners' performance, we need to start taking a more forgiving approach:

(19) The next day was the same. Exactly the same. Except that this time the note said, 'To forgive, divine…' (H8S: 403-5)

In approaching learner corpora, adopting a more forgiving approach may also help us divine means of analysis which cast greater light on that extraordinary phenomenon of the successful foreign language learner and user. As judges of the learner's performance we will err less by doing so.

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