

Corpus as a Tool of Objective Researching and Teaching Business English

Introduction

The development of corpus linguistics – the study and analysis of data obtained from a corpus (a large collection of machine-readable texts) – and its impact on the language study is obvious. No research is done nowadays without a corpus or its techniques. And in pedagogy we cannot overlook the opportunities it can provide for teaching a foreign language.

Pedagogical Approaches

Using a corpus enables teachers of languages to employ several pedagogical approaches concurrently. From the point of view of **personality orientation** we can speak of the *Humanistic approach* which has shifted the focus of attention from the personality of the teacher to that of the student. The student is not being taught by the teacher any more but is pursuing an active search and is learning to find the new by themselves.

From the point of view of the principal mode of reasoning (**cognitive orientation**) of the two approaches conventionally distinguished – the *Deductive* and the *Inductive* – the former has traditionally been dominant in teaching foreign languages which presupposes the teacher's explaining the rule and its later controlled practice, i.e. the movement of knowledge from general statements to particular instances, from the form to the usage. While the inductive approach, conversely, suggests the movement from the functioning of this or that language feature in various contexts to the understanding of its meaning and form.

The inductive approach resulted in the emergence of the *Conscious raising approach* (CRA) which forms the basis of the *Data-driven learning* (DDL) and *Computer assisted language learning* (CALL) where the language databases can be viewed as **learning materials** and computers and software as **means (tools) of learning**.

The main objective of the above approach is to teach a student to retrieve the relevant linguistic information on the language usage from the available authentic

materials. As a rule the students work on their own in computer labs using special software and do the analysis of the particular language features they are interested in. This allows the students to learn how to learn, to act as researcher, and to solve various problems connected with understanding various language forms.

Taking into account the fact that for many students it is not uncommon to be more confident with computers than their language teachers are, it makes them feel ‘peer’ with the teacher thus breaking the conventional ‘teacher-student’ hierarchy.

Business English Texts and their Limitations

Teaching a foreign language should above all pursue practical goals. Among them are first of all students’ acquisition of particular skills which they could later apply in their practical work. Unfortunately we often observe the lack of balance in favour of receptive skills (reading for written speech and listening for oral speech) at the sacrifice of productive skills – producing oral or written utterances appropriate for this or that professional setting. This places great emphasis on appropriate authentic materials that reflect the language that native speakers use when they communicate. These are the materials that can help the students make their speech idiomatic, i.e. approximating that of native speakers (1). For the teachers who are non-native speakers of English this idiomatic property (‘idiomaticity’) has always been a problem.

Here we are totally dependent on the intuition of the native speakers of English. This intuition provides the baseline for developing the texts in textbooks, examples in reference books and materials, exams, and other materials. But sometimes the data they contain are contradictory or simply not available when needed. Besides, linguists’ intuitions about language use may be wrong (2).

Empirical analyses of representative corpora provide a much more solid foundation for descriptions of language use, and the results of these are often surprising to TESL professionals.

Many contemporary Business English textbooks are corpus-based but normally it is a corpus of business articles from newspapers, journals and the Internet sites. They are all very useful but what skills do they teach learners of English? Reading

and writing business articles? Business English having a complex and heterogeneous nature is not confined to the language of business articles. The emphasis should be put on business communication skills such as telephoning, business correspondence, business meeting, presentations, negotiating, etc. Most corpus-based Business English textbooks use the corpus data only as a bank of illustrations in the description of language features while in exercises sections they provide texts representing telephone conversations, emails, job interviews, etc. which do not employ corpus data. It would seem more logical, however, to rely on an appropriate corpus representing a particular skill of Business Communication.

The VOBEC Corpus of Business Correspondence

In October 2004 inspired by visiting the English Language Institute of the University of Michigan and acquaintance with Corpus Linguistics they are successfully doing, I decided to start corpus linguistics in our university for which we created a Corpus team at the Department of Linguistics and Intercultural Communication consisting of senior graduate students. The final goal was to make up a corpus of business English correspondence which could be used for researching and teaching/learning this variety of Business English.

Collecting authentic (real) business letters is a time consuming task so to save time parallel to it we started adding the corpus with ready-made authentic published materials – i.e. samples of business letters from reference books written by native speakers (usually business professionals) and addressed for English-speaking business people. We deliberately avoided textbooks and manuals on Business English as too simplified for teaching purposes and thus not completely ‘authentic’. The corpus was called VOBEC (Volga Business English Correspondence Corpus). By September 2008 the corpus had acquired 1,382 texts represented by 152,779 running (8,928 distinct words).

Students’ Corpus-Based Linguistic Analyses

Let us look at a corpus-based lexical analysis directed towards means of expressing thanks in business letters. How can we thank somebody? The obvious answer might be the verb ‘to thank’ and its derivations – the noun ‘thank’ in the

plural in different collocations (e.g. *thank you (very much)*, *thanks (a lot)*, *I am thankful*, etc.), as well as the adjective ‘grateful’. The corpus gives the following distribution of different means of expressing thanks:

- thank / thankful – 342 instances,
- appreciate (appreciation) – 28,
- grateful – 13.

We notice a reasonably frequent (28) use of the verb ‘to appreciate’ and its derivative noun ‘appreciation’. If we consult widely-used authentic dictionaries, we would see that they place the meaning of thanks at the periphery after such meanings as ‘fully realize the true value or the good qualities of something’.

If we turn to the Russian-English Dictionary, we are not going to find the meaning of thanks neither in the entry of *blagodarit/blagodarnost* (‘to thank’, ‘gratitude’) nor in the entry *spasibo* (‘thank you’).

Now let us look at VOBEC and see how the verb ‘to appreciate’ is used in business correspondence. The list of concordance for the verb ‘to appreciate’ and the noun ‘appreciation’ shows the following three meanings:

- request – 44 instances (51.8%),
- thanks – 28 (32.9%),
- high opinion of something – 13 (15.3%).

The most frequent is the meaning of request. Of all the dictionaries mentioned above this meaning is given only in one.

The subject used with the verb ‘appreciate’ as the predicate is exclusively the personal pronoun of the first person (singular or plural):

- *I greatly appreciate your patience and understanding in this matter.*

The form ‘appreciate’ (the plain stem of the verb without suffix) is used in the following forms and constructions:

1. Present Simple:

- *We appreciate your interest and thank you for writing to us.*

2. Will/shall + appreciate:

- *I will appreciate your response at your earliest convenience.*

3. Would/should + appreciate:

- *I would appreciate a prompt reply quoting trade prices.*

For Present Simple the most frequent is the meaning of thanks while for the other forms it is that of request.

The form of the Past Participle (appreciated) is represented exclusively by the passive voice. The Present Simple form is used to express thanks and *will/would* forms – to express request:

- *A prompt reply would be appreciated.*

Most often people express their thanks for the help they received or for the time and efforts spent by the recipient:

- *We appreciate your help in setting this up.*

At the same time the most frequent request is for the prompt reply:

- *I will appreciate your response at your earliest convenience.*

When it comes to the grammar of Business English I have often heard from the specialist in Business Communication that grammar is not important since errors do not hinder understanding and thus the efficiency of communication. Here we come to observe the traditional view on grammar as on a set of rules (3). However, idiomacticity is not confined to lexis and phraseology, it covers grammar as well. A grammatically correct construction may sound inappropriate or impolite (and therefore be adverse for the successful business communication) while an idiomatic structure (even containing a minor error) will not affect the efficiency of business communication. Ideally, of course, idiomacticity and accuracy should go hand in hand.

In 2007 I was following with great interest a BESIG email discussion on the use of the modal ‘must’. Most participants of the discussion agreed that nowadays ‘must’ has been replaced by ‘have to’. I was very much surprised by the verdict. It was hard to believe that a non-lexical verb of Germanic origin which has been existing in English for several centuries could just drop out of use. We decided to see how things are going on in our corpus.

13 modal verbs presented in the corpus occur 1916 times (2.38% of all current words). The most frequent is ‘will’ (625 instances, 32.6%). ‘Must’ occurs 37 times

(1.93%) which is relatively few in the total amount of modal verbs yet more than ‘have to’ (22 and 1.15%, respectively).

The corpus shows a variety of meanings for ‘must’:

- probability (5)
- instructions (4)
- conditions of a contract or agreement (5)
- obligation (23):

In the meaning of obligation ‘must’ is usually used with the first person pronouns (singular and plural). These are the letters which are usually unpleasant for the addressee (bad news letters, warnings, etc.) where the author wants to emphasize that he/she is forced to do something. The most frequent clusters: *we must ask you to... and we must ask for ...*:

For that reason, we must ask for replacement of this entire collection.

The verbs used after ‘I/We must...’: *request, remind, decline, stress, press, take steps*:

If you cannot do so, then I must regretfully decline your offer as it stands.

Conclusion

To summarise it can be claimed that corpus techniques make it possible for students to carry out unguided research of various language features. At the same time for the teachers a dedicated corpus can provide a valuable source of training materials.

Non-native speakers become more independent of the intuition of the native speakers of English and are able to draw substantiated conclusions about the usage of language. All this makes Corpus Linguistics an objective tool of teaching and researching Business English.

NOTES

(1) *idiomatic* – typical of the natural speech of a person speaking in their first language. See *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* (1992).

- (2) According to M.A.K.Halliday (1985), *what people actually say is very different from what they think they say, and even more different from what they think they ought to say.*
- (3) Note that the word ‘grammatical’ (speaking of a sentence) means ‘well-formed, constructed in accordance with all the grammatical rules of the language’.

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