

34 A corpus-based study of the use of pronouns in the asynchronous discussion forums in the online intercultural exchange MexCo

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Abstract

This paper reports on research carried out on data extracted from *MexCo* (Mexico-Coventry), an ongoing Online Intercultural Exchange (OIE) in its fifth implementation cycle at the time of writing (May 2016). Based on a set of collaborative intercultural tasks that participants engage with through a tailor-made *Moodle* area, *MexCo* aims to embed internationalisation into the curriculum of the two institutions involved in order to promote global citizenship competences among both students and staff. This study reports on the corpus-based linguistic analysis of the written asynchronous exchanges in two of the discussion forums in *MexCo* in academic year 2014-2015. The analysis was carried out by an ‘expert student’ in collaboration with staff with a focus on the use of pronouns, and three key differences were observed regarding the use of the first person plural pronoun ‘we’.

Keywords: MexCo, online intercultural exchange, corpus analysis, expert student.

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1. Introduction

The *MexCo* project, which started in 2010, has evolved from a project aimed at tandem language learning to an OIE that is integrated into the English and Languages curriculum of the two institutions involved: Coventry University (CU), UK and the Universidad de Monterrey (UDM), Mexico. Its main aims are to support students and staff involved in it to develop:

- intercultural awareness;
- intercultural communicative competence (Byram, 1997; Helm & Guth, 2010, p. 74);
- multimodal digital multiliteracies when using English as a shared means of communication online. This requires an awareness of the concept of ‘cyberpragmatics’ (Yus, 2011), meaning how “information is produced and interpreted within the Internet environment” (Yus, 2011, p. 7).

Due to misunderstandings that had occurred in previous cycles of the exchange (Orsini-Jones et al., 2015), it was decided to utilise corpus linguistics tools and discourse analysis to investigate the use of pronouns in the online asynchronous discussion forums from the 2014-15 cycle of project *MexCo*. Data on student engagement, extracted using the *Moodle* analytics tools, also support the discussion of the results of the corpus investigations. One of the expected outcomes was to be able to devise data-driven tasks/materials to teach intercultural communicative competence and cyberpragmatics for academic purposes to the participants involved in future cycles of the project.

This OIE is supported by online content in a tailor-made and collaboratively designed *Moodle* course, which includes (Orsini-Jones, 2015):

- video lectures on intercultural awareness and features of effective online communication and global citizenship competences;

- intercultural scenarios, situation reactions, word associations, surveys and quizzes (inspired by the MIT project *Cultura*, Furstenberg, Levet, English, & Maillet, 2001);
- asynchronous discussion forums where students co-construct knowledge by, for example, carrying out comparative analyses of stereotypes in Mexican and British media;
- e-tutorials and Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) exercises created by ‘expert students’ about politeness strategies and how to promote productive cultural discussion (these were based on real exchanges from previous cycles);
- multimedia intercultural group learning objects created by all participating CU students with the e-portfolio *Mahara*.

A distinctive feature of this project is that the online exchanges are analysed by staff in collaboration with ‘Expert Students’ (ESs) (Orsini-Jones, 2015, p. 50). The ‘ESs’ are students who have participated in previous online intercultural exchanges, hired as research assistants and student mentors in following cycles, and support staff with their investigations.

2. Method

2.1. Overview of the research

The broad aim of this research study was to investigate the asynchronous forum interactions in the *MexCo* project and involved extracting data from *MexCo* to create a custom-made corpus using the *Sketch Engine* corpus tool to identify interesting intercultural linguistic features in the exchanges. Another aim was to devise Data-Driven Learning (DDL) (Johns, 1991) tasks/materials to raise the awareness of intercultural communicative competence and cyberpragmatics (Yus, 2011) of future cohorts of participants in *MexCo*.

The study is based on the academic year 2014-2015, when participants consisted of 111 Mexican students, 1 Venezuelan and 1 Brazilian from UDEM, and a mix of nationalities from CU (97 British, 5 Chinese, 3 Polish, 2 Lithuanian, 1 Swiss, 1 Greek, 1 Latvian, 1 Czech and 1 Finnish). The corpus tool *Sketch Engine* was used, looking at the use of pronouns in the ‘Video Introductions Forum’ and in the ‘Film Representations Forum’.

The main question that this study intended to answer was:

What does the application of corpus linguistics techniques reveal about the use of pronouns in the MexCo forum interactions?

The specific corpus linguistics techniques used to address this research question were the Key Word in Context (KWIC) concordance and the frequency list generator on *Sketch Engine*. Each occurrence of ‘we’ was then qualitatively analysed to see how it was used. It was also considered important to look separately at British and non-British students, of which there were 97 and 14 respectively and Mexican and non-Mexican students, of whom there were 111 and 2 respectively, to investigate whether this variable may have impacted on the students’ use of ‘we’.

The extracted .html files were recognised by the corpus software and uploaded to create an online database of 101 files constituting a total of 48,558 words (59,457 tokens). The corpus was then automatically part-of-speech tagged using the Penn Treebank tag set (*Sketch Engine*, 2016) to facilitate corpus queries. In addition to nationality and gender data, information about number of forum posts, the dates of these and the number of times each participant viewed the ‘Video Introductions’ and ‘Film Representations’ forums were gathered for each student. These data were obtained using the *Moodle* analytics tools.

3. Discussion

The most interesting finding was that ‘we’ performed three main functions in the corpus:

- Function 1: to refer to people in general, for example ‘I think we need to be careful with stereotypes’, or all students in the project or all students within paired groups, for example ‘I hope we can all learn from each other’.
- Function 2: to refer to just the students in one group, for example ‘We hope you like our video’.
- Function 3: to refer to people of a national, city, or university group (people in Britain or Mexico, CU or UDEM), for example ‘We [people in Mexico] have good weather most of the year’ and ‘We [students at Coventry] have loads of places to eat at uni’.

CU students tended to use ‘we’ more often to refer to just students in their own CU study group, that is function 2 (Figure 1 and Figure 2). UDEM students, on the other hand, were more likely to use it to refer to people of a nationality, city, or university group (people in Britain or Mexico, CU or UDEM), that is function 3 (Figure 3). Various reasons for these differences were considered including the possibility that the more multi-national CU group exhibited a less pronounced national identity than did the UDEM students, who were mostly mono-cultural.

Figure 1. Highest percentage of function 1 in the corpus – CU non-British

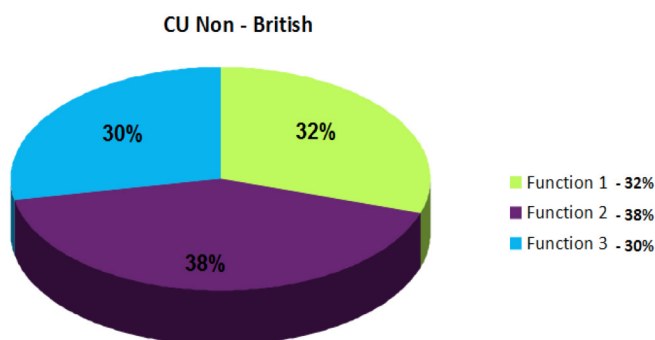


Figure 2. Highest percentage of function 2 in the corpus – CU British

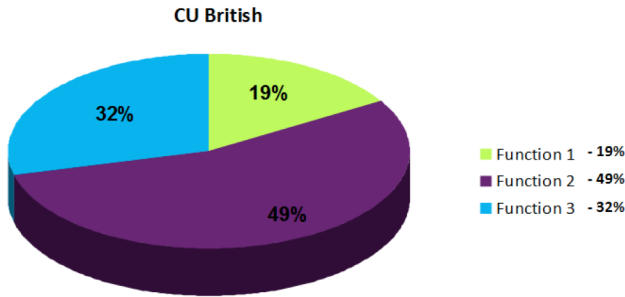
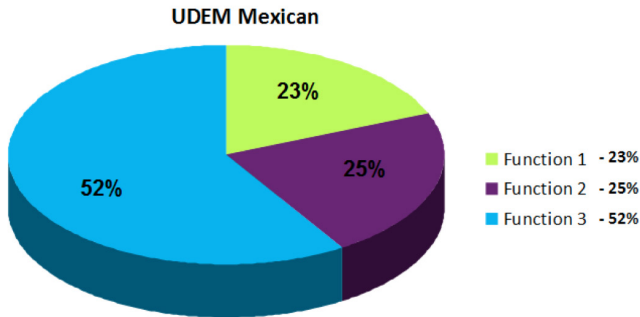


Figure 3. Highest percentage of function 3 in the corpus – UDEM Mexican



4. Conclusions

The project has shed interesting light on the use of pronouns by the participants in the exchanges that will require further investigation in terms of its CMC implications. In particular, the intercultural assumptions and associations betrayed by the use of ‘we’ by the two different groups and the different functional usage associated with it. DDL activities are being designed to help students to recognise that pronouns may have different referents by using contextual clues

in the sample sentences extracted from the exchanges, thereby developing their “illocutionary competence” which involves identifying and producing intended meaning (Ishihara & Cohen, 2010, p. 5). Other tasks are also being designed to encourage students to discuss how the lack of contextual clues can affect communication in online exchanges (Yus, 2011, p. 275).

There are, however, three limitations to the research study presented here. Firstly, the ‘*MexCo* Forum Discussion Corpus’ was not compared to a reference corpus, meaning that log likelihood calculations could not be made. Secondly, the triangulation of data was limited and, thirdly, only the pronoun ‘we’ was considered in detail. Further work on the use of pronouns in the corpus could, for example, focus on ‘you’. A further suggestion for future research in the *MexCo* project is extending the work on *Moodle* analytics begun here to other academic years.

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