

Crossing Spaces in Learner Corpus Research

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The field of learner corpus research (LCR), which emerged in the late 1980s/early 1990s, aimed to add to corpus linguistics one variety that was not yet covered at the time, that of learner English, i.e. written and/or spoken data produced by foreign or second (L2) language learners. The objectives of this type of research were – and still are – to gain a better understanding of the process of learning a foreign or second language and to design more efficient language teaching and testing tools and methods. Learner corpus research is now an established subfield within both corpus linguistics and second language acquisition, with its own scientific association, journal, biennial conference series and dedicated handbook (Granger et al. 2015).

In its over thirty years of existence the field has remained true to its initial objectives, but it has progressively outgrown its initial boundaries and is still expanding. In my presentation, in keeping with the theme of the conference “English going places, Corpora crossing spaces”, I will tackle in turn three types of boundaries that LCR has crossed over the years: language boundaries, disciplinary boundaries and conceptual boundaries.

In terms of language, the field has expanded from a near-exclusive focus on L2 English to an impressive number of other L2s. This expansion has been accompanied by an equally large increase in the number of learners’ mother tongue backgrounds covered. One weakness of the majority of current studies is that they fail to take into account the acquisition setting. Apart from some rare exceptions, no distinction is made between English as a Foreign Language learners and English as a Second Language learners, thereby neglecting the degree of exposure to the target language.

The number of disciplines to which learner corpus research is linked has also expanded considerably. The initial synergies with Second Language Acquisition and Foreign Language Teaching have been progressively complemented with links to other crosslingual varieties (Granger 2015), i.e. language varieties that have specific characteristics due to the interplay of two or more languages, in particular Contrastive Linguistics and Translation Studies, World Englishes (WE) and English as a Lingua Franca (ELF).

Conceptually, the notions of ‘native speaker’ and ‘error’, which have been at the heart of LCR since its origin, have been revisited following criticisms from several quarters, in particular WEs (Tan 2005) and ELF (Seidlhofer 2001). I will argue, however, that used advisedly, in full awareness of their limitations and in keeping with the research objective pursued, these notions still have a key role to play in learner corpus research and should therefore not be overly stigmatized.

Reference

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