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'Speaking in tongues': EFL learners' use of 'foreign words' in informal interviews

The Louvain International Database of Spoken English Interlanguage (LINDSEI) contains informal interviews with intermediate to advanced level learners of English as a foreign language. The interviews follow the same set pattern and are made up of three main tasks: a personal narrative based on a set topic (an experience that taught them a lesson, a country that impressed them, or a film or play they liked/disliked), a free discussion mainly about university life, hobbies, foreign travel or plans for the future and a picture description. Although the interviews are all conducted in English, 'foreign' words ('FWs'), i.e. words from other languages than English, sometimes feature in the spoken productions. Foreign words have been specially marked up in the LINDSEI corpus (<foreign> WORD(S) </foreign>) and can therefore be retrieved automatically using WordSmith Tools for example.

A 2015 study (Author) explored the use of foreign words and their functions in five of the subcorpora included on the LINDSEI CD-ROM (Gilquin et al. 2010), namely LINDSEI_Dutch, LINDSEI_French, LINDSEI_German, LINDSEI_Italian and LINDSEI_Spanish. The study reveals that the frequency and the dispersion of foreign words varies quite markedly across the various subcorpora, with the French- and German-speaking learners using over twice as many FWs as the Spanish-speaking learners for example. The FWs, which come overwhelmingly but not exclusively from the learners' mother tongue, fall into four main functional categories:

- (1) lexical bridges, which help learners bridge vocabulary/lexical gaps (words/expressions that appear to be unknown or inaccessible to them; e.g. 'cotizar', 'des algues', 'lasser'),
- (2) cultural/institutional bridges, which denote aspects of the education system, events, folklore, places, etc. typically associated with some of the regions/countries mentioned in the set topic and free discussion parts of the interviews (e.g. 'Tour de France', 'Parco Nazionale del Gran Paradiso', 'Vlaamse Opera', 'Abitur', 'gilles de Binche'). This category clearly illustrates the impact of what is discussed on the use of FWs in the interviews,
- (3) pragmatic/discourse bridges, which fulfil basic pragmatic/discourse functions in the learners' L1 (e.g. 'ja', 'allez', 'si', 'enfin', 'bueno'),
- (4) FWs used in direct speech reporting or in metalinguistic discussions (e.g. 'all she could say was <foreign> ich liebe dich </foreign>' - LINDSEI_Dutch, 'in Spanish they they call it <foreign> chela </foreign>' - LINDSEI_Spanish).

The study shows that, while cultural/institutional bridges are the preferred functional category (with the largest proportion of FW tokens – around 40%) in LINDSEI_French, LINDSEI_German and LINDSEI_Spanish, pragmatic/discourse bridges and lexical bridges are the preferred categories in LINDSEI_Dutch (52%) and LINDSEI_Italian (44%) respectively.

This paper sets out to extend the investigation of FWs to the other six learner varieties included on the LINDSEI CD-ROM (i.e. LINDSEI_Bulgarian, LINDSEI_Chinese, LINDSEI_Greek, LINDSEI_Japanese, LINDSEI_Polish, LINDSEI_Swedish) and addresses the following main research question: how widespread is the use of FWs among EFL learner interviewees from a variety of mother tongue backgrounds? Frequency of use, FW lexical variation, dispersion, individual learner differences and preferred functional categories are examined and compared in the eleven learner varieties. The possible impact of interviewer variables such as status, mother tongue and knowledge of other foreign languages on the learner interviewees' use of non-English words is also analysed. The 2015 study showed that LINDSEI_Spanish contains the lowest number of FWs (compared with LINDSEI_Dutch, LINDSEI_French, LINDSEI_German and LINDSEI_Italian). It was suggested that the interviewer's status (i.e. whether or not the learner is familiar with / knows the interviewer) might affect learners' degree of use of FWs as LINDSEI_Spanish is the only subcorpus investigated in the 2015 study where the interviews were conducted either by an interviewer the learners did not know at

all or by an interviewer who was labelled as only 'vaguely familiar' to the learners. This paper aims to further explore the possible impact of learners' level of familiarity with the interviewer by extending the analysis to other subcorpora that exhibit different degrees of familiarity (e.g. LINDSEI_Greek, LINDSEI_Bulgarian).

References

- Author. (2015) An exploration of the use of foreign words in interviews with EFL learners: a(n) (effective) communication strategy? Paper presented at LCR 2015, Nijmegen September 2015.
- Gilquin, G., De Cock, S. & Granger, S. (eds) (2010) *The Louvain International Database of Spoken English Interlanguage. Handbook and CD-ROM*. Louvain-la-Neuve: Presses universitaires de Louvain.