

Teaching and Learning LSP: Blurring Boundaries

Ensino e Aprendizagem de LSP: O Desvanecimento das Fronteiras

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Involved versus informational production dimension in a spoken corpus of Spanish learners of English for Academic Purposes

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Abstract

Biber (1988) first quantitative analysis of language cast light onto different underlying dimensions of linguistic variation that, while remaining latent in language use, could only be unveiled through corpus-driven research. In his original proposal, *Involved versus informational production* came first in the list of dimensions, and together with *Narrative versus non-narrative concerns*, *Explicit versus situation-dependent reference*, *Overt expression of persuasion* and *Abstract versus non-abstract information* presented a comprehensive list of variation phenomena across registers and texts. In this paper we set out to explore the composition of the first dimension as represented in a corpus of 59 Spanish students of English at the Universidad de Murcia (UMU). Linguistic co-occurrence in these samples of language use is analyzed and contrasted against Biber (1988). The paper offers both a discussion of the composition of this dimension and, most significantly, evaluates the impact of multidimensional analysis procedures on non-native speakers.

Keywords: linguistic variation, register, dimension, factor analysis, English

Introduction

Compared with research into other skill areas, there has been relatively little research into the development of EAP speaking at the University level. Most EAP research has concentrated upon methods for increasing academic literacy preferably writing or methods for improving academic listening. Those researchers who have addressed the issue of developing academic speaking have tended to focus on problems of non-native pronunciation and the organization of classroom presentations. However, actual quantitative data on spoken language of learners are difficult to obtain and is rarely used in the EAP context.

One area that deserves special mention is the use of corpora as a learning/teaching/researching tool. The data-driven analysis of register variation has become the centre of different studies after the publication of Biber's (1988) important contributions to this field. This study started a new "era" as far as multidimensional analysis is related, and today still remains paramount (Perez-Paredes, Sánchez, Aguado, & Criado, 2006). Giménez Moreno (2006: 108) stresses the fact that "this field of variation needs urgent research capable of leading to more practical distinctions, to deeper understanding, to more innovative pedagogical approaches and to more effective teaching materials". This is precisely the area where we started to develop our research in 2005.

The present paper addresses the following question:

- How can Biber's (1988) dimension 1 "involved versus informational production" be compared against a corpus of EAP contributed by learners of English as a second language after running our own Factor Analysis?

In 1988 Biber published his first quantitative analysis of language defining different underlying dimensions of linguistic variation that, in the words of the author, while remaining latent in language use, could only be unveiled through corpus-driven research. He explored the variation in texts in terms of textual dimensions and proposed seven factors for categorizing the textual dimensions in speech and writing. Each dimension identifies groups of linguistic features that co-occur frequently in texts. In his original proposal, *Involved versus informational production* came first in the list of dimensions, and together with *Narrative versus non-narrative concerns*, *Explicit versus situation-dependent reference*, *Overt expression of persuasion* and *Abstract versus non-abstract information* presented a comprehensive list of variation phenomena across registers and texts. This study was carried out with the LOB Corpus (1,000,000 word) composed by the following different types of texts and domains: press reportages, press editorials, press reviews, religion, skills, trades and hobbies, popular lore, belles lettres, biographies, essays, miscellaneous, learned and scientific writing, general fiction, mystery and detective fiction, adventures and western fiction, romance and love stories and humour.

Informants and methods

A corpus (ca. 50.000 words) of spoken English language from the CAOS-E (Contrastive Analysis of Orality in Spoken English) database was gathered from students (n= 59) in their first year of English Studies at the University of Murcia. The main aim of this research project is to analyse the characteristics of the so-called oral dimension of learners of English as a foreign language.

The samples were taken in October 2004 and, in the pilot study we present here, the students were interviewed for a maximum time of 15 minutes. The interviews were conducted by an English native speaker following the same protocols of LINDSEI (Louvain International Database of Spoken English Interlanguage). The interviews consisted of three different parts: 1) First students were offered three topics and were asked to choose one and talk about it. 2) The interviewer started to become involved by asking questions related to what the subject had spoken about. An interpersonal, more familiar rapport is expected in this part of the interview. 3) The student was finally asked to look at four pictures that make up a short story and was invited to render his own understanding of it. The interviews were transcribed by native speakers and tagged by Prof. Douglas Biber at the University of Arizona. Figure 1 is an instance of language from our corpus:

FIGURE 1. An instance of language from CAOS-E database



Er.. last year, I went away to Italy em.. but em... to Italy but I.. I had prepared to go to France because I think it's more beautiful

Figure 2 offers the same stretch after tagging:

FIGURE 2. An instance of tagged language from CAOS-E database

Er ^uh++++=Er..
 . ^.+clp++++=EXTRAWORD
 . ^.+clp++++=EXTRAWORD
 last ^jj+atrb+++ =last
 year ^nn++++=year,
 , ^.+clp++++=EXTRAWORD
 I ^pp1a+pp1+++ =I
 went ^vbd+++xvbnx+=went
 away ^rp+pl+++ =away
 to ^in++++=to
 Italy ^np++++=Italy
 em ^nn+++??+=em..
 . ^.+clp++++=EXTRAWORD
 . ^.+clp++++=EXTRAWORD
 but ^cc+cls+++ =but
 em ^nn+++??+=em
 to ^in++++=to
 Italy ^np++++=Italy
 but ^cc++++=but
 I ^pp1a+pp1+++ =I..
 . ^.+clp++++=EXTRAWORD
 . ^.+clp++++=EXTRAWORD
 I ^pp1a+pp1+++ =I
 had ^vbd+hvd+aux++=had
 prepared ^vprf+++xvbnx+=prepared
 to ^to++++=to
 go ^vbi++++=go
 to ^in++++=to
 France ^np++++=France
 because ^cs+cos+++ =because
 I ^pp1a+pp1+++ =I
 think ^vb+vprv+tht0++=think
 it ^pp3+it+++ =it's
 's ^vbz+bez+vrb++0=EXTRAWORD
 more ^rbr++++=more
 beautiful ^jj+atrb+++ =beautiful

Biber, Conrad and Reppen (1998) is an excellent reference for details on the computational aspects of multidimensional analysis, while details of the main characteristics of Multidimensional Analysis can be found in Biber (1988), Biber (2003) and Biber (2006).

The research included here makes use of one of the types of data reduction techniques known as Factor Analysis. As an exploration, we set out to run a Principal Component Analysis. 20 factors were identified, twelve of which have items with representative loadings. However, we decided to reduce the number of factor to seven both to facilitate the interpretation of the data and, most significantly, to duplicate Biber's (1988) procedure.

Results and discussion

The first factor of the seven proposed by Biber (1988) was labelled “*Involved versus informational production*” and represents a dimension “marking high informational density and exact informational content versus affective, interactional and generalized content” (Biber, 1988: 107). There are two communicative parameters involved in this factor: (1) the primary purpose of the writer/speaker: informational versus interactive, affective, and involved; and (2) the production circumstances: those characterized by careful editing possibilities, enabling precision in lexical choice and an integrated textual structure, versus circumstances dictated by real-time constraints, resulting in generalized lexical choice and a generally fragmented presentation of information. *Informational versus Involved Production* in Biber (1988) presents the following linguistic features and weights¹:

TABLE 1. Factor 1: Informational versus Involved Production (Biber: 1988)

Private verbs	.96
THAT deletion	.91
Contractions	.90
Present tense verbs	.86
2 nd person pronouns	.86
DO as pro-verb	.82
Analytic negation	.78
Demonstrative pronouns	.76
General emphatics	.74
1 st person pronouns	.74
Pronoun IT	.71
BE as main verb	.71
Causative subordination	.66
Discourse particles	.66
Indefinite pronouns	.62
General hedges	.58
Amplifiers	.56
Sentence relatives	.55
WH questions	.52
Possibility modals	.50
Non-phrasal coordination	.48
WH clauses	.47
Final prepositions	.43
(adverbs	.42)
Conditional subordination)	.32)
Nouns	-.80
Word length	-.58
Prepositions	-.54
Type/token ratio	-.54
Attributive adjectives	-.47
(place adverbials	-.42
(Agentless passives	-.39
(Past participial WHIZ ⁱⁱ deletions	-.38
(present participial WHIZ deletions	-.32

In Biber (1988) nouns, type-token ratio and word length present negative loading. High frequency of nouns indicates great density of information as bearers of referential meaning in a text. (-.80 –.677). High type/token ratio means that many different lexical items have been used and consequently the use of words with specific meaning. High word length is also associated with great density of information since longer words suggest more specific and specialized meaning than shorter words (Biber, 1988; Chafe and Danielewicz, 1986). Shorter words are more frequently used.

However, it should not be forgotten that this dimension is considered as a continuum with informal conversations and formal texts in the extreme ends of the continuum. The genres that typically align along the continuum of Factor 1 are telephone conversations, face-to-face conversations, personal letters, spontaneous speeches interviews, romantic fiction, prepared speeches, mystery and adventure fiction, general fiction, professional letters, broadcasts, science fiction, religion, humour, popular lore; editorials, hobbies, biographies, press reviews, academic prose, press reportage, and official documents.

Factor 1 in our corpus from CAOS-E exhibits the following linguistic features:

TABLE 2. Factor 1. Informational versus Involved Production. CAOS-E

Not Aux Verbs	.71
All modals	.67
Private Verbs	.63
That deletion	.61
Indefinite Pronouns	.59
Split auxiliaries	.57
TypeToken	.56
All Personal Pronouns	.56
Possibility Modals	.54
Infinitive Verb	.53
Contractions	.50
Public Verbs	.47
Word Length	.45
Verb HAVE	.43
That Compl. Clause Verb	.41
Adverbs	.38
Past Tense Verbs	.35
Non-phrasal coordination	-.58
Final prepositions	-.64
Nouns	-.68

Factors 1 in Biber and in our corpus share the following features:

TABLE 3. Features and weights of Factor 1 in Biber and in our Corpus

Factor 1. Biber 1988		Factor 1. CAOS-E	
Private verbs	.96	Private Verbs	.63
That deletion	.91	That deletion	.61
Contractions	.90	Contractions	.50
Indefinite pronouns	.62	Indefinite pronouns	.59
Possibility modals	.50	Possibility modals	.54
Non-phrasal coordination	.48	Non-Phrasal coordination	-.58
Final prepositions	.43	Final prepositions	-.64
Nouns	-.80	Nouns	-.68
Word length	-.58	Word length	.45
Type/token ratio	-.54	Type/token ratio	.56

There are some other features in factor 1 of our corpus that do not appear in Factor 1 in Biber (1988), but are scattered in other factors. We present them in Table 4.

TABLE 4. Features and weights in Factor 1 of CAOS-E found in other factors in Biber (1988)

CAOS-E Factor 1		Biber 1988	
Split auxiliaries	.57	Split auxiliaries. Factor 4	.44
InfinitiveV	.53	InfinitiveV. Factor 4	.76
Public Verbs	.47	Public Verbs. Factor 2	.43
Adverbs	.38	Adverbs. Factor 3	-.45
Past tense Verb	.35	Past tense Verb. Factor 2	.90

As can be seen in Table 4 some of the features present in Factor 1 in CAOS-E are distributed in Biber (1988) in other factors. The factors with the highest weight in CAOS-E are Split auxiliaries, and Infinitive V. Both correspond to Factor 4 in Biber (*Overt Expression of Persuasion*) and function together to mark persuasion: either explicit marking of the speaker's own persuasion (the speaker's own point of view) or argumentative discourse designed to persuade the addressee. In turn, split auxiliaries occur when adverbs are placed between auxiliaries and their main verb. Although infinitives can have other functions, they are most commonly used as adjective and verb complements; in these constructions, the head adjective or verb frequently encodes the speaker's attitude or stance towards the proposition encoded in the infinitival clause (e.g. happy to do it; hoped to see it) (Biber, 88: 111).

Public verbs have a charge of .47 in CAOS-E similar to .43 in Biber. However, that dimension appears in Factor 2 (*Narrative versus Non-narrative Concerns*) in Biber (1988) as well as Past verb, which has a high charge in Biber (.90) and a very low one in CAOS-E (.35). Past tense usually co-occurs with perfect aspect verbs and third person personal pronouns. Narrative discourse depends heavily on these two features, presenting a sequential description of past events involving specific animate participants. Public verbs are apparently used frequently with these other forms because they function as markers of indirect, reported speech (e.g., *admit, assert, declare, hint, report, say*). (Biber, 88:109). The absence of perfect aspect verbs can be interpreted considering the proficiency level of the informants, students in their First year of English Studies.

As far as the category of “Adverbs” is concerned, it appears in Biber (1988) in Factor 3 “*Explicit versus Situation-Dependent Reference*” with a negative loading and has a wide range of functions, such as time and place reference in addition to specification of manner, etc.

Conclusion

Taking into consideration that the sample from CAOS-E corpus we used here is made up of one single register, we expected some matching of the different features of our factor 1 along the medium-upper area of the Involved versus informational continuum. The components and weights presented in Table 3 show that they differ (+ .30) in their loadings (Private verbs, that deletion, contractions, non-phrasal coordination, final prepositions, word length and type/token ratio). Some of these gaps are simply enormous as polarity is inversed (non-phrasal coordination, final prepositions word length and type/token ratio). Other features cluster around this dimension in our analysis but fail to coincide with the one in Biber (1988). This indicates that more refined research is needed in order to find out the reasons why so much variation is present in our corpus. We have highlighted here the differences and advanced some possible reasons. However, the rest of the dimensions should be analysed to further clarify a redefinition of Factor 1 for CAOS-E.

This is part of a research project entitled *Estudio longitudinal y comparativo de la producción oral (oralidad) de aprendices de inglés como lengua extranjera a partir del análisis de un corpus lingüístico oral recopilado y mediante procedimientos de análisis multidimensional* (00580/PI/04) funded by the Socrates Agency at the Region of Murcia, Spain and directed by Dr. Pascual Pérez-Paredes.

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ⁱ In Factor Analysis these weights usually range between .30 and .1. Loadings below .30 are not considered in the interpretation of dimensions.

ⁱⁱ Biber's term for present and past participle WH deletion