

Chapter 21

Phraseology in English as an Academic Lingua Franca: A Corpus-Based Study of Prepositional Verbs in Writing by Chinese, American, and British Students

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ABSTRACT

Under the context of English as a Lingua Franca, this chapter explores the use of English prepositional verbs in writing by Chinese university students in comparison with that by their American and British counterparts. A written learner corpus compiled by the author and four native comparable corpora were used for both quantitative and qualitative analysis. The overall frequency of prepositional verbs in the five corpora shows that Chinese learners use fewer prepositional verbs in comparison with their American and British counterparts. Qualitative analysis, on the other hand, shows that Chinese learners are capable of producing an adequate number of prepositional verbs that stylistically appropriate. Moreover, differences are also found between the native novice writers in regard to both the frequency and the stylistic features of the prepositional verbs in the four native corpora. The results lead to critical discussion about the use of native corpora as the benchmark in learner corpus research.

INTRODUCTION: ENGLISH AS A LINGUA FRANCA

The worldwide spread of the English language dates back to the sixteenth century when it was used in the then colonies of the UK around the world. However, since the early 20th century, the phenomenon of English being the most commonly used language in international and intercultural communication has gradually been recognised by linguists as well as professionals in other domains. Such a phenomenon has generated a considerable debate since Kachru's (1985) tripartite classification of English as a world language, i.e. the inner, the outer and the expanding circles. The inner circle is made up of countries in

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which English is used as native or the dominant language (e.g. the United Kingdom, Australia). The outer circle includes countries such as India and Malaysia where English serves as a lingua franca between ethnic and language groups, while the expanding circle encompasses countries such as China, Russia and Japan where English has no special administrative status. The second and third tiers in Kachru's (ibid) three-circle model, i.e. the outer and the expanding circles, led to a dramatic increase in investigations into localised varieties of English, which are often referred to as World Englishes.

However, due to the rapid development of globalisation in the past three decades, Kachru's model no longer seems to well represent the current use of English in the world. Kachru's model was pioneering, as it was one of the first attempts to recognise and legitimise the existence of English varieties in countries that belong to the outer and the expanding circles. Nevertheless, the differentiation of English varieties in the inner circle (e.g. British English, American English) as 'norm providers' from those in the outer and the expanding circles might suggest the linguistic privilege of the inner circle varieties and underrepresent the international status of varieties of English in the outer and the expanding circles.

Studies have shown that, as the population of users of English in the outer and the expanding circles is much bigger than that in the inner circle, around 80 per cent of communications in which English is used as a second or foreign language (ESL/EFL) do not involve any native speakers of English (Beneke, 1991; Gnutzmann, 2000). As Graddol (1997, p. 10) observes, native speakers of English "may feel the language 'belongs' to them, but it will be those who speak English as a second or foreign language who will determine its world future". Other World Englishes researchers (e.g. Chen & Hu, 2006; Hu, 2006) also start questioning the global dominance of the inner circle English varieties claiming that varieties of English in the outer and the expanding circles should be treated equally as their inner circle counterparts.

The debate about the global dominance of inner circle English has led to an alternative, i.e. English as a Lingua Franca¹ (e.g., Gnutzmann, 2000; Jenkins, 1996, 1998; Knapp, 2002; Seidlhofer, 2001), which is used to replace the concepts of inner or outer circle English. Different from Kachru's model, which emphasises the geographical representation of English use in the world (focusing more on the nation, not the speakers), English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) focuses on the contexts of communication in which English serves as the common language among interlocutors who do not share the same first language (L1). Native speakers of English in these contexts therefore no longer set the linguistic agenda. Instead, speakers of all L1 backgrounds will need to make adjustments in order to achieve success in communication.

The notion of English as a Lingua Franca has also influenced learner corpus research. While the traditional practice of learner corpus research often involves a native English corpus serving as the benchmark against which the learner corpus is evaluated, in the past few years researchers began to question the use of native reference corpora (e.g. Chen, 2013b). Due to the growing internationalisation of educational institutes around the world, learners of English at the tertiary level in particular have been undergoing the transition from solely being English learners to being both learners and (future) users of English. If these learners will mostly communicate in English with people whose L1 is not English either, what is the point of benchmarking their English proficiency against native 'standards'? Should non-native features found in learner English always be taken as deficiency, or they could be considered as potential features of ELF?

Under the context of ELF, the present study aims to explore the use of multi-word verbs in writing by Chinese university students in comparison with that by their American and British counterparts. The rationale for focusing on written data is that, although research into ELF is a relatively recent activity, it has witnessed considerable progress in studies of ELF in spoken communication (e.g. Baumgarten

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