

Compiling a learner corpus for assessing students' translation skills: design and procedures

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“The assessment of how previous technical capabilities have been implemented for pedagogical purposes represents a necessary background for the assessment of the pedagogical potential of present-day technologies.

(Salaberry, 2001: 1)

New technologies and learner corpus design

Most new technologies like radio, television, VCR, CD and DVD players, computers, MP3 players, mobile phones and other multimedia appliances have been revolutionary in the overall context of human interaction. Although this author dithers about its effectiveness, nowadays it is clear that they have achieved a high degree of pedagogical benefit in the realm of second language teaching. The correlation of technological sophistication and pedagogical benefits is not a direct one, but the great variety of means and the wide possibilities of use in a Second Language class (watching, listening, interacting...) make them a good help for teachers. Moreover, not all the technical attributes specific to new technologies can be profitably exploited for pedagogical purposes, but the extended typology seems to be more accurate and proper for specific purposes each day. Perhaps the great problem arises on the part of the teacher when he has to integrate new technologies into the curriculum, and possibly new technologies do not always provide for an efficient use of human and material resources, but the endless scope of possibilities and their magnetism for students appear as a pedagogically proved excuse for their use in SLA.

Consequently, computer use in general as included in those new technologies and the use of corpora in particular, have achieved an elevated popularity in the last decades. In this fact, the appearance of the Internet and the new possibilities of sharing information all over the world have had a major part of responsibility for such fame.

According to Atkins, Clear, & Ostler (1992: 1-16) we can define corpus as “a subset of an Electronic Text Library (TEL), built according to explicit design criteria for a specific purpose.” And if we consider this general idea as possible to use in teaching, we can say that a learner corpus consists of a collection or body of written exercises about a concrete matter which we will use in order solve learning problems in language acquisition that matter in a correct way.

Krieger (2006) defines corpus and corpora use in a more accurate way by assuring that the main focus of corpus linguistics is to discover patterns of authentic language use through analysis of actual usage. The aim of a corpus based analysis is not to generate theories of what is possible in the language but only to concern the usage of the empirical data and what that reveals to us about language behaviour. He further states how computers can facilitate language learning and how corpus linguistics still remains

quite open to exploration. This author also establishes what corpus studies have to offer the English language teacher by examining what corpus linguistics is, how it can be applied to teaching English, and some of the issues involved. In order to conduct a study of language which is corpus-based, it is necessary to gain access to a corpus and a concordancer program for both quantitative and qualitative research. There are several aspects of language likely to be affected by corpus usage but the most related to our analysis of Spanish “se” is that of register variation (varieties of language which are used for different situations).

In this sense we should retake the mention we did about grammar references and dictionaries and see the study by Hunston (2002). He talks about the importance corpora have had in the development of reference books and dictionaries. The emphasis on collocation and phraseology, as we will need to analyse the phrases and structures (for example those including “se”) we can find and order by using corpora and look for the best solutions (Hanks, 1987; Sinclair, 1987; Summers, 1987). The emphasis on variation, as a determined word or expression can sometimes have a different meaning in different contexts (Biber et al., 1999). The emphasis on lexis and grammar, as it is fundamental for a good establishment of correct translations and uses of structures which sometimes do not have a concrete word-to-word correspondence being the knowledge of rules the only help. And the emphasis on authenticity as the real use of a concrete expression in a concrete text is guaranteed when reference grammars or dictionaries use corpora from students/users because those are genuine communication. We also agree with Hunston (2002: 3) that

[...] reference books for learners of English, then, have been transformed by the use of corpora in their compilation and have become, on the whole, even less like similar books for native speakers. They are greatly influenced by the ease with which information on frequency and typicality is obtained from a corpus, or from contrasting corpora, and tend to emphasise phraseology and the interaction between lexis and grammar. Whilst there is disagreement on the extent to which examples should be authentic in the sense of ‘have been said or written’, there is a concern for idiomaticity and realism in examples.

McEnery and Wilson (2001) examine the roles which corpora can play both in the study of language itself and the possible application of computerised tools for processing natural language, especially in the part where they talk about the use of corpora as sources of empirical data in teaching and linguistics, dialectology and variation studies. we agree in the main four exposed: the advantages of corpora for sampling and quantification; their easy access due to the previous work someone else has done to order and prepare the real information for the user; their high quality data, always surrounded by rich extra information ready to use; and the natural quality of data included being the most reliable source of information on language as it is actually used. The importance of learner corpora can also be shown in Granger’s International Corpus of Learner English which contains 2 million words of written English from learners in 20 countries.

As regards the use of contrastive corpora in two languages, Barlow (1992) suggests that a corpus and a concordancer can be used to compare, among others, language use in student and native speakers to generate exercises and student activities and analyze usage (i.e. when is it appropriate to use the appropriate “se” use?) There are several possibilities to choose and use a corpus, and so any large corpus will serve from those on-line or on multimedia peripherals. Our option here is to construct a corpus,

especially when the target register is highly specific as Krieger says. The teacher only needs to make sure that the corpus is useful for the particular teaching context (Spanish “se” in our case) and to provide the proper type of exercises.

Finally, other interesting views are those on the increasingly important application of corpora in translation. Hunston (2002) asserts that they are extremely useful in training translators and in identifying potential problems for translation, and Laviosa (1997) speaks from the theoretical frame of translation when avowing the process of translation differs from both the target language and the source language: authors in the source language write in a completely different way from those who translate into that language. He found out that the most common words always appeared on translators’ essays whereas specific and less frequent words were mainly used by real English users. Baker (1993, 1995, and 1999) goes even further when she suggests that certain features which have been noticed in translated texts might be observed more systematically by using corpora. She says that translated texts include notes and explicit explanations in order to avoid ambiguity. Original texts would never include this extra information, so not only lexical but also grammatical features would change and its study with corpora would also be helpful.

Design and procedures for a learner corpus.

In our case, teachers of English as a second language, the problem presented to our students is translating Spanish “se” (that is their L1) into L2 (English) solving written exercises where they often find it. In consequence, the design of our corpus will overlap this aim.

We followed three main steps: firstly we sought all the information about the Spanish uses of “se”, we saw how they were translated into the English language by looking up in the most important grammars for English language teaching and we explained this in our class; secondly, we prepared exercises based on those reflections, we gave them to our students in CD format and we got them back with their answers; thirdly, we used Wordsmith programme to scan the exercises and saw if the expected phrases were written down and analysed the corpus quantitatively and qualitatively.

Previous classroom explanation

We have prepared a classification as a summary from the academic proposals of some of the highly developed Spanish language resources sustained by the Real Academia de la Lengua Española: DRAE (2001), Alarcos’s Gramática de la lengua española (1999), Gramática descriptiva de la lengua española (1999) and Diccionario Panhispánico de Dudas (2005). Moreover, we have also taken into account a more student-like approach generally used as students’ background knowledge: the explanatory directions provided in four of the most used course textbooks in Spain for Lengua y Literatura in the first year of bachillerato, as it is the term when the topic has a broader explanation: Bustos and Arribas (SM, 1996); Becerra, Sánchez and Herrero (Mc Graw Hill, 2000); Gutiérrez, Serrano and Hernández (Anaya, 2002); Arroyo, Berlato and Mendoza (Oxford, 2002). With this, we obtain a chart of the most accepted Spanish “se” uses.

After that, we have investigated in Huddleston's (1984) *Cambridge English Grammar*, in Quirk's (1985) grammar, in Thomson's and Martinet's (1986) grammar, in Biber et al. (1999) grammar, in Willis's (2004) Collins Cobuild Grammar, in Bolton's and Goddey's (2005) grammar and in Swam's (2005) grammar. All of them have been chosen at an intermediate level and above. In the end, the summarising chart has been matched as much as possible to that obtained from Spanish course textbooks in order to facilitate students understanding and in order to open possibilities for the creation of a real meaningful corpus. Notwithstanding, the corpus itself is likely to rise some new possibilities of possible analysis.

We have structured the chart into six different groups:

- 1) **Object personal pronoun (pronominal):** it can be translated in a different way depending on the sense it has: from using an English verb that includes that meaning (Juan se acordó del examen = Juan remembered the exam) to the ones in which the English object pronoun (or just an object) is needed (el chico se le aproximó = The boy approached him).
- 2) **Reflexive pronoun:** normally translated by using the English reflexive pronouns (myself, yourself, himself, herself, itself, ourselves, yourselves, themselves): Ana se lava y se peina = Ana combs herself and washes herself (though it is not the only possibility: Ana combs her hair and washes her face).
- 3) **Reciproque pronoun:** this use has not equivalent in English and is usually substituted for the phrase "each other" (María y Alberto se mandan cartas = María and Alberto send letters to each other). In addition, some other possibilities could be found (especially those paraphrasing the sentence: María sends letters to Alberto and he answers her) but most of them much more artificial.
- 4) **"se" reflecting passive:** the most normal way of doing it is the use of a passive sentence (some authors say English passive is nowadays substituting the use of se in what they call an Anglicism): Esos países se explotan sin dificultad = Those countries are exploited with no difficulty. At other times, passive is not needed as this sense is included in the verb (Mariano se tomó un café = Mariano had a coffee) or both the passive and the normal form of the verb are accepted (El barco se hundió = The ship sank, it did it alone, accidentally) or with a slight variation in meaning (about the subject of the action): The ship was sunk (somebody or something did it).
- 5) **Impersonal "se":** In our experience, this is the most confusing one for students of English as a foreign language, as it can be translated into different ways according to every author. Consequently, choosing the proper translation is not easy. Three are the most common ways of doing so: by using a normal subject + verb + object + complement sentence (Se vende coche Nuevo = They sell a new car); by using a passive sentence (Se vende coche Nuevo = A new car is sold); or by using an idiom or paraphrasing the sentence (Se vende coche Nuevo = A new car for sale).
- 6) **Other uses of Spanish "se":** The use with "hacer" is translated according to its inner meaning (make, build, be, do, etc): Pedro se hizo una casa en las afueras = Pedro built a house in the outskirts is different from the passive sense: *el jamón se hace con frío* = Cured ham is done with cool or the impersonal meaning: *el agua se hace hielo* = water is freezing. The use with subjunctive (reflecting the formal or polite Spanish imperative) is normally translated into imperative: *siéntese, por favor* = sit down, please; *¡Cállese y no se mueva!* =

Be quiet and don't move! Verbs of affection usually have a passive sense or a copulative one: *se arrepintió de todo = he was sorry for everything*. Pseudo-copulative sentences where the Spanish “se” has little meaning are most of the times translated into verbs including this meaning: *Juan se parece a su padre = Juan looks like his father*. Dative “se” (which can be included in number one above as its use is very close to that of the pronominal one: *a los hijos se les quiere mucho = we like (our) children a lot*).

Sample exercises to create the corpus

According to the previous chart we had explained in class, we prepared an exercise consisting on twenty sentences, each one containing one specific use of Spanish “se”: **the pronominal use** (*Juan se acordó del examen, Jaime se visitó cinco pueblos, la empresa se arruinó-half-passive*)), the use as a **reflexive pronoun** (*Ana se lava y se peina, el hombre se tomó el pulso*), the use as a **reciproque pronoun** (*María y Alberto se mandan cartas*), the use of Spanish “se” **reflecting passive** (*esos países se explotan sin dificultad; Mariano se tomó un café; el barco se hundió; todo eso se cuece, se fríe y se sirve-half-passive-; el inglés se aprende fácilmente; la empresa se arruinó- half-passive*), the use of Spanish “se” **reflecting impersonality** (*se vende coche nuevo; en esta vida se nace, se crece y se muere*), and **other uses** like the one with “**hacer**” (*Pedro se hizo una casa en las afueras*) or the **subjunctive/imperative** one (*¡cállese y no se mueva!, siéntese, por favor*) or the one with **affective** verbs (*se arrepintió de todo, mi hermano se fió*) or the **pseudo-copulative** one (*Juan se parece a su padre*), or de **dative use**, very similar to the pronominal one (*a los hijos se les quiere mucho*).

The exercise was given to more than a hundred students in first year of Bachillerato as homework after having explained the different translations of Spanish “se” from L1 into L2 (English) (as shown in the chart above). They had to identify those uses and try to provide the correct translation for each of the twenty sentences in the exercise provided in a CD. The task was voluntary so they could choose whether to do it or not, what also means it was done due to their own motivation and not to the obligation of a compulsory item. Moreover, this freedom made them forget about the risks of mistakes, as the important aim of the exercise was to see if they had a clear idea of something explained in a previous lesson.

Once the exercise was done by students in their CD and given back to the teacher, it was corrected by the teacher, and a learner corpus was settled to work with by joining all the sentences.

The methodology followed was simple but effective: the exercise was presented as guided production, that is, the Spanish sentences were written by the teacher and each one contained a different use of Spanish “se” (repeating some of them, of course); the students had to guess which use was there and then had to translate it correctly by following the explanations from the previous lesson. After that, we got every single sentence following the order given and gave the possible answers of this essay.

After this, we searched the sentences written by our students and eliminated those being wrong or containing a fatal mistake, but considering errors (and error analysis) as a positive fact, that is, realising that some sentences given by our students were not completely right, but demonstrated that they had understood the grammar explanation at

least in a basic way, so we also analysed and included them in the final results. Finally, we compared the solutions given by the teacher to the ones of students in order to see the percentage of accuracy and understanding about classroom explanations, on the one hand, and the new possible solutions not included in our theoretical part but grammatically correct, on the other hand.

Corpus analysis

Wordsmith Tool gave us the possibility of using the most accepted phrases in L2 (English) for each “se” coming from L1 (Spanish) and see how correct it was and the general level of accuracy and competence our students had on the topic. This way, we could see the effectiveness of our explanation and the possible solutions to the arisen problems.

Conclusions

I'll try to summarise this paper with just one sentence alleged by one of the teachers who helped in the creation of the learner corpus:

New technologies and especially computers give us a possibility of storing, consulting and searching whose limits are still far from our sight. If we use these tools in the right way, the enrichment we can get as teachers and our students as learners is nearly infinite. I only hope this comfort for our minds will not suppose the upset of other personal skills we have.

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