SOARING AMONG LANGUAGES – ACQUIRING KNOWLEDGE TO IMPROVE MULTICULTURAL UNDERSTANDING AND COMMUNICATION

Cazar lenguas al vuelo – la adquisición de conocimiento para mejorar la comprensión y la comunicación multicultural

Claudia MEJIA
Universidad de Salamanca
clm.delapava@usal.es

ABSTRACT: To study the specialized variety of spoken English used by the non-native speakers within the international hang-gliding community, a corpus collection tool has been designed and administered. A description and analysis of the particular characteristics of this variety –focusing on the language structure– is the ultimate objective of this research project, which brings together the two main interests of the researcher: languages and hang gliding. The information extracted from this study could help improve intercultural communication and mediation within specialized communities and provide insight into the teaching/learning of English for Specific Purposes.

This project is framed around a meticulous methodology that guarantees the validity of the findings and conclusions. The study subjects are a representative sample of this community and the information is gathered through recorded interviews based on a structured questionnaire. The orally-collected data will be transcribed manually, creating a corpus of digital texts that will be analysed.

Keywords: corpora; English for Specific Purposes (ESP); ethnographic research; hang gliding; non-native speaker; multilingual communication.

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper aims to provide a synopsis of the work carried out so far for the doctoral project titled "Hermes and Hang Gliding: A Corpus-Based Study of Spoken English by the Multicultural Members of the International Hang-Gliding Community". First it will offer a brief glance of the sport, the community and the researcher to then present specific information relative to the research process itself, such as materials and methodology as well as preliminary findings.

1.1 Hang Gliding: A Sport and a Community

Hang gliding is a discipline within the realm of air sports which "predates powered flight by about 12 years[1]". Otto Lilienthal (1848-1896) designed the first hang glider while attempting to build what is now considered an airplane; the main difference regarding his design was that all previous designs of potential flying machines had flapping wings and "[n]essuno prima di lui [Lilienthal] si era azzardato a realizzare e sperimentare velivoli concepiti con una superficie alare fissa[2]" (Mejia 2003, 51).

1 As stated in the National Aeronautic Association (NAA) on their webpage about Hang Gliding: https://naa.aero/air-sports/air-sports-disciplines/hang-gliding-paragliding

2 [n]o one before him had dared create and experiment with aircrafts conceived with a fixed wing.

Within the sport it is possible to find over a hundred international competitions worldwide as well as dozens of coaching and training seminars, all attracting large numbers of international attendees. In addition, many pilots travel abroad for free-flying (non-competition) during their holidays. Taking some of the data collected so far, it is possible to state that this is a multicultural, active and cohesive community. As illustrated on the graph below, referring to those who have participated in this study so far: From a total of 65 subjects –from 18 different linguistic backgrounds, 59 non-native and 6 native English speakers–, most of these members have been involved in hang gliding between 30 to 39 years, with an average involvement of 24 years:

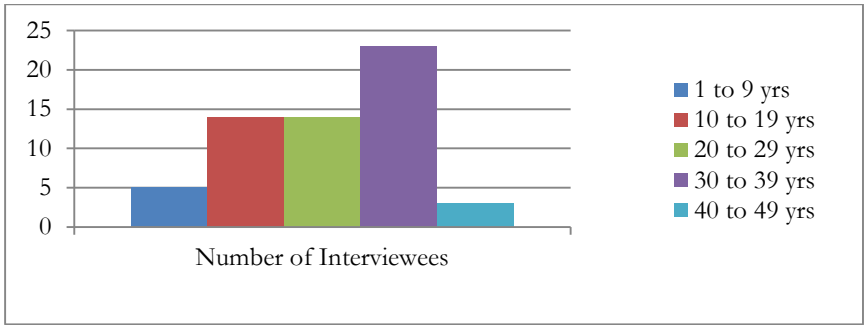

Figure 1: Interviewees' Years of Involvement in Hang Gliding

According to the official records of the *Fédération Aérnautique Internationale* (FAI) (governing body of all air sports) and the *Commission Internationale de Vol Libre* (CIVL) (sub-section of the FAI that governs hang gliding in particular), the international hang-gliding community includes active members from at least 55 different countries. As far as communication and languages are concerned, the FAI/CIVL regulations state that for every event within the competition circuit –regardless of the region it takes place in –"[t]he rules, regulations and information circulated to NACs [National Aero Clubs] and competitors or issued during the event shall be in English […][3]"; this means that all communication among the members of this community, which includes athletes, manufacturers, officials, organizers and volunteers (competition staff), who do not speak the same language(s), is conducted in English.

1.2 The Author's Hang-Gliding Background

I began practicing this sport in 1993 and it has been a never-ending learning process both from the technical and sports psychology points of view. It is one of the few sports where it is not your physical strength or your youth that will allow you to win and make progress, but it is the experience gained throughout the years and your state of mind that really takes you far. This is one of facts that make it a fascinating sport.

In 1994 I joined the competition scene and have since taken part in numerous competitions, placing first or among the first places in several events and placing 8th in the 2014 Women's World Championship. In 2003, I became involved with the logistics of organizing competitions and I have since had the opportunity of hosting and organizing various international events, acting as the Linguistic and Cultural Mediator in several World and European Championships, as well as serving as the Competition Coordinator for the *Fédération Aérnautique Internationale* (FAI).

Hang gliding has taken me around the world and allowed me to live within this multicultural, international community and experience the language and communication flow, in first person.

3 As indicated on Ch. 12.1.2 of the FAI/CIVL's Section 7, pg. 34.

1.3 The Author's Linguistic Background

As far as I can remember, I have always been bilingual and, by the time I graduated from High School, I had become a polyglot, acquiring my third language. Spanish was the second language I learned, at an early age, followed by French, which I studied in High School; during my stay in Italy, where I attended college at the *Università degli Studi di Milano*, I learned Italian, Portuguese and German. I was awarded an Erasmus Grant in 2001, which took me to The Netherlands; this program included a scholarship to study Dutch at the James Boswell Institute and when I moved to northern Catalonia in 2011, I learned Catalan. Besides these eight languages, I have studied Japanese, Turkish and Macedonian; however, due to the lack of practice and contact with these cultures, I have lost most of what I had assimilated. The approach to learning/studying all these languages has been through different methods, allowing me –personally– to have certain insight of the process of language acquisition.

Besides having worked as a cultural and linguistic mediator in large hang-gliding international events, I have also been an elementary school teacher at the *Lycée Français* Paul Valéry where I was in charge of introducing the students –who were already bilingual– to their third language (English) focusing on pronunciation and vocabulary. As of 2017, I became an International Flight Attendant for Delta Air Lines, where –among many other responsibilities– I often assist non-English speaking passengers from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

Experiencing the process of learning a new language several times, repeatedly living through that moment in time where a learner's knowledge is not sufficient enough to ensure proper and complete communication, and being involved in a specific multicultural vocational community for the last twenty-five years, have both prompted me to embark on this project, which is governed by the combination of the two most significant interests in my life: languages and flying.

2. OBJECTIVES

With English being the official language in all international events it is possible to, as Feak states, come to the "realization that most oral communication in English [between members of this community] occurs among speakers who do not share a common first language" (2013, 35); in fact, they do not share the same linguistic background and rarely do they share another common language. This communication happens both on the every-day conversational level as well as encompassing conversation on a more specific, technical level, which is how this study incorporates the field of English for Specific Purposes (ESP).

This project focuses on studying morphological, syntactic and semantic differences in the different varieties of "Englishes" used and produced by the non-native English speakers of the community; moreover, it will attempt to identify whether phenomena such as code-switching, pragmatics and variation are present in their speech and whether they might be connected to the different linguistic backgrounds of the study subjects.

In order to be consistent with the understanding that "language use cannot be realistically described or understood outside its context of social use" (Dressen-Hammouda 2013, 501) and that, as stated by Ide, "[t]he corpus is a fundamental tool for any type of research on language" (2004, 289), an initial research objective is to collect enough data for the creation of a corpus. Hall *et al.* define a corpus as "a digital collection of authentic spoken or written language. Corpora are used for the analysis of grammatical patterns and estimations of the frequency of words, word combinations and grammatical structures" (2011, 349). In order to achieve the creation of a corpus based on "authentic" spoken language, the creation process is lead from the initial stages of the compilation to the completion of the corpus directly by the researcher using only the oral speech produced by the members of the international hang

gliding community, centering on the quality of the content more than on the quantity, keeping in mind that both "large and small corpora are foundational to ESP research" (Feak 2013, 36).

A corpus collection protocol for oral language has been meticulously designed and administered; details of this tool are to be presented in the Methodology section below. Corpus linguistics, a discipline which "aims to explore the extent to which certain features of language use are associated to contextual factors" (Hall *et al.* 2011, 79), provides an ideal theoretical framework for studying cases such as the multicultural international hang-gliding community. Oral text collection can be an arduous, laborious task, since, as stated by Feak, "[u]nlike the case of writing, significant methodological barriers to collecting speaking data along with subsequent transcribing have posed challenges to research" (2013, 35). Despite the considerable expenditure of time and effort, successfully created corpora both ensure the availability of the material to conduct a subsequent analysis and they also help to "uncover characteristic patterns of language use" (Hall *et al.* 2011, 79).

3. MATERIALS

For this project, most of the materials are linked to electronic devices and software or Apps. According to Ide, "[t]he first phase of corpus creation is data capture" (2004, 290), which in this case involves design of a structured interview. The series of seven questions were designed to prompt the interviewees to make use of different registers, both specialized as well as non-specialized language, and evocative discourse, for example, as they are asked to talk about their first and their best flights. All the questions are in open format, following guidelines for ethnographic research to "ask truly open questions" (Genzuk 2003, 6), allowing the speakers to produce a larger quantity of truly natural language. Moreover, for the interview a visual aid presentation was created to provide guidance and support to the interviewees; this presentation was generated using PowerPoint. A Privacy Notice as well as a brief questionnaire to gather personal information, for statistical use, was also prepared as part of the interview process.

The interviews are recorded using a smartphone with a voice recorder App and a microphone to ensure optimal recording quality. As Ide indicates, creating a corpus also "involves rendering the text in electronic form" (2004, 290), and she provides several options for doing this either manually or automatically. However, she adds that "[m]anual entry is time-consuming and costly, and therefore unsuitable for the creation of very large corpora" (*idem.*). Despite Ide's observation, manual text entry and transcription were chosen. Even though specialized transcription software such as that offered by Dragon exists, the widespread use of specialized language and the diverse and sometimes strong accents among the interviewees were found to make automatic transcription inaccurate in multiple instances. After looking into several options for manual transcription, the specific software adopted for this task is called InqScribe[4], a simple software tool which is freely downloadable from the internet and provides a user-friendly environment in which audio or video playback and manual transcription are done in a single user interface. Finally, for the future structural analysis of the transcribed corpus, specialized software, such as WordSmith, will be used; at this stage, different options are being evaluated.

The materials used in this project are essential and simple, mostly within the technological domain; "technology has had a massive impact on the core processes of collection, selection, construction and arrangement through the creation of lexical corpora and the development of associated software" (Hall *et al.* 2011, 272).

4 www.inqscribe.com.

4. METHODOLOGY

Following a strict methodology to guarantee the validity of the study and its findings has been a priority from the very beginning. One of the initial decisions taken was to adopt an ethnographic approach for this linguistic research utilizing, as mentioned previously, a structured interview to be able to generate the necessary data for an analysis. Subsequent to the decisions involving the population sample was the matter of establishing how the interview process was going to be carried out.

The first step was to establish the parameters for the sample, since the sample itself constitutes one of the most important building blocks of such a project. Among the main objectives for this task was to achieve a sample that would be representative of the international hang gliding community; a representative sample can be defined as: "The subgroup of people that reflects the population as a whole (in terms of their social and linguistic characteristics), and therefore lends itself to generalizations above and beyond the scope of the study" (Buchstaller and Khattab 2013, 74). Moreover, of equal importance is to provide a fair representation of this community because "our sample must not favor some sectors of the population over others (so that no sectors of the population are excluded or under or over-represented)" (*idem*.). The following steps were taken to establish the representative sample:

a) Visit the website of the *Commission Internationale de Vol Libre* (CIVL) to access the official registry of the World Ranking Website (WPRS)[5] to collect information on the nations and pilots currently recorded on this database.

b) The number of pilots for each nation was recorded in an Excel spreadsheet where formulas were applied in order to get details of: the total number of registered pilots[6], number of registered pilots per nation, percentage of registered pilots per nation, average number of registered pilots per nation, average percentage of registered pilots per nation and percentage of registered pilots by language[7].

From the results, without referring to English-speaking countries/pilots, it was possible to gather that the languages could be consolidated in three main groups: Group A with more than 10.0% of registered pilots per language; Group B with 1.0% to 9.9% of registered pilots per language and Group C with 0.0% to 0.9% of registered pilots per language. Accordingly, it was agreed to select 10 to 15 interviewees for languages in Group A, 5 to 8 interviewees for languages in Group B and 2 to 3 interviewees for languages in Group C. For a better visualization of this data, these results are represented on Table. 1 below[8]:

5 www.civilrankings.fai.org.

6 At the time this information was accessed (March 21st, 2017), there were approximately one-hundred pilots from unknown nationalities in this database.

7 Countries with more than one main language, such as Canada, Ireland, Spain, Switzerland, etc., were not included in calculating this percentage; however, the possible influence of these countries/pilots in the language percentage will be taken into account for the selection of the group of interviewees.

8 In order to incorporate languages such as Dutch and French in a reliable and consistent manner, the records from the main countries where these languages are spoken were taken into consideration (The Netherlands and France respectively).

LANGUAGE	PILOTS	PERCENTAGE	GROUP
Bulgarian	2	0.1%	C
Croatian	7	0.3%	C
Czech	14	0.7%	C
Danish	13	0.6%	C
Dutch	34	1.6%	B
English	482	23.0%	A
French	82	3.9%	B
German	262	13.0%	A
Greek	21	1.0%	B
Hungarian	13	0.6%	C
Italian	63	3.0%	B
Japanese	157	7.5%	B
Lithuanian	3	0.1%	C
Macedonian	6	0.3%	C
Norwegian	36	1.7%	B
Polish	2	0.1%	C
Portuguese	113	5.0%	B
Romanian	3	0.1%	C
Russian	148	7.1%	B
Slovene	18	0.9%	C
Spanish	226	11.0%	A
Swedish	13	0.6%	C
Turkish	32	1.5%	B
Ukrainian	18	0.9%	C

Table 1: Languages and their Representation within the Hang-Gliding Community.

Once the representative sample had been defined, its range established, and the interview structure designed, the next phase began with some pilot interviews to test both the equipment and the procedure, which lead to certain small adjustments, mostly regarding the questionnaire's structure. In January 2018, the interviewing process began and so far, a total of 65 interviews have been performed with 6 of them belonging to the "native speaker" (NS) category. It has been possible to join 6 international competitions in 4 different countries (France, Italy, Macedonia and USA) and meet with other members of this community outside a specific event in other 5 countries (Austria, Belgium, Chile, Germany and Switzerland).

The actual interview process is the same for every interviewee: Before the beginning of the interview itself, each interviewee is presented with a privacy notification in PDF format, which they read and sign to acknowledge their understanding and acceptance. Then, we proceed to the actual interview which has a total of 7 questions that are presented both orally and accompanied by a PowerPoint presentation; the interview is digitally recorded and saved. At the end of the recording, there is an additional PDF form for the collection of personal data. This PDF is only presented at the end of the interview process to "reduce speaker self-consciousness, for example, about age or socioeconomic status" (Schilling 2013, 99) and, in this case, about their English proficiency.

The transcription process is being done manually using InqScribe transcription software; as mentioned before, this decision was based on the premises that the interviewees will a) include a certain amount of ESP vocabulary leading to probable misidentification of words and b) most interviewees will have different, perhaps strong non-native speaker accents, which could probably lead to inaccuracies on the transcription. Since, in any case, every transcription needs to be carefully and often extensively

revised and amended it seemed feasible to simply tackle the task of transcription manually from the beginning. In future, automatic software will be used to transcribe several manually-transcribed interviews in order to verify the above-mentioned hypothesis and either ratify or modify the decision regarding the transcription method. So far, 23 of the 65 interviews have been transcribed; 2 of them from the native speaker (NS) category. The interviewing and transcription process will continue until 2019, when the analysis of the digital corpus is projected to begin and the possibility of validating the preliminary findings will be viable.

So far, it can be said that there have only been minor difficulties during the transcription process; these involved understanding certain words within the recorded interviews due mostly to some of the interviewees' rather heavy accent. The second major difficulty has been finding the appropriate time of day and the participants' availability to perform the interviews, within the timeframe of any given hang-gliding event. During such a competition, everyone is subject to the same schedule, so there are basically two possible opportunities to perform the interviews: one before the beginning of a competition day –which can be quite early– and a second one at the end of a competition day –which can be quite late–. On the other hand, during such an event, athletes need to invest time in preparing all the necessary equipment, they are under the psychological pressure that comes with participating at a competitive level and getting enough physical rest to ensure a safe and optimal performance; moreover, other members of the community such as event organizers and staff members also have significant amount of duties and obligations to warrant the required standards for this type of competition. These factors lead to the likelihood of pilots and other members of the community not being readily available to participate in the interview process. In other words, the interviewer may have only one hour in the morning and, at best, a few hours in the evening to perform interviews of the potential participant members of this community, hence the process can be rather slow at times. The third issue has been finding a quiet, enclosed space during the competitions to conduct the interviews. Such events usually take place in rural or remote areas, and a meeting room, interview room or an empty enclosed room is not always readily available.

5. Preliminary Findings

Still at an early phase, with transcriptions of about ⅓ of the interviews and the analysis stage yet to begin, it would be ill advised to make any strong statements regarding any of the questions posed for this project. However, as the recorded interviews are manually transcribed, and notes are taken, certain patterns and occurrences seem to emerge; a few examples of these include instances of verbal agreement, sentence structure, word coinage, omission or imprecise use of certain prepositions, etc.

Once the corpus has been compiled and the project overall has evolved, it will be possible to further identify and examine the contents of the interview transcripts to draw relevant conclusions.

6. Closing Remarks

This paper has presented information about the international hang-gliding community and the author, as well as portraying the process and guidelines of the project itself. It has defined the objectives of this project as a collection of data that enables the creation of a corpus to analyze the language variety in an attempt to identify and describe different phenomena.

There is still a vast amount of ground to cover; nevertheless, soaring among languages shall continue to be a remarkable journey where the author will abide to a strict methodology, however will most

definitely not forget to "[e]njoy interviewing. Take time along the way to stop and 'hear' the roses" (Geznuk 1999, 7) during the process!

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