The COALLA Collaboration: New Directions in the Development of Learner Corpora

Joanna PFINGSTHORN & Ilka FLOECK
Institute for English and American Studies
Carl von Ossietzky University Oldenburg
Oldenburg, Germany
joanna.pfingsthorn@uni-oldenburg.de; ilka.floeck@uni-oldenburg.de

The COALLA (Corpus of Advanced Learner Linguistic Action) project was launched in 2011 at the University of Oldenburg as a joint cooperation between linguists and ELT methodologists. The focus of the project is two-fold. While our primary goal lies in the investigation of the extent to which the identification of errors and speech acts produced by second language learners is reliable, the secondary aim is to compile an innovative corpus of advanced learner English.

For both errors and speech acts, issues of identification and classification in authentic (learner) discourse have not been addressed sufficiently to date. The few studies concerned with the topic have shown that the identification of errors is a highly subjective process and cannot be done in a consistent and reliable manner (Hughes & Lascaratou, 1982; Lennon, 1991). The contradictory nature of research findings has also proven that error categorization into bad, worse, and the worst is close to impossible (Rifkin & Roberts, 1995; Hughes & Lascaratou, 1982; McCretton & Rider, 1993). Since studies on speech acts have mainly focused on the production side (cf. e.g. Blum-Kulka *et al.*, 1989; Barron, 2008), research on speech act perception is still in its infancy and needs to be developed both theoretically and methodologically. Whereas the production of speech acts (i.e. the speaker perspective) has been explored extensively for speech acts such as requests, apologies and compliments, the hearer perspective – or more specifically the question of intention recognition – has received noticeably less attention in speech act research (c.f. Clark and Lucy, 1975; Holtgraves, 2008). Until we know what factors are involved in intention recognition or the perception of language acceptability, we have to accept that identifying functional units and errors in learner language is a more or less subjective matter. In fact, to date, there is no existing evidence that the scientific classifications put forward in the literature for errors and speech acts correspond to folk taxonomies of these phenomena.

This subjectivity issue can be remedied by including numerous judges in the data coding process and comparing interrater-reliability. To that end, the COALLA project implements an innovative methodological approach to language analysis based on crowd-sourcing techniques. In addition, the data forming the new corpus encompass spoken learner language elicited during communicative tasks that simulate authentic and interactive language use. COALLA is also the first language tool that is simultaneously tagged for various types of errors and speech acts, offering a more holistic approach to language analysis.

The insights gained about acceptability judgements of both errors and speech acts raise several questions about language assessment and teaching pragmatics in EFL classrooms:

- How can acceptability judgements be implemented in curricula development?

- How can the results of interrater-reliability be applied to language assessment?
- How can EFL teachers be trained to identify errors reliably?
- How can EFL teachers be trained to respond to different severity levels of errors more appropriately?
- Is binary grading beneficial to the learning process and does it represent the realities of language?

References

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