

A corpus-based study on how Brazilian learners of English express attitude in spontaneous conversation

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Corpus-based studies on spontaneous conversation have caught the attention of many researchers from different domains. Despite the difficulties in compiling and analysing students' oral production, recent findings have contributed to the understanding of learners' interlanguage by identifying linguistic features that are prevalent in learners' discourse (Dutra & Silero, 2010, among others). In this paper, we focus on modality, which is going to be analysed in its broad sense. According to Downing & Locke (2006), modality is a semantic category that covers notions such as possibility, probability, necessity, volition, obligation and permission. In doing so, modality expresses a relation with reality, while non-modal utterances are used to make assertions. Moreover, following the Hallidayan Model (2001; 1991), we understand that modality conveys important aspects of stance and attitude of the sender of the message. This view is supported by Biber (2006:95), who observes that the use of modal verbs, for example, is an important device employed to mark stance in academic registers, especially in spoken language. However, it is also acknowledged that corpus-based studies on learners' production are in its infancy and more investigation needs to be carried out in this specific field. In an attempt to contribute to the ongoing discussion on learners' corpora, this paper sets out to analyse an oral corpus of undergraduate students from the Liberal Arts course at Universidade Federal de Sao Joao del-Rey (Brazil), which is a corpus of approximately 35,000 words, compiled during the first semester of the academic year of 2011, in the discipline entitled Oral Skills. We contrast this learners' corpus with a reference corpus of native speakers. This reference corpus is a sub-corpus from the Santa Barbara Corpus of Spoken Language, which was also compiled in an academic setting, and, exactly for this reason, it was comparable with the main corpus in our study. In order to conduct such an investigation, that is, to identify the similarities and differences concerning the use and function of modal items in both corpora, we employ corpus linguistics analytical tools as our methodology. First, we examine frequency lists, concordance lines and lexical bundles, using Wordsmith Tools 5.0. Then, all items are isolated and analyzed separately, focusing on the epistemic, deontic and dynamic types of modality. Interpersonal meaning plays an important role to the topic proposed in this study, which aims at determining how Brazilian learners of English express attitude through modality in their talk in comparison to native speakers of English. Preliminary results indicate that there is a seminal distinction on how learners and native speakers use modal items in their discourse. Examples from the data show that there are differences concerning the forms and functions of modal items in both data. For example, the modal verb *can* is more frequent in the learners' corpus, while the most frequent modal verb used by native speakers is *would*. This might indicate that learners overuse items that belong to the dynamic type of modality, while native speakers seem to be more concerned with face issues. Also, these differences indicate that politeness needs to be taken into account when observing students' use of modal items, specially for the solidarity-social dimension acknowledged by Holmes (1995), which proves to be of importance for speakers in their oral production. Thus, the study indicates that understanding the similarities and differences concerning the use of modality in both corpora within a pragmatic approach can bring interesting insights to language learning and teaching, with further contributions to activities design and materials development. We also believe that such an approach to the study of modality in English can contribute to the emerging area of corpora and to syntax studies, more generally.