

## **The curse and the blessing of mobile phones – a corpus-based study into Polish and American rhetoric strategies**

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The study applies the content-analysis methodology to identify the differences in the rhetoric strategies applied by Polish and American apprentice writers in their argumentative essays. As part of the project aiming at the compilation a Polish corpus of learner English, the data was collected from 79 Polish first-year students of English at the Institute of English Studies, University of Łódź, and their 80 American counterparts, freshman non-English majors at South West University in Marshall, Minnesota. Both groups of students were asked to write an essay in almost identical conditions and on the same topic: “The mobile phone – the curse or the blessing of the end of the 20th century”. Since the Polish and the American essays differed greatly in their treatment of the topic, the decision was made to pursue this observation in a more rigorous way.

The simplest method was chosen to analyse the differences between the two groups of essays: the comparison of wordlists also known as the key-word analysis. According to Scott (2000) key words are a good indicator of the ‘aboutness’ of a text, thus the procedure seemed the appropriate first step to pinpoint the discrepancies between the samples. A list of 321 key words was produced in Wmatrix (the corpus-analysis environment developed at Lancaster University). The items were further sorted into those overused by the American students (145 words and phrases) and those overused by the Polish students (176 items). Both lists were examined in search for the key words which could point to the re-occurring themes in the samples (and thus the ‘aboutness’ of the texts) as well as to other dissimilarities between the two groups of essays. The examination was supported by the scrutiny of the concordance lines of the key items. The analysis led to interesting findings concerning the differences in the choice of arguments and their organisation. Some of these differences are not surprising and can easily be explained, but some reveal unexpected facts about the rhetoric strategies applied by both groups of students.

The lists demonstrate the expected variation between the groups in the choice of arguments, which is attributable to the cultural differences between Poland and the U.S., as well as the differences in the life style of the two groups of students. Thus, the theme of the low cost comes up as one of the advantages of mobile phones in America, especially for making long-distance calls, whereas such argument does not surface in the Polish data, since mobile phone calls are expensive in Poland. The differences in life styles are reflected by the fact that in the American essays the most frequent theme is driving (the experience that most Polish 19-year-olds do not have yet, at least not on regular basis), whereas the Polish list contains the word *mountains* associated with the theme of emergency situations (trekking in the mountains is a popular holiday activity among Polish students).

Although the findings mentioned above specify the differences among the two groups of essays, they hardly reveal any interesting facts about the samples, since such differences could only be expected. However, further scrutiny of the key word lists brings into light a deeper and more intriguing variation between the groups of essays. The American list contains many items pointing to several readily identifiable themes which can be easily explained by cultural differences and differences in life style, at the same time the Polish list contains very few of these identifiable and explainable themes. With the exception of the theme of using texting as a convenient way of contacting people, there are few items in the Polish list whose keyness can be attributed to the cultural differences. On the other hand, the most re-occurring theme in the Polish data is the concept of health represented by items such as *health*, *harmful*, and *diseases*. Another frequent theme in the Polish essays is labelled *general* and is composed of items such as *inventions*, *human*, and *development*. In fact, this seems to be the most striking difference between the Polish and the American data. While the American students answered the essay question by making reference to their own life experience such as driving, or problems with service, the Polish learners talked about civilisation and health hazards.

This discrepancy is further supported by other key words in the samples. The American list comprises such items as the pronouns *I* and *my*, whereas the Polish list includes the pronouns *we*, *our*, and *us*. Moreover, the American list incorporates names of family members (*father*, *dad* and *mom*), and other items pointing to the familiarity such as *house*, *home*, and *Minnesota*, but there are no similar themes in the Polish list. Finally, the Polish list abounds in linking expressions, as opposed to none in the American list.

All these findings point to the fact that the Polish students approach the topic on a more general level, and tend to structure their arguments better, whereas American students relate to their own experience in tackling the

problem and do not pay much attention of the argumentation structure. One explanation of such variation could be that the Polish learners did not own mobile phones at the time of writing. Unfortunately, no data is available on this issue (since the essays were collected with an entirely different purpose); yet this explanation seems highly unlikely, because the mobile phone is a commonplace device among Polish teenagers.

The study has demonstrated that adopting the text rather than the language approach to the analysis of corpus data (Scott 2000) can bring revealing insights concerning the variation in the argumentation structure of Polish and American essays. This variation is not a result of 'nativeness' and 'non-nativeness' in language use but represents deeper differences in the rhetoric strategies applied by Polish and American students.

**References:**

Scott, M. 2000 'Focusing on the Text and Its Key Words', in L. Burnard & T. McEnery (eds.), *Rethinking Language Pedagogy from a Corpus Perspective*, Frankfurt: Peter Lang., pp. 103-122.