

Helping L2 learners and translators find L1-L2 equivalence with the help of corpora

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1 Overview

Language learners have always relied on their first or native language (L1) in order to help them communicate in the second language (L2). Although in the not too distant past the use of the L1 in L2 learning was actively discouraged (Howatt 1984), it is now generally recognized that L2 learners cannot be treated as blank slates: they already know how to use their L1 and there is no point in ignoring this if it helps them progress in the L2 (Atkinson 1993; Frankenberg-Garcia 2004; Cook 2010). Seen from this perspective, one of the most important aids for L2 learners is the bilingual L1-L2 dictionary. Other frequent users of bilingual dictionaries are translators, whose profession constantly requires them to switch back and forth between different languages. However, bilingual dictionaries traditionally focus on single words, and do not usually provide much information beyond that. This half-day hands-on workshop aims to show how information regarding L1-L2 equivalence beyond the level of the isolated word can be obtained by navigating through monolingual corpora in two different languages.

2 Outline

The starting point for the workshop is a brief explanation of the concept of collocation (Firth 1957, Cruse 1986, Sinclair 1991) and of how different languages do not always combine words in the same way. This will be followed by a demonstration of how navigating through a corpus in L1 and a separate corpus in L2 can help language learners, translators and anyone working in bilingual settings find information on collocation that is often missing from bilingual dictionaries.

Next, for the practical, hands-on part of the workshop, the participants will be guided through using the Sketch Engine¹ (Kilgarriff et al. 2004) to obtain word sketches, i.e., automatic, corpus-based summaries of a word's grammatical and collocational behaviour, and will be shown how to deal with bilingual word sketches (Kilgarriff et al. 2013), moving from word sketches in L1 to word sketches in L2 (and back) in order to look up equivalence beyond the isolated word.

The Sketch Engine provides access to corpora in many different languages, including but not limited to very large web-based corpora of English, Portuguese, Spanish, French, German, Italian, Russian, Chinese, Japanese and Arabic. Participants can choose to work with any L1-L2 combination they wish, provided there are word sketches available for the languages they select². Participants will then be invited to present some of their equivalence findings regarding the L1-L2 pairs they explored.

3 Outcomes

By the end of the workshop, participants should be able to understand the concept of collocation and use corpora to learn how words combine in different languages.

4 Requirements

Please bring your own laptop, as you will need to use non-English characters in order to work with Word Sketches in languages other than English.

References

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¹ <http://www.sketchengine.co.uk/>

² Please check the Sketch Engine website or inquire if unsure.