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*The Call Triangle: student, teacher and institution*

## Learning register variation. A web-based platform for developing diaphasic skills\*

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### Abstract

The present paper shows the first results of a linguistic project devoted to the construction of web learning tools for reinforcing sensitivity to diaphasic varieties and for learning style variation in L2/LS learning.

*Keywords:* L2/LS learning; style variation; web based platform

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### 1. Introduction

This paper aims at presenting a project analysing formal varieties of European online languages, working on a suite of Net Mediated Communication (NMC) corpora and studying lexical, discourse and macro-syntactic phenomena. The practical implications of the studies aim at developing freely available resources devoted to L2/LS learning and the development of a web-based delivery platform.

### 2. The VALERE project

The project ('Varietà Alte di Lingue Europee in REte': Formal Varieties in Newsgroups of European Languages: Structural Features, Interlinguistic Comparison and Teaching Applications) aims at investigating the wide range of formal language in some main European languages with particular attention to NMC.

The research is based on the NUNC (i.e. Newsgroup UseNet Corpus<sup>1</sup>), a collection of corpora created from newsgroup messages implemented at the University of Turin.

Formal varieties have considerable relevance for language teaching: an education based exclusively on some language varieties and disregarding their effective pragmatic expressions in usage, can indeed lead to a serious incompleteness of communicative competence in foreign language.

This project aims at partly filling up the gap of textbooks – in general not sensitive to diaphasic varieties. Besides the theoretical interests, which include the analysis of lexicon, syntax and textuality in such a particular form of communication marking a neat line between written and oral varieties, the research aims at the development of web materials designed for both scholars (ranging from linguistics to

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\* The paper is the result of a joint work by the three authors. However A. Allora wrote § 4.1; E. Corino wrote § 4.2, 4.3, 5, 6; C. Onesti wrote § 1, 2, 3, 7.

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.bmanuel.org/projects/ng-HOME.html>

didactics) and common users (teachers and students of foreign languages) based on the online corpus and on the results obtained from the theoretical analysis.

### 3. How to teach using a corpus

As McEnery and Wilson already noted, “Some textbooks gloss over important aspects of usage, or foreground less frequent stylistic choices at the expense of more common ones. [...] nonempirically based teaching materials can be misleading and [...] corpus studies should be used to inform the production of material so that the more common choices of usage are given more attention than those which are less common” (2001: 120).

CALL systems still include with difficulty the innovative proposals starting from corpora. Authentic texts usage like in newsgroups would be extremely useful within foreign language teaching by showing learners a variety of contemporary written language with typical features of oral language too (spontaneity, immediacy, dialogical alternation). The NUNC wide repository of texts in machine readable form is up-to-date (2002-2006) and the POS-tagging gives learners and teachers a rare research opportunity per single parts of speech or combinations of them. Teachers could thereby overcome the problems found in some of the exemplifications in today’s language textbooks, which are frequently non-authentic, not representing a living and ever-changing language.

### 4. Building up exercises

#### 4.1. The Lab

The project aims at a multilingual suite of exercises whose main purpose is to cover the most difficult areas one is confronted with when dealing with formal varieties of a language. At this stage of the work in progress tasks have been developed for the Italian, English and French language and a German section is on its way.

Being in a formal context of language learning, students need to develop language awareness to compensate for insufficient exposure to the L2/LS; furthermore students who are confronted with some LSP, such as students of economics, law or even literature, need to master particular structures and vocabulary. The exercises in the online "Lab" are therefore directly derived from the corpus. This allows users to fulfill their education with the effective pragmatic expressions in usage, thus leading to a better completeness of communicative competence in the foreign language.

The first exercises are 7 different test types (Cloze, Multiple choice, Odd-one out, Complete-the-set, Sorting, Chunking, Matching), based on textual and lexical matters, which have a certain influence on formal styles.

In particular they focus on text organization, dealing with connectives, and graduated synonyms as far as lexical choices are concerned.

All the proposed items are now graduated following a rough distinction in *Beginners*, *Intermediate*, *Advanced* students, but they will soon be updated according to the levels described by the Common European Framework of Reference and the national Profiles describing the CEFR contents.

#### 4.2. Textual exercises

As for the textual activities on connectives, exercises for different levels are made starting from a common source extracted from the corpus and modified to fit for the students characteristics, so the same text will be used for both the Beginner task and for the Advanced task, though in a different form.

This first group of exercises is namely based on a cloze test and requires to fill in the blanks with the right linker. At an elementary stage the cloze combines with a multiple choice exercise giving the choice between three possible distractors:

Business fragmentation is perfectly legal and can reduce VAT. \_\_\_\_\_, C&E have "aggregation" powers, if they consider that VAT avoidance is the sole or main reason for this fragmentation.

1. however
2. nevertheless
3. still

At an intermediate stage a prompt with description of the required term is given and one can access a grammar reference page where a list of connectives with their uses and meanings is given:

*Connective introducing an opposing or limiting statement*

At a further competence level there are neither choices nor online helps, one should be able to complete the cloze with the right - or at least a suitable - word (for this reason at the advanced level more than an answer is envisaged).



Figure 1. A screenshot of the VALERE Lab online.

The grammar reference guide can be accessed at any time and it is based on the corpus occurrences as it entails all the uses registered in the corpus itself.

An extract from *However* is given here as an example:

1. In the middle of the sentence, meaning "comunque/sebbene", sometimes it can be replaced by BUT.  
*As everybody knows when starting at the bottom, however you are working in your business, you don't usually earn a profit straight away.*
2. At the beginning of the sentence, followed by a comma, meaning "tuttavia" (Sentence connector).  
*However, I would always recommend a competent web designer.*
3. At the beginning of the sentence, not followed by a comma, meaning "nonostante/ciononostante" (Stronger break between ideas)  
*However some of our members are concerned that if we register in year 1 but then fail to hit vat registration threshold in year 2 then C&E will come gunning for us.*
4. As a parenthesis meaning "tuttavia" (Variation).  
*You have to bear in mind, however, that Customs & Excise now take a dim view of avoidance.*

The free access to the corpus allows students and teachers to expand the scope of the exercise possibly checking the results in the online corpus, thus reading more examples and enhancing a deeper explanation or even debate.

*4.3. Lexical exercises*

The lexical exercises are based on synonyms and sorting tests. Variables which have stylistic variation but no social variation have been worked out in order to sharpen the students awareness of the register implications of semantic aspects.

The scale of formality developed for a list of verbs, adjectives and nouns (an example for Italian follows) has been the base for multiple choice, sorting and odd-one out exercises.

Formality scale

*[formal style]*  
ebbro  
frodare

*[neutral style]*  
ubriaco  
rubare

*[informal style]*  
ciucco  
fottere, fregare

"drunk"  
"to steal"

ardire, audacia	coraggio	fegato	“daring”
adirato, incollerito	arrabbiato nero	incazzato	“angry”

In this exercise, for instance, given the three synonyms in a scrambled order the student is asked to sort out the formality scale filling the example:

e.g. *indossare* “to wear”:  
 Formality scale  
 indossare                      mettersi                      mettersi addosso, su  
 [formal style]                      [neutral style]                      [informal style]

Non ..... (*formal*), ..... (*neutral*), ..... (*informal*) *vestiti usati*.  
 “I do not \_\_\_ secondhand clothing”

## 5. Conclusions

Providing exercises from newsgroups’ texts will make it possible for intermediate and advanced students to work on collocations, expressions and idioms – which are typical of such type of spontaneous online interaction. Further educational applications might aim at teaching LSP, linked to learning specialised terminology. Such motivating interaction with a multifaceted encyclopaedic base becomes a rich input for learners to develop an active and autonomous studying path.

Experimentation in secondary schools and university classes is in progress, in order to improve learning activities’ effectiveness.

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