

Potential Perspectives Corpus Linguistics Offers for Applied Linguistics Studies: The Use of BNC to Increase Validity

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Abstract

This paper studies how corpora can be incorporated into a study in Applied Linguistics field to increase validity. This study aims at testing the validity of a previous study (Atar, 2014) which focused on the reverse transfer from English to Turkish of Turkish bilingual speakers of English. In that study (Atar, 2014) the processing of predictive conditionals (conditionals which require a real possibility) by monolingual and bilingual Turkish speakers are contrasted and it was hypothesized that the bilinguals would use future tenses in their Turkish predictive conditionals (as a result of reverse transfer from English) which is an ungrammatical structure in Turkish. However, one flaw of this study was that the hypothesis took it for granted that English always has future tenses (or modals) in predictive conditionals (please see Atar, 2014 for details). This is an important issue, because if English already uses present tenses in predictive conditionals, the research cannot claim that Turkish bilinguals use future tenses in their Turkish predictive conditionals as a result of the reverse transfer. Consequently, this study sets out to make the description of English predictive conditionals from the British National Corpus (the BNC) to put the claims of this research on a reliable base and this has implications for the use of Corpus Linguistics in Applied Linguistics studies.

Keywords

Corpus Linguistics;
predictive conditionals;
English conditionals; the British National Corpus

Introduction

From being an approach of a few enthusiasts in 50s and 60s, corpus studies started to widen its users in the following decades (O’Keeffe & McCarthy, 2010). Today, corpus studies are used in various areas ranging from dictionary design to analysis of register differences in many languages. There are two main areas that make use of Corpus Linguistics: The first one is for language teaching and learning, and the

second one is for contributing to academic research in Applied Linguistics studies (Hunston, 2002). This study uses Corpus Linguistics for contributing to academic research in the field of Applied Linguistics.

Corpus Linguistics and Its Applications

Language Teaching and Learning

The idea of using corpus for pedagogical purposes has attracted many researchers studying second language learning. The main reason for this is that Corpus Linguistics uses the empirical method and it usually studies real-life data in contrast to rationalist methods (Biber & Reppen, 2002). Especially before the 80s, language teaching used abstract grammar rules which were deductive in nature and these rules depended on intuition rather than the real language use. However, teachers and researchers came to realize that there was a huge gap between the prescriptive grammar rules in language teaching books and the language used in real life (McEnery & Wilson, 1996). Therefore, corpus studies started to gain popularity while preparing materials for teaching. Corpus studies are used for language teaching in various ways: syllabus and material design, dictionaries, frequency and core vocabulary studies, collocations, learners corpora and specialized corpora (Hunston, 2002; O’Keeffe, McCarthy & Carter, 2007).

One of the fundamental purposes of corpus studies is to prepare efficient syllabuses for language teaching. As a result of the corpus studies in 80s and 90s, researchers such as Sinclair (1991), Summers (1996) and Clear, Fox, Francis, Krishnamurthy and Moon (1996) concluded that teaching materials and syllabus should put an emphasis on frequency, collocations and authenticity. In order to achieve these goals, a lexical syllabus was created by Sinclair and Renouf (1988) who argued that lexicon should be the base for a language teaching syllabus as having the knowledge of lexicon not only increases the level of vocabulary, but also grammar and comprehension of learners. Thus, in a corpus-based syllabus, the most frequent words, central patterns and tendencies of language usage are given utmost importance (Hunston, 2002). As a consequence of this approach, corpus linguists put forward Lexico-grammar as a method of teaching vocabulary and grammar. The Lexico-grammar approach argues that words are not isolated individual items, but rather they are connected to each other in a systematic way (Sinclair, 1996). In his units of meaning analysis, Sinclair

(1996) suggests that grammar does not give meaning to words, but it is the lexicon itself which creates the relationship between form and meaning. To sum up the argument here, corpus studies unearthed the importance of lexicon in language teaching and lexical syllabuses were created to apply the findings in language teaching.

Dictionary design is another area which made use of corpora the most. In corpus-based dictionaries, the meanings of the words are defined according to the real usages of language and examples are from real life. In this way, corpus studies have made dictionaries more authentic and context-specific. Today, most of the well-known dictionaries such as COBUILD and Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English are designed using corpora.

Another popular application of Corpus Linguistics is finding out frequent words and the core vocabulary. In vocabulary acquisition studies, researchers such as Nation (2001) and Read (2004) suggests that at least 95% of the vocabulary in a text must be familiar to students in order for them to understand various text types without difficulty. Moreover, studies such as Hill and Laufer (2003) and Ellis (2006) suggest that vocabulary learning via incidental learning is very slow and students should try really hard and repeat newly-learnt words several times to acquire them fully. Combining these two results from the literature, it is seen that vocabulary learning is a very difficult issue. Consequently, researchers such as Coxhead (2000) prepared word lists of the most frequent words using corpora. The point here is that as learning vocabulary is already difficult, students should give priority to learning the most frequent vocabulary instead of the rare ones. In this way, they can improve their language skills and abilities faster as these frequent words are encountered much more frequently.

The next utilization is forming collocations. In the traditional methods, words are taught as isolated items. However, corpus studies showed that some words go with each other more frequently than the others (Kennedy, 1998). Spreading Activation Model (Dell, 1986) suggests that if related words and collocations are taught together, the pick-up rate of vocabulary will be higher. So, the pedagogic implication of this is that if students are taught these words together, they can learn words better. Consequently, as in frequency studies, by collocation studies corpora make

vocabulary learning more effective and authentic language learning materials are provided to learners.

Another use of corpora in language teaching is the learner corpora. Granger (2003) defines learner corpora as the authentic texts which are gathered from learners and stored in an electronic database. One of the main aims of learner corpora is to analyze the errors of learners and to design materials and syllabus accordingly. The first systematic learner corpus, the Collins Birmingham University International Language Database (COBUILD), was designed by Sinclair in 1980. Many dictionaries and books made use of this corpus and it is definitely one of the cornerstones in the history of Corpus Linguistics (Hunston, 2002). Then, learner corpora are very significant in language teaching and they are used to form the basis of material and syllabus design (De Cock, Granger, Leech & McEnery, 1998).

The last application of corpora in language teaching is the specialized corpora such as the British Medical Journal and Cambridge and Nottingham Corpus of Business English (CANBEC) which are used in English for specific purposes. The aim of these corpora is to compare different genres and registers to help students learn how languages may vary in different registers (Thompson, 2006). To exemplify, corpus studies showed that there is a huge difference in the conjunctions used between written and spoken language (Carter & McCarthy, 1995). Before the advent of corpora, such kind of variation or comparison was very difficult. However, thanks to corpus studies, this kind of information can be obtained and presented to students making language learning more convenient in different contexts.

Academic Research in Language Studies

The second main application of corpora is the academic research in Applied Linguistics studies. Corpus studies have valuable application for the following research fields: formal linguistics, stylistics, translation studies, forensic linguistics, diachronic language studies, monitor studies and sociolinguistics (Tognini-Bonelli, 2001).

Formal linguistics immensely benefits from corpus studies. Most of the formal grammar rules in the past were formed depending on intuition (Aarts, 1991). This way of studying grammar boosted especially after Chomsky's (1957) claim that grammar rules are abstract rational rules which are independent of the context. However, with the rise of Corpus Linguistics after 80s, researchers like Sinclair (1991) claimed that

empirical data is needed to justify the abstract rules in grammar. Moreover, Sinclair (1996) demonstrated that grammar rules are certainly depended upon meaning and lexicon. Consequently, corpora provide the objective, quantitative and empirical evidence for formal linguistics. As mentioned in the previous part, corpus studies have already changed the grammatical rules of the past and these studies have given way to the formation of lexico-grammar which emphasizes the interdependence of form and meaning in grammar. Having changed the understanding of grammar as explained above, in linguistic studies corpus studies are used to ‘describe’ any rules found in language and to ‘test’ the truth of a formerly explained rule in order to see if it is really used like that in real language data. (Hunston, 2002)

In the corpus-led descriptive grammar studies, native speaker intuition is not regarded as reliable evidence as they are totally rational and as there is no way to test it empirically. So, the use of corpus has become very important as it can provide empirical and statistical evidence in language studies (Kennedy, 1998). Corpora can supply thousands of examples about a specific structure and linguists can work out how a structure is used looking at these occurrences. Therefore, unlike Chomskyan approaches, corpus studies can provide inductive results which are totally derived from data (McEnery & Wilson, 1996). In addition, in contrast to rationalist approaches, corpora show with evidence that no rule works perfectly and especially depending on context and register, language variation is observed in every aspect of language (Hunston, 2002). For example, generative grammarians suggest that the utterances in a language are organized in accordance with generative grammar rules. However, Sampson (1987) did a manual research on noun clauses in real-life usages and concluded that generative rules could not account for all the noun clause types in daily language. Hence, describing a structure from real life empirical evidence and forming rules accordingly is a much more reliable method than deductive/rational methods in language studies. To sum up, various grammar rules can be induced from language data and already formed rules can be tested via corpora in linguistics studies.

The aim of corpora in stylistics is mainly comparison. The style of an author shows what kind of vocabulary s/he uses (e.g. technical or non-technical) and his/her preference for certain structures like longer sentences or the use of subordination (McEnery & Wilson, 2002). While evaluating the style of an author, stylistists use

corpora either to compare an author's style to other authors in a corpus or to compare that author's style to a general corpus (such as the BNC) depending on their purpose. One example of this comparison corpus is the Augustan Prose Sample of Milic. The aim of Milic was to represent the sample of English in his time (1675-1725) to compare it with Jonathan Swift's prose style (McEnery & Wilson, 2002).

Translation studies are another significant application of corpora. Three types of corpora are used in translation studies (O'Keeffe et al., 2007). The first one is the monolingual corpora which is either the source or the target of the translation. The second one is the comparable corpora which consist of two or more corpora whose design are very similar. The purpose of comparable corpora is to compare the corpora of different languages. The last one is parallel corpora which, similar to comparable corpora, consist of two or more languages, but include both the translation and original form of texts (Sinclair, 1996). The aim of these corpora is to find out the patterns in translation and these are used to train translators, contribute to machine translation and study bilingual lexicography (O'Keeffe et al., 2007).

Another field making use of corpora more and more is forensic linguistics. The aim of forensic linguistics is to study language use to help law and criminal investigation (Hunston, 2002). Similar to general corpus studies, forensic linguistics studies collocation and frequency, and how these are used in a document. The reason is, this may reveal its writer and this helps the court to find the culprit (Coulthard, 1994). In this application, the style in a text or document is compared to a general corpus to see whether there is a significant divergence from ordinary usage or not. If there are extraordinary frequent usages of some structures or individual styles, this may be regarded as evidence in courtyards.

Another application of corpora is the diachronic and monitor corpora. These corpora are used for studying language change over time. In diachronic (historical) corpora different texts of a language from different dates are collected. Using these kinds of corpora, linguists can study the development of different characteristics of a language over time (Hunston, 2002). The well-known example of English historical corpora is the Helsinki Corpus which covers texts from 700 to 1700 (Hunston, 2002). As for monitor corpora, its focus is more on the current changes in a language. Without changing the design and proportion of text types, some data is added regularly to the corpus and this makes it possible to keep track of the changes in a language (McEnery

& Wilson, 1996). Sinclair's COBUILD project, which is an ever-increasing corpus, is a good example of monitor corpora.

The last major field which makes use of corpora is sociolinguistics. As corpora include information like age, gender, level of education and socio-economic background, it is not surprising that sociolinguistics can make use of corpora (O'Keeffe et al., 2007). To see a good example of this kind of a study, the study undertaken by Kirk (1999) who studied the differences between Northern Ireland and Irish English may be referred to.

The Research Questions

The aim of this study is to study English predictive conditionals in the BNC through concordance and collocation analysis to check the validity of a previous study (Atar, 2014) in order to discuss the opportunities Corpus Linguistics offers for Applied Linguistics studies. Accordingly, the research questions of this study are:

- How do the English speakers in the BNC data use predictive conditionals with regard to the morphological structures?
- Are the usages in the BNC in line with the traditional grammar books?

Method

The BNC forms the data of this study. Firstly, 15 random conditional sentences were selected from BNC (Appendix 1) and then, another 15 sentences (Appendix 2) were chosen and analyzed to increase the reliability of the study. During the selection process, all the conditional types other than predictive conditionals are excluded. Moreover, conditional clauses having modal verbs in the main clause are also excluded as the objective of this study is to see if present tenses or future tenses are used in the main clause. As modal structures are finite in nature, they cannot have tense inflection except for 'have to' (Aarts, 1991). Accordingly, they are excluded from the analysis. Finally, the contexts of the concordances were checked with care to choose the appropriate examples of predictive conditionals. In the analysis stage, the concordance instances are analyzed individually via the use of statistics and the use of percentages for ration.

The data of this study, the BNC, will also be introduced here and why it is chosen as the database will be justified. The BNC was designed to be a representative of English which was mainly used between 1985 and 1993. The project started in 1991 and it

was completed in 1994 by the BNC Consortium whose members were academicians from Oxford University Press. No new texts have been added since then, but some slight revisions were done to the corpus before the second edition (2001) and the third edition (2007). The BNC consists of approximately 100 million words including both spoken and written data. Spoken data makes up nearly 10% of the corpora and the rest, the 90%, is from written data. The BNC was specifically designed to be a representative of English and thus it has many texts from different areas, genres and types. The written part includes texts from local and regional newspapers, various journals and periodicals, popular literary books, academic essays, books and so on. The spoken part consists of transcribed informal conversations of people who were chosen from different walks of life to make the corpus balanced and representative. These conversations were taken from talks from many different contexts such as formal business talks, radio shows or government meetings (Hunston, 2002; O’Keeffe, McCarthy & Carter, 2007).

The BNC was chosen for this study, because the first research question of this study is: ‘How do the English speaker in the BNC data use predictive conditionals with regard to the morphological structures?’ which makes a description of general English relevant, not a specific type or register of English. Looking at the properties of the BNC above, its design is a very reliable one as it is a representative corpus, and as it includes data from many different types of texts and people who are from different social classes. Consequently, the BNC can be the representative of the general English.

Results and Discussion

The aim of this study was to study English predictive conditionals in the BNC to check the validity of a previous study (Atar, 2014) in order to discuss the opportunities Corpus Linguistics offers for Applied Linguistics studies. 15 random conditionals sentences from the BNC were analyzed and then, another 15 sentences were chosen and analyzed to increase the reliability of the study. Then, the contexts of the concordances were checked with care to choose the real examples of predictive conditionals. Finally, in the analysis stage, the instances were analyzed individually using statistics calculations of percentages and ration.

The analysis of the concordances in Appendix 1 shows that 4 (27%) conditional sentences have present tense in their main clause although they imply at a probability unlike habitual/generic conditionals. The remaining 10 examples, which makes up the 66% of the instances, have future tenses in the main clause as described in traditional grammar books (e.g. Huddleston & Pullum, 2002). 1 (7%) sentence has both present and future tenses in its main clause. Other interesting observations include the position of the conditional clause in the sentence. 4 sentences (26%) have conditionals in the sentence-final position and it is in the sentence-initial position in the remaining 11 (74%). As for the results of the analysis of the concordances in Appendix 2, 4 (27%) conditional sentences have present tenses in the main clause and 11 (73%) have future tenses. As for the sentence position, unlike Appendix 1, there is only 1 (7%) sentence-final example and conditional clauses are sentence-initial in 14 (93%) examples.

These results show that future tense usage in the main clauses of English predictive conditionals is the norm. The average of the 30 instances is 70% and this shows that the speakers overwhelmingly prefer the future tense constructions. However, the remaining 30% cannot be ignored as it is still a significant percentage. Accordingly, a further analysis was undertaken and some micro details were presented below.

Looking at the data in detail, it was observed that there were some collocations in the predictive conditional instances which had a present tense preference. In appendix 1, out of the 5 examples (including the one which has both present and future tense), 2 of them have 'be bound to' and 1 of them has 'be likely to' in the main clause. The examples are:

1. They are only likely to be resentful if they suspect that their parents are acting from nothing better than outraged respectability.

9. if you go up, you will get to the Panthéon which is the resting place of a few great men, but if you go downhill then you're bound to end up at the Préfecture de Police. (This is the example which has both present tense and future tense)

12. If we go back now, he's bound to hear us.

Looking at these examples, it is observed that these structures are used with predictive conditionals which have present tenses in the main clause. Especially the 9th example demonstrates how 'be bound to' leads to the use of present tense in the main clause, because in the first part of that sentence, future tense is used in the main clause, but

present tense is used when there is be bound to. Similarly, in Appendix 2, out of 4 examples of present tense use in predictive conditionals, 1 one of them has ‘need to’ (instance 5) in it. The detailed analysis here suggests that although present tense usage seems to occasionally observed, most of these instances are in fact modal like structures (e.g. be likely to and be bound to). Because of the finite nature of these structure, future tense usage is suppressed which implies that future tense usage, taking semantic aspect into consideration as well, is the dominant structure in the main clauses of English predictive conditionals and this provides the answer for the first research question.

So, it can be concluded from these results that:

1. Present tense use in English predictive conditional main clauses is not a rare occurrence. This is in accordance with Hunston (2002) who suggested that corpora studies, in contrast to rationalist approaches, show with evidence that no rule works perfectly and especially depending on context and register, language variation is observed in every aspect of language. However, the overwhelming use of future tenses in the main clauses of predictive conditionals are in line with the literature (research question 2) and this shows that Atar’s (2014) study is based on a valid assumption.
2. Conditional clauses are used overwhelmingly sentence-initially.
3. Present tenses in the main clauses of predictive conditionals have collocations like be bound to, be likely to and need to. However, looking at these examples, it may be observed that these structures are modal-like structures although they are not accepted as modals in grammar books. The meaning of be bound to is similar to must and be likely is similar to could and need to is similar to should. Then, this can explain why these structures are used in present tense structures because modals in English are hardly ever used with future tenses (Aarts, 2011). Therefore, this may be a pedagogical implication and teachers may put emphasis on the structures above.
4. As for the comparison and contrast of this study with Atar (2014), it is clear that present tense usage is not very common in English. This means that there is an overwhelming tendency for the use of future tenses in the English predictive conditionals of Turkish bilinguals and this is in accordance with the traditional grammar books (e.g. Huddleston & Pullum, 2002).

Conclusion

This paper has firstly presented the different applications of the corpora and the use of corpora in Applied Linguistics studies is explained. To answer the research questions of this study, a descriptive corpus analysis from a general corpus is needed. Accordingly, the BNC was chosen, as it is a well-designed and representative corpus of general English. The results of the study obtained from the concordances from the BNC show that rationalist pre-determined prescriptive rules do not necessarily conform to the real usage of a language. The findings for the first research question have shown that the instances in the BNC usually have future tenses as expected in the prescriptive grammar rules, however, present tense usage in the main clauses of predictive conditionals are not too rare, either. Hence, the findings of this study imply that researchers must be very careful about traditional grammar rules and corpora studies must be used in order to obtain empirical and testable data which can yield more reliable, valid and detailed findings.

The findings also imply that Corpus Linguistics can be used as a research instrument to improve the validity of studies in the field of Applied Linguistics. Considering the increase in the number of mixed methods studies recently, this is especially significant as Corpus Linguistics may be used as a part of triangulation.

Notes on the contributor

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Appendix 1

1. They are only likely to be resentful if they suspect that their parents are acting from nothing better than outraged respectability.

2. But if we seek to direct attention to this text as data to stimulate the acquisition of systemic knowledge, we run the risk of making the learner press for precision of meaning beyond any real purpose
3. 'I'll 'elp yer ter move the chairs if yer don't tell ower Mum,' pleaded Frankie.
4. Bar owners will usually insist on being able to sell Guinness because of its popularity in Indonesia and generally the brewers will agree — but only if no Guinness promotional activity takes place in the bar.
5. If they are tied into a working farm, or if there are legal agreements that constrain the ways in which they can be used, clearly that will be a material factor in determining whether the properties have a market value and what it is.
6. It is certainly true that if neither of the main parties emerges with an overall majority after Thursday there will have to be some intense horse trading.
7. Of course, you vary the cast at first, until you discover the hotspot, but if you have not noted each cast fairly precisely you will not know where the fish came from when you do catch one.
8. I was chasing around, getting petitions signed, writing letters, running round the schools and talking to parents, but I think if you don't pressurize, you are not going to get anywhere,' she said.
9. if you go up, you will get to the Panthéon which is the resting place of a few great men, but if you go downhill then you're bound to end up at the Préfecture de Police.
10. I think also we have to acknowledge that whoever is providing a service, if they are trying to produce an enhanced level of service, it will cost more.
11. French radio broadcasts on Jan. 6 reported Vauzelle as saying: "He [Saddam Hussein] is ready for concessions if there is a conference on Palestine.
12. If we go back now, he's bound to hear us.
13. The figures do not include water charges, which will add £77 and £232 to the lowest and highest figures if the recommendations are approved by the council next week.
14. If I'm going out for a professional dinner, something formal, I will wear an evening dress.
15. If dad starts looking through there he'll never get down the street.

Appendix 2

1. If they don't match he isn't the thief and he'll get his job back.
2. If this is so, then we shall almost certainly get a cookbook, and the standard-setters will be doomed forever to the thankless task of blocking, after the event, all the ingenious but undesirable accounting schemes that the wit of man can devise.
3. If we don't run into any trouble and the brook takes us through the wood," he thought, "we really shall be clear of the warren and then we can look for somewhere to rest for a bit.

4. If you don't they won't have any commission at all.
5. If we are to look after the legitimate interests of the preserved railways, one or two changes need to be made to the Bill.
6. Overseas investment firms dealing in the UK will generally not need authorisation if they do not have a UK office and deal only with other professionals and large institutional clients
7. The acrobatics need a great deal of skill but anyone fancying a ride needn't worry if they have a weak stomach, they'll probably leave that behind after the first manoeuvre anyway.
8. If, for example, we have no personal interest in politics or religion, then we are unlikely to want to research in these areas.
9. 'If HMV does have any good ideas,' Russ Solomon says, 'we'll steal them.'
10. If you have lost your place, UCCA or PCAS will write and tell you so promptly.
11. If she's still sure she wants us to get engaged, I'll speak to your father tomorrow.'
12. If this happens, the simple fact of shifting to single-sex classes is unlikely to benefit girls.
13. If his appointor is for the time being absent from the United Kingdom or temporarily unable to act through ill-health or disability his signature to any resolution in writing of the Directors shall be as effective as the signature of his appointor.
14. And if the ideas are good then er incorporated into the care, they're incorporated into the hospital's manifesto if you want, if you like.
15. But the story goes that money speaks, and some people, some parents, if they get hit in the pocket, will probably take more notice of their child,