

**How to
communicate
successfully in
English? An
exploration of
the *Trinity*
*Lancaster Corpus***

8

CASS

Corpus Approaches
to Social Science

CASS: Briefings

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Research

Dana Gablasova

Vaclav Brezina

CASS Centre Director

Tony McEnery

Series Editing & Design

Mark McGlashan

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About CASS...

The ESRC funded Centre for Corpus Approaches to Social Science (CASS) is a research centre based at Lancaster University which aims to bring the methods and benefits of the corpus approach to other disciplines.

From the Centre Director

The corpus approach harnesses the power of computers to allow analysts to work to produce machine aided analyses of large bodies of language data - so-called *corpora*. Computers allow us to do this on a scale and with a depth that would typically defy analysis by hand and eye alone.

In doing so, we gain unprecedented insights into the use and manipulation of language in society. The centre's work is generating such insights into a range of important social issues like climate change, hate crime and education. This series of briefings aims to spread the social impact and benefits of the work being done by the centre and, in so doing, encourage others to use our methods in future.

Prof. Tony McEnery



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Many speakers use English as their non-native language (L2) to communicate in a variety of situations: at school, at work or in other everyday situations. As well as needing to master the grammar and vocabulary of the English language, L2 users of English need to know how to react appropriately in different communicative situations. In linguistics, this aspect of language is studied under the label of “pragmatics”. This briefing offers an exploration of the pragmatic features of L2 speech in the *Trinity Lancaster Corpus* of spoken L2 production (see the Method section for more information about the corpus).

Research question

What is the difference in communicative strategies between more successful and less successful second language speakers?

The Trinity Lancaster Corpus

The *Trinity Lancaster Corpus* of spoken L2 English is a very large database (the largest of its kind) currently containing 2.5 million running words of transcribed spoken language production.

It is based on examinations of spoken English conducted by the *Trinity College London*, a major international examination board, and consists of interactions between exam candidates from a variety of linguistic and cultural backgrounds (L2 speakers of English) and examiners (L1 speakers of English).

Method

The findings reported here are based on detailed analysis of 14 successful and 14 less successful intermediate speakers from Spanish and Italian backgrounds selected from the *Trinity Lancaster Corpus*.

The successful speakers were defined as those who were awarded the mark 'A' on their exam performance, while the less successful candidates were awarded marks 'C' or 'D'.

The study focuses on an *interactive task* that starts with a prompt delivered by the examiner. The prompt is a statement that involves an observation or an issue (usually presented as a personal issue or belief of the examiner). The candidate is then expected to provide comments or suggestions and ask questions to find out more about the situation or issue presented.

Four different aspects of the pragmatics of L2 speech are presented below. These are related to:

1. **Asking questions**
2. **Engaged and active listenership**
3. **Fluency and hesitation**
4. **Taking responsibility for the conversation**

Aspect 1: Asking questions

Finding:

More successful speakers ask more questions (both direct and indirect) while less successful speakers rely more on declarative sentences or short phrases to move the conversation forward.

Example: more successful speaker

S: ah okay so you like going to the mountains

E: er it might be nice to go to the mountains perhaps it depends

S: it can be cold <.> **do you like cold or hot?**

Example: less successful speaker

E: well I I have to go to China

S: ah okay I think that er you will learn er something like this this language

E: mm but he's h-he's not he's not he hasn't been paid so if his boss has no money

S: yeah

E: the business will close

S: er erm

E: he will have no job and

S: she she can't change the the boss he her boss

E: sorry sorry

S: erm she can't change her boss

E: er she's he's tried but erm

S: it's difficult

Key: S = L2 speaker; E = Examiner

Communicative implications:

Well-formed questions lie at the core of successful interaction. Whereas some declarative sentences can function as questions (e.g. when the interrogative nature of the sentence is indicated by rising intonation), their function in the conversation may not be as easy to determine.

The use of such sentences can thus cause breakdown in the flow of the conversation when the other speaker is trying to figure out how the sentence contributes to the conversation (e.g. is it meant to function as a comment, question or a suggestion).

Aspect 2: Engaged and active listenership

Finding:

More successful speakers show more support as listeners than less successful speakers.

Example: more successful speaker

E: have you heard of t'ai chi?

S: er

E: it's a very old Chinese exercise

S: **uhu** no I don't know it

E: and it looks very similar but it works on an inside energy

S: **ah**

E: in the body so you are you are bending

S: **mm**

E: in a very good position your pelvis

S: **mm**

E: eye neck and your

S: **ah**

E: because it's very important to be grounded in life

S: **uhu**

Example: less successful speaker

S: and <.> and <.> and only give him a bit of money

E: yeah but but he I mean he he actually needs a hundred pounds I mean you know if he doesn't have if he doesn't if he can't pay the bill then he's going to be in trouble really <.>

S: **erm then** <.> well erm <.> let me think please <.> you know it it's a hard situation because er i-if if he is asking you for more money

E: mm <.> well it's not more money I mean this is the first time to be to be fair it's the first time that he's asked me but I know that if I give him the money it won't be the last time

S: **okay then** er try to try to give the money to him and then erm don't give more money

Communicative implications:

Success of communication does not rest solely on successful speaking strategies; appropriate listening skills are of equal importance in helping the conversation to flow naturally.

Good listeners help to co-manage the conversation by sending signals to the speaker. These signals are sometimes termed 'back-channel cues' and provide information to the speaker about the position of the listener (e.g. is the listener following the conversation, would the listener like to change the topic, etc.). The use of these markers distinguishes 'active' or 'engaged' listeners from 'passive' listeners. These markers are for example: *mm, okay, yes, yeah, uh, oh*, and *no*.

Aspect 3: Fluency and hesitation

Finding:

More successful speakers use fewer hesitation markers (*er, erm* or unfilled pauses) than less successful speakers.

Example: less successful speaker

S: you should **erm** <.> **erm** ask her if they if she would like to play to play to swim another <.>

another sport <.> but **erm** if she like it very much **erm** **erm** she <.> **erm** <.> she <**pause=6**> **er** she

E: yes she does and erm you know she's very good she's very really good at playing football

S: **erm** and **erm er** it is a good idea to to make **erm er** all the possible for

Communicative implications:

A certain level of fluent flow is necessary for effective communication. At the same time, dysfluency markers such as *er* and *erm* are also a natural part of spoken, unplanned discourse produced by both native and non-native speakers. These markers indicate the place in which the speaker searches either for the right word (lexical gap) or for an idea (information gap). However, a high density of these markers can hinder conversation and distract from the message. As the high number of dysfluency markers is often a result of lower L2 proficiency and vocabulary size this is not something that can change in the short term.

However, L2 speakers could be taught strategies that would enable them to deal with these lexical gaps in a more natural way, e.g. by using a range of expressions as conversational 'place-holders' which would make their speech appear more natural yet allow them to search for information, reformulate the message or seek a clarification. These are for example: *right, say again?, I mean*, etc.

Finding:

More successful speakers take a more active part in the conversation and assume responsibility for its continuation.

Example: less successful speaker

E: because it's cheaper i-is it cheaper?

S: erm something yes er something no erm is cheaper erm isn't cheaper yes but er if er erm but erm the erm someone had to er get you er think so you paid this person so erm is the same price

E: really

S: **so**

E: okay erm am I right to be worried?

S: **erm**

E: am I right to be worried about the internet?

S: **erm** <.>

E: do you think that I'm correct?

S: **yes**

E: worrying

S: **yes yes**

E: mm

Communicative implications:

Being an active partner in a conversation does not mean that one has to talk a lot or most of the time (see also the point on active listenership). An active partner also helps to move the talk along by creating opportunities for the other interlocutor(s) to contribute to the conversation by asking questions and offering comments and suggestions which the other speakers can react to. All of these contribute to a smoothly flowing conversation. While more successful speakers make contributions which are easy to follow and easy to react to, less successful speakers often let the conversation fade. In the example above, it is the examiner that has to take the initiative in moving the conversation forward (by asking questions or introducing new topics), otherwise communication would break down completely.

Implications:

With the help of the *Trinity Lancaster Corpus* we can investigate a whole range of linguistic patterns in L2 speech. We can observe communication styles of different speakers and analyse the effect of external variables (such as speaker age and cultural background) on speakers' linguistic choices. The corpus approach thus plays an important role in uncovering crucial aspects of L2 speech and can inform both teachers and researchers.

More information

For more information, see the project website:

cass.lancs.ac.uk/?page_id=1327

Part of our aim at CASS is to make Corpus Linguistics accessible, which is why we have created our **free online FutureLearn course**. With the course, we aim to demonstrate that corpus approaches can offer researchers from all disciplines unique, valuable insights into the use and manipulation of language in society. We provide all you need to start 'doing' Corpus Linguistics yourself.

This briefing should act as an introduction and companion to the course where you will begin to apply the concepts and methods mentioned here in a practical way relevant to your field of interest.

The course is free, can be done from home, and comes with a whole range of content and support from world-leading scholars in the field of Corpus Linguistics. For more, visit:

futurelearn.com/courses/corpus-linguistics

For more about CASS and our
freely available resources, please
visit: **cass.lancs.ac.uk**



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CASS: Briefings is a series of short, quick reads on the work being done at the ESRC/CASS research centre at Lancaster University, UK. Commissioning work from internationally recognised academics in the field of Corpus Linguistics, *CASS: Briefings* set out to make cutting edge research easily accessible, providing a good introduction to the variety of vital and exciting research going on in the area of Corpus Linguistics.

