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Evaluative adjectives in learner English

Introduction

After 15 years of preparation, in 2010 the *Louvain International Database of Spoken English Interlanguage* (LINDSEI) was finally released. This database contains over 1 million words of informal teacher-student interviews equally distributed among sub-corpora of spoken learner interlanguage produced by upper-intermediate and advanced students learning English as a foreign language and belonging to 11 linguistic backgrounds (Bulgarian, Chinese, Dutch, French, German, Greek, Italian, Japanese, Polish, Spanish and Swedish).[1] LINDSEI is a powerful tool for the study of spoken learner English because it allows the comparison of linguistic features across authentic speech produced by learners of different mother tongue backgrounds. The analysis of learner English through computer learner corpora, which has begun in the late 1980s, is now a well-established field of research, which has offered a new approach to Second Language Acquisition and fresh insights into English Language Teaching (Granger 1998; Granger, Hung, Petch-Tyson 2002).

The present study aims at extending previous research on the expression of evaluation in learner English (De Cock 2007, Pulcini 2009, De Cock 2011), focussing on the use of evaluative adjectives used by learners to express positive or negative attitudes about the topics discussed during the interviews. The nature and the informal character of the LINDSEI interviews provide rich material for the study of evaluative and attitudinal expressions, since learners are engaged in a conversation which starts from a chosen topic and then expands on other issues, events and ideas in a natural and spontaneous way. The aim of this research paper is to assess learners' lexical repertoire, as well as preferred and dispreferred choices in the use of evaluative adjectives. In order to exploit the potentialities of LINDSEI, the data extracted from three sub-corpora will be compared, limiting the investigation

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[1] A control corpus of spoken English used by native speakers, i.e. the *Louvain Corpus of Native English Conversation* (*LOCNEC*), has also been compiled but is not included in the LINDSEI CD-Rom.

to learners of English who are native speakers of Romance languages, i.e. Italian,[2] French and Spanish.

Evaluative adjectives

The study of evaluation has been raising a growing interest in corpus linguistics both from a methodological and theoretical point of view (Hunston and Thompson 2000, Hunston 2011). The core function of evaluation in spoken/written texts is mainly interpersonal, as it brings forward the speaker's judgement, attitude or stance towards a given topic or controversial subject. Evaluation can be expressed through a wide range of linguistic means, including the use of evaluative adjectives signalling quality along the parameters of goodness or badness, in their base, comparative and superlative forms and accompanying patterns of intensification.[3]

Following the classification made by Kerbrat-Orecchioni (1980), a distinction can be made between subjective and modal adjectives. Subjective adjectives express either an emotional state (*happy*) or evaluation; in the latter case, evaluation may relate to a norm (*beautiful*, *easy*) or to a system of values or ideology (*good*, *interesting*, *important*). Modal adjectives convey the speaker's attitude towards the propositional content (*possible*). In this paper only truly evaluative adjectives are considered. As regards syntactic patterning, adjectives may be used in attributive (*a good film*) or predicative position (*it was really good*), and enter into different types of complementation (*good to see*, *interesting for me*). Adjectives can be graded by means of adverb modifiers, mainly intensifiers (*very*, *really*) but also downtoners (*not so beautiful*) and through comparative and superlative forms (*better*, *the most beautiful*).

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[2] For research specifically focussed on the Italian sub-corpus of LINDSEI, see Pulcini (2004) and Pulcini, Furiassi (2004).

[3] Evaluation, defined by Thompson and Hunston (2000: 5) as "*the expression of the speaker or writer's attitude or stance towards, viewpoint on, or feelings about the entities or propositions that he or she is talking about*", may emerge in different ways and in various degrees of explicitness. Parameters of evaluation are the goodness or badness of entities, degrees of likelihood/certainty of propositions (mostly expressed by modals), and expectedness or importance. Evaluation emerges in texts through conceptual, lexical, grammatical and textual signals. Conceptual signals include markers of subjectivity and evaluative expressions (*I think*, *in my opinion*, etc.), comparison (the use of comparatives and superlatives), and references to social values (conformity to shared cultural norms). Lexical signals include evaluative adjectives, nouns (especially value-laden terms such as *problem*, *claim*, *question*) and elements of interpersonal metadiscourse (*maybe, possibly, you know*) typical of the spoken mode.

Methodology

The LINDSEI interview consists of three parts. The first is a warming-up activity around a set topic to be chosen by the interviewee from three given ones: 1) an experience which has taught the student an important lesson, 2) a country that the student visited which was particularly impressive, 3) a film or a play which the student found particularly good or bad. The second part is a free conversation and the third is the narration of a picture-based story. As explained in the LINDSEI handbook (Gilquin, De Cock, Granger 2010), both the set topic part of the interview and the picture description are 'controlled' tasks, leading the interviewees to talk about the same set of topics with a limited freedom of choice. However, the expansion on other topics during the conversational exchange allows a certain degree of naturalness in the interviewees' linguistic output. Some evaluative adjectives are already introduced in the set topics, i.e. *important*, *impressive*, *good* and *bad*, and function as input for the students' production.

To start with, all attributive adjectives were extracted from the Italian subcorpus and then a process of disambiguation was performed. First, noun/adjective homographs (*kind*), adverb/adjective homographs (*pretty*, *hard*) and *-ed* and *-ing* participle/adjective homographs (*impressed*, *moving*) were identified, and nouns, adverbs and verbs were excluded. Second, evaluative adjectives were singled out from modal ones (*possible*, *impossible*) and from adjectives which express emotional states (*angry*, *happy*) or were not used specifically to express evaluation. To perform this disambiguation task, each candidate adjective was observed in its KWIC format using the Concord tool of the concordancing software Wordsmith Tools 5. This process was not always easy, as the following example shows:

1   she (er) gets **angry** (erm) she is not **satisfied** with the painter's work but (eh) the the portrait is **realistic** . it shows the girl as she is (LINDSEI-IT)

In example (1) *angry* and *satisfied* describe the emotional state of the girl in the picture-based story and were therefore rejected. Also the adjective *realistic* was eliminated because, although the speaker seems to evaluate the quality of the portrait, it is not evident whether it is a subjective or a neutrally objective statement. In accordance with these criteria, all adjectives describing emotional states (*happy*, *sad*, *satisfied*, *proud*) were discarded. Similarly, descriptive adjectives denoting size (*big*, *small*) or other features (*cold*, *hot*) were eliminated. A further problem was posed by those adjectives whose semantic value changes depending on the linguistic co-text (or, in Firthian terms, depending on "the company they keep"): for example, *big* in (2) is clearly used to express negative evaluation, since a *big nose* is normally considered unattractive, especially for a woman, whereas *big* in (3), which refers to the size of a city, is mainly descriptive. This means that *big* is not a 'core' evaluative adjective.

2   I see a painter who is (eh) portraying (erm) young woman (mm) who looks not so **nice** he she has (eh) **big** nose straight hair the expression also it's not so: (LINDSEI-IT)

3   generally I like (erm) (mm) **big** big cities (er) which are which are rich in (mm) in culture and (mm) arts (LINDSEI-IT)

Once these criteria were established, evaluative adjectives were singled out also from the students' turns of the French and Spanish sub-corpora using the Wordlist and Concord tools, which allowed us to obtain statistically relevant lexical patterns (collocations) and syntactic clusters, limiting the search to the most frequent evaluative adjectives.

Results

Range and frequency

In terms of range, the number of evaluative adjectives in the Italian, French and Spanish sub-corpora amounts to about 100 types each, i.e. 124 in LINDSEI-FR, 112 in LINDSEI-SP and 104 in LINDSEI-IT. The tokens for each type were summed up in order to calculate the overall percentage with respect to the size of each sub-corpus, showing that Italian and Spanish learners use a slightly higher number of evaluative adjectives than French learners (LINDSEI-IT 1.7%, LIND-SEI-SP 1.6%, LINDSEI-FR 1.3%).

In order to carry out a qualitative analysis of evaluative adjectives used by Italian, French and Spanish learners, three different lists were obtained, narrowing the focus to evaluative adjectives having a frequency score of at least 0.1 ‰ (1 occurrence every 10,000 words). As shown in Table 1, the number of statistically relevant adjectives is slightly different: 28 in LINDSEI-SP, 26 in LINDSEI-IT and 23 in LINDSEI-FR. As can easily be expected, the most common evaluative adjectives rank among the most frequent adjectives in the English language (Leech *et al.* 2001: 286-291).[4]

Table 1 - Evaluative adjectives in LINDSEI-IT, LINDSEI-FR and LINDSEI-SP occurring at least 0.1‰

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[4] As shown by Furiassi (2004) in the computational analysis of two learner corpora, a spoken one (LINDSEI-IT) and a written one (ICLE-IT, i.e. the Italian sub-corpus of the International Corpus of Learner English, which is LINDSEI's sister corpus), the spoken corpus contains a less varied and more repetitive vocabulary, as well as a higher proportion of short words (function words and core lexical items of Anglo-Saxon origin), the use of verbal fillers, discourse markers, and contracted forms. These data confirm that the same differences that exist between spoken and written modes of communication in native use are also present in these learner corpora.

	LINDSEI-IT	‰	LINDSEI-FR	‰	LINDSEI-SP	‰
1.	good	2.3	good	1.2	good	2.5
	better	0.9	better	0.4	better	0.8
	best	0.3	best	0.2	best	0.4
2.	beautiful	1.7	beautiful	1.1	nice	1.7
3.	important	1.1	interesting	1	beautiful	1.2
4.	interesting	1.1	nice	0.9	difficult	0.8
5.	difficult	0.8	great	0.7	great	0.8
6.	bad	0.7	difficult	0.6	interesting	0.5
7.	funny	0.6	awful	0.4	horrible	0.5
8.	strange	0.6	bad	0.3	pretty	0.5
					prettier	0.2
9.	impressive	0.5	funny	0.3	ugly	0.5
10.	nice	0.5	important	0.3	bad	0.4
11.	easy	0.4	wonderful	0.3	friendly	0.3
12.	great	0.4	easy	0.2	important	0.3
13.	wonderful	0.4	expensive	0.2	strange	0.3
14.	famous	0.2	hard	0.2	crazy	0.2
15.	good-looking	0.2	impressive	0.2	easy	0.2
					easier	0.1
16.	useful	0.2	lovely	0.2	expensive	0.2
17.	wrong	0.2	pretty	0.2	funny	0.2
18.	boring	0.1	strange	0.2	hard	0.2
19.	crazy	0.1	ugly	0.2	lovely	0.2
20.	dramatic	0.1	amazing	0.1	serious	0.2
21.	fascinating	0.1	boring	0.1	wonderful	0.2
22.	hard	0.1	dangerous	0.1	famous	0.1
23.	pretty	0.1	friendly	0.1	fantastic	0.1
24.	strong	0.1			favourite	0.1
25.	ugly	0.1			perfect	0.1
26.	violent	0.1			silly	0.1
27.					strong	0.1
28.					stupid	0.1

Common core evaluative adjectives

Our data show that there is a common core of 15 evaluative adjectives used by Italian, French and Spanish learners in the LINDSEI interviews, i.e. *good*, *beautiful*, *important*, *interesting*, *difficult*, *bad*, *funny*, *strange*, *nice*, *easy*, *great*, *wonderful*, *hard*, *pretty*, *ugly*, in the order in which they appear on the Italian list. In the French and Spanish lists the order and frequency are different, which may lead us to make the following generalisations:

- *good* is in first position in all the three lists, but Italian and Spanish learners use the adjective *good* (LINDSEI-IT: 2.3‰; LINDSEI-SP: 2.5‰) and its comparative/superlative forms *better* (LINDSEI-IT: 0.9‰; LINDSEI-SP: 0.8‰) and *best* (LINDSEI-IT: 0.3‰; LINDSEI-SP: 0.4‰) twice as many times as the French ones (LINDSEI-FR: *good* 1.2‰, *better* 0.4‰, *best* 0.2‰);

- *nice* is preferred by the Spanish and French learners, with a frequency score in LINDSEI-SP (1.7‰) which is double the score of LINDSEI-FR (0.9‰) and three times higher than the score LINDSEI-IT (0.5‰);
- *great* is preferred by French and Spanish learners, scoring 0.7‰ in LINDSEI-FR and 0.8‰ in LINDSEI-SP, against 0.4‰ in LINDSEI-IT;
- *interesting* is preferred by Italian and French learners (LINDSEI-IT: 1.1‰; LINDSEI-FR: 1‰) with respect to the Spanish learners (LINDSEI-SP: 0.5‰);
- *important* is chosen four times more frequently by Italian learners (LINDSEI-IT: 1.1‰) with respect to the French (LINDSEI-FR: 0.3‰) and Spanish ones (LINDSEI-SP: 0.3‰).

It is also interesting to observe that this short list of common core adjectives reflects the two opposite poles of evaluation, positive/negative, featuring the antonyms *good/bad*, *beautiful/ugly*, *difficult/easy* and a range of near synonyms such as *good/wonderful*, *beautiful/nice/pretty*, *great/wonderful*, *difficult/hard*.

Preferences

As Table 1 shows, some adjectives rank among the core evaluative adjectives for one or two groups of learners but not for the others. The missing matches normally appear further down on the comparable frequency lists. A notable exception is the adjective *dramatic* (used with reference to *film),* which appears among the statistically significant adjectives in LINDSEI-IT but never occurs in the other sub-corpora. As we move down each sub-list of more than 100 items we find a variety of adjectives which are the result of individual learners' choices, but are not statistically meaningful. Therefore, apart from the 15 common core evaluative adjectives, the remaining items can be seen as 'preferences' of each group of learners, which leads us to make the following generalisations:

- *good-looking* (with reference to the *woman* in the picture-based story) is used by Italian learners (0.2‰) as a synonym of *beautiful* or *pretty*, but is dispreferred by French and Spanish learners (we can find it at the bottom of the respective lists with only 1 occurrence);
- *awful* is preferred by French learners (0.4‰ in the patterns *it's awful/ it was awful / it's really awful*) but dispreferred by Italian and Spanish learners;
- *horrible* (in the pattern *it's horrible/ it was horrible*) is preferred by Spanish learners (0.5‰) but dispreferred by Italian and French ones;
- *lovely* (in the phrase *it was really lovely*) is preferred by French (0.2‰) and Spanish learners (0.2‰) but dispreferred by Italians.

Such preferences in the choice of adjectives by students of different mother tongues and cultures, which goes beyond the choices imposed by the set topics, may be the result of mother tongue interference or different conversational styles.

Positive/negative evaluation

Adjectives expressing positive evaluation are more numerous than negative adjectives. In fact, according to the principles of politeness, positive evaluation is usually a default or preferred option in conversation. However, if we look at the collocational environment of some adjectives, we can see that positive adjective sometimes appear in a negative context. In LINDSEI-IT, for example, the pattern *not beautiful* is rated among the most frequent (in fourth position, after the positive patterns *beautiful girl/ is more beautiful/ very beautiful*). A negative co-text for *beautiful* is identified in 12 concordance strings (10% of all the occurrences of *beautiful* in LINDSEI-IT), as exemplified in (4):

4   I don't think that (eh) beauty is the[i:] only important thing because there are also (er) good actresses who are **not so beautiful** (LINDSEI-IT)

Conversely, negative adjectives may be hedged by downtoners such as *a bit*, *a little bit*, as in examples (5) and (6):

5   I I realised after that . after that t= it was **a bit dangerous**.. because we were . innocent girls and (er) it's always risky (LINDSEI-FR)

6   all of us (er) were talking in English but you know (er) eac= eac= each one (er) has hi= his or her own accent and then it's (mm) **a bit more difficult** to understand (mm)

This aspect emerging from the data reflects and confirms the – perhaps universal – tendency to negate positive adjectives rather than using negative ones (*not so beautiful*, *not that pretty* as opposed to *ugly*) and mitigate the force of a negative adjective using modifiers such as *a little*, *a bit* or *a little bit* (*a bit dangerous*, *a bit more difficult*).

Lexical phrases and syntactic patterns: good, nice and difficult

Moving forward to consider larger lexical and syntactic patterns, we may discover how learners build phrases and clauses. To this end, we examined the context horizon of the concordance strings of three common core adjectives – *good*, *nice* and *difficult* – in order to isolate meaningful patterns of learner English both manually and also using computing features available in the Concord tool (concordance, collocates, patterns and clusters). As a reference, we used the phraseological and syntactic patterns of these adjectives illustrated in the *Macmillan English Dictionary* (2007) to verify whether they are found in the LINDSEI data.

As common core evaluative adjectives, *good*, *nice* and *difficult* are freely combined with many different nouns, especially with topic words, as may be expected

(*good film*, *nice experience*). Regular and irregular comparative and superlative forms are used extensively and correctly by learners (the most common ones being the suppletive forms *better* and *best*), and adjectives are graded with a set of common adverbial modifiers (*very*, *really*, *quite*). This is to be expected from university students of English whose level ranges from upper-intermediate to advanced.

As far as *good* is concerned, its most frequent intensifiers are *very* and *really* in all sub-corpora. The adverb *quite* as a modifier of *good* is not used very frequently by Spanish and French learners (6 and 4 times respectively), only once by an Italian learner. A search for *quite* used as a pre-determiner in the pattern *quite a* reveals a clear avoidance strategy: it is never used by Italian and Spanish learners, only once by French learners in *quite a good result*. Syntactically, *good* is equally used in attributive (*a good film*, *a good experience*) and predicative position (*it's very good*) in all sub-corpora.[5] As regards prepositions which normally follow the adjective *good*, namely *at*, *with* and *for*, we only find a few examples: *I'm not very good at literature* (LINDSEI-SP), *really good at sport* (LINDSEI-FR), *that's good for students* (LINDSEI-IT), *it's not good for me* (LINDSEI-SP). Although the correct pattern *good at* is occasionally used by Italian, French and Spanish learners, only Italian learners use the wrong preposition *in* instead of *at*, as in *the painter is very good in painting* (LINDSEI-IT). As for phraseology, the typical English phrase *good thing,* signalled by the reference learner's dictionary, is used by Italian and French learners (but not by Spanish ones), as in *I think (eh) one good thing is that we study a lot* (LINDSEI-IT) and *the good thing is that (eh) we: can do everything by on foot* (LINDSEI-FR). As regards complementation, we may notice that Spanish and French learners use some *to*-infinitive clause constructions such as *it would be good to have this on my: diploma* (LINDSEI-FR), *it's good to: to know different cultures* (LINDSEI-SP), but Italians never do.

As far as *nice* is concerned, its most frequent collocations are the words *experience* in LINDSEI-IT and LINDSEI-SP, *experience* and *place* in LINDSEI-FR, and the most frequent modifiers are *very* and *really*. Its most common patterns are *it was very nice* in LINDSEI-SP, *it was a nice* in LINDSEI-FR and *not very nice* in LINDSEI-IT. In all sub-corpora *nice* is more frequently used in predicative position than attributive.[6] The only preposition used with nice is *with*, as in *she was very nice with me* (LINDSEI-IT). In LINDSEI-FR we find a *to*-infinitive pattern of complementation in *it's really nice to live*. No occurrences of the pattern *nice of someone* (*to do something*) can be found.

The adjective *difficult* has no notable lexical collocations, as it is almost always used in predicative position in all sub-corpora.[7] Its most frequent modifiers are *very* and *quite*, but it is sometimes preceded by downtoners such as *a little*, *a*

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[5] LINDSEI-IT: attributive 55%, predicative 45% ; LINDSEI-FR: predicative 52%, attributive 48%.; LINDSEI-SP: predicative 48%, attributive 52%.

[6] LINDSEI-IT: 66% predicative, 34% attributive; LINDSEI-FR: 75% predicative, 25% attributive; LINDSEI-SP: 78% predicative, 22% attributive.

[7] (LINDSEI-IT: 90% predicative, 10% attributive; LINDSEI-FR: 100% predicative; LINDSEI-SP: 96% predicative, 4% attributive.

bit, as was noted above with reference to negative evaluation, as in *it was a bit difficult for me to understand* (LINDSEI-SP). Its typical clusters are *it's very difficult*, *it's difficult to.* The latter construction testifies the frequency of the *to*-infinitive complementation which is most commonly used with this adjective, e.g. *it's also difficult to memorize new words* (LINSDEI-IT), *it was difficult to cope with my family life* (LINDSEI-FR), *it's very difficult to speak with . French people* (LIND-SEI-SP). *Difficult* is followed by the preposition *for*, as in *it's quite difficult for me to say* (LINDSEI-IT). The pattern *to find s.th. difficult* is also used, which proves the advanced competence of some learners in producing clauses such as *I find it difficult to decide* (LINDSEI-IT), *I found it difficult to write essays ..*, *Even critics don't like it or find it too difficult* (LINDSEI-FR).

Conclusion

A database of learner English like LINDSEI is an important resource for scholars and its practical benefits for ELT are evident. Authentic data can help scholars and teachers to reflect on learners' interlanguage – focussing on different linguistic features and highlighting patterns of preferred/dispreferred use – and finally use these data to inform EFL pedagogy at large.

As regards the use of evaluative adjectives used by Italian, French and Spanish learners, a core of 15 items was identified, i.e. *good*, *beautiful*, *important*, *interesting*, *difficult*, *bad*, *funny*, *strange*, *nice*, *easy*, *great*, *wonderful*, *hard*, *pretty*, and *ugly*. Although these adjectives are among the most frequent ones in English, and their choice is influenced by the topics set for the interviews, the two poles of evaluation, positive/negative (*good/bad*, *beautiful/ugly*, *difficult/easy*), as well as a range of near synonyms (*good/wonderful*, *beautiful/nice/pretty*, *great/wonderful*, *difficult/hard*) are well-represented. It is also possible to verify the general tendency to negate positive adjectives rather than using negative ones (*not so beautiful*, *not that pretty* as opposed to *ugly*) and to mitigate the force of a negative adjective using modifiers such as *a little*, *a bit* or *a little bit* (*a bit dangerous*, *a little bit strange*). Although spoken discourse normally displays less varied and repetitive vocabulary than written discourse, and the LINDSEI interviews are focussed on set topics, thus limiting the range of choices, the analysis of evaluative adjectives has contributed to shed light on preferences of different mother tongue learners, such as *good-looking* for Italian learners, *awful* for French learners and *horrible* for Spanish learners, and also on how adjectives are expanded into phrasal and clausal constructions. As for lexical phrases and syntactic patterns, it was found that *quite a* is generally avoided, *good thing* (in *the good thing is*) and the pattern *to find s.th. difficult* are only occasionally used. On the whole, very few complex constructions such as *to*-infinitive or *that*-clauses were found in the data. As we may expect from the linguistic competence of advanced students, lexical and syntactic patterns should be handled with accuracy and appropriate level of complexity. By way of conclusion, therefore, we may argue in favour of ELT methods and materials which

emphasise vocabulary building beyond the semasiological component of words, focussing on the onomasiological dimension (synonymy), phraseology (collocations), complementation and idiomaticity.

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