

Portuguese Multiword Expressions: data from a learner corpus¹

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1 Introduction

The proper usage of Multiword Expressions (MWE), i.e., sequences of words with a syntactic and semantic cohesion (Mel'cuk, 1984; Sinclair, 1991, Cowie, 1998; Sag et al., 2002) is crucial in L2 studies. Indeed, L2 learners frequently struggle to choose the right combination of words and eventually produce errors related to the lexical-grammatical, semantic or stylistic aspects of MWE (Nesselhauf, 2004; Gilquin, 2007; Granger and Paquot, 2010; Paquot, 2013).

Our paper focuses on the use of MWE in a subset of COPLE2, a new learner corpus of Portuguese L2, and addresses the following issues: (i) how significant is the difficulty for the learners to produce MWE; (ii) what strategies are employed to deal with unknown MWE.

2 Corpus constitution

Our analysis is based on data from the written register of COPLE2², which is composed by: (i) 966 free handwritten essays from different genres (the most frequent being opinion), collected in evaluation tests; (ii) 424 students (18-40 years); (iii) 14 different mother tongues; (iv) all levels of proficiency (the most frequent being elementary). The corpus will be lemmatized and annotated with information on PoS and error type (Nicholls, 2003; Dagneaux et al., 2005).

We restrict our analysis to learners of Portuguese with Spanish (Romance), English (Germanic) and Chinese (Sinitic) as L1 (cf. Table 1).

L1	Inf.	Male	Female	Average Age	Tests	Texts	Total Words	Average Words/Text
Chinese	129	33%	67%	21.9	277	323	57.385	178
English	65	34%	66%	24.5	118	142	21.610	152
Spanish	52	42%	58%	28.3	102	139	21.200	153
TOTAL	246	36%	64%	24.9	497	604	100.195	161

Table 1: COPLE2 subcorpus

3 Data analysis

The MWE were extracted and annotated during the transcription process of the essays. We organized the data according to some MWE typologies³ and, using a Contrastive Interlanguage Analysis approach (Granger, 1996), we identified different error types:

- (i) Collocations (expressions semantically compositional but lexically and/or pragmatically constrained).
 - Substitution for (quasi-)synonyms or words belonging to the same semantic field: #*maneiras de transporte* 'ways of transport' vs. *meios de transporte* 'means of transport' (Chinese).
 - Substitution for phonologically/morphologically similar words: #*comida populosa* 'populous food' vs. *comida popular* 'popular food' (Chinese).
 - L1/L2 transfer at both lexical and syntactic levels: #*parada de metro* 'subway parada' vs. *estação de metro* 'subway station' (Spanish); #*balança da natureza* 'nature scale' vs. *equilíbrio da natureza* 'nature balance' (Chinese via English); #*especialistas biológicos* 'biological experts' vs. *especialistas em biologia* 'experts in biology' (Chinese).
 - Mismatch of the copulative verbs *ser* and *estar* 'to be': #*estamos cruéis* vs. *somos cruéis* 'we are cruel' (English).

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² <http://www.clul.ul.pt/en/research-teams/547>

More information about this corpus can be found as well in the abstract entitled "COPLE2 – Corpus of Portuguese FL/L2", also published in this book.

³ Mel'cuk (1984), Cowie (1998), Sag et al. (2002).

- Transposition of semantic relations: #*fechadura nórdica* ‘Nordic closeness’ in contrast with *abertura nórdica* ‘Nordic openness’ (English).
 - Use of periphrasis or other words to avoid vocabulary the learners do not know/remember: #*as diferenças e as coisas iguais* ‘the differences and the equal things’ vs. *as diferenças e as semelhanças* ‘the differences and the similarities’ (Chinese); #*animais preciosos* ‘precious animals’ vs. *animais em vias de extinção* ‘endangered species’ (Chinese).
- (ii) Light verbs constructions (as these verbs carry no significant meaning, the students frequently use them interchangeably): #*dar uma grande influência* ‘to give a large influence’ vs. *ter uma grande influência* ‘to have a large influence’ (Chinese).
- (iii) Lexical-syntactic fixed expressions.
- Lexical mismatch: #*dia com dia* ‘day with day’ vs. *dia a dia* ‘day after day’ (English).
 - L1 transfer: #*música viva* ‘live music’ vs. *música ao vivo* (English).
- (iv) Routine formulae.
- L1 transfer (#*sem outras coisas para reclamar* ‘there being no other things to complaint’ vs. *sem outro assunto de momento* ‘there being no other matter to discuss’ (Chinese).
- (v) Idiomatic expressions.
- Substitution for semantically related words: #*faca sempre tem dois lados* ‘knife always has two sides’ vs. *faca de dois gumes* ‘double-edged sword’ (Chinese).

4 Conclusion

Our data show that collocations are especially difficult for learners of Portuguese L2 because, even though they are semantically compositional, they pose degrees of restrictions that are not easily acquired, generating obvious errors. The few cases of idiomatic expressions in our corpus are also problematic. A possible explanation for their low frequency is that learners have elementary proficiency and are not yet familiarized with them. To target this subtype, other methods, such as translations or elicitation tests, would be required.

L1/L2 transfer plays an important role in the students’ productions and is particularly noticeable in expressions with equivalent forms in their L1. We identified cases of transfer of lexical units (either in their native language or adapted to Portuguese), syntactic constructions and register.

We believe that a clear description of the categories of MWE and the identification of factors that correlate with the learners’ difficulties may be the key to their lexical accuracy. It is our aim to provide such a typology for Portuguese.

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