

DEPARTMENT OF LANGUAGES AND LITERATURES

“Completely Headless”

Modification of adjectives in
Swedish advanced learners’ English

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Abstract

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This is a corpus-based, empirical study, which investigates Swedish advanced learners' written and spoken English with regard to modification of adjectives, both reinforcing (e.g. *totally different*, *very nice*) and attenuating (e.g. *kind of false*, *somewhat cynical*). More specifically, it aims to clarify to what degree and in what ways Swedish learners differ from native speakers of English as to frequency, choice of modifier and collocations with adjectives. Possible reasons are suggested for the differences found and are discussed in relation to second language learning. The investigation is based on comparable learner and native-speaker corpora, from which quantitative data are drawn and used as a point of departure for a more qualitative approach. Differences in comparison with the native-speaker corpus are referred to as "overuse" and "underuse", respectively.

As matters of ambiguity or vagueness may interfere with definitions of linguistic categories, the study discusses and exemplifies a number of such cases, involving, e.g., semantic blends, variable scope and context-dependent function variation, all of them related to the process of selecting relevant data from the corpus material.

The investigation shows that the Swedish learners overuse both adjectives and modifiers in their written texts. This applies especially to "all-purpose", relatively informal modifiers, such as the reinforcers *totally*, *very* and *really*, and the attenuators *quite*, *fairly* and *more or less*. Underused modifiers are of the type that combines with a smaller set of adjectives, viz. *all* (e.g. *all important*, *all female*) and *directly* (e.g. *directly applicable*), pointing to a lack of experience in formal writing among the Swedish students. Examples of unidiomatic usage are also found, e.g. *scaringly clear* and *completely headless*, suggesting transfer from Swedish expressions.

The comparison of the spoken corpora shows many similarities in modifier use. There are also differences, indicating over-hedging and underuse of emphatic expressions such as *just amazing* and *absolutely brilliant*, as well as the modifiers *quite* and *really*.

Adopting a somewhat wider perspective, the study concludes with a discussion of the increasing degree of informality in written language, as well as the relevance of being nativelike in oral production of L2 English. Some pedagogical implications in this connection are the need to increase Swedish students' awareness of different genres, especially as regards formal written English, and, for spoken English, to make special note of certain frequently used expressions as well as changes and recent trends.

KEYWORDS: Swedish advanced learners, written English, spoken English, degree modification, adjectives, modifiers, reinforcers, attenuators, collocation, learner corpora, learner English, formal register, informal speech, genre awareness, academic writing, comparative study, contrastive interlanguage analysis.