English as a Foreign Language: Problems Non-Native Speakers Encounter When Writing Texts in English

This document demonstrates typical problems that German, French, and Italian native speakers encounter when composing texts in English. It is shown how assistance can be provided in order to assure and optimize the linguistic quality of foreign-language texts.

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1 Introduction

Good or excellent knowledge of English is required for many professions. The daily work of many authors and other employees involves writing texts in English, e.g. letters, e-mails, marketing texts, or technical documentation. However, this may represent a major challenge for non-native speakers. Usually, the mistakes that non-native speakers make are different from those that native speakers make.

But why? One reason is the missing instinct for the language that characterizes native speakers. Another reason is that writers often tend to transfer accustomed structures or expressions from the native language to the foreign language. This can lead to errors or clumsy wording.

For example, non-native speakers often fall for "false friends". False friends appear to be equivalents in the foreign language that sound or look similar to the respective words in the native language, but usually have an entirely different meaning. For instance, the English equivalent of the German word "aktuell" is not "actual", but "current". Such false friends can be observed in many language pairs and language directions. Besides false friends, there are numerous other types of mistakes that non-native speakers make much more frequently.

To find out which typical errors occur in English texts written by non-native speakers, we analyzed English texts written by German, French, and Italian native speakers and found some interesting results.

2 Typical Errors

2.1 Spelling Errors

In English texts written by German, French, and Italian native speakers, we found a number of spelling mistakes that can be attributed to the authors' native language.

Such mistakes occur frequently when the respective words in the native language are similar to those in the foreign language. For example, the English word „development" is very similar to the French word „développement", so some French native speakers incorrectly spell the English word as „developpement". Another example: The English word „peace" and the Italian equivalent „pace". Sometimes, Italian native speakers accidentally write „paceful" instead of „peaceful".

Apart from similar words, Anglicisms in the native language can also lead to spelling mistakes in English. As there are much more Anglicisms in German than in French or Italian, these be confusing especially for German native speakers. This especially applies to words that originate from English, but that might be spelled differently in German. For example, consider the words "party" and "hobby". Both words exist in German as well, but the plural is formed differently. In German, the plural is formed by simply appending an "-s", resulting in the forms "Partys" and "Hobbys". In English, however, the plural uses the ending "-ies", resulting in the forms "parties" and "hobbies". German native speakers often confuse these plural forms.

2.2 Conjugation Errors and Other Grammar Errors

The texts of the Italian and French native speakers contained a significant number of conjugation errors and other grammar errors. In many cases, verbs were not conjugated correctly. For example, the "-s" was omitted for the third-person singular, e.g. "she sleep" instead of "she sleeps".

Prepositions followed by an "-ing" form (e.g. "for learning") also pose a problem for French native speakers. This is because in French, many of the corresponding prepositions are followed by the infinitive (e.g. "pour apprendre"). For this reason, many French native speakers would e.g. write "for learn" instead of "for learning".

2.3 Incorrect Prepositions

Prepositions are an issue that especially German native speakers often struggle with. They often tend to use the same prepositions in English as they would use in German. For example, consider the verbs "hören" in German and "to hear" in English. In German, "von etwas hören" means to "to be informed about something". On the other hand, "von jemandem hören" means "to be contacted by somebody". While the same preposition is used in both instances in German, this is not the case in English. The English, the corresponding sentences would be "to hear about something" but "to hear from somebody". Such differences between the languages can cause difficulties when composing texts in English.

2.4 Punctuation Mistakes

The rules for commas, full stops, spaces, and various punctuation marks differ from language to language. French native speakers often insert spaces in wrong places when they write English texts. In English, spaces are merely inserted between words and after punctuation marks like full stops and commas. In French typography, however, (protected) spaces are also inserted before colons, semicolons, exclamation marks, and question marks. This is why many French native speakers incorrectly insert spaces in front of colons, question marks, etc.

3 How Can Non-Native Speakers Be Supported When Composing Texts in English?

Human review is a common method that has long been used. After a text is composed by a non-native speaker, his or her text is reviewed by a native speaker, who identifies and corrects any errors. However, this method is very costly. Moreover, most authors are not keen on having their texts scissored by colleagues. An automatic language check would be an alternative that circumvents these two disadvantages. Author assistance tools such as the Congree Authoring Server can assist authors who are not native speakers to compose flawless texts in English. The Congree Authoring Server systematically addresses the problems of non-native speakers.

The linguistics-based Congree Language Check is able to identify virtually all spelling mistakes, regardless of whether they are made due to the native language or other factors. Congree reports misspelled words such as "developpement" or "paceful", which do not appear in the system lexicon in this way, whenever they appear in a text.

Apart from this rule that reports unknown words to the system as possible spelling mistakes, there are more than a dozen other rules that contribute to flawless spelling.

The Congree Language Check also reports many conjugation errors and other grammar errors. For example, French and Italian native speakers often neglect the "-s" after verbs (e.g. "she sleep" in-stead of "she sleeps"). Congree also reports the use of wrong verb forms after a certain preposition (e.g. "for do" instead of "for doing").

Apart from these two examples, there are more than 20 other grammar rules that English texts are checked for.

Apart from spelling and grammar rules, the Congree Language Check also features numerous style rules. Some of them are designed especially for non-native speakers who write texts in English.

For instance, there are more than a dozen style rules for German native speakers, including rules that ensure the correct use of certain prepositions. For example, this includes a rule that informs the author that the German "Erhöhung um" should be rendered as "increase of" in English. The rule will warn the author if he uses the word "increase" with the preposition "by". By means of such rules, it can be made sure that German native speakers do not use the wrong prepositions.

The style rules for German native speakers also cover some false friends. These are shown in the following table:

German word	False friend	Correct equivalent
bekommen	become	get
eventuell	eventual	possible
aktuell	actual	current
übernehmen	overtake	take over
überhören	overhear	miss

Style rules to prevent false friends are also available for French native speakers. The following table lists some of the false friends that are covered by these rules:

French word	False friend	Correct equivalent
adéquat	adequate	suitable
assister à	assist at	attend/participate in
attribuer	attribute	allocate to/assign to
compléter	complete	supplement
délai	delay	deadline/time limit

Apart from using false friends, French native speakers also have problems with English punctuation, as mentioned above. The Congree Language Check also has a rule that addresses the common error of inserting spaces in front of colons, question marks, exclamation marks, etc. This helps French native speakers to avoid this typical error.

4 Conclusion

Non-native speakers of English, such as German, French, or Italian native speakers are faced with a major challenge when writing texts in English. Apart from the notorious false friends, some errors are typical for native speakers of a particular language. For example, German native speakers often use incorrect prepositions, French native speakers have difficulties with punctuation marks, and Italian native speakers often make conjugation mistakes. The spelling is another problem non-native speakers are confronted with.

Despite the said difficulties, the rule-based language check of author assistance tools such as the Congree Authoring Server can help non-native speakers to compose orthographically and grammatically flawless texts in English that do not look like texts written by a non-native speaker.

About Us

Our author assistance tool focuses on consistency, comprehensibility, and translation-oriented writing. But that is not all: Based on the concentrated expertise that we have gained from our research and practical experience, we develop products that are designed to immediately catch attention. We pursue this approach with a competent team that knows exactly what is required in order to deliver user-friendly software.

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