# *The Model UN Corpus of English (MUNCE): A description of non-standard morpho-syntactic features*

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**Keywords**

**Abstract**

This paper describes some of the linguistic features, language functions, uses and transformations in the Model UN Corpus of English (MUNCE) that are shared with in other ELF corpora. Speakers across various ELF corpora produce certain non-standard forms quite consistently regardless of their L1. This paper will present a few examples of non-standard forms found in MUNCE that have also been widely observed in ELF corpora. The MUNCE similarities with both VOICE and ACE include the non-marking of third person singular, demonstrative 'this' with plural nouns and the use of 'different' prepositions. MUNCE similarities with ACE only include the base form of the verb for past tense, the omission of articles, the omission of the copula 'be' and the omission of the plural 's'. MUNCE similarities with VOICE only include the flexible use of definite/indefinite articles, and the treatment of non-count nouns as plural.

## 1. ELF and Model United Nations Simulations

The establishment of a framework to describe English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) has challenged applied linguists to rethink their conceptions of language use in light of rapid globalization and has necessitated a reconceptualization of what language proficiency means in the 21st century (Canagarajah,

2007). According to Eberhard et al. (2021), English is currently an L1 for an estimated 369.9 million people but is an L2 for an astounding 978.2 million people.

In other words, as an L1, English ranks third in the world but as an L2 it is number one. Such a state of affairs calls for a 'redrawing of boundaries' as it were, to accommodate both the pull away from narrow native speaker 'norms' and the push towards increased linguistic diversity. As Sewell (2013: 7) observes, "ELF is closely aligned with much current thinking about language as a dynamic, emergent, and, above all, social phenomenon".

English is an official and working language at the United Nations (along with French, Spanish, Chinese, Russian and Arabic) and as such enjoys special legal status–not only is it a primary means of communication and correspondence, it can be used to draft resolutions, and legal documents. It is through the use of English (and other official/working languages) that diplomats face the challenges of globalization while protecting the interests of their own nations. In order to prepare young people to become our leaders of the future, by giving them a first hand experience of negotiating policies in the hopes of forming a consensus, many educational organizations host Model United Nations simulation events.

Even though MUN simulations have been in existence for many decades, involving millions of participants, virtually no research, linguistic or otherwise, has been done on the features inherent in MUN interactions. This is a particularly egregious situation since the majority of the speakers at the United Nations (upon which MUN simulations are "modeled") are ELF users. "That the characteristics, corporate culture and communication strategies of the UN have remained largely understudied is a compelling argument for filling this knowledge gap" (Tatsuki, in press: 15). Hence the Model UN Corpus of English (MUNCE) project was created to rectify the situation with an analyzable corpus of MUN interactions.

The purpose of this paper is to offer a preliminary description of some of the linguistic features, language functions, uses and transformations in the Model UN Corpus of English (MUNCE) that overlap or bear resemblance to those in other ELF corpora such as VOICE and ACE as suggested by Kirkpatrick (2010). ACE was developed in order to be a global or regional counterbalance for the Eurocentric VOICE. As noted in Tatsuki (in press; 14) there is always a need for "other, specialized corpora to offer glimpses into communities of practice not yet accounted for and thereby provid[e] a more nuanced understanding of ELF in use". Hence, the compilation of MUNCE was initiated.

## 1.1 The issues at hand

A number of studies (Seidlhofer, 2007, 2011; Mauranen & Ranta, 2009; Cogo & Dewey, 2012) have found that speakers across various ELF corpora produced certain non-standard forms quite consistently even though they did not share an L1. In some ways this runs counter to a blanket assumption that L1 transfer plays an identifying role as a source of learner errors and indicates that there may be more nuanced explanations and connections. Although it may be the case that L2 errors on certain features could be strongly connected to the influence of L1 (Tono, 2010; Bestgen, Granger & Thewisson, 2012), examinations of ELF corpora seem to show that "the use of certain non-standard morpho-syntactic forms is not necessarily a reliable indicator of the user's L1" (Kirkpatrick, 2013: 18–19).

The existence of broadly shared linguistic features (regardless of speaker L1) is one of several ways in which ELF corpora are distinct from learner corpora. Another difference is the purpose of identifying variations. In learner corpora, variations (or deviations) from native speaker norms are labeled errors and the purpose of such descriptions appears to be to evaluate the degree of the speaker's deficiency in comparison with some idealized native speaker model.

In reality, though, native speakers of an idealized "standard" English are relatively few (Britain, 2010). Furthermore there are several so-called "standard" Englishes, which when compared, display large amounts of mutual variation (Kirkpatrick, 2013). Thus, although this research continues to refer to non-standard morpho-syntactic forms, this is meant as description rather than prescription since it must be noted that all users of English, regardless of L1 (be it English or another language) produce non-standard forms.

Regarding the current stage of development of MUNCE, nearly 100 hours of interactions have been collected. However, only a limited portion has been transcribed to date. Tatsuki (2021: 21-22) states,

> Although the ultimate goal is a large and analyzable corpus, it has been decided that a careful deliberate approach to the collection, selection and transcription of speech data will eventually prove to be prudent. In keeping with this cautious orientation, limited scale qualitative analyses or case studies will be the initial focus of research.

The decision to conduct small-scale qualitative investigations even at the earliest stages of corpus compilation was also followed by Breiteneder et al (2006) when writing about a similar stage in the compilation of VOICE. In the interest of describing some of the features already emerging in the MUN

corpus, and thereby establishing some of the ways it might be similar to other ELF corpora, this paper aims to answer the following research question:

> Which non-standard morpho-syntactic features of ELF as summarized by Kirkpatrick (2010; 2013) appear in the MUN ELF corpus?

## 2. Selected Observations

The following sections will present a few examples of non-standard forms found in MUNCE that have also been widely observed in ELF corpora as noted in Kirkpatrick (2013, p. 23). Following the model Kirkpatrick established in his 2013 article, the item of focus is indicated with bold type.

(1) The non-marking of the third person singular with '-s'

Whenever a country name is used, the speaker is assuming the role as representative. So, the standard form should be 'Germany suggests' or U.S. recommends' to denote the identity of the speaker as speaking on behalf of the country. Breiteneder (2005) notes that the deletion or omission of third person –s is a natural consequence of the redundancy in English.

- Ok, so is there with that issue that Germany **support** financially the action
- …take action to solve this problem. So, U.S. **recommend** all members to follow…
- Ukraine just **provide** children on their recommendation
- social protection definition **don't** cover
- Anyone who **are** not from committee C got ideas?
- So working paper **become** draft resolution, so we have to read out our draft resolution tomorrow
- So Germany **suggest** (.) Germany **suggest** the the establishing framework to limit excess using of chemical

(2) Flexible use of definite and indefinite articles

Flexible use in this case is interpreted to mean not only interchangeable use but also omission and unnecessary insertion. It must be acknowledged that Tono (2010) predicts that difficulties with article use can be attributed to the lack of articles in certain Asian languages such as Japanese.

- Eh, yeah, it would be ok, if we had your preambular clause. But first we have to **finish operative clause**. (finish **the** operative clause)
- So it is important to save human rights for **the** young people

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- if you **have question** (have **a** question)
- So you have to bring the ideas together [during] the next informal debate in order to **make position paper** (make **a** position paper)

(3) Extended use of 'general' or common verbs

Among the extended use of general verbs, the extensive and extended use of the informal form *gonna* really stands out in contrast to the serious tone in these caucusing sessions.

- we **gonna** check these
- we are **gonna** show the concerns
- So we **gonna** be very, we are **gonna** discuss eh, we are **gonna** discuss committee A topic
- We are not **gonna** write. I'm not just **gonna** write, yeah. We are **gonna** speak our idea
- We are **gonna** say what you like committee A to address

(4) Treating uncountable nouns as plural

The speakers exhibit some variability in marking and not marking plural for uncountable nouns. Kirkpatrick notes that making an apparent choice to mark or not mark "is important as it shows that the use of the non-standard form does not mean that the speaker is unaware of or unable to use standard forms" (2013, p. 24).

- providing aid and maintain **aids**
- And those member states that can't provide significant financial aid, they can support with administrative **aids**
- forcing the products produced by child **labors**
- eh…that the most important, the issues indirectly, the clear fact of child labor access is very hard because 70% of child **labors** is working at…

(5) Use of demonstrative 'this' with both singular and plural nouns

In addition to using 'this with both singular and plural nouns, the also plural forms 'these' and 'those' are mixed with singular nouns. This is not unlike the non-standard use among native speakers of the possessive 'their' with singular nouns, examples of which also observed in this corpus.

- But for example, part time job (.) they help kids (.) things like **those type**

- Eh, we can not can not eh regulate **those kind of worlds** and
- supervise is not able to like regulating **these kind of thing**
- like **there is so many thing** for us to talk about
- Eh, **is there any ideas**?
- **Is there any other things** that we can do?
- **Is there any other member states** get the same situation
- It's the one to help things that children using eh legal tools to save **their life**.

(6) Use of prepositions in different contexts

- **For India case**, children can more of property that of human because there too many of them (In India's case)
- we donate more **on** Africa in the world combine (to Africa)
- please **back** to formal debate (preposition used as verb)

(7) Word class transposition (e.g. verb used as noun, adverb used as adjective)

In these examples we can see nouns used as verbs (*to advice* instead of *to advise*), verbs used as nouns (*explain* instead of *explanation*), adverb instead of adjective (*quickly* instead of *quick* and *financially* instead of *financial*).

- So everyone in committee B, C, D please tell committee A what you like them to **advice** in their working paper.
- And do you have **any explain** for number 4?
- So until 2, we have twenty minutes originally, so we have to be **quickly**
- …better giving administrative aid, rather than **financially** aid,

(8) Interchangeable Verb forms (-ing, pres habitual, infinitive, past perfect) taking advantage of redundancy

- Is there anybody else **have** a problem? (having a problem)
- Let's **sharing** the idea of committee A topic (share)
- It's Ok, we **talk** whatever you want (will talk about)
- If like committee A has any specific problem, they **speak** the problem specifically (can speak about)
- by eh **donate** to provide the trained teachers (donating)

(9) Base form of the verb for past tense

- I'm **concern** about (concerned)
- So until 2, we **have** twenty minutes originally (had)

(10) BE-deletion

Chambers (2004) notes the absence or deletion of the copula verb as an example of a non-standard form that might even be considered to be a kind of "universal vernacular" (p. 129). Kirkpatrick (2013) found that be-deletion (along with the use of the base form of the verb as past tense and the omission of articles) are more numerous in the ACE corpus than in VOICE.

- So I think perhaps night **work dangerous** and unhealthy for youth under 18
- So **what the definition**

(11)   Code-mixing

The majority of the speakers in the MUN corpus (at the present stage of its compilation) are Japanese L1 speakers but as the transcription of other MUN events is completed, that majority will diminish. Knowing the current make up of speaker L1s, it is not surprising that some Japanese communicational influences might enter the speech of the interlocutors.

- **So** and also like
- **So, so** at first it didn't work when I came here

One example is the use of Japanese back channeling markers such as the agreement token 'So,' (which might at first glance appear to function like the English word *so*) which can be used once or reduplicated for emphasis. It is the reduplication and the voice tone that identifies it as a Japanese agreement token.

(12) Translanguaging and Creative Constructions

Cogo (2012) notes "not much research has been done with respect to phenomena like languaging, translanguaging and crossing in ELF interactions" (p. 292). Within the MUN context, depending on the simulation location, the participants might come in contact with speakers from any one of hundreds of L1 backgrounds–or sometimes the majority of participants might share the same L1. So speakers might utilize shared L1 resources when such a strategy will pay off, but in massively multilingual groups, the best communicative option would be word coinages or creative shifts in word class.

- you get **pretty** paid. (Pretty functions like well)
- self **employeed** people (people who are employees in their own firm)

For example, *pretty* can be used as an intensifier as in the phrase *pretty well paid*. The expression *pretty paid* still carries the connotation of *well paid* and is perhaps a more parsimonious way to express the situation.

## 3. ELF Corpora compared

Kirkpatrick (2013) found similarities between ACE and VOICE as well as differences. Among the similarities, were "the non-marking of third person singular, the extended use of common verbs, the use of a uniform question tag, demonstrative 'this' with plural nouns, and the use of 'different' prepositions" (p. 25). Among the non-standard forms found frequently in ACE but not so often in VOICE were "the base form of the verb for past tense, the omission of articles, the omission of the copula 'be' and the omission of the plural 's'" (2013, pp. 25–26). At present, the frequencies of such items in MUNCE cannot yet be reliably compared with ACE or VOICE–only the existence of exemplars of such non-standard forms can be noted and presented for information (see Table 1).

**Table 1.** Comparisons among three corpora

| MUNCE similarities with both VOICE and ACE | MUNCE similarities with ACE only | MUNCE similarities with VOICE only |
|---|---|---|
| • the non-marking of third person singular<br>• demonstrative 'this' with plural nouns<br>• the use of 'different' prepositions | • the base form of the verb for past tense<br>• the omission of articles<br>• the omission of the copula 'be'<br>• the omission of the plural 's' | • the flexible use of definite/indefinite articles<br>• the treatment of non-count nouns as plural |

Neither question tags, nor interchangeable use of *which* and *who* were observed in any discernable pattern. However, this observation could change because the building of the corpus is still underway (the COVID pandemic derailed several crucial data collection opportunities and less than half of the previously collected video data has been completely transcribed). Thus it must be noted that this analysis is still in very its early qualitative stages, yet nevertheless there do appear to be robust similarities among the three ELF corpora.

## 4. Implications for Teaching

Kirkpatrick rightly comments that it is inappropriate "to classify ELF as a deficient form of English solely on the grounds of the presence of non-standard forms, especially when many of the non-standard forms found in ELF are also found in other varieties of English" (2013, p. 23). If learners use their existing linguistic resources with the assurance that communication is achievable via many expressions and language forms whether "standard" or not, they indeed are successful.

Sewell comments, "[a]dopting an ELF perspective on teaching does not mean that norms and standards are no longer required, but that these are mutable concepts and that learners need to be introduced to language variation as soon as they are ready"(p. 7). To ensure this, the most effective teachers may well be those not only with proper language teacher training but rather who those who also have enough deep local cultural and social experience to be familiar with local variants. Within the MUN context, this might also mean those who have had their own substantial experiences within the MUN community of practice.

As can be seen in a number of the examples in MUNCE, the speakers exhibit variation–sometimes using the standard and sometimes not–even within the same utterance. There are many possible explanations for the variation witnessed such as they are simply mistakes or slips, or they are evidence of cognitive processing overload, and so on. It is arguable that they also could be evidence of communicatively strategic choices, a possibility that will be the focus of another paper. One thing however is certain–the measure of a successful speaker of English does not and should not have to depend on his or her ability to mimic narrowly defined native speaker norms.

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