

language trainer – kind of thing

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Hi,

recently I've started learning yet another foreign language (I'm Russian) and came across the same old problem which I've almost forgotten about during the never–ending course of practicing my 1st foreign language, English...

As usual, it's not just the vocabulary that must be learned from the scratch (well, the reality is no so bad), but the grammar with all its rules, tenses, verb conjugations, pronouns and whatever comes in the middle of them... I'm learning Spanish now.

To my surprise I've discovered that the language is indeed relatively simple, especially when put in right words, clear rules, and accompanied with comprehensive examples (I managed to find a great Spanish grammar reference book in English at one of the biggest bookstores in Moscow, which could have been impossible just as well because normally none expects anyone else to learn a foreign language through another foreign rather than through the native one :).

So, I started learning the language in its very core, the grammar. I'm leaving much of the vocabulary and the speech–practice for the future. This works for me well. I'm very used to understand from the structured information rather than from just a collection of disjoint or not otherwise categorized examples.

But to me, w/o attending any courses/classes of the language (I'm a fulltime software engineer), it's hard to make up the multitude of the Qs and correct As to perfect my skills and memorize whatever is not memorized yet (not to mention the "simple" movement from the short–term to the long–term memory, which also needs some regular practice).

Having read the grammar book about 5 times from the beginning till the end, I came up with an idea... And the idea is not sort of grown up from nowhere... I have a few other Spanish textbooks, none of them presenting the information suitable for learning the grammar in a structured way. I have 2 different CD Spanish courses providing almost the same thing (except for colorful pix, audio and video) and a number of prepared, fixed, unextendable

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questions/quizzes/puzzles/whatever. It's just that. If I want to learn the most common irregular verbs in all their forms or just learn the entire conjugation pattern, I must look elsewhere or simply do everything by hand wasting lots of time to just get prepared for the actual process of learning something -- I must structure things, prepare questions and answers and then repeat them often with various modifications like using different verbs, pronouns, tenses, etc. I mean I didn't find any practical aid in those many language sources.

So... The idea... The idea is simple, though to some clever guys in here it may look kinda stupid or maybe even someone may say that it's impossible to do it, but... I want to make a language trainer application for the PC. The functionality is rather simple: within selected grammar area, at random a sentence is being generated according to the grammar rules being currently studied by the user. The sentence is then shown on the screen in one language (native or English would do in my case) and program asks to enter the translation of it in the language being learned (e.g. Spanish).

Of course, this implies that the sentences be generated simple so as not to make the whole thing being aka mission impossible. :) Personally, I think that there are several areas that can be trained separately:

- word banks, common expressions, whatever else may fall here
- verbs and their conjugations, tenses, pronouns, sentence structure (and the order of parts of speech in it), what else is missing?

What I'm currently talking about is the 2nd of the two above... Here's a portion of my other post to a Spanish-related newsgroup:

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Besides, the program obviously should have the translations of the words being used in it, in all forms that are applicable...

Example:

infinitive: eat <-> comer

simple present:

(I) eat <-> (yo) como, (you) eat <-> (tú) comes, (he/she/it) eats <->

(el/ella/Ud.) come

(we) eat <-> (nosotros) comemos, (you) eat <-> (vosotros) coméis, (they) eat

<-> (ellos/ellas/Uds.) comen

present participle / gerund: eating <->comiendo

past participle: eaten <-> comido

etc...

So, for example if the program decides to use 3rd person plural, use the verb to eat and the present tense, then it asks for a translation of:

They <eat|are eating>

and expects:

[Ellos|Ellas] <comen|estan comiendo>

There should be no other words that are irrelevant to the tense, verb itself and its conjugation, word order, gender and number agreements.

I think in this simple way it's possible to organize the rules formally and generate a particular example/problem just out of the rule and word banks.

I'm not saying it's possible to make an ideal thing, but something that'll make it possible to train the basic stuff sounds like feasible.

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At the moment, conjugation isn't a problem -- it can all be easily ripped off from a big reference of irregular verbs. The main thing is perhaps the logic and the rules that will make the application generate sane sentences (though, who cares if you occasionally eat/drink someone (or yourself :), provided the grammar is OK? :).

Currently I'm thinking of managing a number of sets of different things such as verbs of different types (transitive, intransitive, reflexive), pronouns (all kinds of), some nouns, maybe something else to make up simple direct/indirect objects. The primary concern is to pick whatever can be picked at random to a degree not breaking the constraints imposed by the grammar. At the same time, I'd like to have the basic possibility to have multiple correct answers (because, as you might know, the pronouns can be dropped if the verb conjugation tells you the person)... and... I'd love the thing to be extendable with new words and possibly new grammar rules -- through a number of text files (maybe requiring some postprocessing like rebuilding an index for fast search within files, or just translate text to binary form for the mere use during the app normal use).

I'm not saying anything about statistics and scoring here and the organization of the things alike, it's perhaps the least important now...

What do you think about it? And would be out there anyone willing to participate in such a project, to lend a helping hand?

TIA,
Alex

P.S. of course, I'm not pretending to make something suitable for each and every language, but for English and Spanish this would probably work OK.

P.P.S. I sure can program myself, but as noted, not too much of spare time, and, two or more thinking heads are better than one :)

P.P.P.S. Expect no money, no nothing for your participation :) But... Who knows... If I've never seen similar program yet, why not this be the first ever, why not make you famous? It might sell or become 2nd linux with thousands of hackers and users :))