Forwards, backwards, sideways? Directions of interaction between CL and EAP

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How well do corpus linguistic approaches serve English for Academic Purposes? They have certainly driven forward the field. Corpus-derived word and phrase lists now inform syllabuses, for example, and help to make them much more relevant to specific groups of learners. New academic corpora provide access to authentic, discipline-appropriate texts, and these often turn out to be rather different, linguistically speaking, from traditional classroom models. And corpus linguistics is at the heart of data-driven learning, a different and learner-empowering way of reflecting on language problems. EAP-relevant corpus insights keep coming and are still in great demand; there will no doubt be plenty of them at CL19. However, not every development in corpus linguistics advances the cause of EAP to the same extent, and some might even be said to lead backwards, away from our developing understanding of academic genres and contexts, and towards the more general claims that were typical of EAP materials in the distant past. Backwards developments might stem from the view that, once we have automatic ways of assessing student work or creating academic megacorpora, we can dispense with manual mark-up and analysis; in such cases the topic of a text may take on more importance than who is addressing who, and why. Despite their commercial potential, these developments are probably on an opposite trajectory from mainstream EAP, with its growing awareness of variation in academic meaning-making and the importance of context. So, corpus linguistics and EAP can intertwine, or part company. Or advance side by side, which I think is what happens when corpus linguists make discoveries about academic discourse which have no obvious immediate application to teaching and learning, but which can help us notice and talk about text. An example of sideways movement might be the ‘lexical bundle’ phenomenon, which has inspired many EAP studies but is still on the periphery of EAP practice. This paper will provide some examples of CL and EAP developments in all directions, and try to evaluate how well they get along together.