Introducing English as a lingua franca (ELF): Precursor and partner in intercultural communication

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Introduire l'anglais en tant que « lingua franca »:
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Abstract: *It is an indisputable fact that in the 21st century English has become a global lingua franca with non-native speakers of the language outnumbering its native speakers. This calls for the acknowledgement of the language as being dissociated from its primary lingua-cultural roots and transferred to new communicative contexts with ever-changing constellations of interactants. The paper outlines the position of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) as one of several options multilinguals have at their disposal in today's globalized world. It provides an overview of recent empirical studies conducted on the linguistic phenomena emerging from the processes of intercultural communication through English. It seeks to show that effective intercultural interactions are not dependent on adherence to native-speaker norms but are the result of on-line negotiations of meaning between the speakers. Thus ELF cannot be considered 'bad' or 'deficient' English since its users are capable of exploiting the forms and functions of the language effectively in any kind of cross-linguistic exchange ranging from the most rudimentary utterances to elaborate arguments. Language users are perceived as drawing on their multi-faceted linguistic repertoire and selecting the most effective resources for their particular purposes. It is argued that ELF is not, therefore, to be regarded as a fixed, all-dominating language but as a flexible communicative means interacting with other languages and integrated into a larger framework of multilingualism, especially in the current European situation.*

Keywords: *English as a lingua franca, native speaker, language learner vs. language user, multilingualism, cross-linguistic influence, partner language, communities of practice, communication strategies, language awareness, intercultural communication competence.*

Résumé : *Il est indiscutable qu'au 21ème siècle l'anglais est devenu une « lingua franca » globale, le nombre de locuteurs non natifs de la langue dépassant celui des locuteurs natifs. Ce développement appelle la reconnaissance de deux faits : d'une part la langue est dissociée de ses racines linguistiques et culturelles initiales et d'autre part la langue s'applique à de nouveaux contextes communicatifs avec des constellations d'interlocuteurs toujours changeantes. La contribution présente décrit la position de*

l'anglais en tant que « lingua franca » qui représente une de plusieurs options disponibles à l'individu plurilingue dans le monde globalisé d'aujourd'hui. Cette contribution offre une vue d'ensemble des études récentes sur les phénomènes linguistiques qui émergent des processus de communication interculturelle se déroulant sur la base de l'anglais. Nous cherchons à montrer que toute interaction interculturelle efficace ne dépend pas de l'accord avec les normes de locuteurs natifs mais qu'elle est le résultat de négociations spontanées entre les locuteurs concernant le sens. Ainsi, l'anglais en tant que « lingua franca » ne peut pas être considéré comme une forme mauvaise ou déficiente de l'anglais, ses utilisateurs étant capables d'exploiter les formes et les fonctions de la langue de manière efficace dans n'importe quel genre d'échange linguistique, des expressions les plus rudimentaires aux arguments élaborés. On remarque que les utilisateurs de langue ont recours à leur répertoire linguistique varié et choisissent les ressources les plus efficaces afin de parvenir à leurs fins particulières. C'est la raison pour laquelle nous prétendons que l'anglais en tant que « lingua franca » ne doit pas être considéré comme une langue stable et tout dominante mais comme un moyen de communication flexible qui interagit avec d'autres langues et qui est intégré dans le cadre plus large du plurilinguisme, particulièrement dans la situation européenne actuelle.

Mots-clés: *anglais en tant que « lingua franca », locuteur natif, apprenant de langue vs. utilisateur de langue, plurilinguisme, influence linguistique, langue partenaire, communautés de pratique, stratégies de communication, conscience linguistique, compétence en communication interculturelle.*

Introduction

In today's globalized world, interconnectedness has not merely affected numerous aspects of our daily lives in the physical sense of transcending borders. It has above all confronted our information-based societies with the necessity to find a common voice in order to bridge language barriers – not only for the simple exchange of information, but also for the mutual creation of knowledge. Multilingualism is a reality in various kinds of community, with the European Union being a prominent example, and without any doubt it represents an asset in regard to cultural diversity and richness. However, this reality also brings about new 'emerging' language repertoires developing as a result of the immediate processes of language contact induced by communicative need. It is with integrated projects such as for instance DYLAN - *Language Dynamics and Management of Diversity* (cf. DYLAN website)[1], which are mobilized to find out about the potentials but also the problems inherent in multilingualism, that the European Union has taken steps to raise awareness of the linguistic diversity present in Europe as well as to find new ways of dealing with this complexity.[2]

This article aims to provide an insight into one of the most widely applied constituents of European multilingualism, English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) - a phenomenon which is a part of the linguistic repertoire utilized on a daily basis by a large number of plurilingual individuals in Europe. In terms of frequency and scope of use, it is undoubtedly the currently most prevalent language for intercultural communication and for that reason has attracted a good deal of attention recently from all areas of linguistic enquiry.

The article will outline the basic concepts of ELF, survey studies already conducted and point to potential research perspectives, thereby also implicitly giving weight to those phenomena which are likely to have general validity beyond ELF, i.e. which may have parallel manifestations in other contact-induced linguistic codes such as FLI.

ELF – The basics

ELF (English as a lingua franca) as it is generally conceived of is essentially "a 'contact language' between persons who share neither a common native tongue nor a common (national) culture, and for whom English is the chosen *foreign* language of communication" (Firth, 1996: 240, original emphasis). It can, of course, also include native speakers when they engage in intercultural communication (cf. Gnutzmann, 2000: 357). In line with our definition, *any* speaker using English for the purpose of intercultural communication (i.e. with a speaker of a different L1), in principle, speaks ELF – unless they (inappropriately) insist on speaking 'endolingually'. ELF is thus defined *functionally* by its use in intercultural communication rather than *formally* by its reference to native-speaker norms. The crucial point is that speakers of whatever L1 can appropriate ELF for their own purposes without over-deference to native-speaker norms. This counteracts a deficit view of lingua franca English in that it implies equal communicative rights for all its users.

So defined, ELF is emphatically *not* the English as a property of its native speakers, but is democratized and universalized in the 'exolingual' process of being appropriated for international use. As Gnutzmann (2000: 358) puts it, "[w]hen used as a lingua franca, English is no longer founded on the linguistic and sociocultural norms of native English speakers and their respective countries and cultures". Widdowson even goes one step further, claiming that, native speakers have "no right to intervene or pass judgement. They are irrelevant. The very fact that English is an international language means that no nation can have custody over it" (Widdowson, 1994: 385). In fact, as far as *intercultural competences* and strategies are concerned, native speakers are frequently disadvantaged due to their lack of practice in these processes and over-reliance on English as their L1. This can prove counter-productive since the idiomatic kind of language employed by native speakers often represents an obstacle in intercultural communication. This phenomenon, termed 'unilateral idiomaticity' by Seidlhofer (cf. eg. Seidlhofer, 2004: 220), "may even be harmful to the success of communication, if the participants do not share a similar linguistic repertoire" (Gnutzmann, 2000: 358).

Taking up the issue of speaker status, Kachru's (cf. e.g. 1992) influential categorization of English into three circles, with the native speakers in the Inner, the New English speakers in the Outer and ELF speakers in the Expanding Circle, needs to be re-considered. To begin with, given the fact that the non-native speakers now outnumber the native speakers by many times, it is highly questionable whether the centrality of the native speakers is still justified. Secondly, it is claimed that the Inner and the Outer Circle varieties are 'norm-providing' and norm-'developing' respectively, whereas English in the Expanding

Circle is 'norm-dependent'. But such a view ignores the emergent nature of ELF, whereby its users appropriate the language and shape it to their needs. Thus ELF users are not dependent on native-speaker norms but are capable of cooperatively developing norms of their own. Indeed, the effectiveness of ELF depends to a considerable degree on non-conformity with established norms of Inner Circle (or Outer Circle) Englishes.

It is important to stress that ELF, as a use of English, is to be distinguished from the pedagogic subject EFL – English as a Foreign Language. Basically, it can be assumed that the main aim of an ELF speaker is to communicate with other non-native speakers whereas EFL, which is (still) typically learned at school, takes the native speaker as a target and encompasses components of English native-speaker culture. According to this conceptualization, then, it is possible for one person to be in the position of an ELF user at one moment and of an EFL user at another moment, depending on who he or she is speaking to and for what purpose.

A related common misconception of ELF is that its speakers are in the process of *learning* a language repertoire rather than using it effectively. While all of us are, in a sense, life-long learners of any language, including our mother tongue (for instance when we extend our language use into new domains), ELF speakers are not considered merely *learners* striving to conform to native-speaker norms but primarily *users* of the language, where the main consideration is not formal correctness but functional effectiveness. Of course, using and learning are related (you can learn while using), but the point is that with ELF the emphasis is on use and the learning is incidental. This user language may certainly exhibit the same forms as learner English, but the significance of the forms is essentially different.

Reconsidering the concepts of 'community' and 'variety'

Belonging as they do to different primary lingua-cultural communities, ELF users do not themselves constitute a speech community as this is conventionally conceived in the sociolinguistics literature. Here it is usually argued that unless there is a well-defined speech community established by regular local networks of interaction, variation in use is random and does not constitute a legitimate 'variety'. Such a view is based on assumptions of stability and separation which run counter to the reality of ELF as an emergent phenomenon and which are no longer valid (if indeed they ever were) in a world where networks of interaction no longer depend on immediate face-to-face contact.

Since such networks and communities emerge to meet practical communicative contingencies, Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (cf. 1992) suggest that such communities should be called 'communities of practice'. Developing this idea further, Wenger (cf. 2004) gives three features determining 'communities of practice': (1) mutual engagement in shared practices, (2) taking part in some jointly negotiated enterprise, and (3) making use of members' shared repertoire. Having the same native language plays no role in this definition of a community. From this point of view then the community is no longer created by a common language variety, but rather the language variety is created by the community. Many communities of practice are likely to be formed on a global

scale nowadays, most of their members not sharing a first language. This is where ELF is likely to come into play, as a new emergent kind of variety created and used by a new emergent kind of community (cf. Seidlhofer, 2007b: 313-315) – all against the backdrop of multilingualism.

ELF in the framework of multilingualism: a partner language

Multilingual settings are, by definition, sites of language contact in which plurilingual participants variously negotiate and opt for the best means of communication for any given situation. In line with this thought, van Parijs (2004) puts forward what he calls the 'maximin law of communication':

> When deciding which language among those you know you should pick, the question you will spontaneously tend to ask yourself will [... be] which language is best known by the member of your audience who knows it least. In other words, you will systematically ask yourself whether there is any language that is known to some extent by all. (van Parijs, 2004: 115)

Especially in spoken intercultural exchanges, the language choice is not considered fixed, but often negotiated on-line and determined by particular situational contexts. As Mondada points out "participants' orientations towards the choice of language are often not convergent and not stable. They vary throughout the meeting and depend on tasks and practical purposes" (Mondada, 2005: 21).

Naturally, ELF is selected as a means of communication according to these very same principles and consequently has to be interpreted as representing only one of several components of the multilingual repertoire of speakers. It often combines with other languages as appropriate to the intercultural communicative situation – adopting the role of a 'partner language' so to speak.[3] The general point to be emphasized is that, conceived of in this way, ELF poses no threat to other European languages, codes or repertoires. Fairness calls for the recognition of linguistic diversity as expressive of the sociocultural identity of different communities. If cross-cultural interaction is to be efficient, however, there has to be a way of complementing this diversity by some additional means of communication. ELF, as well as its potential francophone counterpart FLI, provides the possibility of extending the linguistic repertoire to account for this need for *inter*cultural communication without compromising the integrity of diverse languages as the means for *intra*cultural interaction and the expression of distinct sociocultural identities. From this perspective, ELF does not undermine multilingual diversity but actually helps to sustain it by entering "into a relationship with other languages" (House & Rehbein, 2004: 2).

ELF relates to other languages in the sense that it is evolving within a multilingual context. Influences of other languages are a natural and crucial characteristic of ELF at all linguistic levels (phonological, lexicogrammatical and pragmatic). From the perspective of multicompetence (cf. Cook, 2002: 10-13), with different languages forming a continuum rather than separate entities in multilinguals' minds, aspects such as innovative linguistic forms, L1 influence or code-switching are no longer regarded negatively as errors or deficiencies but positively as

differences which emerge as motivated by communicative requirement. In this view, then, ELF and FLI are not mutually exclusive phenomena, but are likely to be interwoven in intercultural communication.

Towards tangibility: The need for a description of ELF

In order to gain acceptance as a legitimate, and not a 'deviant', linguistic code of intercultural communication, ELF has to be well-grounded in empirical description (cf. Seidlhofer, 2001 ; 2005a: 65). Essential steps in this direction have been taken by the VOICE project with the compilation of an ELF corpus (cf. Breiteneder, Pitzl, Majewski & Klimpfinger, 2006 and the VOICE website) which serves the very purpose of establishing a sound empirical base for investigating this emerging phenomenon. Indeed, there is a growing body of descriptive work covering a relatively wide range of the aspects of ELF use mentioned earlier. It would go far beyond the scope of this paper to provide a detailed account of these studies, and only a brief overview of the relevant literature can be provided.[4]

Phonology
Jenkins (2000) investigates which phonological features are fundamental for mutual intelligibility in ELF and thereby establishes the notion of a phonological 'lingua franca core' and points out interesting implications for teaching.

Lexicogrammar
Breiteneder (2005) focuses on the specific case of third person singular *-s* marking and ELF speakers' tendency to exploit redundancy in the language. She points to parallels in the linguistic development of other English repertoires which indicate the naturalness of ELF as a linguistic phenomenon.
Dewey (2007) shows various innovative processes taking place in lingua franca use which affect ELF lexis as well as grammar. He also indicates how these linguistic features are symptomatic of underlying strategies and motivations.
Hülmbauer (2007) takes a closer look at the relationship between lexicogrammatical correctness and communicative effectiveness, highlighting the fact that a one-to-one correlation of these concepts does not hold for ELF, i.e. that seemingly incorrect expressions can work perfectly well in lingua franca interactions.
Ranta (2006) investigates the ELF speakers' tendency to use the progressive form to a relatively high degree, and makes a plea for recognising that this apparent 'overuse' is indicative of the different functions that this feature seems to take on in lingua franca contexts.
Taking idiomaticity in ELF as their focus of attention, Seidlhofer & Widdowson (2007) explain that rather than using potentially problematic established idiomatic wordings, lingua franca users tend to handle this aspect of language use in a flexible way, jointly creating and negotiating idiomatic expressions on-line.

Pragmatics
Böhringer (2007) provides an insight into the potential functions of silent and filled pauses in ELF, showing that apart from serving as a means of gaining time for speech encoding, pauses may also play a role in the interactive creation of meaning or even act as structural markers of the speech event.

Cogo & Dewey (2006) make an attempt at linking lexicogrammatical features with pragmatic processes, thereby stressing the highly interconnected nature of different aspects in ELF interactions.

Klimpfinger (2007) presents code-switching as a complex phenomenon in the multilingual framework of ELF which serves various purposes ranging from appeals for assistance to signaling cultural values.

Focusing on the role of repetition, Lichtkoppler (2007) highlights this feature's high frequency as well as its wide scope of functionality, both productively and receptively in ELF communication.

Pitzl (2005) investigates non-understanding in ELF, arguing that through cooperative behaviour and negotiation of meaning lingua franca speakers are capable of using linguistics resources creatively to resolve problematic situations.

A first provisional account of some lexicogrammatical tendencies in ELF users' language has already made its way into the 7th edition of the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English*. Initial observations have shown that ELF speakers frequently do not use the third-person singular present tense *-s* marking but use the same form for all persons (*I like, she like*) use the relative pronouns *who* and *which* interchangeably instead of *who* for humans and *which* for non-humans (as in *things who* and *people which*) omit definite and indefinite articles where they are obligatory in Standard English, or insert them where they do not occur in Standard English (e.g. *they have a respect for all*, *he is very good person*) pluralize nouns that do not have plural forms in Standard English (*informations, knowledges, advices*) use the demonstrative *this* with both singular and plural nouns (*this country, this countries*) extend the uses of certain 'general' verbs to cover more meanings than in Standard English, especially *make*, but also *do, have, put, take* (*make sport, make a discussion, put attention*) use a uniform, invariable tag (usually *isn't it*, but also others, e.g. *no*?) rather than the variation required in Standard English increase clarity/regularity by adding prepositions (*discuss about something, phone to somebody*) or adding nouns (*black colour* rather than just *black*, *how long time* rather than *how long*) (Seidlhofer, 2005b: R92).

What becomes apparent from these features is that to use ELF means to use English 'exolingually', i.e. to appropriate the language according to communicative needs, which often implies that traditional norms are not adhered to. Widdowson (2003: 48) explains that to communicate in this way is "to exploit the resources of the language to produce a novel combination, not allowable by the conventional code, but nevertheless a latent possibility which is *virtual* in the language though not actually encoded". The fact that ELF can contain such unconventional features does not mean, however, that ELF only consists of language which diverges from established norms. Depending on the particular communicative context, ELF "includes both [...] variants that would be considered errors in relation to EFL and, inevitably, given the common ancestor, also variants that are native-like, but by default rather than design" (Jenkins, 2006b: 141).

As an overall aim, the analysis of ELF data is intended to provide insights about ways in which language repertoires in general can be used to work as efficient

means of international communication, and how any lingua franca use is likely to exhibit features observed in ELF, in particular general processes of simplification and the exploitation of redundancies as well as heavy reliance on communication strategies and enhanced accommodation. Another question of more general relevance concerns the effects of the interactants' diverse first languages on the lingua franca (involving aspects such as the exploiting of parallel structures in different L1s, code-switching techniques, intercomprehension, etc.).

ELF features seem to be motivated and triggered by communicative strategies and can only be regarded as surface manifestations of underlying processes. Thus, it is not only, indeed not primarily, linguistic features in the narrower sense that is the focus of attention, but crucially what these features indicate about underlying strategies of communication: it is hypothesized that insights into specific patterns and processes of communicative interaction emerge from ELF encounters. Of interest are the way interlocutors negotiate meaning and achieve cooperation and consensus, how they gauge each other's levels of linguistic and pragmatic competence and adjust expectations on the linguistic and pragmatic levels. Initial findings have indicated that the forms and functions of ELF encountered in these interactions are not subject to random variation but that careful analyses can reveal regularities of wider significance with potential validity beyond ELF. For example, capacity for accommodation is likely to emerge as a crucial factor for communicative success. What can be demonstrated, in short, is that the communication process is based on collaboration in which all the interlocutors are continuously and actively involved. One strand of generalizations might also be grounded in the shared human tendency to reduce effort which could bring about simplification processes (cf. the work of Keller, 1994).

Teaching ELF? – Reconsidering priorities

Once a description of salient features and processes of ELF is made available, it is bound to prompt a reconsideration of priorities in language teaching, a change of focus away from the native speaker as the norm-providing ideal to the actual reality of ELF usage (cf. e.g. Jenkins, 2006a). What has to be accepted by speakers both in- and outside the 'ELF community' is that ELF cannot be regarded bad or *deficient* English – it is just *different in form* from native speaker English and serves *different functions*. There needs to be a change of attitude that comes to terms with the idea that ELF does not in principle lack the potential to be effective for all the communicative purposes it is appropriated for.[5] It can occur in any kind of intercultural communication ranging from the most rudimentary utterances to highly elaborate arguments.

Initial steps towards finding out as to what constitutes effective ELF communication have already been taken. A prominent and frequently quoted example is Jenkins' already mentioned 'Lingua Franca Core' (cf. Jenkins, 2000, 2002) covering the area of ELF phonology. With this partly empirical, partly artificial construct Jenkins suggests "to scale down the phonological task for the majority of learners by […] focusing pedagogic attention on those items which are essential in terms of intelligible pronunciation" (Jenkins, 2000: 123). In this way, prominence can be placed on those components which appear to

be of greater importance for the reality of ELF speakers. This does not mean, however, that ELF research aims at proposing new norms for the English language learners. Seen in terms of a process rather than a product, it rather promotes the raising of awareness of intercultural phenomena in communication and the importance of strategies like linguistic accommodation and negotiation of meaning thereby, again, giving more prominence to how mutual understanding is achieved than to an enforced convergence on standards. Such a 'paradigm shift' (cf. Carson, 2003: 110; Lüdi, 2002: 22) entails an awareness of the culture-specific dependency of thought and behaviour; knowledge of general parameters such as religion or role of the sexes according to which cultures can be distinguished; interpersonal sensitivity – the ability to understand a person in his or her own right; cognitive flexibility – openness to new ideas and beliefs; behavioural flexiblity – the ability to change one's behaviour patterns. (Gnutzmann, 2000: 358)

It is just such 'interpersonal sensitivity' and 'cognitive flexibility' that ELF users can achieve by means of the processes we have referred to: cooperation, accommodation and simplification strategies, the ability to signal non-understanding in a face-saving way, lingua-cultural awareness and open-mindedness towards innovative linguistic forms rather than formal linguistic criteria (cf. Seidlhofer, 2004, 2007a). It is the purpose of ELF research – and interculturally oriented research in general – to raise awareness of these codes of communication also in the context of language teaching.

Concluding remarks

It has become clear throughout the preceding discussion that in ELF situations 'English' is viewed as being appropriated, and made appropriate, as a means of intercultural communication. Like other naturally-occurring language repertoires, it is in some respects regular, but at the same time continually variable. With ever-changing forms and constructions exploited as appropriate by ever-changing speakers for ever-changing purposes and situations it is constantly emergent, constantly 'under construction'. The investigation of ELF has been shown to involve not only finding out about characteristics of a particular development concerning the English language, but also to a great extent about general aspects of intercultural competences. Conducting ELF research on communication, then, is important for linguistic research beyond the specifics of English. It contributes to our understanding of language contact and change, and of foreign-language use; because it offers an interactive situation stripped of the unnecessary decorations of established turns of phrase in a particular community, it sheds light on the most fundamental aspects of human communication. (Mauranen, 2005: 270)

The medium through which such intercultural contact situations are realized can, of course, vary – ELF is one, and FLI another. However, the underlying motives and resulting strategies of communication might be very similar in nature. It follows, and this needs to be emphasized strongly, that an investigation of ELF does not aim at promoting a more wide-spread use of English. Its sole intention is to describe and understand this 'emergent' phenomenon which has

become so prominent in our globalized world. It should also be stressed that this does not mean, however, that ELF is to be regarded as a suitable means of communication in any kind of situation. Language users will draw on their multi-faceted linguistic repertoire and select the most effective form for their particular purposes – and depending on the circumstances, this could be ELF, or FLI, or any other flexible contact code that lends itself to the progressive development of mutual understanding.

Notes

[1] Another EU funded project dealing with multilingualism in Europe is LINEE (cf. LINEE website).

[2] For a discussion of how DYLAN deals with multilingualism project-internally see Böhringer, Hülmbauer & Seidlhofer (forthc.).

[3] This is in line with the multilingual spirit of the DYLAN project, where ELF is only one point of investigation among many other aspects of plurilingualism.

[4] For an overview of earlier ELF-related studies see Seidlhofer 2004. A more recent survey can also be found in Seidlhofer, Breiteneder & Pitzl 2006.

[5] Cf. Jenkins' (2007) large-scale study on attitude and identity in ELF.

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