English as a Lingua Franca: interpretations and attitudes

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English as a lingua franca: interpretations and attitudes

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ABSTRACT: The phenomenon of English as a lingua franca (ELF) has become the subject of considerable debate during the past few years. What emerges from much of the discussion, however, is that there seems to be a good deal of uncertainty as to what, precisely, ELF actually is, and how it relates to the much more firmly established field of world Englishes (WE). This paper therefore begins with an explanation of my own interpretation of both WE and ELF. It goes on to focus primarily on ELF. First, I examine two frequent and diametrically opposite reactions to ELF: one that it promotes monolithicity and denies pluricentricity, the other that it promotes too much diversity, lack of standards, and an approach in which 'anything goes'. I then consider the attitudes implicit in the second of these positions, and, using data drawn from recent ELF research, go on to explore the possible effects of these attitudes on the identities of ELF speakers from Expanding Circle countries. The paper ends on an optimistic note, with evidence from participants in the European Union's Erasmus Programme[1] that demonstrates how first-hand experience of ELF communication seems to be raising their awareness of its communicative effectiveness.

WORLD ENGLISHES AND ENGLISH AS A LINGUA FRANCA

As is well known to readers of this journal, the study of WE has been in progress for several decades, and apart from the fact that the plural, 'Englishes', still occasionally causes raised eyebrows among non-linguists, there seems to be a general acceptance of what the field entails. My own use of the term 'world Englishes' is thus one that is likely to be non-controversial for most scholars of WE in that it refers to *all* local English varieties regardless of which of Kachru's three circles (Kachru 1985) they come from. All, according to this interpretation, are bona fide varieties of English regardless of whether or not they are considered to be 'standard', 'educated', and the like, or who their speakers are. In other words, my interpretation does not draw distinctions in terms of linguistic legitimacy between, say, Canadian, Indian, or Japanese English in the way that governments, prescriptive grammarians, and the general public tend to do.

The only possible area of controversy that I can see here, then, is that some WE scholars may not consider Expanding Circle Englishes as legitimate varieties on a par with Outer and Inner Circle varieties. Yano, for example, argues: 'In Japan, English is not used by the majority, nor is it used often enough for it to be established as Japanese English' (2008: 139). For reasons concerning their historical origins and current patterns of use, Expanding Circle Englishes are still perceived, even by some WE experts, as norm-dependent: that is, as 'interlanguage', or 'learner English', of greater or lesser proficiency depending on their proximity to a particular Inner Circle variety.[2]

Moving on to 'English as a lingua franca',[3] in using this term I am referring to a specific communication context: English being used as a lingua franca, the common language of choice, among speakers who come from different linguacultural backgrounds.[4]

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In practice this often means English being used among non-native English speakers from the Expanding Circle, simply because these speakers exist in larger numbers than English speakers in either of the other two contexts (see e.g. Crystal 2003; Graddol 2006). However, this is not intended to imply that Outer or Inner Circle speakers are excluded from a definition of ELF. The vast majority of ELF researchers take a broad rather than narrow view, and include all English users within their definition of ELF. The crucial point, however, is that when Inner Circle speakers participate in ELF communication, they do not set the linguistic agenda. Instead, no matter which circle of use we come from, from an ELF perspective we all need to make adjustments to our local English variety for the benefit of our interlocutors when we take part in lingua franca English communication. ELF is thus a question, not of orientation to the norms of a particular group of English speakers, but of mutual negotiation involving efforts and adjustments from all parties.

At its simplest, ELF involves both common ground and local variation. On the one hand, there is shared linguistic common ground among ELF speakers just as there is shared common ground among the many varieties of the English that are collectively referred to as 'English as a native language' (ENL). ELF's common ground inevitably contains linguistic forms that it shares with ENL, but it is also contains forms that differ from ENL and that have arisen through contact between ELF speakers, and through the influence of ELF speakers' first languages on their English. On the other hand, ELF, like ENL, involves a good deal of local variation as well as substantial potential for accommodation – the scope for its users to adjust their speech in order to make it more intelligible and appropriate for their specific interlocutor(s). This can involve, for example, code-switching, repetition, echoing of items that would be considered errors in ENL, the avoidance of local idiomatic language, and paraphrasing (see Cogo and Dewey 2006; Kirkpatrick 2008).

The common ground in ELF is being identified in the speech of proficient speakers of English. While the majority of speakers providing data for analysis come from the Expanding Circle, ELF databases usually also include Outer Circle speakers, and most also include Inner Circle speakers. However, in the case of the Inner Circle, numbers are restricted to ensure that they do not distort the data with a surplus of ENL forms or (unwittingly) act as norm-providers, making the other speakers feel under pressure to speak like them. VOICE (the Vienna–Oxford International Corpus of English), for example, allows up to 10 per cent of native speakers to be present in any interaction.

ELF researchers are as interested in the kinds of linguistic processes involved in ELF creativity as they are in the resulting surface-level features, and these processes, such as regularisation, have already been found to operate in ways similar to those that occur in any other language contact situation (see also Lowenberg 2002). Examples of features resulting from these processes are likely to include the countable use of nouns that in ENL are considered uncountable (e.g. *informations*, *advices*), and zero marking of 3rd person singular -*s* in present tense verbs (e.g. *she think*, *he believe*; see e.g. Breiteneder 2005). At present there is insufficient evidence for researchers to be able to predict the extent of the common ELF ground. And it is also likely that researchers working on ELF in different parts of the world, e.g. the VOICE and ELFA (English as a Lingua Franca in Academic Settings) teams in Europe (e.g. Seidlhofer, Breiteneder, and Pitzl 2006; Mauranen 2006), and Deterding and Kirkpatrick in Southeast Asia will identify different branches of ELF, just as there are different branches of ENL such as North American English, Australian

English, British English and so on, and different sub-varieties within these. But at present it is still too early to say.

Two further provisos need stating in relation to ELF research. Firstly, ELF distinguishes between *difference* (i.e. from ENL) and *deficiency* (i.e. interlanguage or 'learner language'), and does not assume that an item that differs from ENL is by definition an error. It may instead be a legitimate ELF variant. This does not mean, however, that all ELF speakers are proficient: they can also be learners of ELF or not fully competent *non*-learners, making errors just like learners of any second language (see Jenkins 2006). At present it is still to some extent an empirical question as to which items are ELF variants and which ELF errors, and depends on factors such as systematicity, frequency, and communicative effectiveness. Sufficient patterns have nevertheless emerged for ELF researchers to be in a position to make a number of hypotheses about ELF, including the two features described in the previous paragraph.

The second proviso is that even if and when ELF features have been definitively identified and perhaps eventually codified, ELF researchers do not claim that these features should necessarily be taught to English learners. In other words, they do not believe either that pedagogic decisions about language teaching should follow on automatically from language descriptions or that the linguists compiling the corpora should make those decisions. In this, ELF corpus researchers take a rather different approach from compilers of most corpora of British and American English (often, oddly, referred to as 'real' English), who tend to transfer their findings immediately to English language teaching publications for circulation all round the Expanding Circle, without seeing any need for the mediation of pedagogic and sociolinguistic considerations.

TWO POSITIONS ON ELF

ELF is seen as non-controversial and is taken for granted by many professionals working internationally (businesspeople, technicians, and suchlike), although their positive orientation is rarely verbalised, let alone published. By contrast, it is the negative responses to ELF, coming primarily from within the field of English studies, which are most often published. Those who criticise ELF tend to orient to one of two (curiously opposing) perspectives on English. First, a number of scholars working within the field of WE argue that ELF is monolithic and monocentric, a 'monomodel' in which 'intercultural communication and cultural identity are to be made a necessary casualty' (Rubdy and Saraceni 2006: 11). This seems to me to be a strange interpretation of ELF, as it is Inner Circle models such as 'standard' British and American English and their respective 'standard' accents, RP (Received Pronunciation) and GA (General American), that are monomodels and which regularly make casualties of Expanding Circle speakers' identities. And this was certainly borne out in the words of the Expanding Circle speakers who participated in interviews with me for my recent research project (Jenkins 2007, and see below).

In fact it seems to me that ELF's pluricentric approach is precisely why those who favour a monolithic approach to the English of its second language speakers – i.e. those who take the second and opposite perspective to the WE critics of ELF – object to ELF so much. According to this second perspective, ELF lacks any standards and by default exhibits errors wherever it departs from certain Inner Circle Englishes (usually British and American). According to this position, ELF and EFL (English as a foreign language) are one and the same. No distinction is made between English learnt for intercultural

communication (ELF) – where native English speakers may be, but often are not, present in the interaction – and English learnt specifically for communication with English native speakers (EFL).[5]

If people wish to learn English as a 'foreign' language in order to blend in with a particular group of its native speakers in an Inner Circle environment or because of a personal aspiration to acquire 'native-like' English, then that is their choice, and of no concern to ELF researchers provided that the choice is an informed one. However, this is a completely different linguacultural context from the one that ELF researchers are investigating. The problem is that because the monolithic position on ELF conflates it with EFL, those who subscribe to this position believe that any differences from native speaker English in the speech of *ELF* speakers have exactly the same status as differences from native speaker English in *EFL* speakers: that is, they are by definition deficiencies rather than legitimate ELF variants. It is worth reminding ourselves at this point that the people who have this ideological frame of mind used to say the same sorts of things about Outer Circle Englishes such as Indian English, Lankan English, and Singapore English – that they were interlanguages rather than legitimate varieties of English with their own norms of use. Now they have simply transferred their attention and derogatory comments to ELF.

UNDERLYING ATTITUDES AND THEIR POTENTIAL EFFECTS

Turning to attitudes, the language that people use when they put forward the second perspective outlined at the outset – that ELF means errors and 'anything goes', and that it is simply interlanguage – is often very revealing. For one thing, the language tends to be emotive. These are three typical examples (emphases added in each case):

- Sobkowiak (2005: 141) describes an ELF approach to pronunciation as one that will 'bring the ideal [that is, Received Pronunciation] down into the *gutter* with no checkpoint along the way'.
- Prodromou, in several similarly worded articles, describes ELF as 'a *broken* weapon' and its speakers as '*stuttering* onto the world stage' (e.g. 2006: 412).
- Roy Harris, referring, in a letter to the *Times Higher Education Supplement* (14 September 2007, p. 14), to the fact that Korean Airlines had reportedly chosen to use French speakers of English, rather than British or American English speakers, because Koreans found the English of the French more intelligible, makes this comment: 'I couldn't care less what kind of English Korean Airlines *inflict* on their passengers.'

The derogatory nature of the kinds of language used in comments such as these demonstrates the strength of antipathy towards ELF forms among supporters of ENL. And although it is not possible to make direct causal links between such attitudes and ELF speakers' identities, the staunchly native English speaker ideology that underpins these attitudes, and also pervades much of the English language teaching material available in Expanding Circle countries, seems to be exerting an influence on Expanding Circle English teachers and their learners. This was suggested, for example, by a questionnaire study of Expanding Circle English speakers' attitudes towards English accents that I conducted (see Jenkins 2007: ch. 6). The results showed that an attachment to 'standard' Inner Circle

native speaker models remains firmly in place among many non-native English speakers, despite the fact that they no longer learn English to communicate primarily with its native speakers.

The respondents even showed little sign of acknowledging the fact that Outer Circle Englishes are now, in the main, firmly established varieties with their own norms. Thus, they rated Indian English as poorly as Chinese and Japanese English for both acceptability and pleasantness, and only slightly higher for correctness. Meanwhile, they consistently oriented most positively to 'standard' British and American English accents, not only in relation to the 'correctness' and 'pleasantness' variables, but also for 'acceptability for international communication'. This is surprising, given the increasing evidence that British and American accents are not the most easily intelligible in lingua franca contexts because of their copious use of features of connected speech such as elision, assimilation, and weak forms.

Similarly, the questionnaire respondents evaluated non-native English accents according to their proximity to these two Inner Circle accents. This meant that they were reasonably well disposed towards a Swedish English accent, which they referred to as 'native-like', 'natural, like native speakers', etc. On the other hand, they made extremely pejorative comments about the accents they perceived as furthest from native English accents, particularly China English, Japanese English, and Russian English accents. For example, the Japanese English accent was described as 'weird' and 'menacing', the China English as 'quarrel-like' and 'appalling', and the Russian English as 'heavy', 'sharp', and 'aggressive'. The respondents even volunteered these kinds of comments about the accent of their own first-language group, making them, in Lippi-Green's (1997: 242) words, 'complicit in the process' of their own subordination.

I was surprised by the extent of the negativity towards non-native English accents demonstrated in many of the responses to my questionnaire study. However, things were less clear-cut and polarised, and more explanatory, in the interview study (mentioned above) that I conducted in parallel. In this study, most of the participants, themselves young teachers of English, expressed a fair degree of ambivalence and even conflicted feelings about their English. On the one hand, they felt some kind of obligation to acquire 'near-native' English accents, by which they meant near-(North) American or British English, in order to be seen – and to see themselves – as successful English speakers and teachers. So at one level they were unable to separate the notion of good English from the notion of an Inner Circle native speaker 'ideal'. This is not surprising in view of the point made above about the ideological underpinnings of much of the material that is available to them: course books, teaching manuals, applied linguistics writings, and so on, whose negative effects on their confidence are doubtless enhanced by comments of the sort made by the likes of Sobkowiak.

On the other hand, the participants also expressed the desire to project their own local identity in their English, and some of them even felt themselves to be part of a community of lingua franca English speakers, and to share a common identity with other ELF speakers. This supports Seidlhofer's point: 'Alongside local speech communities sharing a dialect, we are witnessing the increased emergence of global discourse communities, or communities of practice sharing their particular registers, with English being the most widely used code' (2007: 315).

According to my interview participants, the freedom to express their own local and ELF identities in their English would give them greater confidence as both English speakers and

English teachers. It seems clear, then, to paraphrase Rubdy and Saraceni (2006: 11), that these interview participants felt their identities were casualties of the pressures on them to learn American or British English, and that the opposite would be true if ELF became acceptable and those pressures were removed. The following five extracts are typical of the ambivalent and 'conflicted' comments they made (see Jenkins 2007 for full details):

> Taiwanese English speaker: 'I really feel bad about this you know, I feel like I have to lose my identity. I'm a Taiwanese person and I should feel comfortable about this, and I just feel that when I'm speaking English, I will want to be like a native speaker, and it's really hard, you know.'

> Japanese English speaker: 'Yes, that's lots of contradiction in the view. So in theory I can understand varieties of English and non-native accent, it's good, it's accepted as far as intelligibility exists. But at a personal level still I'm aiming at native-like speaking.'

> Italian English speaker: 'The materials they have, it's mainly videos and tapes, it's all native speakers' accents, so that's the only model they have. Maybe if more materials around was with different accents and non-native speaker accents, then it's like recognizing, it's like codifying, it's like accepting it worldwide.'

> China English speaker: 'First of all I am Chinese. I don't have to speak like American or British, it's like identity, because I want to keep my identity, yeah. [...] I feel that it's quite conflicted for me because I feel happy when they say okay you have a native accent, but erm if they cannot recognize from my pronunciation and they think that okay, you are definitely American, I don't feel comfortable because I am indeed a Chinese.'

> Polish English speaker: 'I've still got a little bit of linguistic schizophrenia ... I know that I don't need to speak like a British person, but because I've been taught for so many years that I should do it, when I hear, let's say, someone speaking British English like a nice RP pronunciation, I like it.'

The fact that most of my interview participants seem to have reached a point at which they no longer consider it, at least in theory, a foregone conclusion that it is essential to imitate ENL speakers in order to communicate effectively in ELF contexts of use is cause for optimism for ELF researchers. In this, there seems to be something of a divide between these younger Expanding Circle English users and those from older generations such as Sobkowiak (see above), with the younger ones being more likely to have experienced ELF communication at first hand, and (perhaps partly for this reason) being more receptive to ELF in theory and to (English) language change in general. Further evidence of younger English speakers' more favourable orientations to ELF can be found in data collected by Peckham, Kalocsai, Kovács, and Sherman (2008) among Erasmus students in Hungary and the Czech Republic. For example, a German participant in their study says:

> I liked very much with the English here to speak English with non-native speakers. It's the funny new words or new pronunciations that emerge and then you just keep those because you like them so much and not important anymore to say in the right way, and even more fun to create this new language.

This German student still considers her differences from ENL to be errors (not 'right'), but she is clearly aware of the creative potential of the kind of English she produces with other non-native speakers. The next student, a French speaker, takes the same deficit approach to the kind of English he speaks as compared with ENL (which he calls 'real English'), but is also well aware of its communicative value:

> Erasmus English is totally different than the real English, but it's like we have different accents, we use these words and it's not correct at all, it's like quite awful sometimes [*laughs*] but it's good, we can understand each other.

A third student, also French, again considers her English to be faulty by comparison with ENL ('I don't speak perfectly English') but is aware of the major advantage of being bilingual and the major disadvantage ('it's not my problem') of being monolingual:

> I was really embarrassed in the beginning. I was like 'oh, I'm really sorry for my level' because I was ashamed I think. And now I don't care about the native speaker because most of them don't speak any other language, so it's not my problem, I don't speak perfectly English but I speak some other language.

Finally, an Italian student points out how effective ELF communication is, and the fact that it tends to be English native speakers who are the source of problems:

> I see that if I'm in the middle of people that are not English and they're speaking English and so there is no problem understanding them, probably my obstacle was that to understand like really English people talking.

Regardless of their perspective on their English and whether they still perceive their differences from ENL as errors, all these younger English speakers seem at least to appreciate their advantage as bilingual speakers of English in ELF communication contexts, and to view the claim that effective communication in English involves deferring to ENL norms as a fiction – something that WE research has, of course, long demonstrated.

Finally, as the purpose of the original workshop at the 2007 IAWE Conference in Regensburg (of which my current paper formed a part) was to explore similarities and differences in orientation to English of WE and ELF scholars, I will end with a short comment on this topic. Over the past few years, ELF research has often been seen as having a very different agenda from WE research. However, it seems to me (and always has done) that world Englishes and English as a lingua franca have a lot more that draws them together than sets them apart. And, to quote myself, 'we need to find ways of bringing WE and ELF scholars together in recognition of their shared interests, whatever their circle or research focus' (Jenkins 2006: 175). The colloquium organised by Margie Berns and Anne Pakir at the IAWE conference in Regensburg in 2007, the first of its kind bringing together WE and ELF scholars, was thus a very important first step in this direction, and I look forward to much future collaboration of this kind.

NOTES

1. The Erasmus Programme is a European Union education and training programme that enables students to study and work abroad, as well as supporting collaboration between higher education institutions across Europe.
2. Arguments such as Yano's ignore the fact that there are established English varieties in some Outer Circle countries where 'English is not used by the majority', but is the preserve of a largely elite educated minority.
3. ELF is sometimes known as EIL (English as an international language). However, to avoid confusion with other uses of the word 'international' (e.g. 'International English' is sometimes equated with North American English), most researchers prefer 'ELF'. This is also generally preferred to the term 'lingua franca English', as the latter implies the existence of one single lingua franca variety of English, which is most certainly not the case.
4. Note that by 'communication context' I am not referring to any specific geographical context. ELF communication, in this interpretation, is not tied to any particular geographical area, but is defined by who the participants are and how they orient to English.

5. Note that I normally use the term 'native English speaker' to refer to both Inner and Outer Circle speakers. But because those who subscribe to the second position outlined above reserve 'native speaker' for the Inner Circle, I am using it in this sense in this part of my discussion.

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