# Pragmatic strategies and negotiation of meaning in ELF talk

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**Abstract**   The global spread of English and the different forms and shapes that the language has taken in the most diverse settings has contributed, especially in the last decades,  to  develop a peculiar sociolinguistic phenomenon which has had implications on a wide range of areas; linguistic, political, socio-cultural, ideological as well as pedagogical. Speakers from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds have increasingly come into contact on a global scale and have adopted English as a contact language, a *lingua franca*, in contexts where the language is used for various communicative purposes. What communicative strategies and discourse practices speakers, belonging to different linguistic backgrounds, use to facilitate the achievement of mutual comprehension, will be drawn attention to in the present paper. The need to re-examine what it means to learn and teach a global modern language from a different methodological perspective will be highlighted. It is therefore suggested that English as a *lingua franca*, ELF, needs to be investigated as a field of enquiry which requires empirical analysis, not only from a linguistic perspective, but also from a sociolinguistic one.

**Summary**   1. Introducing ELF talk. – 2. Approaching ELF research: challenging perspectives. – 3. World Englishes vs. ELF research. – 4. Pragmatic strategies in ELF talk. – 5. Negotiating meaning. Features of ELF interaction. – 6. The native/non native speaker dilemma in ELF. – 7. Pedagogical reflections. – 8. A way forward. – 9. References.

## 1  Introducing ELF talk

The present paper aims at drawing attention to the importance of analyzing English in lingua franca communicative contexts, and in particular, the pragmatic strategies and discourse practices that speakers, belonging to different «linguacultural» (Cogo, Dewey 2012, p. 136) backgrounds, use to facilitate the achievement of a common goal: mutual comprehension. Data collected from the observation of «naturally occurring conversations» (2012, p. 18) in lingua franca settings, as we will see, show that the analysis of speakers' pragmatic strategies when engaged in interaction, are incredibly useful in shedding light on the linguistic resources speakers and listeners use to construct and negotiate meaning and ultimately to achieve successful communication. Like other languages, English has been involved in processes of variation and change. However, the extent to which English has diversified in the world is unprecedented (Graddol

2006, Jenkins 2007, Seidlhofer 2004). Speakers from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds have increasingly come into contact on a global scale and have adopted English as a contact language, a lingua franca, in contexts where the language is used for various communicative purposes.

## 2  Approaching ELF research: challenging perspectives

Making sense of such a peculiar sociolinguistic phenomenon, therefore, entails a new theoretical and methodological approach. It entails approaching ELF as a field of enquiry which requires empirical investigation, not only from a linguistic perspective, but also from a sociolinguistic one. The identification and description of linguistic (phonological, lexical, grammatical) features (Jenkins 2000, Breiteneder 2005, Dewey 2007, Seidlhofer 2004), has represented the starting point in ELF research. Shifting the focus to the underlying pragmatic processes that give rise to unique linguistic forms, provides new insights into how language users make sense of each others in intercultural encounters and how they manage intelligibility problems (Seidlhofer 2001, Jenkins, Cogo, Dewey 2011).

   ELF is said to be a sociolinguistic phenomenon as sociolinguists investigate the relationship between language and society with the objective of understanding why we speak the way we do, the social functions of language (Hymes 1974, Seidlhofer, Widdowson 2009). Following a similar view, Thomas (1995) defines pragmatics as meaning in interaction:

> Meaning is not something which is inherent in the words alone, nor is it produced by the speaker alone, nor by the listener alone. Making meaning is a dynamic process, involving the negotiation of meaning between speaker and hearer, the context of utterance and the meaning potential of the utterance (1995, p. 22).

The contemporary situation of English, in its radically changing contexts requires a fundamentally different approach, one that takes better account of the increased dynamism of a globalizing world. Traditional concepts which used to consider language and culture as unitary and homogeneous entities, disconnected from their socio-political context, are inevitably challenged (Graddol 1997, Crystal 1997, Holliday 2005, Jenkins 2000, 2006a, Kachru 1986, McKay 2002, 2003, Seidlhofer 2004). Choosing an ELF theoretical and methodological approach, on the contrary, means accepting the creative, changeable, dynamic character of the language; in other words, recognizing the linguistic diversity which emerges from the contribution of speakers and listeners engaged in interaction. Speakers actively and skillfully shape and co-construct the language; they manipulate

its linguistic resources and give life to new repertoires which, I believe, are worth looking at.

In these diverse cultural and linguistic settings, pragmatic strategies «cannot be taken for granted as selected from a pre-determined store» (Cogo, Dewey 2012, p. 114), but are constantly negotiated moment by moment in interaction. What this means is that speakers in ELF communication establish communicative strategies to facilitate understanding and overcome non-understanding. In this effort, they are engaged in a process in which they exploit the fluidity and flexibility of the language and therefore contribute to creatively develop and expand the English language (2012, p. 4).

## 3 World Englishes vs. ELF research

In order to further clarify the nature of ELF in its distinctiveness (Dewey, Jenkins 2010), it is useful to distinguish between 'World Englishes' and ELF as different fields of enquiry (Jenkins 2006a). Research in 'World Englishes' is primarily concerned with the empirical investigation of «nativized» Englishes, also referred as «indigenized» or «non-native» varieties of English (Anchimbe 2010, p. 271; Kachru 1986, 1992) in the «Outer circle» (Kachru 1986, 1992).[1] A major objective in this field has been the struggle in favour of the legitimization of these varieties in their own right (see Kachru 1986, 1992, Kachru, Nelson 2006, Kirkpatrick 2010). Contrary to this, ELF has been concerned with interactions which occur in highly variable socio-linguacultural settings (see Seidlhofer 2009)[2] which also include the «Expanding circle» (Kachru 1986, 1992) countries. However it is important to highlight that ELF research is not limited to the use of English in the «Expanding circle», as «communication via ELF frequently happens in and across all three of Kachru's circles» (Seidlhofer 2009, p. 236). Therefore, ELF research is not linked to any geographical settings; rather it tries to untie linguistic description from physical boundaries or definite speech communities (Seidlhofer 2009, Dewey 2009).

In this light, the purpose of lingua franca research is not primarily to describe the characteristics of ELF as a definite variety but to uncover the

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1 In Inner Circle countries English is used as the primary language, such as United Kingdom, the Unites States, Australia and Canada. Outer Circle countries are multilingual and use English as a second language, such as India and Singapore. In Expanding Circle countries, the largest circle, English is learned as a foreign language, such as China, Japan, Korea and Egypt. For detailed information on the spread of English in the world, see Kachru (1986, 1992).

2 See Seidlhofer (2009) for a detailed discussion of commonalities and differences between ELF and WE.

underlying communicative processes which give rise to innovative uses of English and consequently to accept its «hybrid», «mutable» nature (Cogo, Dewey 2012, p. 13). Research in ELF has moved beyond systematic description of ELF linguistic features, however interesting they may be, to an «explanation of the underlying significance of the forms: to ask what work they do, what functions they are symptomatic of» (Seidlhofer 2009, p. 241).

## 4 Pragmatic strategies in ELF talk

Examples of pragmatic strategies used in ELF talk to signal non-understanding and to achieve comprehension will be reviewed in the following section. Negotiation can occur either from explicit indication of trouble (Post-trouble source) or without explicit signals of trouble (Pre-realizations) (Cogo, Dewey 2012, p. 115). In the first case, there is a mismatch between the speaker's intended meaning and what the listener seems to understand (Bremer 1996). As one of the speakers is aware of this mismatch, the negotiation strategy can be initiated to solve the problem of non-understanding. Varonis and Gass (1985) have proposed a largely used model of negotiation, where non-understanding is made up of four parts: a trigger, an indicator, a response and an optional reaction (1985, p. 73). The trigger is the utterance which creates the problem, while the indicator is the signal that shows that there is a problem. This is shown in the following example where the trigger occurs in the first turn and the indicator in the second turn:

    A: what is your name?
    B: My name?
    A: yeah (Varonis, Gass 1985, p. 76).

Schegloff, Jefferson, Sacks (1977) suggest that in many cases a non-understanding is initiated in the turn immediately following the trouble-source turn. They call it «the next turn repair initiation». The following sequence illustrates this.

    Frieda: This is nice, did you make this?
    Kathy: No, Samu made that
    Frieda: Who?
    Kathy: Samu (Schegloff, Jefferson, Sacks 1977, p. 368).

In the above example the indicator of repair is «who?» which is positioned immediately after the source of trouble, that is the utterance «No, Same made that». Schegloff, Jefferson, Sacks (1977) report this as a typical example to explain the start of a repair sequence (Schegloff 1992).

Wong (2000) and Schegloff (2000) explore the issue of repair in subsequent turns. In the following example, Wong (2000) shows how a NS (Beth) and a NNS (Lin) are talking about a friend going on a long journey from California to Montreal with a little baby.

Beth: so they were gonna go all the way to Montreal in nine days
Lin: oh
Lin: nine days?
Beth: Yeah
Lin: Jeesus (Wong 2000, p. 251)

The repair initiation comes when the NNS (Lin) repeats a part of the second turn (nine days?). The trouble-source turn becomes problematic when the speakers compare it with previous knowledge, that the nine days will be spent in a car with a little baby.

According to Varonis and Gass (1985), Schegloff, Jefferson, Sacks (1977) and Wong (2000) the indicators are the elements that identify the non-understanding. Varonis and Gass (1985) provide a list of 4 verbal indicators (apart from c, the silent response) as illustrated below:

a. Echo
i. Rising intonation
A: What is your name?
B: My name?
A: Yeah
b. Explicit statement of non-understanding
A: Are you a student in your country?
B: in my class?
A: in your country?
B: Oh, I don't understand
A: OK, OK so what did you do in your country?
c. No verbal response
A: What is your purpose for studying English in Ann Arbor?
B: silence
A: What is your purpose for studying English
d. Inappropriate response
A: Are you a student in your country?
B: in my class?
A: in your country (Varonis, Gass 1985, p. 76).

## 5 Negotiating meaning: Features of ELF interaction

More recent research findings have identified further pragmatic strate-
gies which occur in ELF talk. House (2003) studied the interactions of
international students at the University of Hamburg. They were asked to
discuss their opinions on a reading text about the role of English as a lin-
gua franca. From the analysis of these data she found out that there was
a lack of discourse markers like 'well' or 'I think' when students started
or completed a new turn. The most common feature of turn-taking was a
repetition of the previous student's comment used also to signal accept-
ance and understanding of a previous statement. A second common feature
was the high use of conjunctions like 'and' and 'but' when starting a turn
(2003, p. 146).

Meierkord's (2000) exploration into ELF conversation contributed to
identify additional pragmatic features. Her findings, based on the analysis
of conversations between overseas students in Great Britain, show that
pauses often occur, especially at the end of a conversation, to facilitate the
transition from one exchange to the other; secondly, participants prefer
to discuss safe topics, such as meals and life in hostels, rather than more
complex issues; thirdly, participants tend not to deal with a particular topic
for too long and they tend to use politeness strategies, such as routine
formulae in openings and closings, backchannels, simultaneous talk and
sentence completions (in McKay 2010, p. 237).

These studies have highlighted the key role of interactional negotiation
and co-operation for successful ELF communication, therefore supporting
the argument of ELF talk being «cooperative and mutually supportive»
(Seidlhofer 2001, p. 143). Backchannels, for example, are signals (verbal and
non-verbal) e.g. 'mhm, yeah, uh huh, right', etc. that indicate to one of the
speakers that he/she can continue talking or that the interlocutor is listen-
ing or is interested in what is being said. They are often used to elicit more
conversation or elucidation on some topics (in Cogo, Dewey 2012, p. 139).

Simultaneous speech, which occurs when speaker and interlocutor talk
at the same time during the conversation, are also considered as a sign
of cooperation often employed to clarify something immediately before it
could lead to misunderstanding. Another strategy for supporting the con-
versation is the utterance completion (2012, p. 142), for instance, when a
second speaker continues the utterance of a previous speaker. These have
been also called «collaborative productions» (Szczepek 2000) aimed at
showing active involvement and a desire to get the conversation going. In
other words, all these pragmatic strategies show a degree of cooperation
between participants who are collaboratively engaged with the purpose to
facilitate ultimate comprehension.

Previous studies in lingua franca talk have claimed that lack of shared
knowledge between participants who can't rely on an established set of

mother tongue's norms, leads to misunderstandings and a block in the intelligibility process. In contrast to this, the present paper supports the argument that it is precisely the 'non-nativeness' of the participants which facilitates co-construction of meaning in the effort of seeking mutual intelligibility (Mauranen 2006a, 2009; Cogo, Dewey 2012). This issue will be dealt with in the following section.

## 6 The native/non native speaker dilemma in ELF

The analysis of data gathered from lingua franca talk shows that non-native participants in the conversation are very skillful in «exploiting the multi-linguistic resources available to them». Speakers can draw on «the varied resources of their linguacultural repertoires, often in flexible and creative ways in order to achieve their communication purposes» (2012, p. 136). Therefore, being non-native speakers is not a limitation when it comes to pragmatic awareness, rather it becomes a valuable resource as it provides speakers with the ability to use their multilingual awareness and consequently enhance successful meaning construction. «ELF speakers are more effective precisely because they speak other languages and are multicompetent» (Cogo, Jenkins 2010, p. 273). As Cogo and Dewey (2012, p. 137) emphasize, meaning does not depend on the linguistic forms themselves, rather on the manipulation and selection of the discourse processes which encourage mutual negotiation.

The native-non-native speaker dichotomy, which views the native speaker as the ultimate attainment in language learning and non-native features as an obstacle to successful communication (see Davies 2003, Medgyes 1994, Modiano 2005), is not any longer appropriate and relevant in ELF communication. This classification is not useful also because it places all non-natives in the same basket regardless of their mastery of the language, their perceptions of that mastery and the purposes for speaking English (Cogo, Dewey 2012). For instance, some non-native speakers may feel more or less comfortable when speaking English, some will consider themselves as learners, others as users in their own right, and in between, there will be a wider range of speakers with more or less competence in English. Second speakers of English also widely differ in their language goals and needs. Jenkins (2006b), in her distinction between ELF and EFL perspectives on language pedagogy, points out that while EFL prepares learners to interact with ENL speakers, ELF approach prepares learners to use English to interact with multilingual speakers. Similarly, House (2007) argues to go beyond the notion of 'non-native' speakers and to refer to them as 'multilingual speakers'. «ELF needs to be investigated as language in use in its own right, without trying to make it fit pre-existing categories and language norms» (Seidlhofer 2001, p. 137). ELF speakers

are therefore legitimate users of the language and not «deficient learners engaging in interlanguage conversation» (Cogo, Dewey 2012, p. 38). An ELF approach needs to focus on how speakers exploit and manipulate the various linguistic resources available to them in such a way as to achieve successful communication.

## 7 Pedagogical reflections

Data gathered from the observation of ELF «naturally occurring interaction» may be especially useful in terms of pedagogical reflections and practices. In other words, they may be transferred into language classroom skills and conveyed to language learners. This may contribute to the development of new teaching approaches and syllabus which would focus on the learners' need to be competent in the international uses of English, and to deal with topics that cater to multicultural environments and diverse communicative goals (McKay 2010, p. 239).

In practical terms, as McKay suggests (2010, p. 239), classroom practices may enhance repair strategies, such as asking for clarification, repetition and rephrasing and allowing time for pauses. A variety of conversational and negotiation strategies could be introduced and practiced, such as managing turn-taking, back channeling, and initiating topics of conversation. Learners could be given examples of real data and asked to identify discourse strategies that help the meaning-construction process or impede intelligibility. Strategies to overcome communication problems could be suggested to make learners aware of what happens in bilingual/multilingual interaction via English. Last but not least, data from ELF talk should prove valuable to convey the idea of the hybridity and flexibility of the English language in current multilingual societies, the need to negotiate various identities and become familiar with different voices.

Nonetheless, the relationship between ELF and ELT is not as straightforward as it may seem. Incorporating ELF empirical work in language pedagogy will require teachers, teacher training institutions, institutions employing teachers, textbook producers and bodies which develop curriculum and assessment materials (Sharifian 2010, p. 16) to challenge and revise their theoretical and methodological frameworks.

## 8 A way forward

However, it is important to highlight that ELF research calls for a re-thinking of many traditional concepts in applied linguistics and definitely breaks with tradition. Seidlhofer (2007) points out the need to update old assumptions about the language in light of the new sociolinguistic

developments brought by the globalization of English. In particular, the concept of speech community needs to be revised. Research into language variation so far has focused on «specific speech communities which are more or less stable and readily identifiable» (Cogo, Dewey 2012, p. 164). A revisited concept of speech community cannot be linked «to group cohesion or socialization into a particular set of values or beliefs; it is more about engagement in dynamic communities of practice, many of which are virtually conceptualized» (2007, p. 314).

Moreover, as it was argued in the present paper, English as a lingua franca is a language in constant change, hybrid and heterogeneous which cannot be described as a distinctive variety or identified with a particular speech community. As research suggests, while ELF is a globally diffuse phenomenon, nonetheless, this has not lead to the emergence of a lingua franca variety. English as a global language becomes localized with new linguistic forms developing in the interaction process (see Giddens 2003).

The purpose of this paper has been to draw attention to the need to challenge our understanding of how language change and variation unfolds and then investigate lingua franca communication from this new perspective. English as a lingua franca is a new kind of sociolinguistic reality that therefore requires systematic investigation in its own right. Among major recent studies in the ELF field we can mention the VOICE corpus (made publicly available as a research resource in June 2009) and the ELFA corpus (see Mauranen 2003). However, even if corpus linguistics has provided valuable insights into actual language use, corpus-based work so far has been mainly concerned with ENL interactions, in other words, interactions where native speakers of English are involved. More corpus-based studies which investigate uses of English across second language users are necessary for a more systematic analysis of 'naturally occurring interaction' from an ELF perspective. These are crucial issues that need to be explored in depth if we really want to make sense of what learning a modern international language means in the current globalizing world. If we neglect these issues we run «the risk of prejudice, stereotyping, and ultimately alienation. Understanding these differences open doors, not only for those who are in less powerful status, but for all of us» (Boxer 2002, pp. 161-162).

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