Common ground and different realities: world Englishes and English as a lingua franca

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ABSTRACT: This paper argues that the ‘world Englishes paradigm’ and English as a lingua franca (ELF) research, despite important differences, have much in common. Both share the pluricentric assumption that ‘English’ belongs to all those who use it, and both are concerned with the sociolinguistic, sociopsychological, and applied linguistic implications of this assumption. For example, issues of language contact, variation and change, linguistic norms and their acceptance, ownership of the language, and expression of social identities are central to both WE and ELF research. The growing body of descriptive ELF research that is now becoming available can thus add substance to work in the field as a whole. It can also offer fresh perspectives on several theoretical constructs central to WE, such as ‘community’, ‘variety’, ‘lingua franca’, even ‘language’.

INTRODUCTION

Like all papers in this Symposium, this paper originated from a workshop at the 13th IAWE Conference in Regensburg, Germany, in October 2007. In the general abstract¹ supplied by the workshop convenors, research in world Englishes (WE) and in English as a lingua franca (ELF) were presented as separate, distinct, even incompatible:

Panel members . . . will focus on ‘lingua franca’ as a theoretical concept within the framework of ELF and/or of World Englishes. The session’s goal is increased appreciation of these two frameworks and insights into the current scholarly debate that has been generated by a range of interpretations of English as a lingua franca. (emphasis added)

Anne Pakir’s abstract for her own contribution also mentioned ‘two contradictory views on English as a lingua franca (the world Englishes view and the ELF view)’. The objective of this paper is to question whether there is such a contradiction. It highlights what WE and ELF have in common, and argues that the study of ELF needs to be perceived as entirely compatible with the WE paradigm.

SIMILAR CHALLENGES

It is of course true that ELF research has had its primary focus on Kachru’s Expanding Circle, but obviously communication via ELF frequently happens in and across all three of Kachru’s circles. Research in the ‘world Englishes paradigm’, on the other hand, has been less concerned with the Expanding Circle. Nevertheless, while it is of course problematic to compare developments in historically and socioculturally quite diverse contexts and

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different kinds of community, there are striking similarities in the development of these fields of enquiry and in the responses to research agendas focusing on non-native Englishes. What WE and ELF have certainly in common is that they have asked difficult, ‘unorthodox’ questions and posed major conceptual challenges.

Considering the history of the ‘emancipation’ of various Englishes around the globe, it is of course not surprising that the groundbreaking work in their recognition and description emanated from and has been essentially focused on the Outer Circle. But it has been a protracted uphill struggle. Even today, what is often termed ‘international’ by Inner Circle scholars, publishers, etc. is simply an extension from the old ‘ancestral home’ of English to the newer native varieties. Thus Kachru (1997) criticizes the *Cambridge International Dictionary of English* for using the term ‘international’ for referring to ‘America, Britain and Australia’ (pp. 70f). ‘International English’ is indeed generally interpreted as the distribution of native-speaker Standard English rather than the way English has changed to meet international needs.

From an ELF perspective, a similar observation can now be made regarding conceptualizations of ‘international’ English that include the Outer Circle but exclude the Expanding Circle. Thus ICE, the International Corpus of English, was described as ‘the first large-scale effort to study the development of English as a world language’ on an earlier version of the introductory text on the ICE website. However, as Greenbaum explains,

> Its [ICE’s] principal aim is to provide the resources for comparative studies of the English used in countries where it is either a majority first language ... or an official additional language. In both language situations, English serves as a means of communication between those who live in these countries ... Excluded from ICE is the English used in countries where it is not a medium for communication between natives of the country. (Greenbaum 1996: 3f.)

While there obviously have to be clear criteria for and limits to what can be included in such a corpus, it is worth pointing out that ICE’s conceptualization of ‘English as a world language’ does not include the most widespread contemporary use of English – that which from a global perspective actually constitutes the prevailing reality of English, with the largest number of speakers, in interactions in which more often than not no native speakers participate – namely English as a lingua franca. And so, while impressive progress has been made over the last few decades in the corpus-based description of English as a native language (ENL) and nativized varieties, no comparable research efforts exist to date for the description of ELF – there are the Vienna–Oxford International Corpus of English (VOICE) and the English as a Lingua Franca in Academic Settings corpus (ELFA), but they are (still) relatively modest in size. This means that currently, there is a very considerable gap between the extent of the spread of ELF and the extent to which efforts have been made to describe it.

This lag is likely to be due to what elsewhere I have termed a conceptual gap (Seidlhofer 2001), the difficulty that seems to be inherent in accepting a language that is not anybody’s native tongue as a legitimate object of investigation and descriptive research. Here again, we are witnessing similarities with earlier phases of WE research: as late as 1996, Braj Kachru had this to say about what he called ‘paradigm myopia’:
There are essentially two types of response. One is to view this overwhelming linguistic phenomenon as an age-old process of language dynamics accentuated by the complex culturally and linguistically pluralistic contexts of language acquisition, language function, language contact, and language creativity. This response demands questioning the earlier paradigms, asking new probing questions, and looking for fresh theoretical and methodological answers.

The second response, from a number of active scholars, is to marginalize any questions – theoretical, methodological, and ideological – which challenge the earlier paradigms or seek answers appropriate to new global functions of English. (Kachru 1996: 242)

Thirteen years on, the acceptance of nativized varieties of English has made very significant progress, at least in academia, and the term ‘Englishes’ is generally taken to include both ‘English as a native language’ and ‘English as a nativized language’. However, the myopic response described by Kachru is still the one that prevails when it comes to ELF. Thus, instead of a difference perspective with an acknowledgement of plurality, English in the Expanding Circle is by and large approached, from both inside and outside the circle, from a tenacious deficit perspective in which variation is perceived as deviation from ENL norms and described in terms of ‘errors’ or ‘fossilization’.

NEW REALITIES, NEW CONCEPTS

What seems to get in the way of a conceptualization of ELF that is in keeping with the contemporary world is, more than anything else, an entrenched way of thinking about what ‘a language’ can be, a resistance to the conceptual adjustments required by the rapid changes the globalizing world has been undergoing. A case in point is the way the crucial terms ‘community’ and ‘variety’ are, by and large, still used in the same way as they were long before the days of mass international air travel, let alone electronic communication.

It is important to remember that these terms have to do with social conditions and relationships between language and society that have undergone radical change in recent decades and so are in need of quite radical reconsideration themselves. In sociolinguistic thinking it is primarily identification with a particular community that makes a variety a variety. I have suggested elsewhere (Seidlhofer 2007) that, at a time of pervasive and widespread global communication, the old notion of community based purely on frequent face-to-face contact among people living in close proximity to each other clearly does not hold any more. A much more appropriate concept is that of communities of practice characterized by ‘mutual engagement’ in shared practices, taking part in some jointly negotiated ‘enterprise’, and making use of members’ ‘shared repertoire’ (Wenger 1998: 72ff.).

With the current proliferation of possibilities created by electronic means and unprecedented global mobility, changes in communications have accelerated and forced changes in the nature of communication. And for the time being anyway, it is English as a lingua franca that is the main means of wider communication for conducting transactions and interactions outside people’s primary social spaces and speech communities. It seems inevitable that with radical technology-driven changes in society, our sense of what constitutes a legitimate community and a legitimate linguistic variety has to change, too. Thus we are witnessing, alongside local speech communities sharing a dialect, the vigorous emergence of regional and global discourse communities (Swales 1990) or communities of practice with their particular ELF registers constituting shared repertoires for
international/intercultural communication. Closing our eyes to the contemporary reality of English as a lingua franca just because we cannot neatly slot it into familiar categories of ‘variety’ and do not wish to call its users a ‘community’ is therefore a case of paradigm myopia in the Kachruvian sense.

**INNOVATION, DESCRIPTION, OWNERSHIP**

It would seem that at some level of abstraction, we are watching a situation unfold that has clear parallels with the establishment of Outer Circle Englishes over the last few decades. Issues of *ownership* of the language, of norm-dependence vs. *norm development*, as well as of *acceptance* and assertion of *identity*, are arising with reference to ELF now as they have been for other Englishes for quite some time. These issues are all intricately related, and are inextricably bound up with the availability of sociolinguistic profiles and linguistic description. Unless we know a good deal more about how much and how speakers of the Expanding Circle really use English in their communities of practice, what their shared repertoires look like, and which communication processes characterize ELF as it is used in jointly negotiated enterprises, the significant contribution that ELF speakers make to norm development will remain invisible. The sense of ownership of the language that is gaining ground among speakers as ELF expands into yet more regions and domains is bound to be reflected in the way the language is used and moulded according to interlocutors’ specific needs in various contexts. A closer look at professional and private interactions via ELF also reveals, as we shall see below, how speakers assert and communicate their own identities, how they use the language creatively and ‘subversively’ rather than mimicking native speakers of English. And acceptance of the very concept of ELF as a legitimate alternative to the concept of ENL will be furthered when it is clearer just what it is that is waiting to be accepted – that is, when documentation and analyses of a wide range of speech events carried out through ELF become available. Here again, scholars working on Outer Circle Englishes have provided inspiration and guidance for a long time. One example is Ayo Bamgboye, who in 1998, and in this very journal, discussed ‘the ambivalence between recognition and acceptance of non-native norms’ and tied it closely to ‘the overriding need for codification’:

> Once we take, as our point of departure, the function of English in English-using communities, it follows that our preoccupation with non-native Englishes should be more with the norms of these varieties and how characteristic innovations have contributed to the development of these norms. Crucial to the entrenchment of innovations and non-native forms is codification. Without it users will continue to be uncertain about what is and what is not correct and, by default, such doubts are bound to be resolved on the basis of existing codified norms, which are derived from an exonormative standard. Codification is therefore the main priority of the moment, and it is to be hoped that research and collaboration in the future will be directed towards this objective. (Bamgboye 1998: 12)

In the early 21st century, it seems clear that there are English-using communities not only in the Inner and the Outer Circle but also English-using local, regional, and global communities of practice communicating via ELF in the Expanding Circle and, importantly, across all circles. What is certain is that we have come a long way from conditions a quarter of a century ago that prompted an eminent linguist to claim that ‘[t]he relatively narrow range of purposes for which the non-native needs to use English . . .
is arguably well catered for by a single monochrome standard form’ (Quirk 1985: 6, emphasis added). Taking Europe as an example, there is substantial research available now that documents that the language has penetrated the daily lives of innumerable people to a considerable extent, from casual small talk to corporate business negotiation (e.g. Berns, de Bot, and Hasebrink 2007; Brutt-Griffler 2002; Cheshire 2002; Graddol 2006; Seidlhofer, Breiteneder, and Pitzl 2006). It follows, therefore, that research needs to be undertaken that investigates the possible emergence of ELF innovations, and makes these visible as expressions of identities and evidence of the sense of ownership of the language.

Earlier in his 1998 paper, Bamgbos’e explains that he uses the term codification ‘in the restricted sense of putting the innovation into a written form in a grammar, a lexical or pronouncing dictionary, course books or any other type of reference manual’, and that ‘[t]he importance of codification is too obvious to be belaboured’ (p. 4). It was a very similar kind of reasoning and sense of urgency that motivated me to propose a research programme that would make empirical work on ELF possible by compiling a computer corpus of ELF talk:

What I propose, then, is to consider extending Bamgboso’s claim to ELF and to explore the possibility of a codification of ELF with a conceivable ultimate objective of making it a feasible, acceptable and respected alternative to ENL in appropriate contexts of use. This is, of course, a long-term project and a huge and laborious task – an undertaking which must be carried out with extreme care, and which should not give rise to exaggerated expectations, let alone reckless premature commercial exploitation. (Seidlhofer 2001: 150)

As is evident from even this short quotation, the focus of this proposal is on fostering a conceptualization of ELF, as an alternative to ENL, in order to help develop a conscious, ‘declarative’ knowledge and awareness of what is going on ‘procedurally’ anyway. In keeping with Bamgboso’s argumentation, codification is recognized as a crucial requirement in this process, and one that does not deny the inherent fluidity of ELF. As I have always emphasized, it is an understanding of the more general communicative processes that is the main objective of documenting and observing how ELF speakers interact. Clearly, what Bamgboso says about codification in the Outer Circle needs to be modulated according to the different sociohistorical conditions of the Expanding Circle. In that sense the above quotation about ELF primarily constitutes an essentially programmatic claim, with far-off but thinkable results in terms of actual descriptions of certain observed regularities. The recognition of indigenized Englishes in the Outer Circle has been long in the making, and it would be unrealistic to expect this process to happen overnight in the Expanding Circle, even despite the acceleration of such processes that global electronic communication has indisputably brought with it (see also Dewey 2007b).

Another important point Bamgboso makes in the 1998 paper is that there are different types of norms, which he terms ‘code norm’, ‘feature norm’, and ‘behavioural norm’. It is beyond the scope of the present discussion to go into detail about these categories here, but Bamgboso’s observation is worth emphasizing:

Of these three norm types, the one frequently appealed to is the feature norm, and this is largely because nativization is often narrowly construed as predominantly linguistic. The fact, however, is that linguistic nativization is only one of the processes of indigenizing a non-native variety of English. Equally important
are pragmatic and creative nativization both of which fall largely within the scope of behavioral norms. (1998: 2, emphases added)

This observation is particularly apt when applied to descriptive ELF research as it has been gathering momentum over the last few years. Rather than limiting itself to the identification of particular linguistic features, this research has tended to take a much more processual, communicative view of ELF, of which linguistic features constitute but a part and are investigated not for their own sake but as indications of the various functions ELF fulfills in the interactions observed. So the crucial challenge has been to move from the surface description of particular features, however interesting they may be in themselves, to an explanation of the underlying significance of the forms: to ask what work they do, what functions they are symptomatic of. And the explanations that are found when analysing the accomplished interactional work that speakers undertake via ELF very often have to do with ‘behavioral norms’, with pragmatic and creative processes. As analyses of the data in VOICE make clear, when people use ELF, they find ways of exploiting and exploring the meaning potential of the language as a communicative resource, and realize (in both senses of the word) the significance of the forms they use, their relative functional usefulness. In other words, form and function can be clearly seen as operating interdependently.

Descriptive work so far has described and analysed many different kinds of ELF interactions from a wide range of perspectives. The emphasis has been on in-depth, situated, qualitative studies, often for PhD and MA theses. A few examples of recent and current work will serve for illustration. The special contribution of communication accommodation theory (Giles and Coupland 1991) to understanding ELF talk was forcefully argued in Jenkins’s work on ELF phonology (2000: ch. 7), and since then accommodation has been a focus in several ELF studies that followed suit (e.g. Cogo 2007; forthcoming; Seidlhofer, forthcoming a). The interdependence of form(s) and function(s) is demonstrated in studies homing in on various aspects of lexico-grammar, such as Breiteneder (2005), Hülmhäuser (2007; forthcoming), Dewey (2007a), Ranta (2006), Seidlhofer (forthcoming b). Other studies show ELF users successfully resolving instances of miscommunication when they occur (Pitzl 2005), establishing rapport (Kordon 2006), and employing communicative strategies such as repetition (Lichtkoppler 2007), silences (Böhringer 2007), and considerate and mutually supportive communicative behaviour overall (e.g. Hüttner, forthcoming; Kaur 2008; Kirkpatrick 2008; Pullin-Stark, forthcoming). Speakers signal their cultural identity in various ways, e.g. by making code-switching an intrinsic part of many interactions (Klimpfinger 2007; forthcoming), creating their own on-line idioms (Pitzl, forthcoming; Seidlhofer and Widdowson 2007) and, more generally, their own inter-culture (Pölzl 2005; Pölzl and Seidlhofer 2006; Thompson 2008). There are also quasi-ethnographic, even longitudinal studies investigating the use of ELF in various settings, such as Schaller-Schwaner (2008), Smit (forthcoming) in higher education and Ehrenreich (2008) in multinational corporations.

**PERSPECTIVES FOR THEORIZING**

The ELF speakers in these studies can be observed using the underlying resources of the language, not just the conventional ENL encodings, and adjusting and calibrating their own language use for their interlocutors’ benefit. What these studies referred
to above have in common is that they document ELF users’ degree of independence of ENL norms. They allow insights into how speakers assert their multilingual identities and their joint ownership of the lingua franca they are using – and in using it, they are shaping and developing it. These empirical studies of highly complex and sophisticated interactions are bound to impact on the received wisdom concerning the terms ‘community’ and ‘variety’. They also indicate very clearly that the term ‘lingua franca’ as understood in the acronym ELF does not denote an ‘impoverished’, purely expedient and makeshift code for lack of something better, but a vibrant, powerful, and versatile shared resource that enables communication across linguistic and geographic boundaries.

By observing a multitude of ELF interactions in different settings and with speakers from a great variety of linguacultural backgrounds, what we see again and again is how people engage with each other and do on-line interactional work. This process can be related to the notion of ‘languaging’ as it has been used in sociocultural theory (Swain 2006). What the notion of languaging would seem to emphasise is the emergent on-line exploitation of linguistic resources to achieve communicative ends. Phipps, albeit from a somewhat different point of view, describes ‘languages’ as people who:

move in the world in a way that allows the risk of stepping out of one’s habitual ways of speaking and attempt to develop different, more relational ways of interacting with the people and phenomena that one encounters in everyday life. ‘Languages’ use the ways in which they perceive the world to develop new dispositions for poetic action in another language and they are engaged in developing these dispositions so that they become habitual, durable. Languaging, then, is an act of dwelling. (Phipps 2006: 12)

This resonates with the findings of ELF studies: ELF users too are seen to be languagers. They exploit the potential of the language, they are fully involved in the interactions, whether for work or for play. They are focused on the purpose of the talk and on their interlocutors as people, and emphatically not on the linguistic code itself. We can observe people absorbed in the ad hoc, situated negotiation of meaning – an entirely pragmatic undertaking in that the focus is on establishing the indexical link between the code and the context. These communicative acts are thus a far cry from calling up elements of a foreign language as they were learnt at school and pressing them into service as ‘correctly’ as possible in a quasi-display of successful, i.e. ‘error-free’, ‘learner language’ (Ranta, forthcoming; Seidlhofer 2001; see Mollin 2006 for a different view). Rather, the interactants are making use of their multi-faceted multilingual repertoires in a fashion motivated by the communicative purpose and the interpersonal dynamics of the interaction. In many speech events, boundaries between languages also seem to be perceived as fluid or irrelevant, as if speakers were ‘disinventing and reconstituting’ their languages (in a more literal sense than the one conveyed in the book with that title edited by Makoni and Pennycook, 2007). Seen in this light, the incipient study of ELF may even encourage us to raise questions about the denomination ‘Englishes’ and ‘world Englishes’, i.e. countable (proper) nouns implying separate bounded entities. It is to be hoped that with a larger ELF corpus, VOICE, becoming generally available, it will be possible not only to undertake more descriptive research but also pursue interesting perspectives for theorizing about the meaning of ‘English(es)’ and ‘language’ generally.
CONCLUSION

As I stated at the outset, it would not do to treat contexts which are sociohistorically very diverse as if they were the same. ELF and postcolonial Englishes are very different realities on the ground. But this does not mean that the different perspectives cannot be drawn on fruitfully and combine forces where appropriate. It seems to me, for instance, that Schneider’s evolutionary perspective is of relevance to all contexts, emphasizing as it does the notion of linguistic ecologies and the assumption that ‘speakers keep redefining and expressing their linguistic and social identities, constantly aligning themselves with other individuals and thereby accommodating their speech behaviour to those they wish to associate and be associated with’ (Schneider 2007: 21). Which brings us back to Bamgbọ̀se and his observation that ‘it is people, not language codes, that understand one another’ (Bamgbọ̀se 1998: 11)

As I hope to have indicated in this paper, ELF research has both benefited immensely from the pioneering work in WE and has new insights to offer that can feed back into scholarship in the world Englishes paradigm at large. Though different in some respects, both are engaged in the same shared endeavour to understand and confront the sociolinguistic challenges of a rapidly changing world. This is why ELF merits acceptance as forming part of the wider WE research community, to which, I would suggest, it can bring fresh impulses and ideas in the continuing exploration of our common ground.

NOTES

1. The Symposium abstracts were (presumably inadvertently) omitted from the printed conference programme, which contained abstracts for all the other sessions. This means that the abstracts were only available on site, and electronically to all workshop presenters, hence no exact references can be given for them.
2. The release of VOICE Online 1.0 is planned for the end of May 2009; the corpus will be made available for research purposes free of charge (see VOICE website).
3. These questions are also investigated by the Viennese research team, working on ‘emergent varieties’, of the EU project ‘Language Dynamics and Management of Diversity’ (DYLAN) (see Bühringer and Hülmbauer, forthcoming).

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**Corpus websites**

ICE: [http://www.ucl.ac.uk/english-usage/ice/](http://www.ucl.ac.uk/english-usage/ice/)
VOICE: [http://www.univie.ac.at/voice/](http://www.univie.ac.at/voice/)