

6. English as a lingua franca and French learners

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Non-native speakers of English are 'guestimated' to outnumber native speakers by about four to one. An unknown number of these will never need to communicate with native speakers of English, and will therefore only ever use the language instrumentally as a lingua franca. How they use this lingua franca, and how it develops, are clearly matters that are beyond the control of native speakers, and indeed none of their business. I would suggest, however, that comparatively few English learners or speakers in France fall into this category, and that as yet, no codifiable European English as a lingua franca (ELF) has developed.

Barbara Seidlhofer has forcefully argued the case for the existence of ELF, and the need for native speakers to recognise it, in a number of articles and conference presentations. She claims that "a lingua franca does not need to be reduced to a pidgin language, restricted in social role and linguistic resources, such as limited vocabulary and stylistic range," and that "it is likely that an empirical investigation of ELF will show that a sophisticated and versatile form of language can develop which is not a native language" (2001a: 146). She suggests that the ways in which non-native speakers simplify, replace, overuse, underuse or avoid certain expressions or structures, compared to English as a native language (ENL), need not be regarded as learning strategies – "a constructive way of making do with the limited resources available at a particular stage of interlanguage" – but rather as "communication strategies: evidence not of a linguistic deficit, but, if intelligible, of successful communication" (p. 144).

As indeed they are. For example, millions of non-native speakers of English communicate successfully without using the third person *-s*, while treating "who" and "which" as interchangeable relative pronouns for both objects and people, and using the verb stem or infinitive instead of a gerund in constructions like "I look forward to see you tomorrow." The same applies to pronunciation. As Jennifer Jenkins has shown, many non-native speakers also use very few "weak forms," pronouncing the full vowel in words like *to*, *from*, and *for*, instead of the schwa,

and pronounce the unvoiced and voiced 'th' as /s/ and /z/ or /t/ and /d/: *I sink, zese* and *zose; I tink, dese* and *dose*. (Some of these sounds, of course, are also used in various native-speaker varieties.)

Jenkins (2000: 160) argues that "There is really no justification for doggedly persisting in referring to an item as 'an error' if the vast majority of the world's L2 English speakers produce and understand it," and increasing numbers of native-speaking English language teachers are beginning to agree (especially those who themselves suffered English teachers at school who informed them that utterances like "he done good" and "we don't need no education," used by the majority of British native speakers, are "not English"). Michael Lewis (1993: 26), one of the most influential figures in ELT over the past decade, has long argued that teachers should ignore the semantically redundant third person -s, which takes a long time to acquire because learning is meaning-centred. And many teachers have seen the pointlessness of obliging learners to stick the tips of their tongues between their teeth to produce th-sounds.

Yet a handful of widespread grammatical patterns and pronunciation features do not constitute a fully fledged lingua franca. Seidlhofer (2001a: 150) envisages "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," but such a codification has yet to be carried out. Unfortunately, a corpus of limited size, such as the half-million-word Vienna-Oxford ELF Corpus, is unlikely to reveal anything resembling a standardised alternative to ENL. For example, 30% of the idioms in the *Cobuild Dictionary of Idioms*, current in ENL and recognised by all native speakers, appear less often than once per 10 million words of corpus text. Half a million words are not sufficient to codify a language.

Seidlhofer laments (p. 137) that "ELF as a use in its own right, and ELF speakers as language users, have not yet entered people's consciousness," even people such as Robert Phillipson (author of *Linguistic Imperialism*) "who have dedicated their working lives to protecting human language rights," but this could be because the evidence that reveals its existence has not yet been presented. To assume in advance what has to be proved – that such a corpus will reveal the existence of a single European ELF – is an unfortunate inversion of scientific method. Various local research projects are underway: Peter Trudgill is directing one in Switzerland,

which is apparently finding things that look like a Swiss ELF, and Allan James is describing the English used by young people in the Alpine-Adriatic region, with its mix of Germanic, Slavic and Romance languages. The evidence may yet reveal that there is indeed an incipient European ELF. But it might equally reveal a collection of non-standardised local versions of English influenced by different local languages.

Seidlhofer (p. 136) gives the example of the Danish foreign minister who described Danish exceptions to the Maastricht Treaty conceded at a summit in Edinburgh as the “so-called Edinburgh agreement,” thereby, as her source article puts it, “inevitably creating false and unintended impressions when talking impromptu to the ‘world’ press” (Phillipson and Skutnabb-Kangas 1999: 29). Seidlhofer argues that the Danish foreign minister was “using English as a lingua franca in the way he often has occasion to use it, with interlocutors who use it in the same way” (p. 137). ELF speakers would have understood ‘so-called’ to mean “the agreement called the Edinburgh agreement” rather than something that can only improperly be called an agreement. This is because the chief meaning of the Danish loanword *såkaldt* is the former, as with the equivalent words in several other European languages, including *sogeannt* in German and *cosiddetto* in Italian. It is only in ENL that the most common meaning of ‘so-called’ is the negative one. Consequently, for Seidlhofer, this meaning is simply irrelevant in this context.

Yet Phillipson and Skutnabb-Kangas use this case as an example because it *did* cause misunderstanding. If the ‘world’ press was merely a handful of British journalists, it suggests that using so-called ELF in Britain can create false and unintended impressions, so that ENL is indeed relevant in the interpretation of English spoken by a Dane in Scotland. If the ‘world’ press who misinterpreted the Danish minister really were the world press, this demonstrates that the supposed ELF meaning is not widespread, or indeed part of a lingua franca. After all, a French journalist who only spoke English (ENL) and French would not have understood the ‘lingua franca’ meaning of *so-called*, as the French *soi-disant* does not have the second meaning shared by *såkaldt*, *sogeannt* and *cosiddetto*. This example suggests that no such thing as ELF, analogous to indigenized varieties of English, yet exists. Just as there are numerous indigenized varieties of English, there are a large number of local varieties of ELF.

The plurality of English (or Englishes) has, as Seidlhofer points out, been embraced in universities. Multiculturalism is the order of the day, and literature and linguistics course catalogues tend to mention World Englishes and literatures in English. Yet Seidlhofer (2001b: 42) laments that “‘English’ is still a rather fixed entity in the singular when it comes to teaching and using the language as such.” She complains that while the English students in her university (Vienna) study postcolonial literatures, and Phillipson’s theories of imperialism in their linguistics classes, in their language classes “they are taught, and are usually eager to learn, English idiomatic expressions and proverbs originating in the UK and the US” (p. 43). Yet if these students are also reading literature from the UK and the US it would be surprising if they were *not* interested in the language as spoken and written in those countries. Implying that they should *not* be does not exactly square with the “learner-centredness” that Seidlhofer describes as “current in the discourse in ELT” (2001a: 134).

The majority of students in English departments in European universities today clearly use the language in an identificationary rather than a merely instrumental way. They tend to want to learn to speak and write something resembling a native version of English. They want to learn English or American expressions and they ask their teachers to correct their non-native “errors.” Jennifer Jenkins (2001) has suggested that European English as distinct from UK English is likely to gain favour because of negative attitudes to Britain – Europe’s sick man, with its inability to speak other languages, its mad cows, foot and mouth disease, and disintegrating transport system. She predicts that British English will become no more than a regional sub-variety of European English spoken mainly on British soil among consenting native speakers, who will also have to learn Euro-English if they want to participate in the English-speaking community on mainland Europe. Yet this (wholly justified) ‘cultural cringe’ does not seem to reflect the attitude of the vast majority of the learners I’ve encountered in European universities. Brecht proposed after the 1953 Berlin uprising that the East German government should dissolve the people and elect a new one. If the hopes of the proponents of ELF are to be realised, they may need to do something similar with the students who believe that they are speaking English as a foreign or second language.

While literature students are likely to identify with the languages and cultures they are studying, science, law and business students, and the majority of students in

private language schools, more often have instrumental language needs. Yet the benefits of using ELF in education, when or if it comes to be codified, are not necessarily as clear-cut as Seidlhofer believes. She suggests (2001a: 151) that ELF could be “a possible first step for learners in building up a basis from which they can pursue their own learning in directions (ELF or ENL) which it may be impossible, and unwise, to determine from the outset.” But it seems unlikely that any university-level English learner could get by with ELF alone. After all, the reason that English rather than something like Esperanto is the obvious candidate for a lingua franca is precisely because it has so many native speakers on four continents. If communication with ENL speakers and participation in ENL-dominated fields will ultimately be necessary (e.g. doing the necessary reading for a business or science degree, or publishing in scientific journals), learning a codified ELF and then having to unlearn it, in order to learn something approximating to ENL, might well require *more* rather than less effort.

Moreover, participating in these fields does not necessarily involve subjection to the linguistic imperialism of native speakers. If a French scientist writes a scientific paper in English, his or her identity as a French person becomes irrelevant; his or her identity as a member of the international scientific community is uppermost. The language of scientific journals is English, but one might just as well conceive of this in terms of “scientific English norms” as “native speaker norms.” The default referent is scientific English, most of which is incomprehensible to the vast majority of ENL speakers. Scientific English, like legal English, business English, and other forms of “English for specific purposes,” is, to use Seidlhofer’s (2001a: 136) words, “full of conventions and markers of in-group membership such as... specialized vocabulary and idiomatic phraseology, and references and allusions to shared experience and cultural background,” but this culture is the culture of science rather than an exclusive and exclusionary culture of native speakers of English. (The almost universal use of English as the language of science clearly *does* have serious cognitive consequences – conceptual impoverishment, loss of nuances, homogenisation of meaning, and so on – but it is not the role of English language teachers to philosophise about these issues in the classroom, any more than it was Newton’s Latin teacher’s to warn him off writing in Latin.) Aiding scientists who are not native speakers of English to participate in this global undertaking by teaching scientific English is not so much “exerting power and domination” (Seidlhofer 2001a: 141) as empowerment.

Seidlhofer (2001b: 43) also writes, "I do not wish to deny that there may be learning purposes for which adhering to native speaker English models is a valid, or at least arguable, option," a splendidly double-hedged concession. I would suggest, on the contrary, that adhering to native speaker English models in higher education is the only way to enable our learners to take part in the culture shared, to some extent, by every reader of this journal, to allow them to enjoy the literature and all the other cultural products we willingly consume, and to permit them to participate usefully in the spheres of science, technology, commerce, etc. that their presence at university suggests they wish to enter.

Furthermore, it is not helpful to non-native speakers – or speakers of ELF – to ignore the reality that business students worldwide are being fed the notion of "Total Quality Management," which includes the dogma that all company documents should be error-free. A great many ENL speakers would throw a business proposal or a catalogue that seemed to contain as few as two "errors" straight in the bin. A job application ending "I look forward to hear from you" is, unfortunately, likely to meet the same fate. Learners who know that they will only ever need English as a lingua franca for work or travel, who will never have to suffer *collège*, *gymnase* or Cambridge exams (and examiners), who have no plans to apply for a job in the City or on Wall Street, and who will not be writing documents to send to native-speakers, can happily live without third person -s's, gerunds, and so on. Yet learners who do not fall into that category should be aware of contemporary linguistic realities.

It is, of course, desirable that ENL speakers recognise the existence of attested ELF features (just as it would help if English teachers in British schools stopped informing up to 97% of children that elements of their native non-RP dialect "aren't English"). It would aid many ENL-speaking teachers to begin to regard English as a language that they need to learn as well as teach. And we constantly need to keep in mind Seidlhofer's (2001a: 149) excellent point that native speakers such as myself cannot have *intuitions* about ELF, but only *impressions*. But it is too early to assert the existence of a standardised European ELF before the evidence has been collected, and to lament that it is not being used as a language of instruction.

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