

Chapter 3

Trouble with English?

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It has long been recognised in research into English as a Lingua Franca (henceforth ELF) that English mother tongue speakers, particularly those who are monolingual, are often at a linguistic disadvantage in settings where English is used as a lingua franca, despite English being their native language. Not only do those who are monolingual lack the ability to switch into the other languages of their non-native English speaker interlocutors, but even if multilingual, they tend to be more attached to native English and less able than their non-native speaking counterparts to adjust their English in order to ensure smooth, successful transcultural communication. In this chapter, I will discuss this further, go on to consider the implications of the latest thinking about ELF communication, and finally explore how the situation is likely to be altered as a result of Brexit, both for the nature of English beyond its mother tongue countries and for the position of native English speakers in lingua franca communication.

ELF communication is, by its nature, very diverse, or more accurately, 'superdiverse', to use a term that has suffered badly from overuse since Vertovec (e.g. 2007) first coined and published it. Increasing numbers of people from a growing range of first language groups around the world, including massive numbers in China, have been adopting English as their primary language for international communication. Their use of English is influenced on the one hand by their mother tongue and other languages they speak, and on the other hand by the kinds of English used by their interlocutors in ELF interactions, a combination which Mauranen (2012) describes as their 'similects' (see below). As a result, the various ways in which English is used in both speech and (albeit less so) in writing are expanding commensurably. Thus, it is often impossible to know what to expect at the start of a communication in which English is the lingua franca in terms of the other ELF user's English.

Transcultural communication skills are therefore paramount, and more successful ELF communicators will be able to adjust (or accommodate) both their own use of English or other languages (so as to make it more appropriate for their interlocutors), and their own receptive expectations (so as to more easily understand what is being said to them). Familiarity with a range of other ways of using English obviously plays an important role in being able to understand. Meanwhile, the process of having learnt another language or languages is helpful in being understood, by alerting speakers to what kinds of linguistic features non-native speakers may find difficult to understand in English.

However, many native English speakers lack both these skill sets. In particular, regardless of whether they are multilingual or monolingual, they seem to have difficulty in appreciating that people who did not grow up in an English mother tongue country do not necessarily understand native English idiomatic language. Because English has long been the primary global lingua franca, those native

speakers who lack transcultural awareness perhaps assume that all non-natives who speak English speak, or should speak, nativelike English, complete with all its local idioms. This situation, of course, is not helped by the English language teaching industry's mistaken assumption that people learn English to communicate in the main with native speakers rather than with other non-native speakers. They therefore include native idioms in language teaching materials and test the ability to use them in examinations for English as a Foreign Language. But as Sweeney and Zhu (2010) demonstrate, even when native speakers are transculturally aware, they are not necessarily able to translate their transcultural awareness into successful use of accommodation skills so as to make spontaneous conversational adjustments to their English.

A case in point, and one of numerous examples I could provide, was a monolingual BBC Radio 3 host interviewing the Italian opera singer, Roberto Alagna, who was in London to sing at the Royal Opera House. After initial pleasantries, the interviewer, wanting to know how Alagna was finding his London experience, asked "is it going swimmingly?". It was clear that Alagna did not have any idea of what this opaque idiom meant, and the interviewer, after an uncomfortable pause, realised this and asked instead "is it going well?". A second example involved a bilingual Channel 4 News presenter who was interviewing Emmanuel Macron, then a candidate in the 2017 French election. He and Macron had discussed the current move towards the right in France, and the presenter then went on to ask "so how would you buck that trend?". Macron looked confused, and the presenter, realising his mistake, tried again, asking "how would you go against it?". While in both cases, the interviewer, especially the second one, was able to paraphrase fairly speedily (which is by no means always the case), these two anecdotes demonstrate that native speakers who have experience of speaking English with non-natives, and even those who have other languages, may find it problematic to adjust spontaneously away from their local use of English. This seems to be true even when they are making an effort to be comprehensible in lingua franca settings. Having said that, native speakers with more experience of communicating with non-natives, and especially those who are themselves multilingual, seem likely to be better than others at making adjustments once they have noticed the problem.

Finally, an example from the EU itself. As Van Parijs (2011) recounts:

At many EU meetings, interpretation is provided for at least some combinations of languages, but more and more speakers choose to speak in English rather than in their own language ... When they speak, no-one or hardly anyone in the audience listens to the interpreters. But when a British or Irish participant takes the floor, you can often notice that some participants suddenly grab their earphones and start fiddling with the channel selector. Ironically, the people whose language has been learned by everyone are becoming those who most need the expensive and stiffening intermediation of interpreters in order to be understood (p. 219).

The point that Van Parijs is making, and one that has been made by several others with experience of EU meetings, is that the native speaker delegates speak as if they are addressing an audience of other native speakers, not an international audience made up of a majority of people who come from a large range of first languages other than English. As a result, they make few if any concessions in terms of the speed of their speech, use local British or Irish idioms, and tend not to adjust their use of English for the benefit of their multilingual audience. Later in the chapter, I will return to the native speaker accommodation issue and discuss

both how Brexit may exacerbate it and how steps might be taken to improve matters.

But it is not only accommodation skills *within* English (ie ELF) communication that present problems for native speakers. I have already mentioned that multilingual native speakers are shown in research to often communicate better than monolingual native speakers in ELF settings. This is because ELF is, by definition, a multilingual phenomenon, and the latest conceptualisation of ELF – English as a multilingua franca – makes this clear. In the early stages of ELF research until the early years of the first decade of the 21st Century, ELF was understood as consisting of a range of varieties of English, much like mother tongue varieties such as British English, American English, Australian English, and postcolonial varieties such as Indian English, Singapore English and the like. As increasing amounts of ELF corpus data were collected, it became clear that a ‘variety’ approach to ELF was inappropriate, because ELF communication was far too fluid, flexible and hybrid to be captured by the notion of bounded varieties. Variability thus began to be seen as one of, and possibly *the*, defining feature of ELF, and the idea of ELF ‘varieties’ was replaced with Mauranen’s (2012) ‘similects’ to which I referred briefly above.

According to the notion of similects, most, if not all, ELF users have at least a trace of first language influence in their English. But they do not develop their English beyond the English language classroom in communication with their first language peer group, among whom they generally use their first language. The development of their English therefore depends on who they subsequently interact with: in other words, speakers from other first languages than their own, most of whom are also multilingual. This means that ELF is “a site of unusually complex contact” (p. 29), which Mauranen terms “second-order language contact: a contact between hybrids”. She goes on to observe that “second-order contact means that instead of a typical contact situation where speakers of two different languages use one of them in communication (‘first-order contact’), a large number of languages are in contact with English, and it is these contact varieties (‘similects’) that are, in turn, in contact with each other”. ELF is thus what she calls “a hybrid of similects”, and the way it develops among its users will vary widely from one to another, even if they share the same first language, as they will not share the same multilingual interlocutors.

But the variability of ELF goes even beyond this. Most recently, it has been increasingly recognised that multilingualism has been to an extent overlooked in ELF research. Whereas it has often been treated conceptually as if it was merely one of a number of characteristics of ELF communication, its significance goes far beyond this: multilingualism is the entire *raison d’être* for the existence of the phenomenon of ELF. In other words, ELF itself exists within a framework of multilingualism rather than vice versa. This means, in turn, that whereas the primary focus was hitherto on the ‘E’ of ELF, it has switched to the ‘LF’, that is, to the other languages of all but ELF’s monolingual English users. I have therefore proposed a change in the definition of ELF to encompass this conceptual development. Up until recently, ELF has been defined in a number of similar ways, for example, as “any use of English among speakers of different first languages for whom English is the communicative medium of choice” (Seidlhofer 2011: 7). I have argued that it should be redefined as “multilingual communication in which English is available as a contact language of choice, but is not necessarily chosen” (Jenkins 2015: 73).

This reconceptualisation, which has gained widespread acceptance in the ELF research community, shifts the emphasis to the multilingualism of (most) ELF users. It recognises that they may choose to move strategically in and out of the various languages within their entire multilingual repertoire (a phenomenon known as ‘translanguaging’; see García and Li Wei 2014), rather than speaking exclusively in English, despite English being known to everyone engaged in the interaction. For English as a *lingua franca*, then, the crucial distinction is no longer between native and non-native English speakers, with its attendant implication that native speakers are the ‘owners’ of English. Instead, the crucial distinction becomes that between multi- and mono-lingual ELF users: between those who can and those who cannot slip in and out of other languages as and when appropriate. This presents further problems, going well beyond those of accommodation *within English*, for monolingual English speakers, who are by definition restricted to ‘English only’.

Having explored the problems with ELF – and its essential multilingualism – for native English speakers, we turn now to consider the implications of Brexit for the English language, and hence for both its native and non-native speakers.

At the time of writing, the process of the UK leaving the EU is only just beginning, and it is too early to predict with any certainty whether English will remain the primary working language of the EU after the majority of its native speakers (that is, all but the Irish members and some Maltese) have departed. My guess, nevertheless, is that it will do so, regardless of arguments being put forward in favour of one of the other two working languages taking over this role. Assuming it remains with English, however, the issue then becomes: what kind of English will it be? Despite the native-normative attitude towards languages that the EU has favoured to date, in practice, the English in EU use has always been English as a *lingua franca* rather than native English, except when the speakers are, themselves, native speakers. Thus, both local non-native features, and features that have been found to occur frequently across speakers from different first languages in ELF corpora such as VOICE (Vienna-Oxford International Corpus of English; see Seidlhofer 2011) and ELFA (English as a *Lingua Franca* in Academic Settings; see Mauranen 2012), are likely also to have figured frequently in EU interactions. Examples include the countable use of nouns that are uncountable in native English (e.g., feedbacks, advices, informations), the non-marking of 3rd person singular in the present tense (e.g., ‘she think’), and the conflation of ‘who’ and ‘which’ (e.g., ‘the paper who’, ‘the delegate which’), among many other features that would not be used by native speakers of standard English.

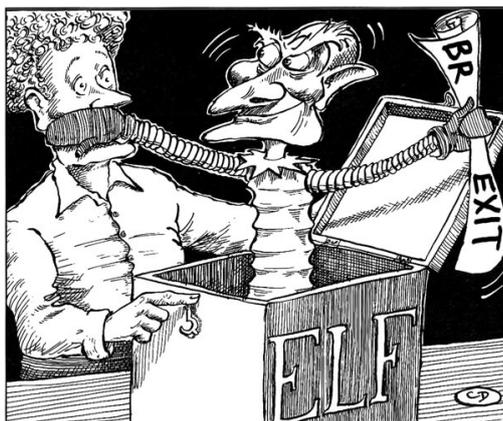
The question is what will happen once the majority of native speaking EU members are no longer present as examples of native English. And given all that is known from sociolinguistic research about language contact and its effect on language change, the likelihood is that with such a major reduction in contact with native speakers, EU English (i.e. ELF) will increasingly move away from native English, while the absence of monolingual native speakers in EU settings will lead to an increase in translanguaging, and hence in multilingualism per se. And because the EU (with or without the UK) is so powerful and influential, any developments in English/ELF use within its institutions and member states are likely to spread out first to the whole of Europe and then beyond, to English users in other parts of the world for whom the language functions as a *lingua franca*, such as East and Southeast Asia, and Latin America. If this happens, ELF, this “hybrid of similects”, as Mauranen calls it, will move further and further away from native English, but continue to maintain mutual intelligibility across its users by virtue of their accommodation skills. Native speakers of English will then be

still further disadvantaged in ELF communication settings. Not only will the English they hear become still more distant from the English to which they are accustomed at home, but their already often weak accommodation skills will be still further challenged. Added to this, those who are monolingual will increasingly find themselves left behind in supposedly 'English' interactions in which their conversation partners translanguage in and out of other languages.

For those monolingual British who engage in transcultural communication, Brexit will undoubtedly prove to be a linguistic lose-lose situation. On the one hand, they will only be able to communicate in English at a time when their need to be able to speak other languages following Brexit, will never be greater. On the other hand, the kind of English used in its lingua franca role, first in the EU, and subsequently around the rest of the world, (probably led by Chinese ELF users because of their vast numbers) will diverge increasingly from native English, and its native speakers will find themselves at a growing disadvantage in transcultural settings even though using their mother tongue. As the world's English users defer less and less to the conventions of native English, not only will its monolingual speakers need to make the effort to learn other languages, but they will also need to work hard to improve their transcultural communication skills so as to understand and make themselves understood by the majority of the world's English users.

The situation post-Brexit, in effect, will present a reversal of what Van Parijs (2011) has described as the "free riding" of Anglophones, by which he means that all other Europeans and much of the rest of the world have to learn English at a cost to themselves in time and money, whereas Anglophones do not. He has therefore proposed that the UK pay a linguistic tax to be distributed to non Anglophones. This, he argues, would help to remedy what he sees as the current global linguistic injustice relating to English. However, with Brexit, the situation is reversed. It is now the Anglophones who will need to pay to learn other languages or become left behind in an increasingly mobile, multilingual world. They will also have to spend time improving their ELF communication skills as ELF moves ever further away from native English.

Meanwhile, for non-native English speakers – who form the vast majority of multilingual ELF users – it is a win-win situation. Although it has long been said in the ELF and World Englishes literature that the 'ownership' of English resides with all its users regardless of whether they are native or non-native speakers, this has never been widely accepted in practice: a lurking sense that native English is somehow better, purely because it is 'native', has continued to prevail, even among those who tolerate non-native English. But with ELF moving ever further away from native English norms and towards multilingual ELF users' preferred ways of using ELF, it is the non-natives who will have all the advantages. Not only will English be less time consuming for them to learn once a raft of superfluous grammatical rules that add nothing to international intelligibility are no longer considered to need deferring to, but they already have at least one other language than English, as well as being more effective communicators in transnational settings than the majority of native speakers. Trouble with English indeed. But only for those that Brexit is leaving behind in the UK!



HIDDEN CONSEQUENCES Will Brexit give an unexpected boost to English as a lingua franca?

Chris Duggan, cee-dee.com, adapted by *EL Gazette*.

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