

## THE DECEIVING ELF? Can English really fulfil the role of a *lingua franca*?

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**Abstract** – The debate which surrounds the role of English as a *lingua franca* has been lively and extensive over the last twenty years or so. Numerous conferences and specific publications in the field testify to the interest and importance that the question of the development of a possible international functional language has stimulated. The present article aims to critically reassess the claims made for ELF and, at the same time, highlight the profound significance of the issues the debate has raised. Discussion of ELF has touched upon the perception of linguistic diversity, (in)accuracy and variation, intelligibility and the potential functions of an international language. Other topics of profound importance that are part of the debate relate to the role of any language in creating and maintaining identity, enabling social mobility and empowering its users. Some criticisms of ELF proposals have been easily rebutted, but this paper aims to underline the serious linguistic and socio-linguistic aspects of the debate in order to emphasize the need for a theoretical underpinning to our understanding of how language can operate in the global environment. Clarification of what we can and cannot know about language change and behaviour will also contribute to ideas as to future research in ELF but will also bring us to the conclusion that predictions of the future development of ELF are of little purpose beyond the curiosity value they may possess.

**Keywords:** English; *lingua franca*; non-native speaker.

*...the fancy cannot cheat so well  
As she is fam'd to do, deceiving elf.  
(John Keats, "Ode to a Nightingale").*

### 1. Introduction: great claims

In the last twenty years or so there has been significant debate about the role of English as a *lingua franca*, a language of contact between people needing to communicate but possessing different mother tongues.<sup>1</sup> In the course of a sometimes heated exchange of views, substantial claims have been made about a posited new version of English, potentially available to all and offering greater clarity and efficiency to users. Without going into the intricate details of the debate, this article hopes to identify the underlying theoretical issues at stake and problematize the question of the role of this hybrid language in global communication. Analysis of the issues raises the question of whether the promises of English as a *lingua franca* are unrealistic and so risk being impossible to keep, and, which may be, at the same time, not as desirable as they may at first appear.

Though usually couched in apparently modest terms, the claims for the new *lingua franca* are substantial. Perhaps most significant and revealing of all, especially for language experts, is the claim to inevitability and the forces of nature: “the logical

<sup>1</sup> From the many works published on the subject I draw attention to the following as being particularly interesting: Jenkins (2007); Prodromou (2008) and MacKenzie (2014).

conclusion can only be that ELF is an entirely natural phenomenon, while attempts to hold it back and arrest its development are entirely unnatural” (Jenkins 2007, p. 17). This runs the risk of allowing for no dissenting opinion: anyone who doubts the characteristics and role of the new lingua franca seems to be going against nature and futilely trying to command the tide to recede. But this natural phenomenon also risks appearing to be ‘all things to all men’: it is claimed to be polymorphous, changing even as we speak it, non-normative (or at least non-*exo-normative*) and able to play both the global and the local game thanks to its core and non-core features (Jenkins 2007, pp.1 9-20, and 23-24, and especially Jenkins 2000 *passim* for detailed description of the concept of a *Lingua Franca Core* [LFC] in pronunciation).

This core also facilitates teaching of the new global language. Although Jenkins is at pains to stress that her proposal is based clearly on considerations of intelligibility and not difficulty, the overall effect is claimed to be a reduction in “the *size* of the task, while increasing teachability” (Jenkins 2007, p. 27). There is also a certain, ill-defined, but socially significant ‘niceness’ that features in ELF interaction: “ELF interactions often are consensus-oriented, cooperative and mutually supportive” (Seidlhofer 2001, p. 132). We might naturally be tempted to contrast this with the allegedly imperialistic arrogance of the TEFL world as described by Phillipson (2009) and Holliday (2009) among others. Indeed, the reign of English as a foreign language to be (imperfectly) learned by the expanding circle with much struggle and expense has largely (and perhaps rightly) come to an end. The sociolinguistic thinking surrounding ELF is very specific in its claims about this: the English spoken by native speakers is on the way out, superseded by the language the vast majority of its non-native users speak. It seems to boil down to a question of demographics and democracy: native speakers are outnumbered<sup>2</sup> and so language change will favour the new variety. At the same time, these new speakers are concerned with “efficiency, relevance and economy in language learning and language use” (Seidlhofer 2001, p. 131) and yet capable of contributing to the growth of a “sophisticated and versatile form of language..., which is *not* a native language” (Seidlhofer 2001). And there is the additional hope that this form of English can cancel its past and various (and very deep) social and political connotations, ushering us into a dual-language environment in which English as a native language (ENL) can happily coexist with its unrelated cousin (ELF), without exerting influence or control, so offering a free and egalitarian means of communication, and abolishing the native – non-native dichotomy which has bedeviled both language teaching and more general human interaction for almost all of the post-war period (c.f. Graddol 2006, p. 83).

## 2. But what is a lingua franca?

These optimistic claims about the future role of English deserve critical analysis, but first we must take a step back and assess the validity of the conceptualization itself. What is a

<sup>2</sup> Jenkins (2007, p.44) puts this succinctly: “the numerical balance of its speakers is shifting so dramatically in favour of NNSs”. However, a note of caution is required partly due to the fact that very recent estimates of the number of NSs of English range between 309 million (Ammon 2013) and 375 million (MacKenzie 2014): certainly a huge number that does not necessarily allow us to accept the theory that EFL users will somehow ‘prevail’. We should also be aware that Ammon (2013) gives figures for ‘global strength’ based on the estimated GDP of NSs. Here the rating of NS English is more than double that of its nearest competitor, Japanese (although these estimates admittedly date back to a period from 1984 to 2007).

lingua franca and can some form of present-day English justifiably be regarded as one? Various definitions and descriptions gravitate around three main elements: a lingua franca is a language of contact between peoples speaking other mother tongues, it has a hybrid nature and it is not the first language of its users. Jenkins puts it succinctly:

A contact language used among people who do not share a first language, and is commonly understood to mean a second (or subsequent) language of its speakers... Its pluralistic composition, then, clearly exemplifies an intrinsic and key feature of lingua francas: their hybrid nature. (Jenkins 2007, p. 1)

Ostler (2010, p. xv) puts it in even simpler and more realistic terms: “by its nature, a lingua franca is a language of convenience.”

There is a clear emphasis among researchers on the practical utility of this version of English, and its shared ownership. A lingua franca is useful for everyone and belongs to no-one. However, we might be justified in calling these assumptions about the present-day role of English into question. Firstly, is it truly a means of communication used by non-native speakers? The answer is affirmative very often, as Jenkins (2000, 2007) and Seidlhofer (2001) point out, and the general view is that the “vast majority” of interactions in English are between non-native speakers of the language, but this is perhaps to inadvertently conceal a much more complex picture. English is a mother tongue to approximately 350 million speakers and so many interactions are between native speakers, or are a potential mismatch with a native and non-native speaker communicating. This detail is not lost on researchers, who dedicate significant effort to attempts to level the playing field between NSs (native speakers) and NNSs (non-native speakers) of English, but is perhaps being ignored as regards our original and fundamental conception of the role English is playing. The historical lingua franca (as used in the southern Mediterranean from 15th to 19th centuries) had a less complex (especially politically speaking) role compared to modern English (see Ostler 2005 for an outline of the historical role of lingua francas) and so the application of the term to the present-day is questionable. Indeed, as we shall see, it is potentially highly problematic and probably contributes to some of the misunderstanding and, even misrepresentations that have played a part in the debate.

To put the issue simply, the original lingua franca grew up spontaneously, made no great claims as to its usefulness or authority and indeed had no explicit standards (or tests). Contrast this with what we know of current forms of English: the mother tongue of many, an official language in numerous countries around the world (Ammon 2013, p. 112), taught explicitly in schools and online and published and printed in huge quantities. English has not been exclusively spontaneous and ‘natural’ in its growth or development, especially in the post-war period (Phillipson 1992 and 2009, especially pp. 54-71; Graddol 1997) and it is repeatedly represented as the useful and, indeed, liberating language of the planet.<sup>3</sup> It is associated with various international institutions (the most used language in the European Union and one of the official languages of the United Nations, the only language used by ASEAN etc.), and so has gained authority. Perhaps most obvious of all, it is a language that is tested and certified repeatedly and globally. Kachru’s Three Circle model of world Englishes (Kachru 1992, in McArthur 1998, p. 100, but see also Prodromou 2008, pp. 258-9) which still gives an effective and easy-to-use representation

<sup>3</sup> Here I cite Dunton-Downer, *The English is Coming!* (2010) as an example of the rather unquestioning neoliberal ideological support for the growth of English and its presumed benefits. English is “the world’s default common tongue” (p. xv) and “Global English has become a means for us to embrace that future. It is also by now a linguistic fact of life” (p.17).

of the current state of affairs underlines to us just how complex the role of English is. The gap we might perceive between the current reality of English and the story of lingua franca is thus quite substantial.

The original lingua franca was also hybrid in nature, being formed largely from Italian dialects, with elements from Portuguese, Spanish, French, Arabic, Greek and Persian. Again, this contrasts with the present: while English can perhaps legitimately be described as being of distant pidgin origins, its process of formation as a potential lingua franca is not closely comparable to the history of the early modern Mediterranean. And these differences are important as they have to do with potential inclusivity and ownership. The history of the original lingua franca (see Ostler 2010) links it directly to no power or superpower (although the economic ascendancy of Venice probably played a significant part in its development) and probably indicates it had few native speakers. Clearly this is not the case for English, and we might suggest that the difference is highly significant. There are people who may claim ‘ownership’ of the English language, either through history and tradition or thanks to geography and economics, or, perhaps even more importantly for our study, there are many who are prepared to recognize this ownership, deferring to imagined superior knowledge and linguistic ability (see Jenkins 2007, chapter 6, pp. 147-196).

There are, of course, similarities with the original lingua franca, and utility and comprehensibility are probably the most important of these. The prevalent use made of English by NNSs is beyond doubt and explains the lingua franca comparison, but while this is perfectly reasonable in a rough and ready way, the differences it contains are probably the explanation for the heated debate among scholars on the topic of ELF. Jenkins (2007) dedicated a significant portion of her book (especially chapter 1, Jenkins 2007, pp. 1-30) on attitudes to ELF in defending the role of ELF against perceived ‘attacks’ and making strong claims as to the qualities it possesses. We might urge caution here because the differences in historical, social and political elements in ELF as opposed to the original lingua franca may well be the cause of the misunderstandings or misconceptions she refers to. We may reach the conclusion that we cannot divorce proposed communicative benefits from social and historical reality. When one communicates in ELF it is unlikely that the features and connotations of British English, American English or whatever other form is influential in a particular area can be removed and forgotten. The situation is clearly not the same as it was for trading communities in the Mediterranean.

### 3. The issues

#### 3.1. A host of geopolitical questions

There are numerous issues at stake in the ELF debate, which is hardly surprising if we accept the idea that English can never attain the putatively innocent or neutral role attributed to the original lingua franca. During the debate some rather insubstantial criticisms have been raised and quite rightly scotched, but other controversial topics have perhaps not been given the attention they deserve. What is perhaps most interesting to note is the deep significance of the issues involved, which touch on the fundamentals of sociolinguistics, the role of languages in politics and the history of human communication. Holliday analyses some of the most prescient postmodern issues in his paper on the role of culture in English language teaching (Holliday 2009) and leaves us with awareness of how

complex the situation of centre and periphery is, and how any solution proposed from the western perspective risks becoming an imposition on emergent cultures. I would tentatively suggest that ELF, for all its good intentions, cannot avoid these issues.

### **3.2. Some 'Aunt Sallies'**

In her book on ELF and attitude and identity, Jenkins mentions various misconceptions about ELF (Jenkins 2007, pp. 19-20) and proceeds to rectify them. Quoting Seidlhofer's rebuttal of the misconceptions, she essentially aims to respond to one principal accusation, namely that ELF is in various senses monolithic. Quite convincingly she denies the suggestion that ELF insists on a single variety being taught, or prescribes a set of rules or norms. Even her Lingua Franca Core (Jenkins 2007, pp. 23-4) emphasizes the right and opportunity for speakers of ELF to follow their own pronunciation instincts when these do not impede comprehension, and she hopes this will encourage a certain continuity of pronunciation habits from one's mother tongue into ELF communication.

Other criticisms are also quite easily challenged. The debate about lowering standards can be resolved convincingly by recourse to observations about language change, critiques of the 'myth of falling standards' (Jenkins 2007, p. 34 here quotes Bolton's work in Hong Kong) and pertinent questioning of ownership of the standards themselves (c.f. Widdowson 2003, pp. 35-44) which also leads us to doubt the idea that ELF will be one single set of norms. The idea that NS English is more comprehensible is dispensed with effectively, and again the question of ownership undermines the somewhat simplistic notion that NSs are the best judges of intelligibility.

These rebuttals are not merely negations; they have positive aspects that are presented as part of the appeal of ELF. The claim that there is no 'perfect' version of English allows for variation and inclusivity, while greater flexibility of approach will come as a relief to all teachers and learners, even to the extent of representing 'errors' as legitimate innovations and signs of language change. Any residual accent can be considered a conduit for identity expression instead of being an imperfection to be ironed out with great difficulty. Global communication will, consequently, be greatly aided, and this is shown by the great numbers of NNSs using English as a practical means of communication (Seidlhofer 2001 and Jenkins 2007).

### **3.3. Some real issues**

However, if we look a little more deeply we find that some of these issues might only have been resolved superficially, while others, and potentially more interesting ones at that, may have been neglected. In skipping the obligation to problematize the idea of ELF we risk missing a great deal of highly significant avenues of exploration into language. A lack of deep theoretical analysis is probably at the root of some of the most intense disagreements about ELF. Let us try to summarize the most salient and analyse them briefly.

Firstly, vague historical understanding of lingua francas, and especially of English as a (possible) lingua franca has perhaps engendered various misconceptions. If we wish to claim a role for any form of English internationally, I suggest we have to accept two premises: it will have a *history* and this will affect its present role, status and reputation, and it will possess a current standing economically, politically and even artistically. It is probably impossible for any form of English, even an internationalist ELF, to get away from this. It is the fate of any language to be the sedimentation of its past performances

(MacKenzie 2014, p. 48, see also Pennycook 2010, pp. 2-3) and these will be social and political as well as personal. The idea of creating a form of ELF which can cohabit around the globe with traditional (recognized, certified) forms of the English language is unlikely to come about. Cross fertilization would seem to be much more likely, leaving aside any question of ‘authority’ which might still be attached to NS and NS countries.

Underestimation of the complexity of the social context of ELF use and its ideological realities causes some of the most serious problems in ELF thinking. The confusion between localized and homogenized models of ELF is related to this. In pronunciation, it is unlikely that NNSs will not be influenced in some way by NS models, and, at the same time, the problem of intelligibility will not go away. While it is notoriously difficult to measure understanding, it is clear that some norms will be required (as the LFC suggests), but others will also aid or inhibit comprehension to varying degrees. Worse still, certain sounds might produce unwillingness or reluctance in the recipient to make the leap required for understanding. This is, naturally, highly subjective, but no less real for that. More to the point, the residues of localized pronunciations seem fine and politically correct, but might well vitiate against a truly international language, from a semantic and especially an affective point of view. The assumption that ELF encourages reciprocal accommodation and mutual understanding is reasonable (for an explicitly pragmatic language), and has some support from corpora (Promodrou 2008, especially pp. 71-90), but it is not a given and need not always be the case.<sup>4</sup>

An added corollary to this, and a particularly important one in my opinion, is the problem of inequality in the use of any form of English, or language for that matter. Wolff’s observations (1959, quoted in Jenkins 2007, p. 67) on non-reciprocal intelligibility are of relevance here. Just because one person understands a conversation does not automatically mean the other interlocutor understands, or claims s/he understands. Wolff observed this in terms of economic power relationships, but there may be myriad hierarchical reasons behind instances of non-comprehension or a reluctance to understand one’s interlocutor. Certainly accommodation and collaboration cannot simply be assumed in all contexts. Linguistic understanding is a fraught issue not merely because of the theoretical impossibility involved in measuring it cognitively (it is essentially opaque to us as we can never assess or ‘read’ with perfect clarity or reliability what a subject has understood, but only test for the products of understanding or make explicit inquiries using questionnaires about perceptions of comprehension), but also due to the multi-faceted nature of the problem. We have two or more contributors to an interaction who may understand or interpret on different levels, who may understand but claim not to have done so, or claim to have a comprehension which they have not in fact attained. Discussion of intelligibility in the ELF debate is understandably inadequate because it is only just beginning.

The ‘shape’ of ELF is not just a question of local and supranational with various accommodations. It also tends to lead to a view of the language as in some way *neutral*. Whether speakers leave their identity behind when they use ELF or they each preserve

<sup>4</sup> When we consider lexis, the picture is more open to question: Jenkins (2012, p. 490, quoting a study by Cogo) recounts an optimistic reading of a Japanese-Italian encounter in which Spanish vocabulary is used a resource which “signals rapport” and substitutes vocabulary that is lacking. The whole issue of code-switching has been analysed from a pragmatic point of view in the ELF literature but the readings are not entirely convincing. We are no further along the line than Rampton’s famous comment (quoted in MacKenzie 2014, p. 24) that “Code-switching in sociolinguistics winds up as interference in SLA”: the linguistic act is in the eye of the beholder.

their own origins and idiosyncrasies, the hope is that they will communicate cooperatively and effectively with this new, neutral tool. Because it is not ‘British English’, the problems of the Empire may be forgotten, as it is not ‘American English’, issues of neoliberalism need not apply. Here we run the risk of committing the same mistake as that denounced by Phillipson (1992 and 2009): assuming neutrality in a language that is far from impartial or without stain. Indeed, it is perhaps more realistic to claim that no language is without a political aspect. The aim of encouraging a neutral language is laudable and surely instances of neutral language use will occur, but it is unlikely that a whole language will be intrinsically so.

We return to pronunciation when considering another facet of neutrality. The LFC is an admirable attempt to clarify what really causes confusion in spoken English and to establish what are instead unimportant sound variations. However, it begs a significant question. Why is there such emphasis on understanding and information in the entire ELF debate, to the detriment of other functions of language? While phonetic variation might be perfectly *comprehensible* to most recipients, this does not entirely guarantee the *effectiveness* of the contribution so made. There may be, for instance, a phatic deficit in an interaction due to dissonance in pronunciation styles, or even interpretations of sarcasm or criticism where none was intended. There may be all sorts of hierarchies at work when we speak and there is probably no legitimate suggestion that these can be switched off when we use ELF. Attitudes and emotional responses are particularly generated by accent and speech style (Garrett 2010, especially pp. 53-4) and have notable effects on listeners. While Garrett quotes studies of NS reactions to both NS and NNS English, it is perfectly possible that some sort of evaluation goes on in NNS listeners as well. Indeed, we might follow Voloshinov (1973, chapter 1) and Duranti (1997, p. 16) when they claim that every linguistic contribution is subject to evaluation. This evaluation is hardly surprising if we see every linguistic contribution as a performance, not just of language but also of identity (MacKenzie 2014, p. 48).

The concept of identity leads us to other pregnant considerations regarding the role of ELF. There is little discussion in the literature of Esperanto<sup>5</sup> and the omission is perhaps of interest. Esperanto’s lack of success is well-known and it might seem like a well-worn story, but it is highly relevant in that it reminds us that languages which appeal on a rational level have no cast-iron guarantee of success. They need to ‘catch on’ and the reasons why they do may perhaps be described (Ostler 2005, 2010) with a certain degree of confidence. Indeed, the perplexity described by Jenkins (2007, p. 197 and chapter 8) might be alleviated by a more sensitive understanding of the difficulties of encouraging changes in language use.

Esperanto is a language without its own culture and so lacks affinities and does not inherit loyalty. This compromises it both in terms of appeal and in terms of potential meaning. Edwards (2009, p. 55) puts this well:

The symbolic values of a language, the historical and cultural associations which it has accumulated and its ‘natural semantics of remembrance’ (Steiner 1992, 494) provide a rich underlay for every communicative interaction.

Perhaps we can go so far as to say that a language needs a culture to make it *real* and this rhetorical/poetic/affective function also makes it ‘lovable’. ELF is in a double bind here: it

<sup>5</sup> Jenkins 2007 is a neat example. In her book she makes only two references to Esperanto and both of these are reporting comparisons that other writers made.

aims to be free of British English (or any other norms or localized and politicized varieties), but, perhaps, in a sense it needs them. In the absence of an established ‘indigenous’ culture ELF will it reasonable to assume, be tempted to utilize the cultural resources of ‘traditional’ English to fill the semantic and connotative gaps it repeatedly finds itself faced with, and indeed, this eclecticism is, I think, consistent with Jenkins’ and Seidlhofer’s general tone in their descriptions of what ELF is.

This brings us to the most fundamental issue of all in the ELF debate: NSs and NNSs. “Native speakers tend to get a bad press in work on bilingualism and ELF” (MacKenzie 2014, p. 6). The criticism of NSs is clear in Jenkins (2007). They are seen as arrogating powers of selection and judgement based on intuitions deriving purely from accident of birth. They are accepted into the ELF fold, but only reluctantly and on the understanding that they somehow negate or conceal their linguistic heritage. Thus they are asked to accommodate to ELF behaviour (and even ‘learn’ ELF as a new, semi-foreign language, Jenkins, 2012, p. 487) and be uncritical of supposed ‘errors’. “ELF does not exclude NS of English, but they are not included in data collection, and when they take part in ELF interactions, they do not represent a linguistic reference point” (Jenkins 2007, p. 3).

Besides the potentially important point that when NS ‘take part in ELF interactions’ there is little justification to exclude this data *a priori* in ELF research, there is a more basic issue here. Throughout the ELF debate NSs have been taken as an important, even threatening group with substantial potential bearing on the development of the language. There is indeed good reason for this. But the definition of a NS is notoriously problematic (see Davies 2004 and Mackenzie 2014, pp. 6-9). With increased mobility and migration the line is perhaps fuzzier than ever. What is not in doubt is the difficulty in making statements about NS behaviour or the essential difference in their language. However, the ELF debate tends to involve what the NSs should and should not be allowed to do, with their identity already assumed. Following the consensus reached in the 1990s about NS teachers of English (see Medgyes 1994 and Graddol 2006, pp. 114-5 for examples of this) it seemed almost natural that ELF should also assume a somewhat critical stance concerning NSs and their role. But whereas in the post-war history of English language teaching there may have been and may still be a recognizable cohort of NS teachers with a clear historical (and economic) part to play (Phillipson 1992), perhaps the same cannot so easily be said of NSs in general, or of their effects on language. The intrinsic difficulty in defining a NS compromises strong statements both about their behaviour and its effects. Indeed, the understandable and eminently reasonable criticism of intuitive judgements as to what is permitted or correct in a language calls into question one of the few remaining features of NS-ness: the ability to “confidently make judgements on the correctness of grammatical sentences” (Tan 2015, p. 324).<sup>6</sup> This leaves ELF in a potentially hostile relationship with an unknown and unknowable competitor. The critique of NS may be both excessive and unproductive because it is inadequate sociolinguistically and rather vague.

Mention of NSs naturally brings the discussion on to error: an admittedly unresolved aspect of language and learning. Defining error is invariably a political and ideological act and notoriously NNSs tend to defer to NSs on the issue (Jenkins 2007, chapter 6). However, the position of proponents of ELF is revealing. Error sometimes

<sup>6</sup> Another potentially ‘defining feature’ the author mentions (and indeed uses in a questionnaire) relates to entertainment choices (which TV and radio channel is the respondent “most likely to tune in to”) Tan (2014, p. 327). This is an interesting aspect of language use that will become relevant below.



becomes ‘variation’ or ‘creativity’ or ‘innovation’ (e.g. Seidlhofer 2001, p. 126: “egalitarian licence to speak in ways that meet diverse local needs”) with little clarification of which errors are mistakes and unacceptable (and in what contexts) and which are indeed developments in ELF. Despite attempts to support judgements through corpus-based research (the VOICE corpus is the most important in this regard)<sup>7</sup> the problem is not yet overcome. There is only limited evidence to demonstrate that the third-person *-s* is really disappearing in ELF and there are intuitive and anecdotal signs that skipping it still remains as an imperfection in many speakers’ contributions in English. Instead, it might be preferable to observe that the lack of *-s* on the third person is also a feature of many NS dialects. Again the NS/NNS dichotomy is open to question. It might be much more profitable to analyse the reception of supposed errors and their pragmatic effects rather than reach subjective assessments of ‘right and wrong’. The somewhat untheorised *laissez-faire* attitude present in some ELF literature (e.g. in Seidlhofer 2001, and criticized in MacKenzie 2014, p. 69: “unpredictably non-standard grammar is, and will remain, one of the identifying characteristics of spoken ELF”) is possibly as dubious as the NS intuition-based norms imposed by textbooks, dictionaries and now corpora using NS text as data. Admittedly, MacKenzie also suggests that “for the majority of speakers in ELF interactions, the ‘errors’ *simply don’t matter*” (MacKenzie 2014, p. 66; punctuation in original), but this comes with the added disadvantage of risking disorienting the learner who may sometimes prefer pedagogical clarity to detailed linguistically accurate language description. Jenkins (2007, p. 13), with characteristic honesty, quotes Quirk’s famous remark that distain for elitism is a comfortable exercise for those who are already safely in the elite, but although she does so critically, she fails to convince us that learners will feel confident of even a legitimated ELF if certain norms are left ambivalently open for adjustment. Error and personal expression are a highly subtle area for sociolinguistic analysis, but it may be said with some degree of confidence that error in a language in which one claims expertise is probably intrinsically different in many cases from error in a language in which one is beginner or moderate user. Certainly the personal and identity effects are different, probably resulting from feelings of power or helplessness as perceived NSs or NNSs. Again we are reminded that every linguistic act is, or may be interpreted as being, a performance of identity, a representation of a speaker’s provenance and adherence, but perhaps also of his/her skills and expertise. Firth’s famous ‘let it pass’ principle (quoted in Prodromou 2008, p. 75) might accurately reflect overt behaviour in many ELF interactions, but this can by no means assure speakers that they are not being evaluated as to their perceived precision and rhetorical skills.<sup>8</sup> There are few convincing reasons to believe that ELF interactions will invariably avoid the ‘moral gymnasium’ that so much human social interaction involves.

Perhaps this issue is at the base of the important criticism Jenkins has recently made of academic institutions regarding the use of English (Jenkins 2013). The contradiction she observes, that the same institutions that are keen to recruit international students (for financial and other, perhaps more creditable motives such as the

<sup>7</sup> It is worth noting here some of the real issues with corpora and ELF: they are, perhaps inevitably, rather small and subject to inclusion criteria we might criticize. There is also a fundamental risk that a corpus which attempts to study ELF and its variations will become self-defining and the aims of the study will dictate the findings. The VOICE corpus, for example, can only be considered as representative of a largely educated population of ELF speakers. For VOICE see [www.univie.ac.at/voice](http://www.univie.ac.at/voice).

<sup>8</sup> It is worth noting here that the phrase ‘let it pass’ is hardly neutral from a pragmatic perspective: it is easy to envisage many situations in which ‘let it pass’ indicates (mild?) disapproval of a lack of precision and an almost patronizing acceptance of the contribution all the same.

internationalisation of the learning environment) are ambivalent or even hostile to ELF, is certainly not baseless. Students risk studying in an English-only academic context, having been explicitly encouraged to do so, and then find themselves in some cases with little tuition or support in English after an initial pre-course training period, but subject to assessment that is often highly influenced by the linguistic means they happen to have at their disposal. Put simply, a near NS-level candidate in a master's programme examination will probably have a significant advantage over an ELF user who displays some of the 'creative' variations considered typical of this form of English (e.g. non-use of third person -s; conflation of past simple and present perfect; reduction in redundancy; differences in singular/plural distinctions and use of the definite article, and variation in the use of prepositions: see MacKenzie 2014, chapter 4). This is not to mention the possible subjective effects of an excessively analytical linguistic style compared to the idiomaticity of the NS. Jenkins (2013) makes a noble attempt to challenge the status quo, but she cannot, I suspect, remove the real issue: the impression we give, especially when we are up for explicit assessment (in an interview or writing a paper) depends to a significant extent upon our linguistic repertoires,<sup>9</sup> and this would not be so serious if there was not a 'natural' form of the language still in existence and granting certain candidates or participants a seemingly unfair advantage.

Unfairness brings another issue of importance to the fore: despite the rhetoric associated with ELF, it could even constitute an elitist and socially unjust development in language history.<sup>10</sup> Phillipson's Global English and World Englishes paradigms (Phillipson 2009, p. 89) seem to present ELF as part of a more humane, diverse and culturally respectful approach to linguistic development. Putting aside any criticisms we may make as to the binary polarity of the scheme, we might question whether this category that recognizes local norms and supports diversity really does represent a humane development for the individual. ELF risks being as elitist as any other language that is aspired to by many in a wide area. It is, like other claimed forms of global English, "not evenly distributed around the world" (Mufwene 2013, p. 45). There are no conclusive reasons to believe that ELF use will greatly reduce the costs of studying English (unless ELF will mean the reduction in use of other 'competitor' languages such as French, Spanish, Arabic or Chinese), and, as we have seen, the fact that one can make oneself understood in a version of ELF might be a positive thing, but will hardly suffice for the full development and expression of a person. There is every danger of hierarchies becoming established here: of varying degrees of competence in ELF on the one hand, and of 'haves' and 'have-nots' on the other.<sup>11</sup> Here Ostler's view is significant:

Elitism is the weak point in the profile of every global language. Every lingua franca is a partial language – in the sense that not everyone knows it: it is a skill that needs to be acquired

<sup>9</sup> See Blommaert 2005 for a discussion of repertoires and 2010 for a series of striking examples as to the importance of repertoires and resources.

<sup>10</sup> This is not to say that it will happen. The moral aspect probably has little to do with the process of language change (witness language death). Instead my aim here is to remind us that positive ideas about the use of ELF risk being superficially very attractive to anyone of a liberal bent but may not be realized in concrete situations.

<sup>11</sup> Witness the precipitous charge in India to pay for private schooling in English: a sacrifice that supposedly enables the offspring of poor parents to access better employment opportunities. See "English or Hinglish – which will India choose?" Zareer Masani, BBC Website ([www.bbc.com](http://www.bbc.com), 12.11.2012) for a simple description. Ostler (2010, p. xviii) also speaks of the "English-speaking elite" as being present on almost all continents.

consciously by those who do not grow up with it, and that education comes at a high price.  
(Ostler 2010, p. xvii)

A certain absence of discussion in the ELF literature on this issue, along with the perhaps overly sanguine view of its liberating qualities (being accommodating and inclusive, and owned by no-one, as we have seen is claimed) is suggestive: ELF must ‘come of age’ and become a ‘real’ language (socially and pragmatically speaking) if it is avoid the danger of merely reinforcing global inequalities. Here Holliday’s critique is very prescient: the claims of “freedom from NS standards and culture... and tolerance for linguistic diversity” (Holliday 2009, p. 152), standards which can be negotiated by ELF speakers and “present a counterweight to hegemonic Anglo-American dominated English” (Phillipson, cited by Jenkins and Holliday) may seem very attractive, but (firstly) there is no certainty of their acceptance by ‘the periphery’ and (secondly) they might even be rejected on various grounds: that acceptance of ELF is an imposition of an inferior idiom upon learners; that it is not genuine, but a construct; that it is still shot-through with assumptions and understandings of the world that are essentially ‘English’ or western. Indeed, if we analyse ELF with western cultural or scientific tools (here Edwards’s comments quoting Hurka on outsiders’ failures to understand the minority experience are relevant: Edwards 2009, p. 42), we must question whether it will ever be possible to create or observe something that does not take on a western (or ‘Central’ in Holliday’s terminology) character.

The qualities of efficiency and effectiveness quoted by Seidlhofer (2001, p. 131) can in themselves be described as noticeably ‘western’ and, we might add, only of relative importance. Language does much more than communicate information (witness Jakobson’s Poetic Function, or Halliday’s three-level model of functional grammar that highlights social interaction and text as well as information exchange: Halliday 2004, pp. 29-31). It is a means to identify oneself and others, to perform roles and create and reaffirm relations between fellow humans. It is a means of personal realization, change and development, and so an intrapersonal arena of use. Quite understandably, ELF literature is, so far, substantially lacking in these aspects of language use, and the ‘get-out clause’ of defining ELF as ‘function’ rather than a language or variety is hardly fully satisfactory (MacKenzie 2014, p. 53). Questionnaires such as that used by Tan (2014, p. 327) include items such as, ‘what language would you use to tell a story/write a diary/speak to yourself?’ and this might be telling. It is a reminder of the potential intimacy a language may articulate and the emotional importance it may have to the ‘user’.

Entertainment has already been mentioned, but it deserves a little more emphasis. ELF tends to ignore the importance of artistic creativity in language choice. Jenkins (2007, chapter 6) struggles bravely with the results to her survey on attitudes to ELF and she is admirably honest in presenting data that is clearly disappointing to her in that respondents consistently show deference to Anglo-American norms and a desire to imitate centre country accents. However, this data (confirmed by my own *ad hoc* research) should come as no surprise. We might call it the ‘Shakespeare (or Shakira) Effect’. Respondents reveal a strong inclination to *emulate* the language of their heroes or favourites, and to identify with a dialect of English which they represent. This is hardly surprising. If we ask why someone learns a language, economic benefit is probably only a part of the answer. A certain cultural dominance might also be at play, along with a perfectly healthy admiration of the cultural contribution of a language group. It is worth bearing in mind Woolard’s observation (in Duranti 1997, p. 77), “It is who speaks a language rather than where it is spoken that gives it its force”. Woolard underlines the importance of personal relations in this process, rather than the more easily analysed (and criticized) forms of authority such as schools and governments; we might add the ‘personal’ influence exerted by music and

the arts in general. Songs, poetry and other literary creations can have a double effect linguistically; firstly they may inspire curiosity and even love for the language they are articulated in, and secondly they may inspire NNS to aspire to their norms. This is neither good nor bad, but is to be observed and understood (perhaps through more detailed surveys and ‘language biographies’). Thus, beyond the ‘Europop’ cd produced in a simple form of English for purely commercial reasons (the market is potentially wider), we can find the expression of malaise, criticism or joy at varying levels of complexity as described by Pennycook (2010), for example. There is no reason to exclude ELF from this role, but it has not been analysed adequately until now.<sup>12</sup>

All of the ‘issues’ briefly described above tend towards an ‘elephant in the room’ that has not, in my opinion, been adequately treated in ELF literature and, perhaps, not been understood fully by mainstream linguistics either. Aspects such as performance, the hierarchical nature of language use and reception, the place of artistic expression and the attachment (affinity) felt by speakers (rather than ‘users’) to a particular language or dialect can come together under the concept of *meaning*. It is this which rather risks being overlooked by ELF as it is presently envisaged and observed. Every linguistic act takes place in a history of cultural and linguistic performance, and cannot escape this burden, or fail to use its richness. For Bruner (1990, p. 11), language is a symbolic system for constructing meaning, and the context for this is culture, the product of history. Blommaert (2005) also emphasizes the importance of history. If we care to understand discourse we must remember that: “people speak *from* a particular point in history, and they always speak *on* history” (Blommaert 2005, p. 126). This history forces us to recognize the “‘layered simultaneity’ in texts” (Blommaert 2005, p. 126), and this is something ELF has failed to comprehend until now. It is as if the new lingua franca is (or is imagined to be) a tabula rasa and can start afresh without the accretion of centuries of events, meanings and culture, but this is unlikely to be true of a dialect that is so recognizably close to British and American English.

## 4. Some conclusions

### 4.1. Some general comments

There are, I think it is clear, good reasons for calling into question the optimistic claims surrounding ELF. It can rarely be a neutral means of communication and will probably always sit alongside a culturally significant group of dialects that are seen as in many ways its progenitor. This dialogic relationship cannot be ignored without compromising our understanding of the language.

At the same time, we should not underestimate the complexity of the experience of ‘language use’. Appreciation of it stems from our ability to interpret meanings that are “metaphoric, allusive, very sensitive to context” (Bruner 1990, p. 61). According to Bruner, these meanings imply narratives, and narrative requires both an understanding of what is considered canonical and what violates this, and “something approximating a narrator’s perspective: it cannot... be ‘voiceless’” (Bruner 1990, p. 77). This implies a cultural and social-historical shared background to situate utterances, and so interpret

<sup>12</sup> MacKenzie (2014) mentions this in passing (p. 123) but does not develop the point to any great extent.

them. This might be contrasted with a simply neutral and efficient means of communicating.

This is all the more significant if we think of Bourdieu (for a simple description of Bourdieu's ideas in this regard see Duranti 1997, pp. 8-9 and 44-46). The *occasionalist fallacy* he described reminds us that language is not just a set of lexical and grammatical items to be used to construct messages at will. Its exchanges are largely pre-ordained, or at least suggested, through patterns of race, gender and class and repeated routines that we participate in regularly. A language will be one of the principal carriers and realisations of these elements of the *habitus* and ELF is not, I would maintain, exempt from this.

The meaningful acts involved in language use imply pragmatics, and in its infancy study of ELF has to some extent neglected this area. Only recently do we find explicit attempts to investigate pragmatic elements in ELF discourse and these tend to concentrate on what we might call functional questions,<sup>13</sup> rather than exploring the subtle pragmatics involved in all highly situated contributions to interactions (tone variations, lexical choice and idiomaticity, cultural references, to name but a few). These contextualized contributions are, as all instances of language use, open to evaluation, and this may be negative and not only referring to accent or grammatical precision, but to identity as whole.

There is still a risk of the monolingual fallacy in the ELF debate and of an inadvertent monoculturalism. The determination to encourage the development of an easy-to-use, democratic tongue, however admirable or understanding, does sometimes take on a messianic tone, and risks pushing out other languages.<sup>14</sup> There are (often unstated) assumptions about certain political values that we might be in accordance with, but which happen to share a similar cultural provenance to the English language itself. It is also interesting to note a lack of analysis of translation as an issue: should documents be translated into ELF rather than a 'native' form of English so as to encourage wider intelligibility (at the cost, probably, of style and 'naturalness' that are often the objective of a translator)? Should documents like treaties and trade agreements be promulgated in ELF and then translated as secondary versions, for convenience but not having the same authority?

Lastly, our study of any lingua franca must take into account the possibility of undisclosed meanings, and this is even more the case in a dual NS – NNS use environment. NSs are traditionally renowned for their use of connotation and implication, metaphor and cultural cues to half-disclose meanings (Cook, quoted in MacKenzie 2014, p. 7). Again this begs the question as to what and who are native speakers, but the difficulty does not absolve us from considering yet again the complexity of the issue of understanding. ELF is claimed to encourage easy intelligibility, but the risk is that this is only at the expense of the true range of language use, or that it depends on a highly suspect appreciation of what constitutes understanding of a text or interaction.

<sup>13</sup> Jenkins (2012, p. 489) mentions some of these, but they are largely in justification for code switching and might be considered rather weak pragmatic acts. Certainly there is a wealth of pragmatics in attempts to use English in global contexts that requires examination in future ELF research.

<sup>14</sup> It is perhaps relevant to mention here the substantial growth in masters courses conducted in English in Italian universities over the last ten years. I am aware of few if any similar courses in French, Spanish or German in the same institutions.

## 4.2. Some suggestions

It is hoped that the present attempt to shed light on the fascinating and highly significant issues thrown up by the ELF debate does not seem unduly critical. There is little doubt that forms of English are acting as a lingua franca in all sorts of contexts around the globe. Pioneering work, especially that of Jennifer Jenkins and Barbara Seidlhofer, deserves nothing but the highest respect. However, we may see the ELF debate as coming of age in the difficulties it faces and these difficulties suggest possible courses of action.

First and foremost, we should constantly remind ourselves of the manifold complexity of language use and this warns against excessively simple recipes and descriptions. Even corpus-based description of ‘real’ linguistic behaviour risks eliminating the entirety of the *meaning* of each use of a particular form, lexical item or structure. We also risk spreading our net too narrowly in collecting data from limited groups and, as often occurs in linguistic research, “underestimating the vernacular”.<sup>15</sup>

It is worth noting the danger of leaping to powerful conclusions based on apparently salient data. Assumptions as to the democratic vitality of ELF, based on the roughly 2:1 disequilibrium between NNSs and NSs are built on sand. The emulation mentioned above tempts us to doubt calculations as to numerical advantage and this unease is reinforced by considerations of economics and power and other more subtle generators of influence. There is probably no automatic, direct relation between numbers of speakers and historical linguistic developments, except perhaps at the lowest figures. The huge numbers of NNSs are very significant, but not, I would suggest, adequate grounds for anything but cautious hypotheses about language change.

Connected with these observations is the obligation to recognize history and social context as fundamental to understanding the features of any ELF. It is not enough to describe certain similarities or divergences from ‘traditional’ forms of English. They need to be explained and contextualized. All the more when examining a lingua franca, which is a *social language par excellence*.

Most importantly of all, we should resist the temptation to try to tell the future when we discuss ELF. Perhaps it is natural to do so because ELF is a relatively new development and seems somehow future-orientated, but linguistic investigation is difficult enough even when we try to explain the here and now, without taking leaps in the dark and making firm predictions. The only prediction that can be made is perhaps Ostler’s: “Ultimately, and for the foreseeable future, the use of English will be a political issue” (Ostler 2010, p.30). In searching for the future we risk missing, or misunderstanding the present. And of course, to appreciate the present we need a deeply informed view of the past.

ELF is a development of history and so does not deceive us or its users. However, we risk deceiving ourselves if we do not realize that this is an area of language that demands a multi-disciplinary approach and serves to underline the intricacy of interactions and layers of human experience that go to make up language as it is used.

<sup>15</sup> Coupland 2013, p. 11. He contrasts attempts to map out ‘whole languages’ with the fruitful approach based on vernaculars and individual, localized and themed genres, all of which underlines the difficulty of generalizing about language.

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