

INTRODUCTION

ELF in specialized domains of intercultural communication

MARIA GRAZIA GUIDO

This special issue of the *Lingue e Linguaggi* journal, entitled *Uses of English as a Lingua Franca in Domain-Specific Contexts of Intercultural Communication*, collects the contributions presented at the International Conference with the same title that took place at the University of Salento, Italy, in December 2019. The Conference represented the conclusion of a PRIN Project (PRIN being the acronym for ‘Project of Relevant National Interest’) co-funded by the Italian Ministry of University and Research, whose title (summing up the topics that were explored) was: “English as a Lingua Franca in domain-specific contexts of intercultural communication: a cognitive-functional model for the analysis of ELF accommodation strategies in unequal migration contexts, digital-media virtual environments, and multicultural ELF classrooms”. Three academic Research Units were involved in this Project: the proposing Unit of the University of Salento (Principal Investigator and Unit Coordinator: Prof. Maria Grazia Guido); the Unit of the University of Roma Tre (Unit Coordinator: Prof. Lucilla Lopriore); and the Unit of the University of Verona (Unit Coordinator: Prof. Roberta Facchinetti).

This PRIN project started from the assumption that ELF is an area in need of a more principled systematic enquiry since, so far, it has conventionally been referred only to a general view of Global, International English based on native-speakers’ norms of usage, which actually omit to recognize ELF as a use of English that is independent from English as a Native Language (ENL). On such grounds, the aim of the PRIN Research Team has primarily been to challenge the accepted Anglocentric principle according to which the so-called Standard-English code and even ENL pragmatic usage represent shared norms in intercultural interactions and international transactions adopted worldwide across cultures, specialized contexts and communities of practice. As a consequence, this PRIN research has provided evidence in support of an acknowledgement that people from different linguacultural backgrounds appropriate English by making reference to their own different native semantic, syntactic and pragmatic codes through which they convey their own communicative needs.

The chapters of this special issue enquire into the uses of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) in domain-specific discourses that demonstrate the extent to which the English language comes to be appropriated by non-native speakers who, indeed, do not experience it as an alien ‘foreign’ language, but rather as a ‘lingua franca’ through which they feel free to convey their own native linguacultural and experiential uses and narratives, rhetorical and specialized repertoires and, ultimately, their own socio-cultural identities. The domain-specific discourses explored in the course of this research project and illustrated in the various chapters concern ELF variations employed in: (a) institutional, professional, as well as ‘undeclared’ migration settings (UniSalento Unit); (b) digital media employed for global communication (UniVerona Unit); (c) multicultural and multilingual classrooms characterizing contemporary western societies (UniRoma Tre Unit).

On such grounds, the Contributors – who are internationally recognized ELF scholars (among whom the illustrious academics Henry G. Widdowson and Barbara Seidlhofer stand out), as well as young and promising ELF researchers – starting from the hypothesis that non-native speakers make ELF their own by exploring its possible meaning potential that may not conform to native speakers’ conventional usage, enquire about the ways in which ELF users communicate with each other, how they come to an understanding of each others’ ELF variations informed by their respective native-language formal and functional structures and, conversely, what types of misunderstandings occur when one set of native-language formal and functional structures, as well as of domain-specific register conventions – transferred into their respective ELF variations – comes into contact, and frequently into conflict, with another.

This special issue, therefore, explores the consequences of such issues on spoken, written and multimodal communication, with a special reference to Italian multicultural contexts. To this purpose, a number of original models were developed with the aim of challenging conventional constructs in the fields of cognitive and functional grammars, text linguistics and discourse pragmatics which are traditionally centred on native-speaker norms of English usage. The ultimate objective has been to explore ways by which ELF-mediated communication, on the one hand, can be improved by developing effective strategies of meaning co-construction and register hybridization that could take into account ELF speakers’ diverse native linguacultural schemata and, on the other, can instead be prevented because of a failure in accommodating the interacting speakers’ different ELF variations.

The adopted methodological approaches are applied to the domains of: sociolinguistics and intercultural pragmatics (enquiring into the relations between ELF variations and non-native speakers’ identity in multilingual

societies); a multilingual comparative view of cognitive-experiential linguistics (investigating processes of transfer of typologically different L1-structures to ELF); intra- and inter-lingual translation and mediation in specialized discourse; a multicultural view of language pedagogy; and methods for describing ELF variations in intercultural communicative contexts (regarding data collection, analysis and interpretation).

By taking a multicultural and multilingual stance, the common objective has been to promote a more extensive understanding, on the one hand, of the processes of unconscious cognitive-experiential transfer of ELF-users' native typological-syntactic, lexical-semantic and discourse-pragmatic features into their respective ELF variations, and, on the other, of the ELF variations resulting from such an L1→ELF transfer as an essential factor determining communicative success or failure in today's intercultural interactions. The ultimate objective is to promote a critical debate on these domain-specific topics so as to foster a deeper understanding of the nature of ELF as an essential factor in contemporary international communication.