

English as a lingua franca and linguistic diversity

JULIANE HOUSE

A large part of international communication today is conducted in English in its role as a lingua franca. The term *lingua franca* comes originally from Arabic *lisan al farang* referring to a contact language, a rather restricted ‘language of commerce’ used by speakers of Arabic with travelers from Western Europe. This meaning is *not* appropriate for today’s lingua franca English whose major characteristic is its enormous spread across many geographic, social and cultural areas, its openness to forms from many different languages. Speakers of English as a lingua franca (ELF) differ widely in terms of their proficiency, background, motivation and purpose of using English. One of the characteristics of ELF is therefore its variation. ELF is a language used by people who share neither a native tongue nor a common culture, and for whom ELF is often the default means of communication.

ELF’s enormous formal and functional flexibility coupled with its world-wide spread has led to another remarkable feature: that the number of ELF speakers is substantially larger than that of native speakers of English – tendency growing. ELF speakers make use of the English language as a convenient tool – as a language for communication – and in this use they tend to retain their different national, regional, local and individual lingua-cultural identities. The consequence of this diversity is that ELF can indeed be called a stateless language: it is no longer owned by the inner circle of English native speakers, rather it belongs to the growing number of people from many different states who choose to use it. ELF is thus a new type of English, a hybrid language, a kind of ‘pluralized English’ that accommodates diverse speakers’ needs, norms and values.

ELF is definitely not a “reduced, interference-bound system of verbal communication”, as was recently claimed by Snell-Hornby (2010) in *The Linguist*, and it is silly to disparagingly refer to ELF as “Globish”, “McLanguage” or even “BSE” (for “Bad Simple English”) and so on. Pioneering empirical studies of the use of ELF, for instance by Firth (1996) and Meierkord (1996), had already shown that ELF communication is characterized by a remarkable, and

indeed unexpected, dearth of misunderstanding and break-down of the talk – very different from interactions between native and non-native speakers, as captured in Interlanguage studies over the past decades. And more recent surveys of the use of ELF in interactions, (cf. e.g. House 2009, 2010, 2011), have shown that ELF speakers tend to creatively and innovatively use certain strategies to safeguard interactional success. For example, they deliberately repeat words, phrases or clauses in order to gain time, support their short-term memory and monitor what they themselves and others have said; they co-construct utterances whenever an interactant appears to be lost for words; they accommodate to each other's speech styles, and they creatively re-interpret English discourse markers using, for instance, *yeah/yes, I think, you know, okay* and so in a self-serving and self-supporting way which systematically differs from English native speaker use.

Is the wide-spread use of ELF a threat to other languages and to multilingualism and multiculturalism, as is currently often claimed? I don't think so. ELF speakers' mother tongues, or any of their other languages, will always come into play whenever participants are able to understand them. ELF is simply an additional language, a 'co-language' functioning not against, but in conjunction with national languages and regional and local varieties. As to minority and immigrant languages, it is often not so much ELF that threatens them, but the negligent or prejudicial policies enacted by many states. ELF and multilingualism are *not* 'either – or' matters, and the use of ELF need not damage linguistic-cultural diversity. The vast majority of ELF speakers are *per se* bilingual or multilingual speakers, which means that transfer from other languages and code-mixing are common in ELF interactions.

Speakers choose to communicate in ELF for their very own comfort and advantage because ELF currently has the highest 'linguistic capital'. As de Swaan (2001) remarked, what is important here is not the right of people to speak and write in whatever language they wish, but rather the freedom of everyone else to ignore what they say or write in the language of their choice.

The launching of the *Journal of English as a Lingua Franca* (JELF) is a sign of ELF's increasing importance in the world. As a member of JELF's advisory board, I wholeheartedly welcome this new journal as a forum for research on ELF from many different parts of the world. This research will, I hope, focus on empirical corpus-based work not only in the area I happen to be most interested in, the pragmatics of ELF use, but also in many other areas such as sociolinguistic and socio-political discussions on the relation of ELF to other local and global languages and other *linguae francae*, to multilingualism, multiculturalism and translation and interpreting practices; psycholinguistic and neurolinguistic issues concerning the nature of the "bilingual mode" (Grosjean 2001), which speakers naturally find themselves in when using ELF, to studies on the teaching of competence in ELF interactions.

I look forward to many stimulating presentations of ELF studies in JELF as well as constructive and controversial debates in all of the above-mentioned areas, and possibly many more.

References

- de Swaan, Abram. 2001. *Words of the world*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Firth, Alan. 1996. The discursive accomplishment of normality: on 'lingua franca' English and conversation analysis. *Journal of Pragmatics* 26. 237–260.
- Grosjean, François. 2001. The bilingual's language modes. In Janet L. Nicol (ed.), *One mind, two languages*, 84–95. Oxford: Blackwell.
- House, Juliane (ed.). 2009. English Lingua Franca. [Special issue]. *Intercultural Pragmatics* 6(2).
- House, Juliane. 2010. The Pragmatics of English as lingua franca. In Anna Trosborg (ed.), *Handbook of Pragmatics* vol. 7, 363–387. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- House, Juliane. 2011. Global and Intercultural Communication. In Karin Aijmer & Gisle Andersen (eds.), *Handbook of Pragmatics* vol. 5, 363–390. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Meierkord, Christiane. 1996. *Englisch als Medium der interkulturellen Kommunikation*. Frankfurt: PeterLang.
- Snell-Hornby, Mary. 2010. Mind the GAB! The hazards of a global language in translation studies. *The Linguist* 49. 18–19.

About the Author

Juliane House is Professor Emerita of Applied Linguistics at the University of Hamburg. She currently directs a project on multilingualism and multiculturalism in German universities. Her research interests include English as a lingua franca, contrastive pragmatics, discourse analysis, politeness theory, intercultural communication, and translation theory and practice.

E-mail: jhouse@fastmail.fm

