

# English as a lingua franca: myths and facts

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I write this essay as an opinion piece, from an evolutionary perspective, which is more consistent with my current research and which one may choose to align in spirit with Ostler (2010), focused on articulating a diachronic and social scenario for what authors such as Jenkins (2007) and Seidlhofer (2011) identify as ‘English as a lingua franca’ (ELF). I do not necessarily disagree with the latter but would like to direct the reader’s attention to issues that I hope some contributors to this new journal will not avoid addressing.

Jenkins (2007) and Seidlhofer (2011) are not necessarily mistaken in arguing that non-native speakers of English worldwide need not worry about not sounding native-like and contributing to the emergence of new regional or local varieties. However, I won’t refrain from asking whether ELF eliminates the need to distinguish between the Inner, the Outer, and the Expanding Circles; whether there is really an emergent *community* of speakers of ELF (i.e., a group of individuals feeling united by and associating themselves with the same language); and whether speakers in the Expanding Circle develop any communal norms in the same ways as those of the Inner and Outer Circles do.

I raise all these issues without ignoring that English has spread around the world at the cost of indigenizing in the new settings of its usage, as it is adapted to communicative needs and prior communicative habits of its new speakers (Mufwene 2009). It is thus also speciating, more noticeably in places where it has also vernacularized or just become well established, though it is not clear what impact the features contributed by the Expanding Circle exerts on its structural integrity. So, I cannot help asking, like other authors discussed in Jenkins (2007) and Seidlhofer (2011), why this particular attention to ELF, especially if, as they admit, it has no common norm.

To be sure, one may expect to find somebody that speaks some English even in some of the remotest rural places in the world today, thanks largely to the commitment of national education systems in the otherwise non-Anglophone world to teach English as a foreign or official language, but not necessarily because of the BBC or the Voice of America. Many non-Anglophones who

learn English do not listen to, least of all watch, these broadcast media, *pace* Phillipson (1992). In any case, many others who listen to or watch them follow broadcasts in the local or regional official languages, such as French, Spanish, Portuguese, Arabic, and undoubtedly Mandarin. It's only after they have learned enough English that they may choose to follow English programs, in order to *improve* or *maintain* their understanding skills. Besides, the first mission of these prominent broadcast institutions is not to spread English (although this is an important consequence) but to familiarize the world with various aspects of British and American world views; call it *political propaganda* if you will. The British Council, which I should not ignore, is an industry that responds to demands from the language *buyers*, a lucky one that has benefited from national markets that do not want to find themselves on the margins of globalization.

I accept ELF as a fact, a beneficial outcome (apparently more unplanned than planned) from the British imperial expansion and the emergence of American hegemony since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century in science and technology, as well as in the military. It is hard not to recognize English as a worldwide lingua franca that bridges the communication barrier not only between native English speakers and native speakers of other languages, but also among the latter, although, as recognized by Jenkins (2007) in arguing against the term *global English*, there are still pockets of the world and of populations that make no use of English. I'll adduce personal anecdotes below to prove both positions.

One time, while on vacation in a remote village in the Democratic Republic of Congo (my homeland), far away from Western-style modernity, I was surprised by a young eavesdropper who understood my private conversation in English with my wife, an American monoglot. (I later used the young man as her interpreter for those moments when she was alone with my extended family.) Likewise, I was also happily surprised to find, at and around the Old Shanghai's market, merchants and peddlers quite comfortable in enticing me in some English to buy their merchandise, whereas a number of university professors at the conference to which I was invited to speak were reluctant to speak English. (Don't get me wrong. The embarrassment was mine in the first place, as I was on business in China and I should have been prepared to speak at least a few words in the host country's language! I was partaking in the Anglophone linguistic hegemony!)

On the other hand, I wasn't so fortunate in Belo Horizonte, Brazil, when, once alone without my host, I could not buy something in a clothing store or order the right dish in a restaurant because the merchant and waiters spoke no English and I no Portuguese. (I had had a similar experience in Poznan, Poland, where only handing my host's phone number to the front desk clerk finally enabled me to check into my hotel late at night, as I speak no Polish either.)

While English has certainly become a useful lingua franca around the world, one shouldn't fool oneself in counting too much on it. Though it is part of modern education curricula in schools almost all over the non-Anglophone world today, its market value varies inter-individually depending, *inter alia*, on where one lives and what they intend to gain from it. In 2008, while a guest of the Japanese Association of College English Teachers (JACET) in Tokyo, I heard teachers deplore the fact that many Japanese would not speak English despite all the years they had spent in school learning the language. What the teachers forgot is that, in Japan as elsewhere, many students are learning English like some other subjects, such as trigonometry and physics, just to satisfy academic requirements that they put to rest after graduation.

This is all reminiscent of various historic lingue franche of the past. I'll start with the celebrated example of Latin, with which ELF is often compared, especially in claims of how much more global the latter is compared to the former. Not everybody spoke Latin during the Roman Empire. It was the privilege of those who interacted with the Roman rulers in the provinces or worked for the Roman colonial system. These included (1) the legionaries recruited from the local populations, who spoke Vulgar Latin (the ancestor of today's Romance languages); (2) the indigenous ruling class, whom the Romans rewarded handsomely in sharing power with them, up to making it possible for them to hold prestigious offices in Rome (including becoming emperor); and (3) the merchants, thanks to whom Roman-style towns started in the provinces. It is from these that neo-Latin varieties would gradually spread to the rest of the national territories of southwestern Europe after the collapse of the Western Roman Empire. Thus, Latin did indeed spread 'all over' then, as a lingua franca of an elite class. However, it was its vernacularization in the emergent Roman-style towns, the expansion of these into cities and important economic and cultural centers, and the ensuing gradual urbanization of today's Romance countries that really spread globally, within their national boundaries, the lingua franca that had started as an urban colonial legacy.

The fate was different for the (circum-)Mediterranean Lingua Franca, which has bequeathed us its name as a type of language that bridges communication between groups speaking different native languages. Its identification has become associated not only with its structural divergence from Italian and other then emergent Romance languages, but also with language mixing in the relevant trade settings. No wonder some sociolinguists define pidgins as lingua francas! One is reminded in fact of attitudes of Europeans to creoles and pidgins lexified by their languages, disfranchising them as non-European. Ironically, many speakers of these new varieties claim they speak a European language or one of European descent. Readers should in fact think again about implications of biased terms such as *new Englishes* and *indigenized Englishes*, which suggest that the varieties are somewhat illegitimate in comparison with

the presumably more legitimate ones identified as *native Englishes* (Mufwene 2001).

Dakhli (2008) highlights, *inter alia*, speakers' lack of loyalty to *Lingua Franca* as a trade language, one that everyone considered the language of the other group, with *Franca* used by southern Mediterraneans to identify north-western Mediterraneans from Italy to Portugal. The fact that no particular European group claimed *Lingua Franca* as their language, owing largely to its extensive structural divergence from their vernaculars, did not help. Yet, power inequities after the collapse of the Arab and Moor rule in Iberia are an ecological factor that favored the European linguistic element in it. Or was it also, or primarily, the fact that the Romans had traded earlier, around the Mediterranean, in Latin that favored the Romance/Latin element in it?

Today, while it is true that English speakers of the Outer Circle take this former colonial language to be one of their own and may worry about its local norms, I bet speakers of the Expanding Circle worry instead about being understood by the outsiders with whom they communicate, especially those who speak it natively or are expected to speak it fluently. The reason for the expectation may be (1) living in a country where English functions as a mother tongue or as an official language, or (2) working in an institution that has adopted it as an important, if not the dominant, working language. An informal poll I conducted at a symposium organized at the JACET meeting cited above revealed that the overwhelming majority of the audience of more than 200 participants (the whole assembly minus two of the participants) do not consider English to be one of the languages of Japan. Many of us speak English indeed as the other people's language, which we are happy to use, even if reluctantly sometimes, out of necessity to interact with those who don't speak our languages. We do this more eagerly when there are some rewards associated with the exercise, like the possibility of finding a more lucrative job, especially outside our homeland, opening new markets for what we produce, having a wider audience/readership for our ideas, etc., etc.

These last considerations raise the question of who sets the standards of acceptability. Theoreticians of ELF advocate that the majority do so. However, that majority does not form a community, especially since practitioners of English in the Expanding Circle do not use it to communicate with each other within their respective countries. Their interactions with each other in English take place in settings where they interact concurrently with nationals of other countries, who might give up on you if they are from the Inner (or Outer) Circle and you do not satisfy the standards that they find acceptable. The choice is between approximating standards from the Inner Circle and ignoring them, and therefore narrowing one's range of competitiveness. In fact, I wonder who learns another group's language not caring at all about being understood (and being accepted) by the native-speaking community. Besides, which language

community ever set up their standards democratically, by majority rule, independent of the linguistic norms that emerge on their own in a network or community of practice?

So, should speakers of ELF be encouraged to set up their own standards at the risk of defeating the very reason why they invest so much energy and money to learn the language? Should they develop awareness of the particular ways in which they are innovating and diverging from the target models and then feel proud? Is the divergence not part of the normal course of language appropriation and evolution, which proceeds under ecological conditions that the learners are not aware of and can try to control only if they want to reduce the divergence? Are there many liberal native speakers out there, even among linguists, who are not amused or annoyed by, or impatient with, ELF or even Outer Circle speakers whose utterances diverge to the point of preventing intelligibility? Are there many native speakers who accommodate non-native speakers other than by being patient, unless they evolve in the Outer Circle and know that the host's standards prevail or become acceptable? And what will happen if the local or regional ELF standards impede international communication not only with Inner and Outer Circle speakers, but also among the ELF speakers themselves? Despite myths about the cultural uniformity of our planet under the pressures of worldwide globalization, such speciation cum fragmentation is in fact a probability to be expected if English were at all to displace other vernaculars (very unlikely!) and indigenized also in today's Expanding Circle.

I could raise more issues, but I hope these are enough to keep ELF scholars busy for some time. I bring them up not because I want to undermine a new journal that is likely to advance knowledge on some aspects of the spread of English around the world, especially in territories that were not colonized by England or, later, the United Kingdom, but because these questions are evolutionarily significant and should, I believe, be kept in mind in the academic discourse that focuses on the emergence of English as a worldwide *lingua franca*. It is natural to also discuss its characterization as a true "global language," more so because it is not restricted to trade, unlike the Mediterranean *Lingua Franca*, but can also be used in various other domains of our cultures.

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