**Complexity, negotiability and ideologies: A response to Zhu, Pitzl and Kankaanranta et al.**

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Why BELF and intercultural communication? Since the recognition of ELF as a sociolinguistic reality, the links between ELF and intercultural communication have repeatedly been mentioned, usually with reference to ELF being an intercultural phenomenon, but these fields of research and their scholars have so far not joined forces. So it is a welcome effort the one that the editors of this special issue have made and I am delighted to have been invited to write a response to three of this issue’s papers – Zhu’s paper on Negotiation, Pitzl’s on understanding and misunderstanding, and Kankaanranta, Louhiala-Salminen and Karhunen’s on English in multinational companies.

Even at first glance it is obvious that these three papers are quite different and they collectively cover extensive ground. From explorations of negotiation as a crucial phenomenon of intercultural communication and ELF in Zhu’s paper, we move to Pitzl’s critical analysis of understanding in a policy document and we end with a focus on English as a corporate language in Kankaanranta et al’s paper. In whichever order we read them these contributions clearly engage with different areas and draw on different theoretical, empirical and contextual aspects.

In the first paper, the focus is on negotiation of cultural frames of reference and identity from a conversation analytic perspective. Zhu explores the points of connection between intercultural communication (IC) and ELF and emphasizes how in recent years there has been a paradigm shift in the study of IC moving away from the reification and essentialization of the concept of ‘culture’, as a national, fixed and bounded notion. Zhu suggests a focus on negotiation of cultural identities and frames of reference as a key process in intercultural and lingua franca communication. She shows that exploring the negotiation process made relevant by the interlocutors in interaction allows researchers to see the individual agency and to appreciate the contingent nature of interaction rather than the assumed and predicted cultural frames.

We then move from the connections between IC and ELF to Pitzl’s paper, which, instead, concerns the area of language policy and a specific document, i.e. the *Common European Framework of Reference* (CEFR). Pitzl critically engages with the notion of ‘understanding’ in the CEFR and shows how this document conceptualizes understanding as something non-negotiable, uni-directional and output-oriented. In the document, the achievement of understanding is conceived as a task for the non-native speaker, rather than a negotiated process between the interlocutors (whether native or not). The CEFR also seems to imply that understanding results in one single output or interpretation, which is the one sanctioned by the native speaker. The author demonstrates how the CEFR is responsible for creating images of successful communication that are unreal, imagined and unachievable, where miscommunication apparently does not occur.

The final paper moves on to yet another area of research, BELF and the role and conceptualization of English as a shared ‘corporate language’ in multinational corporations. Kankaanranta et al’s theoretical approach is drawn from bringing together three long-standing, fruitful and evolving strands of research on this topic, that is, corporate communication, applied linguistics and international management. They explore how this collective research informs the teaching of English for business professionals in programmes such as the ones run by business schools, and they provide the case study of one institution of this kind, that is Aalto business school. The authors explore the institutional efforts to link the curriculum with the demands of the labour market and how the students prepare for their future work needs in English.

Despite their different theoretical and empirical perspectives, the three papers also converge on at least two aspects, i.e. the conceptualization of ‘English’ and ‘language’ and the complexity of ELF communication. Firstly, they all, in different ways, touch on the concept of ‘language’ and ‘English’ and implicitly or explicitly address the myth of ‘language’ as a bounded entity.This is certainly not new, in factsince the beginning of ELF research there has been an engaged discussion of the concept of ‘English’ and a regular call to review and re-conceptualize what ‘English’ is and what it stands for in different disciplines, such as applied linguistics and language teaching especially (see Seidlhofer 2011; Jenkins, Cogo and Dewey 2011 for a review). However, Kankaanranta et al extend the discussion by exploring how not only applied linguistics, but two other different and related strands of research conceptualize the notion of ‘English’, i.e. international management and corporate communication. On the one hand, we have seen applied linguistic research moving to more fluid and emergent conceptualizations, especially in the field of (B)ELF (though I would specify that it is mainly sociolinguistic work that has been more sensitive to ELF conceptualizations). On the other hand, in international management and corporate communication there is still an understanding of English as a unified and fixed national variety. “In international management literature corporate language is used as practically synonymous to English as native language (ENL)” (Kankaanranta et al, this issue, Section 2.2). It seems clear that the concept of ‘corporate language’ is usually equated with English, mostly perceived as ENL, and when ‘English as a Lingua Franca’ is mentioned, it is normally used interchangeably. In other words, it seems that business communication research takes ELF to mean just ‘English’ and the ‘Lingua Franca’ nature, i.e. the fluid and emergent aspects, are lost or ignored (Ehrenreich 2010).

Kankaanranta et al highlight the discrepancy between the conceptual elaboration of a unitary and fixed ‘English’ and the actual flexible use of linguistic resources in the workplace. The discrepancy is also mirrored in the inconsistencies within corporate communication itself: while the official ENL version of English is used, for example, in formal reporting and corporate websites, the multilingual flexible English is employed in internal meetings and informal activities. And although the authors conceptualize ENL and BELF as two extremes along a continuum, I find the continuum perspective somewhat problematic. In my view, the formal ENL version (at one end of the continuum) is the result of the ideological positioning of the company, while the co-constructed and flexible use of English in everyday practices, or BELF (at the other end), is a bottom-up process, which might still be influenced by ideologies, but possibly different ones. The discrepancy between the view of ENL, for the ‘corporate face’ of the company in the formal settings, and BELF, for the everyday communication in its informal use, clearly recalls Goffman’s distinction between ‘front-stage’ and ‘back-stage’ communication (Goffman 1956). In front-stage communication the actors perform in line with social conventions and the conventions recognized and understood by their audience. This is the corporate face of the company, the one that is normally assumed to be the accepted and ratified version of communication, the one that is ideologically driven but un-contested. It does not represent the actual communication practices, but it represents and recreates the ideologies dominant at the time, in the institution. It is clear, though, that business communication research tends to ignore the ideological nature and the institutionalized aspect of language and linguistic practices, but these have nevertheless tangible repercussions on the micro-level of communication and everyday language use too.

In fact, the ideological roots of the myth of languages as bounded and fixed entities are widespread, not only within business communication, but also in linguistics and applied linguistics, especially in the area of second language acquisition and modern languages education (cf. a similar debate in May’s collection of papers, 2014). Ideologies of this kind are very influential and can shape and underline institutional policies and impact practices in education. This is the case with assessment documents such as the CEFR, as Pitzl’s paper shows. Pitzl critically explores the conceptualization of ‘language’ and ‘English’ in the CEFR, and demonstrates that it is contradictorily viewed as native-English, although the premises of the document emphasize its plurilingual nature and the general aim of the CEFR is “to develop a plurilingual competence” (Council of Europe 2001: 4; cf. Pitzl, this issue, Section 3). The CEFR, therefore, continues to assume the existence of bounded, static languages, which contradicts its premises of plurilingual nature and intercultural language learning.

In sum, although there have been discussions on the conceptualization of ‘English’, and also the notion of ‘language’, in different areas of expertise, not much has changed in relation to the reification of such concepts. There has certainly been a move from singularity to a recognition of the plurality of Englishes, but the assumption again is the existence of fixed and discrete languages, existing in total isolation and irrespective of language contact. This is not totally unexpected especially since, as Blommaert (2006: 245) maintains, some linguistics and sociolinguistics “authors even today assume the existence of bounded, rule-governed, and reified ‘languages’ as their units of study.” But this view of boundedness, homogeneity and stability is today often extended to the notion of diversity and multilingualism, turning diversity into ‘a reified diversity’, or multilingualism into an aggregation of many reified languages.

Furthermore, the impact of language ideologies on decision-making processes and on the formulation of policies in institutional contexts is often disregarded or downplayed. Language ideologies can have a considerable effect both on policies, or the more macro-sociolinguistic aspects of institutional work, but also on practices, such as the micro-management of communication in institutional contexts. Language ideologies also have an important impact on individuals’ repertoires, their multilingual resources and how they are deployed in institutional communication contexts (cf. Cogo 2012).

The second aspect that arises throughout the papers is the complexity and uncertainty of ELF communication, and the need for negotiation strategies, which is particularly explored in Zhu’s contribution. “The need for Negotiation in intercultural and lingua franca communication is greater, given the variability in discourse, heterogeneity in linguistic and cultural backgrounds and uncertainty in frames of reference” (Zhu, this issue, Section 5). This is also emphasized in Kankaanranta et al’s paper whereby the “negotiable”, “situation-specific” and “context-dependent” nature of BELF is also the reason why, the authors maintain, BELF cannot be used in front-stage contexts.

In this respect, two issues need to be considered: one is the nature of BELF as emergent in communities of practice (CoP) and the other concerns ideology and negotiability. Zhu reminds us of the importance of the concept of ‘community of practice’ in understanding and exploring lingua franca communication. An essential aspect of these communities is the emergence of a common repertoire of resources, which is co-constructed by the community members. Unlike other more fleeting kinds of communities, the members in CoPs recognize themselves as forming part of the community in which they have a common interest. Although ELF communities could be transitory and brief groupings in “contact zones where people from diverse backgrounds meet” (Canagarajah, 2007: 935), these fleeting groups are not the interesting CoPs where (B)ELF research is conducted. This is because what is interesting about CoPs is the process of co-constructing the repertoire and the negotiation that comes with it. From a sociolinguistic perspective, therefore, research can focus on how people negotiate their repertoire, what resources become accepted and appropriate, what resources are seen as legitimate and what ideologies drive the construction and selection of the repertoire.

To fully understand the complexity of (B)ELF, therefore, it is important to consider that (B)ELF communities are of numerous kinds, some can be more stable, and others more fleeting, in the composition of their members and membership practices. It is possible that in more stable communities certain practices are negotiated and become established and a specific genre of communication, which is typical of their business, could be identified. In complex phenomena like (B)ELF, there is a natural tension between the process of creating and co-constructing the members’ resources on the one hand, and sanctioning and stabilizing them on the other.

BELF, and language in general, is intrinsically negotiable and emergent and it has the potential to be so all the time. However, negotiation and accommodation can realize differently depending, among others, on first encounters versus encounters among people who have been members of the same community for some time. A stable community can become less stable when a new member joins and some of the already negotiated and accepted practices may need to be negotiated again in an attempt to accommodate for the new member, or they may not be negotiated in an attempt to exclude new members. The members could also use divergent accommodation practices to underline perceived differences and possibly to create a different group identity.

This brings me to the second issue concerning the complexity of ELF communication: the relation between ideologies and negotiability. Zhu provides an engaging discussion of negotiation of cultural frames and identities on a micro-level, from a conversation analytic perspective, in naturally-occurring ELF interactions. At the end of the paper, she clarifies that “[I]t is more important to study how participants negotiate cultural differences perceived and made relevant through interactions.” (Zhu, this issue, Section 5), rather than the ones that are assumed or external (to the interaction). While I agree with Zhu that it is very important to uncover the negotiation processes that make communication in such super-diverse contexts possible, at the same time contextual aspects of institutional culture, ideologies and power-relations are also a key part of intercultural and lingua franca communication. These are not always made relevant to interactions, they are not always accessible to the researcher or cannot easily be inferred from the data transcripts, but they are still part of the interaction, even when they are not negotiable or negotiated in that specific moment. And for this reason we need in-depth ethnographic investigations of these contexts and contextual influences.

This relates to the nature of meaning and understanding in interaction. Meaning and understanding are not only what is apparent in the interaction, or the result of what is made relevant by the participants. As Pitzl reminds us, understanding is not a receptive skill, but something actively “shared by all parties”, and miscommunication is “part of- any kind of- communication” (Pitzl, this issue, Section 2). In other words, meaning and understanding are not linear processes, they do not only come out of the utterances in the exchange, but meaning and understanding are related to the wider context of the sociolinguistic norms of the community. Every piece of interaction is the result of different contextual levels, all playing a role in the single micro-encounter. At the macro level, policies, institutional frames and power relations have a bearing on the contextual sociolinguistic analysis, but they are not necessarily negotiable or negotiated. Corpus data can only give us a glimpse, or a ‘fixed’ historical moment of understanding resulting from emerging and fluid realizations, and this may not be sufficient in superdiverse contexts like ELF. As Blommaert and Rampton (2011: 8) emphasize, superdiversity poses “empirical challenges to traditional ideas about the achievability of mutual understanding and the centrality of shared convention”. Negotiations are not free of motivations, agendas, struggles and power relations, as well as the more or less open possibility of identity work. We can explore these aspects and their effects on social structures only when we engage in more ethnographic work, such as the research in ELF communities of practice.

In this response, I have explored some of the common themes that run through three papers in this special issue, and honed in on some areas of particular interest. It goes without saying that all the aspects addressed in this paper need more research, which would include investigations in different settings, different communities and different repertoires of resources. Firstly, we need to see more work that is longitudinal, covering communities at different stages in their formation, to see how members co-construct meaning, how emergent norms become more established, what norms become sanctioned or not and what is contested. Secondly, we need more research on (B)ELF and multilingual practices *in a holistic way* (see Zhu 2014), which would not only transcend traditional views of static plurality of languages, but would also view them in a range of linguistic and social practices, with ‘language’ as only one element of the semiotic world they operate in.

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**Bionote**

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