English as a Lingua Franca: form follows function

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Some clarifications on the nature of ELF

Introduction

In this paper I wish to respond to the article published in *ET* 94 by Saraceni while at the same time providing some clarifications concerning the concept of English as a Lingua Franca (henceforth ELF).

In his article Saraceni raises three main questions (and a number of related debatable comments which I will quickly deal with in my final remarks) regarding: 1) the nature of ELF and its speakers, 2) the relationship between ELF and the World Englishes (henceforth WE) paradigm, and 3) the distinction between form and function. I will address each of these questions, and in so doing consider a number of notions concerning the ELF research field.

English as a Lingua Franca: respect for diversity

Let me start with the obvious. Nowadays there is a universal acknowledgement among sociolinguistics scholars that all varieties of English are equal, and that, in terms of demography, the Outer and Expanding Circle speakers of English are more in number than those of the Inner Circle. That English is used more in non-native contexts (Graddol 2006) has, however, not yet been translated into the recognition of certain non-native varieties as 'legitimate'.

The first criticism moved by Saraceni is that ELF is a monolithic entity for all Expanding Circle speakers, a 'one size-size-fits-all model of English' (2008:22), which is claimed to be reminiscent of Quirk's International English. Given that Jenkins and Seidlhofer have addressed the same misconception in various publications, including the book Saraceni co-edited with Rubdy, I find it remarkable that this point is still raised.

ELF communication is used in Expanding Circle situations where non-native speakers of English are communicating mainly with other non-native speakers. ELF is not a single, unified variety of English, but language in use in situations where bilingual or multilingual speakers of English are involved (Seidlhofer 2005). ELF basically is a 'mode of communication' (Seidlhofer & Widdowson 2007), which can have various varieties. In other words, it is an umbrella term that encompasses all types of communication among bilingual users of English in the Expanding Circle, but allows for local realisations as well as extensive use of accommodation strategies and code switching. Thus, ELF does not in any sense attempt 'to replace one model with another', as Saraceni claims. On the contrary, it describes the diversity and appropriacy of use in specific local and lingua franca contexts of use.



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Related to the claim of ELF research excluding diversity is that concerning prototypical ELF users, who, according to Saraceni, exclude speakers 'from extremely poor countries', and, instead, are limited to 'jet-setters'. Saraceni goes on to illustrate his claim with a quote from the VOICE website involving 'a Hungarian educationalist', 'a Korean sales representative' and 'a Spanish Erasmus student'. I am not sure about the Korean sales representative, but as far as the other two kinds of ELF users, and especially the Erasmus student, are concerned, they could certainly not be identified as 'jet-setters'. In any case, the crucial point here is that ELF research does not exclude any kind of speaker. All users of English who use the language in lingua franca communication contexts are, by definition, ELF speakers.

WE and ELF are not separate paradigms

Saraceni's other observation about ELF concerns the framework it works with. He distinguishes three positions: the first, a purist view that promotes native English as the model for all speakers, the second, associated with the WE paradigm, which stands for 'a pluralised and pluricentric view of English in the world', and the third, 'which sought an alternative model to ENL, more relevant to people for whom English is a lingua franca' (ibid., 22). Therefore, according to Saraceni, the second and third frameworks are separate.

There are at least two points to be made here. The first one is that, the distinction between WE and ELF is not sustainable. As already clarified by Jenkins, ELF sits perfectly 'comfortably within a World Englishes framework' (Jenkins 2007:17) and works *with* it, rather than *against* it, in a number of directions. To mention the most relevant common ground between ELF and WE: ELF research rejects the monolithic, native-speaker ideology, and refers to a bilingual proficient speaker as an empirically based alternative to native norms. ELF celebrates and supports diversity and appropriateness of English use in different contexts, therefore rejecting a monocentric model of lingua franca use and supporting endonormative realisations of lingua franca varieties. This last point is the most controversial within WE, as some scholars would not agree to Expanding Circle Englishes as legitimate varieties (see Jenkins 2007a).

The second point concerns Saraceni's misunderstanding that ELF offers *one* alternative model to ENL. As already mentioned above, ELF is not *one* variety, but, possibly, as many as the lingua franca contexts where English is used. I say 'possibly' as, for the moment, this is still a matter of empirical investigation. What ELF research is doing is documenting the ELF features/strategies that are common to all ELF users *and* the local features/strategies that characterise distinct ELF varieties. And this is where the misunderstanding about ELF starts: critics of ELF, including Saraceni, think that ELF stops at documenting the common ground without acknowledging the differences in the various lingua franca uses of English.

Referring to ELF research, Saraceni's comments are contradictory: on the one hand, he maintains that ELF is 'constructed in academia' (ibid., 25), while on the other, he acknowledges the empirical corpus work, but remarks that 'nobody needs the *what* changed for them. The *what* changes anyway, in spite of all corpus based studies' (ibid., 25). To clarify, ELF research is entirely empirically based, not invented by academics, and already has a number of corpus projects: VOICE, ELFA, the corpus of ASEAN English as well as a number of corpora resulting from smaller scale PhD research projects. Besides, the need for this description should not require any explanation. That language changes is self-evident and accepted by the vast majority of linguists. What is less universally recognised, even among linguists, is that Expanding Circle users of English too are contributing to that change by innovating in their own use of English, and that they are entitled to do so. Scholars of English are finding it difficult to recognise ELF alongside Inner and Outer Circle varieties of English, even when corpus descriptions and analysis are in place.

If we accept that language changes, empirical corpus research can acknowledge and document that change. This does not mean that language change will be arrested by corpus compilation, because the changing process is part of any natural language and cannot be stopped. But just as it was necessary to acknowledge change for the Inner and Outer Circles it is now necessary to do it for the Expanding Circle too. The *what* question is precisely the kind of question that linguists compiling ELF corpora are trying to answer: issues concerning the study of natural language in the real world.

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I now turn to another aspect of Saraceni's article, which concerns the main question in his contribution, i.e. whether ELF is about form or function.

ELF as both form and function

In addressing the title of his paper, Saraceni claims that there is still a certain confusion as to whether 'ELF refers to a language variety (or set of varieties) or, more simply, to the role that English plays in various situations worldwide' (ibid., 24), in other words, whether ELF is form, a 'code', or function of a specific existing code. If we follow the argument that 'the *what* does not need changing', i.e. that the code of reference for Expanding Circle users is already available to them, we are left to assume that the code-norm Saraceni is referring to is ENL, i.e. one of the Inner Circle varieties, and that lingua franca use of English is but a function of ENL. That is to say, according to Saraceni, ELF should head back to the native-speaker, inner-circle model for all users of English, irrespective of their needs and choices.

In ELF contexts it is not English native speaker norms that are attended to. Rather, ELF users from different first language backgrounds orient to communicative success. Research has shown that on a practical level, speakers of ELF are less concerned about adhering to native speaker standards and more concerned about their communicative skills. While they are more intent on communicating effectively, ELF users accommodate to each other both to ensure intelligibility and to display group membership (Jenkins 2007b). In these situations and communities, ELF is both form *and* function; besides, by performing certain functions it is appropriated by its speakers and changed in form. In other words, form seems to follow function and start a circular phenomenon of variation and change.

The appeal to the form–function dichotomy is reminiscent of the formalist/functionalist debate in pure descriptive linguistics. In sociolinguistics, however, where I would say we operate, the interest lies not in separating the two, but in studying their interrelated nature in natural language use in specific contexts. ELF research so far has shown the interrelationship between form and function and has highlighted ways in which they are mutually constitutive, i.e. functional motives can lead to changes in the form (lexis, grammar and phonology), and in turn lexicogrammatical innovations impact on pragmatic strategies (Cogo and Dewey 2006). Form and function in this respect are closely tied together.

Final remarks

A number of other points also need comment, and I will mention three of them. Firstly, Saraceni claims that Seidlhofer's statements are 'data-free', whereas her comments are based on extensive empirical research called VOICE (ibid., 22). Secondly, he claims that ELF research has a 'didactic tone', whereas the aim of ELF research is describing not prescribing. Finally, he claims that language change and negotiation of meaning 'are completely outside the control of academia' (ibid., 26), whereas what linguistics academics for years have been engaged in doing is precisely documenting that change.

Having said that, I understand entirely the insecurities expressed by Saraceni. ELF research is a relatively new and stimulating field of investigation and a lot of work remains to be done. Questions, clarifications and controversies regarding ELF are a welcome challenge because they both show interest in this exciting and rich phenomenon and contribute to clarifying those aspects of ELF that are frequently misunderstood.

I would like to end by referring to the last comment in Saraceni's paper:

'Instead of "*which* English should we use?" we could begin to ask "*what* is English?"'(ibid., 26).

The *what* question is precisely what is being addressed by the ELF research; the *which* question, on the other hand, is a matter for individual English speakers to answer. ■

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