English as a lingua franca: between form and function

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A critique of the notion of English as a lingua franca between global rules and global roles

Introduction

In this paper I wish to discuss some aspects of the current debates about the concept of English as a lingua franca. In doing so, I will use a recount of the pre-publication stages of the volume *English in the World: Global Rules, Global Roles*, co-edited by Rani Rubdy and myself (2006) as a starting point, to set the scene, and will move to more theoretical considerations in the second part of the paper.

The pre-history of *English in the World*

The initial idea behind *English in the World* began to germinate in 2002, nurtured by discussions between co-editor Rani Rubdy and myself, encouraged, inspired and helped along by invaluable input from Alan Maley. The three of us were at the Institute for English Language Education (IELE) of Assumption University, Bangkok, teaching on Master's degrees in English Language Teaching and in English Language and Literatures. That particular environment was a fundamental source of inspiration. We were teaching in English, about English, in a prototypical Expanding-Circle setting, with students from about fifteen different countries. The international composition of the student population mirrored an equally variegated faculty, with each teacher coming from a different part of the world. Significantly, only one of us – Alan Maley himself – was from an Inner-Circle country. It is difficult to imagine a better setting for the birth of a book entitled *English in the World*.

In those ideal environmental conditions, two of the courses I was teaching at the IELE were called 'English as a World Language' (in the MA in ELT) and 'World Englishes' (in the MA in ELL). The choice of these two names was driven by a mere administrative necessity to have two distinct titles. Admittedly, one course had a more pedagogical focus and the other a literary one, but the theoretical and ideological underpinnings were the same. This superficial distinction, however, soon came to acquire a more important significance. Rather trivially, this took place as I was queried by some of my students about the choice of those two different titles. From a semantic point of view at least, they could indicate two very different approaches to the same subject. It was all too apparent: the idea of a singular English, used around the world, or that of a plurality of Englishes used in different parts of the world?

The question seemed to echo the famous Quirk-Kachru debate that had taken place on



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English Today just over a decade earlier. But time had passed since those almost mythological pages of academic history had been written. The most notable indicator that these were different times was the presence of a new party that had entered the scene in a very visible way: the party of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF). ELF was all new, exciting and, above all, based on empirical research.

But, somehow, we were not entirely convinced. We were not entirely convinced because we saw the ELF programme almost as a heuristic of Rundolph Quirk's view of English as an international language, almost a re-proposal of it, under a different guise. This requires some explanation. Purist positions about International English had come repeatedly under criticism in the world Englishes (WE) literature long before the Quirk-Kachru debate (see, among others, Kachru, 1982 and, for a full review, Bolton, 2005). The discourse was clearly delineated so that conceptions of British English as an ideal model were construed as anachronistic at best and patronising or even racist at worst. With its pluralistic and egalitarian approach, the WE school of thought seemed to offer the only valid alternative analytical model of the complex sociolinguistics of English in the world.

The debate was not only based on sociolinguistics but also on ideology. It was conservatism versus liberalism. The idea that there were as many Englishes as there were countries in which English was used gradually gained momentum and became common currency even outside academia. The WE position enjoyed relatively unrivalled and undisputed success for a while. The forefront position of the WE paradigm did not remain completely unchallenged for very long. Towards the beginning of the new millennium, some of the WE tenets began to feel somewhat restrictive, as the importance and the presence of English became more firmly established in the expanding circle. Consequently, the WE model displayed some limitations as it was relevant more to Outer-Circle settings, where different varieties of English are used intranationally, than to Expanding-Circle countries, where English is mainly used as an international language.

These observations came from scholars who were developing a different model of analysis of English in the world (e.g. Jenkins, 2000; Seidlhofer, 2001). It was a model which emphasised the role of English as a lingua franca (ELF) for international communication rather than the peculiarities of each variety of English used intranationally. Jennifer Jenkins's *The Phonology of English as an International Language* (2000) was seminal. In a way, it was a manifesto – a demonstration of how things could be done differently. Her study was based on empirical research and, because of this, its findings were persuasive and devoid of ideological concerns. In addition, these findings allowed the book to provide clear proposals for those involved in the pedagogy of English. The main one being that it is not necessary to spend time and energy in teaching and learning all aspects of phonology in an attempt to emulate native speakers and it is instead advisable to concentrate one's attention on those discrepancies (from native-speaker models) which cause actual problems of intelligibility. Jenkins' work was based on the classification and the description of core and non-core features of phonology among speakers of English worldwide. For obvious reasons, the study could not – physically – be as comprehensive as it ideally should have been, but it provided a clear indication of the direction of ELF research.

The direction was one which emphasised empirical description of the use of English as a lingua franca worldwide. It was a challenging and daunting task. But it was also a task the accomplishment of which was seen as necessary according to the following line of reasoning:

- for most users of English around the world this language is a convenient and practical tool for international communication; this is a very different use from that of English as a Native Language (ENL), which has the function of a national language;
- consequently, ENL cannot represent a valid or relevant model for learners of English as a foreign language;
- despite the fact that the above two points had been repeatedly made in the academic discourse about English in the world, very little change was discernible in actual language pedagogy, where ENL continued to be regarded, unchallenged, as the preferred model;
- a new model, therefore, needed to be developed, alternative to ENL and closer to the needs of international users of English;
- in order for it to be as relevant as possible to the people it was principally meant for, this

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model should be based on empirical description of the ways in which successful non-native speakers of English actually use this language as a lingua franca.

On first reading, the ELF project seemed not only wholly reasonable, but also desirable. However, as I said earlier, we were not entirely convinced.

We could see three positions:

- one, traditional and purist, which saw ENL as the only viable option and the best model of English for the world; although it had been virtually ousted from English language teaching as academic discourse, this position was the dominant one in English language teaching as industry, which continued to regard the Native Speaker as the ultimate arbiter of linguistic norm and the ideal language teacher;
- another, the WE paradigm, which was against a monolithic ENL and for a pluralised and pluricentric view of English in the world;
- the third one, which sought an alternative model to ENL, more relevant to people for whom English is a lingua franca for international communication.

What did not convince us about the ELF approach was, crucially, that it seemed to want to replace one model with another. If a British or American ENL model was deemed exonormative for most learners of English around the world, so would be, we suspected, any other model that was intended to be suitable for users of English around the globe, from Argentina to Vietnam, passing through Vienna, Cairo and Beijing. We saw ELF as an attempt to describe a one-size-fits-all model of English and it was in this sense that, to us at least, ELF did not seem, in the substance, very different from Quirk's idea of International English.

Another fundamental point that made us very sceptical was that the ELF project was based on the assumption that ELF speakers were 'not primarily concerned with emulating the way native speakers use their mother tongue within their own communities' but were only interested in 'efficiency, relevance and economy in language learning and language use' (Seidlhofer, 2001:141). Considering that they were made within a discourse which elected empirical research as the sole credible way forward in the field, we were somewhat baffled by these kinds of statements, which were at once confidently conclusive and altogether data-free.

Our uneasiness with the way ELF was conceptualised was augmented by the description of the prototypical user of ELF as a jet-setter busy attending international conferences or business meetings, which seemed rather alien in the context in which we were operating. Most of our postgraduate students were teachers or would-be teachers of English. Some of them came from extremely poor countries such as Myanmar and Laos and the majority from developing countries such as Thailand, China, Indonesia, Vietnam, and the Philippines. Our students were going to teach English to people for whom this language was not only a passport to a better career and education, but also something that would grant them access to a body of knowledge and possibilities of communication that would otherwise remain virtually unreachable. If our students and their own students did not necessarily represent the most typical user of English in the world (it is extremely difficult to suggest any credible statistics here), I would be very reluctant to accept that:

> A Hungarian educationalist coming to Copenhagen to discuss qualification equivalences in European higher education with her Finnish colleagues; a Korean sales representative negotiating a contract with his German client in Luxembourg; a Spanish Erasmus student chatting with local colleagues in a student hall in Vienna. (from the VOICE website)

are in any way representative of the population of speakers of English and the circumstances in which they actually use English on a global scale.

However, despite our reservations about the ELF rubric, we certainly did share one of its fundamental concerns, namely that despite the quantity and quality of the academic discourse around English in the world, there seemed to be very little tangible change in actual English language teaching practice. At the same time, we were aware that the world Englishes school of thought had perhaps suffered from an excessive amount of ideology at the expense of more practical matters and that its ideas were generally more relevant to Outer-Circle settings than Expanding-Circle ones.

We felt that it would be useful to voice our concerns, throw them into the arena in a rather

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provocative way, and invite some of the experts in the field to engage in a constructive debate. To quote our introduction to *English in the World*:

> The diversity of views on the subject clearly indicates that a debate would be timely in order to sharpen our perceptions and clarify thinking about this important global phenomenon. Such a debate should also lead to a better understanding of the pedagogical implications involved ... The power that English and speakers of English wield today makes it imperative that many of the controversial aspects relating to English as an international language be addressed. Identifying concerns that are particularly interesting or contentious from either point of view (EIL/EFL or World Englishes), will hopefully not only help advance further thinking among the scholarly community but yield important pedagogical insights that can feed into teachers' and learners' classroom experience. (Rubdy & Saraceni, 2006:15)

The central strand of conceptualisation that our book sought to disentangle was the relationship between world Englishes and English as a lingua franca and whether these two approaches were in binary opposition. I do not wish to provide a self-indulgent review of the book here, nor do I dare say to what extent its aims were achieved. I will, however, highlight one fundamental point that has clearly emerged out of that asynchronous discussion. That is, all the contributors to the volume expressed, explicitly or implicitly, the necessity to clarify ideas and concepts or to dispel misunderstandings. On reading the various papers, one notices a detectable endeavour, a pressing urgency, almost a struggle, to shed meaningful light onto at least some of the key terminology commonly used to describe the roles, varieties and users of English in the world. In fact, at the risk of clumsily stepping into self-praise for a moment, I believe that our volume had the considerable merit of providing our invited contributors with a common space that they could use to explain notions that were, perhaps, somewhat obfuscated by misinterpretation or by polysemic ambiguity.

That space expanded after *English in the World*. In this expanded space, attempts to further clarify the position of ELF, both in its own right and in relation to WE, have multiplied. In the next part of this paper I wish to address this issue from an epistemological perspective, with particular regard to the very term 'English as a lingua franca'.

The epistemology of English as a lingua franca

Many of the contributors to *English in the World* have subsequently produced important publications to further elucidate the ideas that they had expounded in our volume (and elsewhere). Two of those are Andy Kirkpatrick's *World Englishes: Implications for International Communication and English Language Teaching* and Jennifer Jenkins's *English as a Lingua Franca: Attitude and Identity*, both published in 2007. In *English in the World*, both authors articulated positions in favour of a description of English as a lingua franca, and both authors see WE and ELF not as antagonistic but as aspects of the same phenomenon, namely the existence of varieties and uses of English outside and beyond ENL that need to be granted full recognition.

What I would like to do here is to engage in an epistemological exercise with the aim of understanding exactly what is meant by English as a lingua franca. The reason why I feel the necessity of such an exercise is twofold. First of all, in her book, Jenkins contends that in our call for papers Rani and I had 'so seriously misunderstood' (Jenkins, 2007:19) what ELF was about that she and Barbara Seidlhofer felt they had to 'set the record straight' (ibid.) and, for that purpose, they 'corrected [our] misrepresentations of ELF researchers' position on the diversity of world Englishes' (ibid.). However, despite their best efforts, 'a number of major misconceptions about ELF remain' (2007:29–30, endnote 13) in our introduction to the volume, a clear reflection of the fact that we were 'completely failing to grasp' (ibid.) the real meaning of ELF. As a partial consolation and slight reassurance about our intellectual ability, Jenkins adds that Rani and I are not the only ones guilty of misunderstanding and/or misrepresenting ELF, as '[t]he same kinds of misconceptions about ELF characterize several other contributions to the volume' (ibid.). In actual fact, 'scholars who recognize the legitimacy of ELF are at present in a fairly small minority among linguists (even, surprisingly, sociolinguistics [*sic*] and applied linguists)' (2007:7). Thus the scholars who do not recognise the legitimacy of ELF include, in Jenkins's view, such names as, Ronald Carter, David

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Crystal, Braj Kachru, Tom McArthur and Peter Trudgill. In an outburst of positivism, Jenkins goes as far as to argue that 'scholarly opposition to ELF seems to be based not so much on rational argument as on irrational prejudice' (2007:12).

Indeed, Jenkins dedicates a considerable amount of space of her book to lining up and reproaching a long series of scholars, culpable, in her view, of either misrepresenting or ignoring ELF. This leads to the second reason why I think an epistemological exercise is necessary. That is, I suspect that the confusion that so many of us seem to have about ELF may originate not only out of irrational inability or refusal to understand, but perhaps from a certain degree of inconsistency in the way ELF has been defined thus far. In particular, there seems to be a lack of clarity as to whether the term ELF refers to a language variety (or set of varieties) or, more simply, to the role that English plays in various situations worldwide. It is not clear, that is, whether ELF is about form or function.

The obvious action to take, in attempting to understand a complex notion, is to refer to publications which specifically deal with the notion in question. I would like to begin my exercise by consulting Jenkins's latest monograph, where ELF is defined as 'an emerging English that exists in its *own right* and which is being described in its *own terms* rather than by comparison with ENL' (2007:2). This initial definition suggests that ELF is a variety of English, and the use of the noun phrase 'an English' is syntactically and semantically in line with the idea that there are many Englishes in the world – hence, ELF would be one of them. This interpretation seems to be confirmed by the assertion that ELF 'is not primarily a local or contact language *within* national groups but *between* them' (2007:4). Later on, however, the singular becomes plural: 'ELF varieties are used internationally rather than intranationally and are born of international contact among their NNSs' (2007:17). That ELF refers to varieties of English is reinforced by the observation that 'it is entirely for learners to decide what kind of English they want to learn, be it EFL … an ESL (outer circle) variety, or an ELF variety for international communication (for example, China English, Spanish English, Japanese English, etc.)' (2007:21–22).

The premodifiers 'China', 'Spanish' and 'Japanese' suggest that these varieties are characterised by their own peculiar linguistic features, in much the same way as Outer-Circle varieties or, indeed, inner circle ones, are generally thought of. This approach, therefore, does not seem to be significantly different from the way nativised Outer-Circle varieties have been described and discussed in the world Englishes paradigm. However, the idea of emerging distinct varieties, an established concept in WE, seems to contrast openly with the idea of 'an emerging English'. It seems to me that establishing clearly whether ELF refers to one international variety or to many local varieties is of fundamental importance if one is expected to understand and appreciate the concept and the nature of ELF. In any case, be it one variety or many, the emphasis of ELF seems to be firmly placed on language as code. Hence the necessity to describe it – or them? – in the same way as, for example, Singaporean or Indian Englishes have been described.

Alongside this idea of ELF as variety(-ies) of English, there is another idea, of wider currency, which 'emphasizes the *role* of English in communication between speakers from different L1s, (Jenkins, 2000:11, my emphasis). Indeed, this role 'does not exclude NSs of English' (2007:3), as 'ELF does not stop being ELF if inner or outer circle members happen to be present' (2007:2). In my opinion, the most crucial node to disentangle in the discourse about ELF is the seemingly interchangeable way in which the two meanings are attributed to ELF, one about a function of English, the other about a variety (or varieties) of English, with its (or their) own distinct features. The question then is: how does the fact that English is used as a lingua franca entail the presence of describable patterns of linguistic similarities in the way it is actually used?

ELF is referred to both as a role and as a code by Barbara Seidlhofer in a similar way. She states that it is 'a way of referring to communication in English between speakers with different first languages' (Seidlhofer, 2005:339) and, just a few lines later, she argues that 'in order for the concept of ELF to gain acceptance alongside English as native language, there have been calls for the systematic study of the nature of ELF – what it looks and sounds like and how people actually use it and make it work' (Seidlhofer, 2005:339–40). The first call came from Seidlhofer herself, in her often-cited article in which she identified a 'conceptual gap' and proposed 'to explore the

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possibility of a codification of ELF with a conceivable ultimate objective of making it a feasible, acceptable and respected alternative to ENL in appropriate contexts of use' (Seidlhofer, 2001:150). Incidentally, quite unequivocally, this brings us back to a view of ELF as a singular linguistic entity.

Three readings of ELF are therefore possible:

- ELF refers to the function of English as used among non-native speakers as a shared common language; ELF communication does not have to exclude native speakers.
- ELF refers to local varieties of English emerging in Expanding-Circle settings, such as China, Japan, Europe, Latin America, etc.
- ELF refers to a variety of English, with its own phonological and lexico-grammatical features, stemming out of the types interactions involving primarily non-native speakers.

The first two readings are relatively easy to understand and accept, although they would appear to be substantially different from one another (or nearly incompatible). The third one seems much more problematic.

Andy Kirkpatrick, another contributor to *English in the World*, defines ELF as 'a medium of communication [used] by people who do not speak the same first language' (Kirkpatrick, 2007:155) and laments the scarcity of the 'analysis and descriptions of *lingua franca* Englishes' (ibid., emphasis in the original) 'despite this extremely widespread and common *function* of English' (ibid., my emphasis). He then goes on to provide an overview of ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) English as a form of ELF. Again, here we have the term being used to refer to both a function and a form of English. The question, once again, is, what is ELF? (a) The *fact* that people in ASEAN countries use English as a common language to communicate among them, or (b) an actual variety with its own phonological and lexico-grammatical features? The novelty, in Kirkpatrick's account, is that the concept of ELF is applied to an international but geographically, politically and economically self-defined area of the world (see also Kirkpatrick, this issue of *English Today*). We can therefore add a fourth interpretation of ELF:

- ELF refers to a distinct variety of English used internationally as a lingua franca in a particular region of the world.

My epistemological exercise has not reached a satisfactory conclusion. In *English in the World* Barbara Seidlhofer explained what ELF is not (Seidlhofer, 2006:40–50). It is still not entirely clear, however, what exactly it *is*.

Final remarks

My own best understanding of the whole ELF project and of the rationale behind it is encapsulated in the following quote:

> anyone participating in international communication needs to be familiar with, and have in their linguistic repertoire for use, as and when appropriate, certain forms (phonological, lexicogrammatical, etc.) that are widely used and widely intelligible across groups of English speakers from different first language backgrounds. (Jenkins, 2006:161)

Apart from the serious epistemological difficulties discussed above, another, possibly even more profound, problem intrinsic to the ELF paradigm is its strong deontological stance. One cannot help but feel a didactic tone in ELF discourse, which, although not openly prescriptive, seems to want to impart directives as to what users of English *should* or *need* to be doing in order to communicate with one another. Seeking to devise an appropriate model of English involves a will to make choices that are the exclusive right of each individual user of English, whether they use this language as a lingua franca, a national language or a language for singing pop songs. The counterargument is that ELF simply offers, without imposing it, an alternative and thus widens, and does not restrict, choice. Jenkins's invectives against those who dare question the validity of ELF, however, do not leave much space for manoeuvre. Ultimately, this argument misses one fundamental point. That is, nobody needs a model of English construed and constructed in academia *for* them, no matter how much it is based on empirical research. Seidlhofer claims that:

> Changes in the perception of the role of English in the world have significantly influenced current thinking about approaches to teaching (if not the teaching itself) and led to an increased socio-political and intercultural awareness. The how is changing, but linked to a what that is not. (Seidlhofer, 2001:140)

My view on this is that nobody needs the *what* changed for them. The *what* changes anyway, in spite of all corpus-based studies, no

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matter how extensive they are. In fact, the *what* changes faster and in more complex ways than any corpus-based study will ever be able to document in real time. What the ELF paradigm is crucially missing is the realisation that

> Because of the diversity at the heart of this communicative medium, LFE [(Lingua Franca English)] is intersubjectively constructed in each specific context of interaction. The form of this English is negotiated by each set of speakers for their purposes. The speakers are able to monitor each other's language proficiency to determine mutually the appropriate grammar, phonology, lexical range, and pragmatic conventions that would ensure intelligibility. Therefore, it is difficult to describe this language a priori. (Canagarajah, 2007:925)

What *is* describable by means of corpus-based research is the ways in which in expanding circle settings some distinct linguistic features occur with sufficient regularity in the use of English. In Thailand, for example, certain usages have become part and parcel of what could begin to be referred to as Thai English. Expressions such as 'make merit' and others (cf. Tan, 2005) are instances of how English becomes naturalised and acculturised in different sociocultural settings. It is in this sense that we are really witnessing the 'end of English as a foreign language' (Graddol, 2006).

I am not sure, and in fact I doubt, that 'the vast majority of verbal exchanges in English do not involve any native speakers of the language at all' (Seidlhofer, 2005:339), but I firmly believe that as it acquires more importance and establishes itself as a lingua franca in the Expanding-Circle, English will continue to be borne upon and shaped by both centrifugal and centripetal forces originating from the simultaneous necessities for people to communicate with one another and to express and reaffirm their identities. Jenkins claims that 'ELF is an entirely natural phenomenon, while attempts to hold it back and arrest its development are entirely unnatural' (2007:17). In fact, nobody wishes to, nor can, arrest anything in this context. The evolution of languages and the ways people negotiate their use on a day-to-day basis are completely outside the control of academia.

To conclude, I feel that there has been too much emphasis on the *form* of English as a lingua franca and not enough on its *function*. I think that questions that need to be asked should address how people in the Expanding-Circle relate to English, what it represents to them, as it relocates itself from a foreign language to a lingua franca (Saraceni, 2009, forthcoming). Instead of '*which* English should we use?' we could begin to ask '*what* is English?' ■

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