

Lingua franca, interpreting (ELF)

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The global spread of English as lingua franca (ELF) has impacted interpreting in far reaching ways. With an estimated two billion people, a third of the world's population, now using English (Potter and Crystal 2016) – of which only 372 million, or one fifth, are native speakers (Simons and Fennig 2017) – it is important to examine ELF in its own right rather than as deviation from the Standard English (SE) norm. At the same time, the claim that ELF use is “functionally appropriate and effective” (Seidlhofer 2011:120) is inconsistent with the reality reported by professional interpreters and translators.

Initial investigations into the impact of non-native English on interpreting were largely confined to the repercussions of foreign accents on interpreter performance, with particular emphasis on student interpreters (Sabatini 2000; Kurz 2008). However, increased awareness of the pervasiveness and impact of ELF led to attempts to investigate it from a number of perspectives, including its wider socio-economic impact on the profession and market developments, the value of introducing an ELF pedagogy in interpreter training, its implications for interpreters' cognitive processing, and the use of English as a pivot language in relay interpreting. Interest in these issues was sparked by longstanding anecdotal discussions among professional conference interpreters of what some refer to as “BSE” or “bad simple English” (Reithofer 2010:144), “Globish” or even “desesperanto” (Donovan 2011:12) or “Lego English” (Jones 2014). The mandate of this emerging new strand of research is to examine the foundations of such complaints critically, but empirical studies remain extremely limited. According to a bibliometric analysis of the literature on the impact of ELF on interpreting (Albl-Mikasa 2017a), a total of 26 publications had been written (in English) on ELF and interpreting by the end of 2015. Of these, 58% were based on empirical investigations, with two-thirds either concentrating on a single aspect such as foreign accent or using introspective methods. This is astounding given the significant impact of ELF on international communication in general and translation and interpreting in particular. The sheer number of non-native English speakers (NNS) and the widespread use of English as vehicular language in international communication makes it the most frequently used conference language worldwide. Of all reported interpreting assignment days across 33 languages, 27 per cent were found to involve English (Neff 2011), making “the predominance of English in conferences and ... the world at large ... the single most significant issue for interpreting today” (Donovan 2011:7). Among other things, this is due to non-native speakers frequently using English even where interpretation is provided for their languages (Kurz and Basel 2009:189). The impact on interpreting is twofold. First, “markets are becoming increasingly two-way – the national language plus English, with a corresponding assumption that interpreters will cover both directions, i.e. provide a retour into their B language” (Donovan 2011:14). Second, interpreters are increasingly faced with speakers communicating in a language (English) that is not their first and in which they have less than optimal fluency. This means that truly multilingual events that feature interpreting between native speakers of several languages, with interpreters working in a number of language booths, have largely been replaced by bilingual and bidirectional events with larger numbers of non-native English speakers and listeners.

Research themes

Jones (2014) discusses “three particular obstacles” for the interpreting profession today, namely: “new technologies” (including ICT and remote interpreting), “poor communication skills” on the part of meeting participants, and “the increasing use of international English (‘globish’)”. This is echoed in Gentile’s (2016) global survey of interpreters’ perception of their professional status. Of the 469 responses to open questions, 52 professional conference interpreters referred to ELF as negatively affecting the profession, without any explicit formulation in the questions prompting them to do so. The specific issues raised were the decreasing demand for interpreting and consequent downgrading or discrediting of the profession, insufficient communicative power on the part of ELF speakers, and concern that the combination of ELF and new technologies penetrating the market could lead to a “commoditisation” of conference interpreting (Gentile and Albl-Mikasa 2017:60).

More detailed results were obtained in a small-scale survey focusing more directly on ELF in relation to interpreting (Albl-Mikasa 2010). Of the thirty-two professional conference interpreters who responded, 81% stated that globalization and the spread of ELF had a noticeable adverse effect on their work as interpreters, 72% that conferences were increasingly two-way and that there was a marked decrease in the number of booths for languages other than English, and 69% reported that the number of interpreting assignments had decreased due to an increase in English-only communication. A majority also entertained fears regarding the profession’s future (59%) or at least foresaw a noticeable shift from conference to community interpreting (16%).

Conference interpreters perceive the shift in their image – from that of indispensable facilitators of multilingual communication to providers of a service which could potentially be replaced by ELF – as a source of pressure, and are frustrated with reduced language and poor communication skills in ELF settings, which result in decreasing job-satisfaction levels and declining motivation (Albl-Mikasa 2010:142). Consequently, it is necessary to re-think the interpreters’ role, broaden their range of professional activities and perhaps re-brand them as intercultural consultants and multilingual communication experts in globalized translingual environments (Albl-Mikasa 2014a:31). Researchers also suggest developing a sense of tolerance and empathy in an environment in which “capacity for accommodation is likely to emerge as a crucial factor for communicative success” (Hülmbauer et al. 2008:32). The latter is particularly applicable to the increasing use of English as a pivot language in the European institutions, the largest employer of interpreters worldwide. Working on relay from lesser known languages now involves the English interpreter not only accommodating colleagues taking the pivot on relay, but also adjusting to non-English mother-tongue delegates, while being monitored by the source speech delegation which typically has some knowledge of English. For Jones (2014), these developments mean that “any theoretical model of interpretation and any pedagogy of interpretation” have to develop ways of dealing with such situations, where “the interpreter takes into account multiple audiences and multiple interpreting objectives in the course of one single interpretation”. The trend seems irreversible. With twenty-eight member states, twenty-four official languages and a total of 552 translation combinations at the time of writing, the EU policy of full multilingualism has changed from “controlled full multilingualism” after the 2004 enlargement to “cost-efficient multilingualism” after further enlargements, combined with economic crises. While House supports this development, calling the EU’s multilingual regime an “expensive illusion” (2003:561), Gazzola and Grin’s (2013) statistical analysis

concludes that it is fairer, more effective, and less costly than any substitution with ELF is likely to be. Support for the use of interpretation comes from a larger-scale study outside the institutions (Reithofer 2010, 2013), which demonstrated that the level of understanding speeches in conference settings can be significantly higher among participants listening to a professional interpretation into their L1 than those listening to the ELF original.

While external job-related pressure is a factor, it is performance-related stress and the additional cognitive load that stand out in interpreters' critique of ELF. Interpreters often cover up ELF-induced difficulties by drawing on their skills and motivation to produce an improved version of the source speech (Reithofer 2010). This adds to cognitive load, physical exhaustion and post-work stress, and is becoming a demotivating factor and potential health hazard (Albl-Mikasa 2010; Reithofer 2010). In an AIIC Workload Study (AIIC 2002:25), a sample of professional conference interpreters rated an unfamiliar accent as the fourth most stressful factor (62%) and 71% confirmed that a difficult accent was a source of stress that is "very frequently" encountered in professional assignments. While accent and pronunciation apply to both non-native and native speakers, Gile explicitly mentions bad pronunciation "by the non-native speaker" as taxing the interpreter's processing capacity (2009:173). Empirical studies have shown that it adversely affects students' interpreting performance (Sabatini 2000; Kurz 2008), with prosody potentially having a greater impact than phonemics (Lin et al. 2013). While the burden is also felt by professionals, they recognize similar disadvantages from native speakers such as Scottish speakers and concede that they get used to Chinese ELF speakers, for example, as they listen to them repeatedly (Albl-Mikasa 2013b:7).

From the very limited body of evidence produced so far, it seems that it is the combination of (a variety of) source-speech-related factors extending beyond accent and pronunciation that causes stress and adds to the interpreter's cognitive load. According to Gile, "the speaker factor, i.e. the way a particular speaker constructs and delivers his/her speech" (2009:200) has always been one of the strongest determinants of interpreting difficulty. High source-speech information density and a rapid delivery rate are problematic, as is an excessively slow speech rate because chunks of information have to be kept in one's short-term memory longer. These and similar factors are implicated in addressing the issue of ELF, but the emphasis shifts from identifying speaker-oriented factors to analysing their interrelation and interdependence. Thus, accent may be closely linked to speech rate, with significantly higher mean comprehension scores for heavily accented slow speech (Matsuura et al. 2014). However, the benefit of slow delivery rates, usually a characteristic of NNS rather than native speakers, may be offset by increased information density. There may be a tendency on the part of ELF speakers to concentrate on content and list factual items in their effort to convey the intended information using limited linguistic resources. Albl-Mikasa et al. (2017) demonstrated this in a study in which technical content was presented on the basis of the same PowerPoint slides by one native (Canadian) and two non-native speakers (Hungarian and Croatian) and interpreted by 7 professional interpreters. The native speaker's faster speech rate (187 wpm versus 128 and 156 wpm, respectively) was alleviated by higher redundancy, the use of analogies and paraphrasing, as well as meta-discursive comments such as "I will now show you" and rapport-building stretches addressing the listeners more directly. The findings suggest that despite slower speech rates, non-native speakers may be more difficult to interpret when they lack the pragmatic means and supplementary capacity to present ideas in a listener-friendly manner. Moreover, slow delivery rates may even be detrimental rather than helpful, if formulation problems lead to

stuttering, halting speech, self-corrections or false starts, or the overuse of hesitation markers. Rather than granting interpreters a break and extra processing time, the lexical searches typical of ELF speakers (Mauranen 2012:117) may disrupt their speech flow and rhythm, thus impairing their performance.

The findings of Albl-Mikasa et al. (2017) also point to differences between native and non-native speakers with respect to overall text organization and information presentation. Native speakers' argumentative logic was supported by targeted content development in combination with an explicit outline of the superstructure of the argument and the well-placed use of discourse markers, clearly indicating central ideas and themes. This contrasted with a lack of logical interconnectivity and partly missing or ill-placed interpersonal metadiscourse markers such as hedges and certainty markers in the NNS presentation, which may explain why two thirds of the interpreters in the study preferred the NS presentation and why 69% of respondents in an earlier questionnaire study preferred NS over NNS source text producers (Albl-Mikasa 2010:130).

More combinational complexity is manifested on the lexical and phrase level. ELF has been found in corpus studies to be variable, diverse, creatively appropriated, and crosslinguistically influenced by a variety of linguacultural backgrounds (Seidlhofer 2011:81). Depending on proficiency levels, NNS tend to use expressions and concepts in unconventional or incorrect ways, sometimes embedded in irregular sentence structures (Albl-Mikasa 2014c:300). A particularly frequent phenomenon is negative transfer from ELF speakers' first languages (L1), most of which interpreters are unfamiliar with (Albl-Mikasa 2010, 2014c). ELF users may come from any number of linguistic backgrounds, and low-proficiency users are found to rely heavily on translation from their L1s (Pavlenko 2005:438, 446). Here, the "shared languages benefit" (Albl-Mikasa 2013a:105) can make a real difference, because knowledge of the speaker's L1 allows the interpreter to link into the logic behind the L1-based L2 structures, clarifying the intentions behind non-standard patterns. This phenomenon has been repeatedly reported by interpreters in introspective questionnaire and interview studies (Albl-Mikasa 2013a, 2014c) and was confirmed in a performance-based experiment involving professional interpreters (Kurz and Basel 2009).

Inconsistent or inappropriate use of style and register similarly put the interpreter under pressure in terms of having to adapt the speech to make it more homogeneous (Albl-Mikasa 2014a:27). A similar phenomenon is the tendency on the part of NNS to "make more use of elements of jargon and technolect ... as short cuts to communication ... and as a way of offsetting deficiencies in creative language use" (Donovan 2011:12). Taken together, these factors offer some explanation for interpreters' preference for the "reliable structures" of NS (Albl-Mikasa 2010:135; Albl-Mikasa et al. 2017) and their assertion that ELF speakers tend to sound "washy as if the speakers themselves were not sure of what they are talking about" (Albl-Mikasa 2014c:298) or only "superficially as if they were making sense" (Jones 2014). They also lend weight to their claim that processing ELF speech poses additional cognitive demands, rendering their work more tiring.

From a cognitive-constructivist point of view, ELF input, when incoherent, inconclusive or imprecise, may impede processes such as inferencing, anticipation or the retrieval of translation equivalents and transfer routines (Albl-Mikasa 2015). This is due to the fact that "interpreters use direct linguistic correspondences very often" for reasons of cognitive

economics, “whatever the theory” of meaning-based translation (Gile 2009:239). Such “translinguistic equivalents” or “regular associations or ‘links’ between particular LCs [Language Constituents] in two languages” (ibid.) may be disrupted when bottom-up processing is impaired. According to the ‘Principle of Encoding Specificity’ (van Dijk and Kintsch 1983:334), this is because the non-standard ELF input does not match encoded items learned and rehearsed during training and practice. As a consequence, the direct links between standard SL and TL items, especially lexical units and set phrases, or automatized transfer routines established over time as a “mental translation memory” of sorts (Albl-Mikasa 2015:55) become dysfunctional. Instead, greater reliance on top-down processing and higher-order inferences comes to the fore; this is more resource-intensive and thus more tiring.

The accommodation measures employed during target speech production may add to the cognitive load (Albl-Mikasa 2010:137). The simplification and suppression of sophisticated idiomatic phrases in the interests of NNS audience design, for example, are “cognitively demanding” (Shintel and Keysar 2009:261). For interpreters, they introduce additional pressure, creating a conflict of interest between their role as experts with high linguistic standards and the necessity of acting as communication facilitators (Albl-Mikasa 2010:138).

Future directions

Future research must address the additional skills, competences and strategies needed to cope with the challenges posed by ELF in the context of interpreting. Interpreters’ introspective reports stress that violations at the pragmatic, syntactic, morphological and lexico-semantic levels increase the cognitive load for all listeners, making capacity management a central topic both within and beyond interpreting studies. The question as to whether factors related to cognitive load and stress also apply in non-interpreter-mediated settings, be it in academia, politics or multinational corporations, is yet to be addressed. Research is needed to establish which ELF-induced problems are specific to the interpreters’ processing conditions, where unidirectional speeches in non-dialogic settings and online delivery under time pressure do not allow for the pragmatic interaction strategies typically employed in conversational ELF encounters. As “first-hand witnesses to actual language use” (Donovan 2009:62, 66) in the “wide range of encounters” in which “intellectual, legal and political ... knowledge and information” is exchanged and power is negotiated (ibid.:53-54), interpreters can provide insights into communicative settings that are more complex than the small-scale face-to-face discussions and meetings from which ELF data has often been retrieved thus far. This could help identify the parameters of successful communication and define its prerequisites in diverse settings (Albl-Mikasa 2017a).

The interpreting profession would benefit greatly from research that can identify settings in which ELF works and those in which it fails to work, and the extent to which language experts can enhance events with a majority of non-native speakers. These lines of inquiry might be complemented by reflection on whether target speech (re)production can and should level out linguistic weaknesses in the source speech and improve its logical coherence and fluency. It is as yet unclear whether or not normalization and compensation measures should “create and project the illusion of the non-hybrid text” (Pym 2001b:11).

The pervasiveness of ELF invites a rethinking the interpreter's role and status. From the neutral voice or channel between competent native speakers to the mediator between less than competent non-native speakers, from language expert to multilingual communication consultant, a redefinition of the professional profile of the interpreter is much needed (Albl-Mikasa 2014b). Empirical studies should shed light on the question of directionality (Beeby Longsdale 2009), investigating, for example, whether English-B interpreters are better equipped to cater to the needs of the new, increasingly non-native client type, and whether they are better able to adapt their style to an international audience and avoid idiomatic phrases and culture-bound terminology. According to Blommaert and Rampton (2011:6), globalization is an amplifier of social, cultural and linguistic diversity, bringing together people "with very different backgrounds, resources and communicative scripts", destabilizing "assumptions of common ground" and "of mutual understanding and the centrality of shared convention". It may be that this scenario calls for a new type of multilingual communication expert.

A major issue in times of increasing migration and refugee movements is the role and impact of ELF in and on community interpreting. To date, only Guido (2013) and Määttä (2017) seem to have broached the topic. Guido describes the different linguistic features as well as underlying conceptualizations and conventions employed by West African refugees and non-native speakers of English and Italian clinical specialists in interpreted trauma reports. Määttä's (2017) account of ELF in telephone interpreting in a police department demonstrates that the ELF context triggers various reformulation and verification procedures on the part of the interpreter, who proceeds from assumptions of limited language and discourse skills on the part of both the interviewer and the interviewee; at the same time, the interviewer brings his limited knowledge of English to bear on his assessment of the interpretation. Questions relating to the interpreter's rendition of inarticulate utterances in coherent, standard language in the perceived "best interests of his client" (Mason 2009b:82) appear to be relevant to all ELF-based dialogue interpreting settings, not least in ad-hoc-interpreting (Traverso 2012), where ELF is particularly likely to be used.

Further reading

Albl-Mikasa, M. (2017) 'ELF and Translation/Interpreting', in J. Jenkins, W. Baker and M. Dewey (eds) *The Routledge Handbook of English as a Lingua Franca*, London & New York: Routledge, 369-383.

Offers a relatively complete overview of the limited research thus far carried out into the implications of ELF for both translation and conference and community interpreting.

Määttä, S.K. (2017) 'English as a Lingua Franca in Telephone Interpreting: Representations and linguistic justice', *The Interpreters' Newsletter* 22: 39-56.

Presents one of the first and very few accounts of the impact of ELF on interpreters in community interpreting settings.

Reithofer, K. (2010) 'English as a Lingua Franca vs. Interpreting – Battleground or peaceful co-existence', *The Interpreters' Newsletter* 15: 143-157.

Illustrates the critical perspective of professional conference interpreters with regard to ELF in conference settings.

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