Book Reviews

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Understanding English as a Lingua Franca: A Complete Introduction to the Theoretical Nature and Practical Implications of English used as a Lingua Franca (Oxford Applied Linguistics). Barbara Seidlhofer. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011. xvii+244 pp. ISBN 978-0-19-437500-9 (pbk). £32.00.

Barbara Seidlhofer's latest monograph, *Understanding English as a Lingua Franca*, comes at a moment when the English language, while serving this function since the first colonizations in the sixteenth century (Jenkins *et al.* 2011), has truly established itself as a language of nearly global communication, a language for which the predominant reason for learning has become to interact primarily *not* with its native speakers, but with other *non*-native users. The past two decades have accordingly witnessed a burgeoning of articles, dissertations, conferences, corpora, and a dedicated journal devoted to the topic; yet in many circles the phenomenon has still remained unnoticed or unacknowledged, acquired many misunderstandings, is raising mixed opinions or encountering strong resistance. Barbara Seidlhofer, a long-time expert on the subject and one of the pioneers of research in the field, explores and elucidates the many facets and repercussions of the controversial topic at hand.

For the purpose of her book, Seidlhofer defines ELF[2] as any use of English among speakers of different mother tongues and linguacultural backgrounds, across all three Kachruvian circles.[3] In contrast to some earlier definitions and conceptualizations (e.g. House 1999, Jenkins 2007), this importantly includes native speakers of English (NSs), who for aims of intercultural communication may use ELF as their additional language.

The opening chapter sets the scene by casting light on the familiar phenomenon of the growing masses of people learning English worldwide, on a scale unprecedented by any previous *lingua franca*.

Chapter 2 makes readers aware of the deeply rooted and all-pervasive misconception – in both popular and scholarly discourse – that English is the preserve and asset of native speakers, the only legitimate and authoritative provider of standards. In her critique of this linguistic imperialism, Seidlhofer also devotes some space to interrogating the very concept of NS, showing how this stable, homogeneous and hypercorrect construct is an idealized notion and how difficult it is to agree on its satisfactory definition (let alone a definition of an 'educated' NS). Chapters 3 and 4 turn to the reified and equally elusive notion of 'proper', 'real', 'Standard English' (StE) and to

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[2] Sometimes also labelled 'English as an International Language' (EIL).

[3] 'Inner', where English has historically been the mother tongue of the vast majority of the population, 'Outer', where its varieties function as official and second languages, usually owing to colonial history, and 'Expanding', where it is being taught in schools as a foreign language (Kachru 1985).

why (contrary to Quirk 1985, for instance) it is an *in*appropriate objective for learning the language.

The first interesting chapter for this reviewer is chapter 4, devoted to a discussion of how non-native users adapt and variably alter English *ad hoc* to suit their communicative purpose – rather than "adopt" it as a "franchise language", per Widdowson (2003:50). Thus, they preserve their identity without striving to mimic NSs' communicatively irrelevant conventions, and therefore play an active role in the development and spread of the language.

The aim of *lingua franca* interactions is communicative efficiency, which is achieved by accommodating to the interlocutor. This is different from grammatical correctness. In Chapter 5, drawing on data from the VOICE corpus and other empirical studies – though without adequately explaining annotation conventions used in VOICE corpus data – Seidlhofer provides numerous examples of authentic ELF talk that diverge from standard English to illustrate the processes and communication strategies at work.

Any language is an inherently evolving system, continually shaped by use (Cameron and Larsen-Freeman 2007, Larsen-Freeman and Cameron 2008). The changes taking place in English are normal and natural processes of spread, variation and adaptability, only accelerated and intensified by its non-native users. Because of this fluidity and flexibility, Seidlhofer emphasizes, it is crucial in ELF research to go beyond a static description of the formal linguistic properties and focus on the process of 'languaging' (Becker 2000) and the underlying pragmatic functions to which speakers' plurilingual resources are flexibly and creatively exploited in accordance with user needs and circumstances in their interaction with the world. For instance, reduction of redundant linguistic features (such as plural and 3rd person singular present tense markings) serves the principle of communicative economy, while additive redundancy (such as adding emphasis with a preposition where standard English requires a direct object, as in "discuss about" or "answer to") "serves several purposes to do with accessibility, such as lending more weight to the verb, gaining processing time, or highlighting the object, i.e. what it is that is discussed" (p. 146). This is the central argument of the book, explored in chapters 5 and 6.

Here Seidlhofer draws on Searle's (1969, 1995) distinction between *constitutive rules* – the underlying encoding possibilities which constitute the system and determine its limits, at all its levels (thus similar to the system of generative principles and constraints, and creativity in the Chomskyan sense) – and local and variable *regulative* usage *conventions* for acting on the former, which do not constitute the system itself – for instance, patterns of lexico-grammatical co-occurrence (Seidlhofer and Widdowson 2009). For Seidlhofer, the encoding rules and creative possibilities, a 'virtual language' (Widdowson 1997, 2003), become ELF users' common ground. What distinguishes ELF communication from NS usage is that ELF-ers creatively

draw on and actualize the code without full adherence to, and beyond the restrictions of, the established regulative conventions of ENL usage. She hypothesizes that ELF users' mode of communication may be radically different from that of ENL speakers, being more compositional, bottom-up, analytical. Consequently, using idiomatic expressions in ELF communication makes it additionally difficult also because the receiver will tend to deconstruct non-transparent idioms and focus on the semantics of the component parts.

The two final chapters steer towards implications of ELF for language pedagogy. In the tradition of Cook (1999, 2002), Seidlhofer campaigns for the empowering concept of competent 'users' to refer to ELF speakers instead of the rather derogatory label of 'learners'. She is emphatic that ELF should not be misunderstood as a set of reduced forms, or a "low-level makeshift language" (McArthur 2001:1) used in rudimentary communication for simple transactional exchange of information. Nor should it be confused with attempts at 'language planning' which are not descriptions of actual usage.

The concluding chapter moves from corpus planning (prescriptions for use) to acquisition planning (prescriptions for learning and teaching) – that is, which formal and functional features of language should be focused on for learning, and what contributions ELF research can make to current pedagogical thinking. In ELF, the question is not does the process result in performance resembling 'natural', native-like usage, but rather does it facilitate further acquisition? Seidlhofer thus draws our attention to two considerations: *ends*, or the objective to be attained, i.e. what the learners will need to use the learnt language for (in the case of English typically involving no aspiration to be native-like), and *means*, i.e. how to activate the learning process.

She subsequently resummons the issue of the orthodox normative orientation towards a NS baseline, the widespread and entrenched assumption that the only valid goal of learning English is conformity to NS norms, and that progress and competence should be evaluated against this benchmark. Earlier on, in chapter 3, she had signalled how because of this stance ELF talk may run its users into trouble: quoting Guido's (2008) study of miscommunication between Nigerian immigrants and Italian immigration officials, she demonstrated how the way the Italians had been taught English at school resulted in real-world problems for the African migrants. As regards teacher training, she advocates raising language instructors' awareness by hands-on work on transcripts of ELF interactions. Finally, Seidlhofer provides a short inventory of strategies for achieving understanding which have relevance to translation and interpreting: "gauging [addressee's] linguistic resources, … paraphrasing, avoiding 'unilateral idiomaticity', giving preference to 'transparent' expressions, being explicit, exploiting or adding redundancy, and attending to non-verbal communication" (p. 205).

The book fulfils its role of presenting a useful, insightful and in-depth

exposition of the controversial themes, looking into the nature of ELF and the global spread of English, explicating its many facets, and illuminating the conceptual and theoretical underpinnings. It raises critical awareness of the implications for description and didactics. In particular, it mounts a convincing case for reconsidering the old constructs of language variety, community and competence, replacing preoccupation with the processes of adoption and conformity with a focus on adaptation and creativity. The monograph dispels the myth that effective communication requires adherence to a NS benchmark, and forces the reader to fundamentally rethink English-language instruction and assessment, the incongruity between ELF users' needs and purposes and the ways the language is still being taught and tested, towards more realistic and achievable goals. Finally, it exposes the urgency of giving ELF its due attention. The monograph should be of interest to linguists, teachers, materials writers, and other readers concerned with the phenomenon of the global use of English. The discussion is amply illustrated with relevant examples and vivid quotes. Along the way, it provides a broad review of key relevant literature, also noting the topic's adjacency to neighbouring disciplines.

A bit vexing is the sometimes not clearly structured presentation, with the line of argumentation meandering and zigzagging about, which could be justified only occasionally. While many of the issues raised are naturally intertwined, finding them scattered across chapters does not result in a very clear presentation, leaving the reader with an impression of chaos. Also, some fragments are a tad prolix and repetitive; this is particularly the case with the first three chapters, which could beneficially be slimmed down by at least 30%. Furthermore, especially given that this is a book on *lingua franca* English, a few sentences here and there are rather tangled and complicated.

This reviewer was also a bit upset by the omission in the introductory chapters of earlier criticisms levelled at the inadequacy of native-speaker models as the benchmark in language teaching, learning and assessment. It is only very late, in section 8.7, that recognition is made of some former work that made a case for ELF and the need for a reorientation in thinking, research and pedagogy. Another blanket assertion I had difficulty agreeing with is the overemphasis on the "disabling inadequacy syndrome among non-native teachers of English" (p. 57). This reviewer's experience, the discussions in the TESOL Nonnative English Speaking Teachers caucus over the past decade, and literature on the subject (e.g. Mahboob 2010) indicate that while many non-native teachers do indeed have an inferiority complex, the picture is not as bleak as the quote suggests and they are proudly aware of their assets and advantages. I am also not convinced that ELF-ers construct what they have to say more analytically, bottom-up, and compositionally (p. 138); Schmidt's (1983) study showed that some second-language users may rely much more on formulaic language than on the rules of syntax.

While the book presents a comprehensive and expert picture of the title topic, it also oversimplifies some other notions, such as treating interlanguage as a continuum between L1 and L2 (p. 89), which suggest an initial and a final state grounded in the two languages. A proper understanding of this term, however, covers any self-governing on-going linguistic system whose targets shift over time – be it the language babies acquire, or a tongue being studied by a polyglot who falls back on knowledge of earlier learnt languages (and usually more on those learnt studiously than the ones acquired naturalistically). Some other notions and research findings from the SLA field are likewise overly cursory and simplified. For example, in chapter 8, Seidlhofer mentions research in SLA which showed that the acquisition of features follows a certain 'natural' sequence controlling their learnability and providing guidelines for syllabus sequencing. In fact, the order was not invariable across studies (e.g. Ellis 1985). Moreover, research in the acquisition of negation and interrogation structures, for instance, revealed that despite the existence of broad similarities in the route taken by all language learners, some variation and difference among them can be traced to their linguistic background. The exact order in which learners acquire particular grammatical forms may vary (some steps are added or left out, or specific morphological features are acquired in a different order). Also, similarity in the course of syntactic foreign language development between classroom and naturalistic learners is typically reflected only in unmonitored, spontaneous comprehension or production. When the data collected are heavily controlled and represent a focus on form, they indicate that differences in the type of input that learners receive in classroom (structured) and naturalistic (unstructured) settings *have* bearing on the course of IL development. Thus, even if formal instruction may have no major effect on the overall sequence of development associated with natural unplanned communicative language use at the *vernacular*, unmonitored edge of the stylistic continuum, it does impact the *careful* one (what Ellis (1994:654*f)* calls the *variability hypothesis*).

Also, Seidlhofer calls English *the* international language (p. 2), which may leave an incautious reader with the impression that we are dealing with a monolithic construct, which of course, as she acknowledges later, is not the case. Some features of morphosyntax or pronunciation which are redundant in a conversation between for example a Pole and a Turk (remember that the VOICE corpus which the book relies on for examples registers interactions between mainly European language backgrounds) may conceivably be crucial in an interaction between, for instance, a Pakistani and a Taiwanese, or vice versa. This is why a cross-validation with interactions between speakers from other L1-backgrounds is so crucial, and why initiatives such as the Asian Corpus of English (Kirkpatrick 2010) should be explored alongside.

While at one point she acknowledges their formal resemblance, through-

out the chapters Seidlhofer attempts to draw a distinction between the language of ELF users and learner language, but some of the cases and contentions are difficult to uphold. For instance, her samples of 'divergence' from the NS code quoted in chapter 5 are exactly what can be witnessed in EFL classrooms. The observation that ELF-ers exploit rules inherent in the 'virtual language' and by doing so go beyond what they were presented with, mirrors Chomsky's (1965, 1980:34) poverty of the stimulus argument ("Plato's problem") that had been raised to refer to the acquisition of any (but particularly a native) language. Also, Seidlhofer sometimes seems to credit ELF users with more than they may truthfully deserve. For instance, in that same chapter she neglects to observe that the usage of L1-influenced coinages may reflect a speaker's ignorance rather than altruism and concern for the interlocutor. From the user's perspective, ELF more often than not is not an adaptation of ENL, because the user may not know the ENL norms to adapt. Similarly, in chapter 6, Seidlhofer rightfully asserts that NNSs may produce forms that are more appropriate than the established alternative – but again, they need not be aware of this alternative, and we are not in a position to tell why they used the form they did without, say, interviewing them afterwards.

Given the title of the book, from the perspective of a language instructor and methodologist I would have appreciated an inventory of, or at least a hint at, the language features which are crucial to ELF communication and those which are negligible. I miss more examples and benchmarks and a codification akin to those provided in Jenkins' (2000, 2002) Lingua Franca Core, Walker (2010), or even Seidlhofer's own earlier (2004) work, especially when, earlier in the book, she argues for methodical analyses of ELF "to develop a coherent and sustainable alternative conceptualisation of what this 'English' is" (p. 56). While some examples are mentioned, and the fluidity and variance in global English demonstrated, the explication that in ELF functions are more important than forms is not very helpful to a reader who is looking for teaching or translation solutions, and rather impracticable: it is not always immediately salient what markers to focus on, while the functions themselves may be rather vague (and teaching them may be a much longer process, as Deterding (2010) suggests). The book thus fails to provide a workable alternative for course content and classroom activities aligned with an ELF-informed approach, or at the very minimum a list of language content priorities that would be relevant for practitioners and translatable to pedagogy. Only on page 152 does Seidlhofer state her book is emphatically *not* intended to prescribe forms that ensure effective communication. This is however a bit late when the reader has covered three quarters of the volume in a quest for practical solutions. While learners of English in classrooms – where most of the learning in this world takes place – may have their

own agendas and priorities in learning, they rarely seek alternative learning models, and will do with the books, grammars, dictionaries, and tests that are accessible or administered to them. To change the *status quo*, the materials designers need practical, tangible indications. The scarcity of such benchmarks is one reason why even CEFR and ELP descriptors of language ability incorporate notions of proficiency. They do give credit for what the learner achieves ('can do') in terms of usable language, but need to provide comparable assessment and measurable scores, for course placement, study abroad contexts, the labour market, etc. The reference scales, however imperfect they may be, fulfil their role.

While Seidlhofer's book already provides a handful of indications that merit consideration from the translation and interpreting profession, we could add a few more points of relevance to the list:

- Interpreters might sometimes consider toning down their native-like pronunciation;
- Code-mixing might be allowed and cognates preferred in settings where more than one language is shared between the translator/interpreter and the receivers;
- Paraphrasing becomes justifiable, even if it prolongs the transmission;
- In cases of choice, regular forms might be preferred over irregular ones;
- Culturally tethered and semantically opaque idiomatic expressions and colloquialisms should be avoided when the audience may not know them;
- Structurally more explicit constructions should be chosen over less transparent ones;
- More and more non-English books and other texts we translate are interspersed with English terms. When translated into English, these can be signalled typographically or otherwise.

Most of these could largely be summed up by the good old rule of ensuring clarity of the message.

In sum, the book's few weaker points are negligible in comparison with its assets, and *Understanding English as a Lingua Franca* will be a welcome addition to my course on current issues and controversies in foreign language teaching, next to Seidlhofer's other book, *Controversies in Applied Linguistics* (2003).

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