The Acquisition of Sociolinguistic Competence in a Lingua Franca Context

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Mercedes Durham

In loving memory of my cousin David Kosofsky

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1   English as a Lingua Franca

1.1 English as a Global Lingua Franca

As English has increased in use across the world, so have attempts to account for its spread and to analyze the new ways it is used. While discussions about English in native, in foreign language and in lingua franca contexts are wide ranging and diverse, one aspect which has received relatively little attention so far is the sociolinguistics of English as a lingua franca (henceforth ELF). The present volume focuses on this topic and examines how non-native speakers of ELF deal with native sociolinguistic competence and whether they are able to acquire the variable patterns native speakers have.

As early as the 18th century, English was seen to be on course to become a world language:

> English will be the most respectable language in the world and the most universally read and spoken in the next century, if not before the close of this one. (President John Adams, 23 September 1780, in Kachru, 1982: 2)

From the vantage point of the 21st century, this impression seems remarkably prescient: English is not merely the language of England and other countries of the British Isles, but a language used natively across the globe by millions of speakers (Crystal, 2003). The specific processes involved in this spread have been examined in detail and numerous studies have presented and described the wealth of varieties of English worldwide (for example, Cheshire, 1991; Gorlach, 1998, 2002; McArthur, 1998; Trudgill & Hannah, 1982). Recent estimates suggest that there are around 400 million speakers of ENL and a similar number (around 430 million) who use English as a second language in countries where it has some kind of official status (Crystal, 2003: 67). The latter countries are often those which were affected by British colonization and in which English was established as an important second or official language, but not as a first language (for example India, Cameroon, Nigeria and Jamaica).

However, while these numbers are substantial, it is the foreign language speakers of English, rather than the first and second language speakers, who have made it the truly international and universal language of the 20th and 21st centuries. Ten years ago, Crystal (2003: 68) estimated that 750 million people spoke English as a foreign language with at least a 'medium level of conversational competence' and, more recently, Bolton and Graddol (2012: 3) found that nearly 400 million people in China, roughly a third of the population there, were English learners. Taking the figures for native, second and foreign speakers of English together, it can be said that at least 25% of the world's population speaks English reasonably proficiently (Crystal, 2003: 69), a striking statistic given that nearly 7000 languages are spoken throughout the world (Lewis, 2009). While not quite reaching John Adams' 'universal' distribution, it is clear that English is the most widely spoken language on the planet. This spread was not achieved purely through colonization or territorial expansion, but rather through increased globalization and the export of British and American culture, literature, music and technology. Much recent work on World Englishes (Brutt-Griffler, 2002; Crystal, 2003; Graddol, 2006; Jenkins, 2003; Schneider, 2007, 2011, in addition to those already mentioned above) has been concerned both with the reasons for its exponential growth, and with the consequences of this growth on the language of both native and non-native speakers.

As the proportion of people who use English as a non-native language has grown, so have the number of reasons why it is seen as a valuable additional language. Many non-native speakers have learnt (or are learning) English not because they necessarily intend to use it with native speakers, but rather because it is now used as an international lingua franca in many areas of business, industry, medicine, science and education.

This use of ELF is a relatively recent phenomenon, and while it is taken for granted today, it was noteworthy in the 1980s, as evidenced by Ferguson's discussion of language use at European scientific and academic conferences:

> English is widely used on the European continent as an international language. Frequently conferences are conducted in English (and their proceedings published in English) when only a few of the participants are native speakers. At such conferences the English spoken often shows features at variance with the English of England but shared by the other speakers. (Ferguson, 1981: xvi)

It is not just in Europe and at conferences that such language use occurs, but in some form or other in most parts of the world. This is not to imply that English is used everywhere (despite what some English-speaking tourists may think or desire), but rather that if a non-local language is used for conversation, it is likely to be English. The ubiquity of English affects its overall perception and its more general use.

Before discussing the effects of ELF on speakers, native and non-native, I will address the important preliminary question of whether English is like other lingua francas. Broadly speaking, a lingua franca is a language used by speakers of different languages to communicate with each other (Meierkord, 2006). People have used lingua franca languages for trade, for diplomacy and for a wide range of other reasons throughout history. In some instances the language used as a lingua franca was the native language of one group and a second or third language of another group, but often lingua francas were chosen as neutral languages between speakers of different languages. Additionally, mixed language varieties such as pidgins and creoles were sometimes used as lingua francas. Pidgins are languages which arise through the contact of speakers of two or more languages using a language that is native to none of the groups. A pidgin is said to be a language with no native speakers, and a creole is a pidgin which has acquired native speakers (this is a somewhat simplified explanation of the difference between pidgins and creoles, but suffices for the purposes here; see Todd, 1991: 48ff). To give two brief examples of lingua francas: Latin was widely used as a lingua franca across the Roman Empire and French was a vital tool within diplomatic circles across Europe (and Russia) from the 17th century until the 20th century. Often the people using a lingua franca are not as proficient in it as native speakers are, but because the main purposes of lingua franca use have to do with communicative urgency and a desire to get one's point across, this is not generally seen as problematic.

Although there have been a number of important lingua francas historically, including the two mentioned above, and various languages are currently used as lingua francas in specific countries (for example Swahili in East Africa and Hausa in Niger and Nigeria), the situation of English is unique. Never before has one language been spoken by such a high proportion of people across the world and in so many different contexts. As noted, many of the earlier lingua francas were used primarily for trading or diplomacy, and the number and proficiency of the non-native speakers would have been relatively low. English is completely different in this respect, as research on ELF has underlined. English is a *global* lingua franca, the de facto choice across numerous bilingual and multilingual communities all over the world.

Consequently, English as a language in the 21st century is characterized by its many different kinds of speakers and its different kinds of uses. To understand ELF fully, the models of use provided by native speakers and by foreign language learners are not sufficient and the topic must be approached from a new angle. Attention has therefore turned to the non-native contribution to the use of English: by examining this, researchers have gained new insight into where the language may be heading. The present study is a contribution to this new field of inquiry. Its focus is ELF in Europe and, more specifically, Switzerland, a complex linguistic community which clearly brings out the sociopolitical factors that often shape lingua franca usage.

To clarify differences between English as a native language (ENL), English as a second language (ESL), English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and ELF, this first chapter will present a general view of the field of World Englishes and EFL, before addressing the European situation more closely and discussing the merits of a sociolinguistic approach to the use of ELF.

Although most research on English is related to native speaker varieties, there is a longstanding tradition of studies which attempt to account for the 'other side of English': that is to say, the side which 'is concerned with English as the "other tongue", or as a second language' (Kachru, 1982: 1). These studies take as a starting point the fact that the purposes to which English is put within a country have an important bearing on the type of English used. The growing importance of English has affected its structure: the more English is used, the more likely it is to acquire new distinctive forms. Indeed, recent research conducted across Europe has come to the conclusion that English is in the process of acquiring a new pan-European form (see Erling, 2004; Seidlhofer, 2001, 2011) due to its increasing lingua franca use.

One reason for this is that, in the past 50 years, the status of English in Europe has changed in many countries from a foreign language to a type of national language used for economic and communication purposes (Cenoz & Jessner, 2000; Hoffman, 2000; Phillipson, 2003). This explains why more people want to learn English, creating a vicious circle (as some people regard it) whereby as the use of English worldwide increases, the desire to learn it and use it grows too, which then further adds to its overall use and the number of people wanting to learn it. Some researchers see the spread of English as a further example of Britain's colonizing tendencies or evidence of American globalization. In their eyes, this makes ELF a threat to the vitality of other languages, or at least as a threat to the use of other languages in a wider sphere (Phillipson, 2003; Skutnabb-Kangas, 2009). Although these concerns have some validity, they neglect the fact that in many instances it is the choice of the speakers themselves to use ELF rather than a top-down requirement.

Strictly speaking, it is not up to linguists to judge people's linguistic choices, whether it be to use the non-standard in one's own language or to favour a single language as a lingua franca. Instead, the task of the researcher is to impartially observe, report and try to understand as much as possible about language as it is currently used by speakers around the world.

Having introduced the notion of ELF, the sections below provide a broad classification of different types of English speakers and detail the challenges of finding suitable categories for speakers of ELF in the 21st century (Section 1.2), examine the shift to ELF and the implications of this kind of use for acquisition (Section 1.3), and finally treat the potential for new research on ELF using sociolinguistic methodology (Section 1.4). These will help to establish precisely what ELF is and what it is not, which in turn will ultimately inform the discussion of what features ELF itself might contain and how these might be transferred from native varieties.

1.2 Classifying English Users

Many models used to classify English users focus on native, second and foreign language categories and do not take international or lingua franca English into account, but, as pointed out by Seidlhofer (2011: 5), some of these traditional classifications (for example, Kachru's circles of English model which is presented below) were never intended to be anything more than purely conceptual and cannot account for the global situation of English today, but are nevertheless useful starting points for analyzing alternative models of English use and the circle model will be presented in more detail here. Other models, Modiano's (1999: 10) for example, deal with International English as an entity in its own right, but often in doing so lose distinctions of how English is acquired differently in different groups. English as an international language (EIL) is seen by Modiano as a variety which is made up of 'features of English common to all native and non-native varieties' (Modiano, 1999: 10), so while it is a useful concept to go beyond purely native speaker models, it does not explain how the shift to ELF took place and what the linguistic implications of this are.

Kachru's (1982: 38ff) system of categorization was developed to account for the different functions of Englishes and the 'models' which they follow. In his grouping there are three different circles of English-speaking countries: inner, outer and expanding, which can be roughly overlaid onto the concepts of English as a native langue (ENL), English as a second language (ESL), and English as a foreign language (EFL), respectively:

(1) The **inner circle** refers to the countries where English has traditionally been seen as a native, or first, language; i.e. the United Kingdom, the United States, Ireland, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. These varieties are viewed as 'norm providing' (Kachru & Nelson, 1996: 78) as they often serve as the model for non-native forms of English.

(2) The **outer circle** refers to countries where English is spoken as a second language and where English has essentially acquired an institutionalized form (Kachru, 1982). This includes countries such as India, Cameroon, Nigeria and Jamaica, and other English-speaking territories mentioned in Crystal (2003). For Kachru (1982: 38), these varieties are characterized by an extended range of sociolinguistic, stylistic and register uses, evidence of *nativization* in 'both formal and in contextual terms', and a 'body of nativized [and localized] English literature'.

(3) The **expanding circle** comprises all the countries where English is spoken as a foreign language and where the English used is a 'performance variety' (Kachru, 1982: 38). Kachru gives the examples of Iran and Japan, where English is taught at schools but does not have societal or cultural function, noting that 'the performance varieties of English have a highly restricted functional range in specific contexts; for example,

those of tourism, commerce, and other international transactions'
(Kachru, 1982: 38). Additionally, these varieties, unlike those of the inner
and expanding circle, do not have an 'institutionalized status'. Instead,
'[i]dentificational modifiers such as *Japanese* English or *Iranian* English
are indicative of geographical or national performance characteristics'
(Kachru, 1982: 38).

The inner circle varieties are clearly defined in Kachru's characterization but
the boundary between the outer and expanding circles is less transparent
because 'an institutionalized variety always starts as a performance variety,
with various characteristics slowly giving it a different status' (Kachru, 1982:
39). The distinction between institutionalized and performance varieties is
tied both to *attitudinal* and *linguistic* processes, but also to '(a) the length of
time in use; (b) the extension in use; (c) the emotional attachment of L2 users
with the variety; (d) functional importance; and (e) sociolinguistic status'
(Kachru, 1982: 39). While useful as a conceptual starting point, Kachru's
model cannot be used to make hard and fast distinctions between varieties
and speaker types and, more importantly, it is not fully able to deal with an
extremely globalized world and with the use of ELF. In today's society, there
are a number of countries where English is regularly used intranationally as
a lingua franca, but where it is clearly not (yet) an institutionalized variety.
The situation of Switzerland, which will be discussed in Chapter 3, is one
such case.

The 'other side' of English has grown exponentially since Kachru's first
discussion in 1982 and it is clear that the circle which has grown the most is
the one he aptly named the expanding circle, although his use of the term
expanding does not quite match the situation currently found. For him, the
circle was expanding in the sense that English was studied as a foreign lan-
guage in more and more countries. While certainly true in this sense, the
expansion has also involved a marked increase in frequency and the range of
purposes for which English is used. In the 21st century, many countries
which clearly do not fit into the original outer circle are using English (non-
natively) in ways that go far beyond what would be predicted in expanding
circle varieties. They are using ELF, similarly in some ways, to outer circle
varieties, but without the historical, cultural and institutional background of
English, and as such are different from purely ESL and EFL situations.

1.3 From ESL and EFL to ELF and Beyond

The transition of English from a native language, to a second language,
to a lingua franca is important, because, as Seidlhofer (2011: 40–41) points
out, '"English" does not simply transfer intact from one context to another –
the "E" in English as a Native Language is bound to be something different