



English as a lingua franca

by Professor Barbara Seidlhofer
University of Vienna

At the beginning of the 21st century, as a result of the unprecedented global spread of English, roughly only one out of every four users of the language in the world is a native speaker of it. This means that most interactions in English take place among 'non-native' speakers of the language who share neither a common first language nor a common culture, and who use English as a lingua franca (ELF) as their chosen language of communication.

In consequence the current usage of English is being shaped at least as much by its non-native speakers as its native speakers. ELF is thus not dependent on British, American or Australian sociocultural norms, nor is it governed entirely by what native speakers of English would regard as 'normal' or 'idiomatic' language use.

The forms that ELF takes are usually influenced by various factors, including the linguistic and cultural background of its speakers. This means, of course, that ELF takes many different forms, but despite this, successful communication through ELF clearly does occur in millions of interactions every day and all over the world, so there must be a significant common core of vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation that makes this possible.

The most interesting uses of ELF can be observed in spontaneous spoken interactions, when the language has to be processed and understanding achieved in real time. Descriptive work on spoken ELF is under way in the Vienna Oxford International Corpus of English project (VOICE)*. Though still in its early stages, analysis so far does reveal certain regularities in the way ELF speakers use the language. In particular, there are expressions which by native-speaker standards would be 'errors' but are generally unproblematic and no obstacle to communicative success through ELF.

Analysis of ELF interactions shows that speakers often make certain patterns regular so as to avoid the grammatical redundancies and idiosyncrasies of Standard English. They exploit regularities that are in principle possible in the language system, but not recognized as correct in Standard English and therefore not recorded in Standard English grammars and dictionaries. For instance, ELF speakers from many different first language backgrounds often:

- do not use the third-person singular present tense –s marking but use the same form for all persons (*I like, she like*)
- use the relative pronouns *who* and *which* interchangeably instead of *who* for humans and *which* for non-humans (as in *things who* and *people which*)
- omit definite and indefinite articles where they are obligatory in Standard English, or insert them where they do not occur in Standard English (e.g. *they have a respect for all, he is very good person*)
- pluralize nouns that do not have plural forms in Standard English (*informations, knowledges, advices*)
- use the demonstrative *this* with both singular and plural nouns (*this country, this countries*)
- extend the uses of certain 'general' verbs to cover more meanings than in Standard English, especially *make*, but also *do, have, put, take* (*make sport, make a discussion, put attention*)
- use a uniform, invariable tag (usually *isn't it*, but also others, e.g. *no?*) rather than the variation required in Standard English
- increase clarity/regularity by adding prepositions (*discuss about something, phone to somebody*) or adding nouns (*black colour* rather than just *black, how long time* rather than *how long*)

While these features do not seem to interfere with intelligibility, others do. Obviously, unfamiliarity with certain vocabulary items can give rise to problems, particularly when speakers lack paraphrasing skills. Most interesting perhaps are cases of 'unilateral idiomaticity', where particularly idiomatic language use by one speaker can be problematic when the expressions used are not known to the other speaker(s). Characteristics of such unilateral idiomaticity are e.g. metaphorical language use, idioms, phrasal verbs and other fixed native-speaker expressions such as *in my book* or *can we give you a hand*. This indicates that idiomatic native-speaker language use can be a disadvantage in certain ELF interactions.

It is easy to dismiss ELF as the use of 'incorrect' English by people who have not learned it very well, but it is an entirely natural linguistic development, an example of how any language varies and changes as it is appropriated by different communities of users. As this development is described and recognized, features of ELF will inevitably find their way into future dictionaries of current English.

* See <http://www.univie.ac.at/voice>