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Linguistic Insights  
Studies in Language and Communication

Maria Grazia Guido

English as  
a Lingua Franca  
in Cross-cultural  
Immigration Domains

Peter Lang

This book explores the cognitive and communicative processes involved in the use of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) within cross-cultural specialized contexts where non-native speakers of English – i.e. Western experts and non-Western migrants – interact. The book argues that the main communicative difficulties in such contexts are due precisely to the use of ELF, since it develops from the non-native speakers' *transfer* of their native language structures and socio-cultural schemata into the English they speak. Transfer, in fact, allows non-native speakers to appropriate, or *authenticate*, those English semantic, syntactic, pragmatic and specialized-discourse structures that are linguistically and conceptually unavailable to them. It follows that there are as many ELF varieties as there are communities of non-native speakers authenticating English. The research questions justifying the ethnographic case studies detailed in this book are: What kind of cognitive frames and communicative strategies do Western experts activate in order to convey their culturally-marked knowledge of specialized discourse – by using their ELF varieties – to non-Westerners with different linguistic and socio-cultural backgrounds? What kind of power asymmetries can be identified when non-Westerners try to communicate their own knowledge by using their respective ELF varieties? Is it possible to ultimately develop a mode of ELF specialized communication that can be shared by both Western experts and non-Western migrants?

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**English as a Lingua Franca in  
Cross-cultural Immigration Domains**



# Linguistic Insights

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**PETER LANG**

Bern · Berlin · Bruxelles · Frankfurt am Main · New York · Oxford · Wien

Maria Grazia Guido

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To the displaced people of the world.



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## Preface

One of the most interesting implications that emerges from Maria Grazia Guido's enquiry is the need for a reappraisal of the validity in the current globalized world of the Kachru typology of varieties of English as expressed in his celebrated three circles. As has been pointed out, the placement of NS varieties in the Inner Circle, while reflecting the spread of the language, the varieties in the other circles being historically derivative in one way or another, it also carries the implication of socio-political primacy: NS English is at the centre, the epicentre indeed, with the other varieties rippling from it, not only derivative but dependent. The outer and expanding circles are defined only in reference to the inner one. The use of the term 'expanding' also carries with it the implication that the other circles are in some degree more stable: the terms 'inner' and 'outer' suggest a fixed location not a process. But of course all varieties, wherever they are located, whatever the community of users, are in the continual process of expansion. To say that inner circle varieties are norm providing suggests that they have a relatively well defined and stable norm to provide. It is allowed that outer circle varieties may develop norms of their own, which enables them to be identified as different Englishes, but this tolerance does not extend to expanding circle uses of the language. What is said to distinguish them from outer circle uses is that they are, of their nature, exo- and not endo-normative.

The distinction between outer and expanding circle English is difficult to sustain. Outer circle English is associated with relatively close networks of interaction within primary communities, and tends to be endonormative. But these networks are themselves typically restricted to certain domains of use. In the expanding circle, the language also operates in networks of interaction, typically to sustain discourse communities of a secondary kind – communities of practice

that are also to this extent endonormative: conventions of usage are established which serve both a communicative and solidarity function. It is not easy to see why one kind of discourse community should be privileged and its usage identified as legitimate variation and the other not. And in both cases, problems naturally arise when one set of usage conventions comes into contact, and into conflict, with another. This is a familiar phenomenon within outer circle Englishes – when a Nigerian’s vernacular English comes into contact, say, with that of a Sri Lankan. Some accommodation is called for, and one might argue that the fact that each has invested social identity in the vernacular as an expression of primary community values, this accommodation is particularly difficult to achieve.

To the extent that expanding circle usage will also be influenced by the first language, accommodation and adaptation will also be called for here, but with less investment in communal identity which is likely to make this easier to achieve – neither party claims any communal ownership of the language. Thus the co-operative imperative can more readily take precedence over the territorial. But what happens when the outer circle user comes into contact with the expanding circle user? This is the kind of situation that is so interestingly examined in Maria Grazia Guido’s book.

In the contemporary world, we see a reverse of the historical process of human movement and settlement. Previously, people from Europe emigrated to the third world where their inner circle languages were taken over and adapted to become outer circle variants. Most of the immigration these days is of people who were earlier colonised (and still, one might argue, colonised but by different means) and who come from the outer circle, also, of course, bringing their language with them. But whereas the colonisers could assert the integrity and the power of their own English, and claim a special legitimacy for it, the colonised immigrants to Europe are not in a position to do so. Though their English may be accepted within their own communities as a legitimate expression of their own communal identity, and recognized by enlightened sociolinguists as an English in its own right, it is not accepted as such by the people in Europe they now encounter. Their way of speaking is not accorded any outer circle status: it is simply taken to be a deficient version of an inner circle standard, and

on a par with the English of expanding circle users. So Italian immigration officers, for example, using English as the only available lingua franca to interview a Nigerian refugee will make no allowance for the particular linguacultural conventions that characterize Nigerian English usage – apart from anything else, the Italians are unlikely to be aware of what these conventions are. In these circumstances, what happens, as Guido shows so convincingly, is that the Italians will naturally interpret the immigrants' language use in reference to their own lingua franca English, as influenced by their own linguacultural associations. It is easy to see how misunderstandings might therefore arise. On the one side, the immigrants, accustomed to the adequacy of their outer circle English, are naturally unpractised in adapting it to meet the needs of the occasion. On the other side, the Italian immigration officers will tend to take their usage at its face value and assign it significance in reference to their own linguacultural assumptions. The conditions that favour the co-operative co-construction of meaning and mutual accommodation that characterize much of ELF interaction simply do not obtain here.



# Transcription symbols<sup>1</sup>

[ ]	<i>overlapping speech</i>
<u>underlining</u>	<i>emphasis</i>
◦ ◦	<i>quieter speech</i>
(.)	<i>micro-pause</i>
(..)	<i>pause</i>
::	<i>elongation of prior sound</i>
hhh	<i>aspiration</i>
.hhh	<i>inspiration</i>
> <	<i>speed-up talk</i>
=	<i>latching</i>
[No.]	<i>utterance number</i>
[a/b/etc.]	<i>move marker</i>
/	<i>final-utterance/line boundary marker</i>
[...]	<i>omitted parts</i>

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1 Transcription conventions are adapted from Edwards (1997: 323-324).



# Introduction: A Cognitive Model of L1-Transfer as ELF-Authentication

## 1. Defining ‘English as a Lingua Franca’ in specialized domains

It is a truth universally acknowledged that English is today’s global ‘lingua franca’ for international communication. Statements like this are typical of historical periods and societies when the dominant ethnocentric beliefs of a ruling class with the economic and political power determine what is true and can be taken for granted and what is not. Taken for granted, for instance, is the idea that the grammar code of Standard English – and, implicitly, also native-English pragmatic behaviours – are shared norms in intercultural transactions across the world, ranging from the domains of economics and politics to the fields of law, environment, social sciences and so on, until it encompasses every domain wherein Western culture exerts its influence over the other non-Western civilizations. The starting point of the research presented in this book is precisely this: such unconditional recognition of the privileged status of the English language in the world does not in fact acknowledge the communicative needs of other non-native – and, crucially, non-Western – speakers of English. This lack of acknowledgement of other pragmatic modes of communication may have very serious socio-political and personal consequences, particularly when domains of cross-cultural specialized communication related to immigration are involved. This book, therefore, intends to explore communication precisely in such domains, by presenting an ethnomethodological research focused on the cognitive and communicative processes involved in the production and reception of discourse in English as a lingua franca (ELF). Such processes are examined as they occur within professional domains where non-native speakers of

English – i.e., Western experts and non-Western immigrants – interact in multicultural specialized contexts such as centres for legal advice and medical assistance to non-EU immigrants and asylum seekers, multiethnic educational workplaces, and gate-keeping situations, like welfare interviews. The data concerning these speakers' use of ELF were collected during the implementation of longitudinal case studies and analyzed according to a protocol procedure that opted for avoiding any description of the degree of conformity of such professional interactions to the conventional forms and functions of English specialized discourse. In fact, the adopted method of protocol analysis (Ericsson/Schultz 1982) gave preference, instead, to an investigation of the 'unconventional' pragmatic outcome of the contact between these two different socio-cultural and linguistic groups of participants in the interactions. This methodological preference justifies the enquiry into the processes by which the 'experts' in charge of the case-study situations reported in this book (mostly Italian specialists using English as a 'lingua franca') try to impose – intentionally or involuntarily – upon the immigrants they interact with pragmalinguistic uses and generic conventions that are typical of their own 'Western' specialized background. The assumption is that precisely because such uses and conventions are the product of a particular cultural tradition, they are not only 'cognitively and linguistically inaccessible' to non-Western immigrants from different L1 backgrounds, but also 'conceptually unavailable' (cf. Widdowson 1991a) to these people. In fact, they usually find it difficult, if not impossible, to understand specialized concepts and discourse behaviours that are alien to their native socio-cultural and pragmalinguistic 'schemata'. By *schemata* is here meant the background knowledge of culturally-determined linguistic and social behaviours stored in the minds of the members of a specific speech community (cf. Carrell 1983) and thus informing not only their native 'social-semiotic' cognitive frames (cf. Halliday 1978), but also the actualization of such frames into the grammar structures of their L1. Hence the research questions justifying the analysis are: (a) What kind of cognitive frames and communicative strategies do Western experts activate in order to get across their culturally-marked knowledge of specialized discourse to non-Westerners from different linguistic, cognitive and socio-cultural backgrounds? (b) What kind of

power asymmetries can be identified in such cross-cultural interactions? (c) Is it possible to ultimately develop a mode of ELF specialized communication that can be acknowledged and even shared by both Western experts and non-Western immigrants?

To answer these questions, a number of case studies were analyzed with the objective of enquiring into the possible ways in which (a) the ELF used by the Western experts comes to be interpreted by the non-Western immigrants with reference to their own L1 pragmalinguistic uses and native socio-cultural schemata, and (b) the ELF spoken by the immigrants – mostly as their own pidgin or creole varieties of English – may come to be interpreted by the experts with reference to their own L1 pragmalinguistic uses and native ‘Western’ socio-cultural schemata. The underlying hypothesis is that both the participants in the interaction tend to activate in their minds ‘top-down’ interpretative processes through which they activate their own native socio-cultural and linguistic schemata in order to come to an understanding of the unknown communicative situation they are involved in – a cognitive operation which is here assumed to be at the very source of cross-cultural miscommunication. Crucial in this research, therefore, is the notion of *transfer* of the participants’ respective L1 semantic, syntactic and pragmatic structures into ELF – a transfer, it is argued, primarily due to the participants’ different cognitive-experiential backgrounds underlying their native languages, cultures and societies. The notion of ‘L1→L2 transfer’ is central in established Interlanguage research (cf. Selinker 1992; Selinker/ Lakshmanan 1992) as a justification of the ‘syntactic errors’ produced by the non-native speakers of a language (cf. Corder 1981). The present book aims at expanding this conventional notion of transfer to include a cognitive dimension based on the speakers’ native schemata informing their L1 and, thus, predictably interfering with their use of ELF in cross-cultural interaction. Consequently, these transfer processes are also assumed to influence the grammaticalization mechanisms triggered by the interference of the L1 syntactic and cognitive structures (e.g., native ergative or phrasal constructions, different uses of modals, etc.) with the L2-grammar, thus contributing to the development of the grammar code of an ELF variety. By the expression ‘developing ELF grammar’, however, what is meant is by no means anything like

a gradual approximation of L2-English to the standards of English as a native language (ENL). On the contrary, ELF is a term that, in the present research, is meant to be inclusive of the conventional notion of ‘fossilized interlanguages’, as well as of those varieties of English defined as pidgin and creole, for it is contended that both interlanguages and pidgin/creole languages (cf. Hymes 1971) are autonomous diatopic varieties of English having the same value as the so-called ‘standard’ English variety. As such, their distinctive syntactic, semantic and pragmatic characteristics are not to be regarded in terms of ‘interlanguage errors’ in need of defossilization, or as ‘code deviations’ performed by ‘uneducated’ non-native speakers for limited functional purposes – such as business or institutional transactions. In fact, such ‘pidgin/creole’ or ‘interlanguage’ characteristics have to be considered independently from ENL for they reflect typical grammaticalized features of particular ELF varieties, and each variety needs to be acknowledged and accepted by the speakers of other ELF varieties, ENL speakers included.

This view of independent ELF varieties might almost appear unusual considering that so far – apart from few pioneering theories of ELF as an autonomous language advanced by a small group of linguists (cf. Kachru 1986, 1992; Widdowson 1994, 1997; Jenkins 2000, 2007; Seidlhofer 2001, 2004; Mauranen 2005) – no hint at a notion of ELF as genuinely independent from ENL has been formulated in research on global and international English (cf. Brumfit 1982; Trudgill/Hannah 1995). However, the fact that ELF varieties do exist and are actually used in many circumstances of today’s cross-cultural communication represents an applied-linguistics issue that urgently needs an appropriate exploration and description. The crucial tenets about the model of English as a lingua franca advanced in this book are, on the one hand, its principled detachment from native-speaker models of ENL which so far have very rarely been questioned – even when ELF is openly acknowledged as a global language for international communication in need of standardization (cf. Crystal 2003) – and, on the other, the recognition that there must be more than one variety of ELF. More specifically, the former tenet – which underlies the present research in all its case-study articulations – supports the argument that ENL is not the parameter against which all the cognitive-semantic,

syntactic, pragmatic and generic ‘variations’ produced by non-native speakers have to be assessed. And since, as argued above, the very notion of Interlanguage should be revised in view of a construct of ‘lingua franca’ that rejects any hypothesis of ‘ENL approximation’ justifying ‘interlanguage errors’, as well as ‘register deviations’, this book advances an enquiry into the varieties (and the corresponding cognitive-semantic, morpho-syntactic, pragmatic and generic structures) of contemporary ELF-discourses, developing from operations of ‘L1→L2 transfer’ that are caused by the interaction between different native languages, cultures, experiential schemata and social/professional contexts. In this sense, the very notion of ENL as the ‘authentic variety of English’, to be learned and used in every context of cross-cultural interaction, comes to be challenged by a view of ELF as ‘language authentication’ which is a process of appropriation that occurs according to its speakers’ L1 backgrounds and native socio-cultural and experiential schemata (Widdowson 1979a: 163-172).

This rationale is brought to bear on the latter tenet of this research that supports the argument for the existence of more than one ELF variety, depending on the particular groups of speakers from different L1 backgrounds who ‘authenticate’ English according to their own diverse native cognitive-semantic, syntactic, pragmatic and specialized-discourse parameters. This view seems to run counter the prevalent notion of ELF as a unique and shared ‘international variety’ of English, additionally acquired by non-native speakers for an efficient, relevant and economical communication in everyday interactions as well as in specialized transactions (cf. Abbott/Vingard 1981; Brumfit 1982; Pennycook 1994; Trudgill/Hannah 1995; Firth 1996; Bhatia 1997; Knapp/Meierkord 2002). A view of ELF like this, however, would have in itself the implication of a ‘foreign language’, if not of an artificial ‘pre-constructed’ language, to be ‘passively learnt’ – exactly like ENL – and not ‘actively appropriated’ to the non-native speakers’ own L1 schemata. Also in cases like this the outcome of ELF use should consequently be expected to be miscommunication, which would undermine, as House (1999) claims, the ‘myth of mutual intelligibility’ in ELF interactions. In focusing on ELF as an additionally-acquired international variety of English, House also introduces the thorny issue of ELF pragmatics as a unique and shared code of

dialogic behaviour which she views as characterized by a recurring lack of cooperation in “the most basic social alignment between speaker and hearer” (1999: 82). In fact, if on the one hand phonology seems the only rather unproblematic linguistic domain – even without removing those phonetic features preventing ‘mutual intelligibility’, to concentrate on a phonetic ‘Lingua Franca Core’ (Jenkins 2000), (which is also confirmed by the case studies in this book, often featuring African-pidgin/Italian-ELF interactions) – on the other hand, mispronunciation, semantic-meaning variations and pragmatic peculiarities caused by L1→L2 transfer can indeed trigger pragmatic misunderstanding. A unique ELF pragmatics is therefore a ‘myth’ like a unique ELF grammar insofar as, differently from the models of Interlanguage Pragmatics that assess cross-cultural pragmatic failure in the same way as Interlanguage models deal with errors – that is, by judging them against native standards of ENL pragmatics, with the ultimate aim to approximate it and conform to it (cf. Thomas 1983; Kasper/Blum-Kulka 1993), ELF pragmatic behaviours, instead, must be diverse because they crucially depend on the transfer into ELF of the speakers’ diverse native pragmatic behaviours. Mutual intelligibility, therefore, needs to be achieved by the participants in a cross-cultural interaction through the development of the awareness of each other’s different ELF varieties, informed by their respective L1 grammar and discourse-pragmatic features. Such awareness would guarantee successful communication, which is indeed essential in specialized domains of interaction like the ones illustrated in this book, regarding Western experts interacting with non-Western immigrants and asylum seekers. In cases like these, characterized by explicit power asymmetries between the participants in the interaction, the Western expert is the one who is here expected to initiate a dialogic co-construction of an ELF discourse which could be accessible and acceptable – and possibly shared – by the other non-Western participant. The ultimate aim of such ‘ELF co-construction’ is the participants’ reciprocal acknowledgement of all the peculiarities of each other’s use of ELF, which are due to the L1→L2 transfer processes and, for this reason, are liable to cause misunderstanding and even communication breakdown.

The theoretical grounds, justifying the case studies reported in this book, are founded on the contention that misunderstanding in ELF use is

less frequent when the two participants' native languages are typologically similar in their cognitive-semantic and syntactic structures (cf. Greenberg 1973a). These structures, once transferred to the participants' use of ELF, are not expected to cause serious divergences, so that the ELF varieties the participants speak have good probabilities of converging syntactically and being cognitively shared in the interaction. This is so because the grammatical and experiential features of the ELF varieties are predictably perceived by both participants as 'unmarked', so that this sense of familiarity with the lingua franca produced by such L1/L2 typological convergence is expected to facilitate the participants' mutual pragmatic accommodation (cf. Giles/Coupland 1991). Conversely, a 'marked' ELF interaction is the one informed by two typologically-different L1s respectively spoken by the participants. This means that the typical L1 constructions transferred by one participant into the ELF variety she uses is expected to make such a variety problematic for the other participant from a typologically-divergent L1 background which, in turn, informs the different ELF variety he uses. In view of this contention, questions about whether an approximation to the ENL syntax and pragmatics would enhance success in cross-cultural communication, or whether a simplification of the ENL norms would lead to a shared 'syntactic and pragmatic ELF core', are bound to be challenged by a notion of ELF whose varieties directly depend on the interference of the speakers' L1-typologies with the structures of the English language they use, which makes such varieties converge or diverge from each other. In cross-cultural interaction this would in fact render a specific use of ELF on the part of one participant more or less 'marked' to another participant from a different L1 background, depending not only on the 'availability' in his/her native schemata of the semantic-syntactic features of the ELF spoken by his/her interlocutor, but also on the 'accessibility' to experiential concepts and pragmatic behaviour which, as in the cases under examination in this book, can also be of a specialized kind. Being aware of these processes of L1-interference underlying ELF-use is therefore particularly important for the experts in charge of cross-cultural specialized interactions and, as such, responsible for the successful outcome of communication.

## 2. The chapters

These theoretical grounds inform the parts into which this book is subdivided. Part One deals with some crucial domain-specific issues emerging from the Western experts' interaction with non-Western illegal immigrants and asylum seekers. Chapter 1 of this part presents precisely an instance of cross-cultural miscommunication caused by the Western experts' lack of awareness of such L1-interference processes as they interact with non-Western immigrants through the use of an ELF variety that fails in its attempt to foster a shared understanding of the events recounted by the immigrants in their reports. The chapter specifically focuses on the contact between two different semantic conceptualisations of events in two typologically-different L1s spoken by the participants in three interactions, represented respectively by Italian welfare officers interrogating Nigerian illegal immigrants who were suspected of hiding the identities of the smugglers that had helped them reach the southern coasts of Italy. The ELF used throughout these interactions was represented by the Nigerian immigrants' pidgin variety and by the welfare officers' 'specialized variety of ELF'. Central to the analysis are the typologically-different accusative and ergative natures of the Western and non-Western participants' L1s. Hence the African immigrants' native ergative constructions of events (in which an animated agent in grammatical-subject position is substituted by its logical object according to the OV(S) typology) were transferred to their use of ELF so that, in these immigrants' reports of their clandestine journey to Italy, the prime cause for the illegal transport is not ascribed to human agency ('the smugglers'), but to an inanimate medium (e.g., 'the boat', 'the van', etc.) apparently endowed of a life of its own. Therefore, once the ergative structures were transferred into the ELF used by the Nigerian immigrants, they were interpreted by the Italian welfare officers (accustomed to their own native 'accusative' SVO structures) as the immigrants' deliberate intention to omit information about the perpetrator (the agent) of the alleged illegal activity and, thus, about the identity of the smugglers.

Also Chapter 2 presents another case study on cross-cultural miscommunication occurring in the specialized-discourse domain of