

Misunderstandings in English as a Lingua Franca

Developments in English as a Lingua Franca 1

Editors

Jennifer Jenkins
Will Baker

De Gruyter Mouton

Misunderstandings in English as a Lingua Franca

An Analysis of ELF Interactions
in South-East Asia

By

David Deterding

De Gruyter Mouton

ISBN 978-3-11-028651-9
e-ISBN 978-3-11-028859-9
ISSN 2192-8177

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

A CIP catalog record for this book has been applied for at the Library of Congress.

Bibliographic information published by the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek

The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data are available in the Internet at <http://dnb.dnb.de>.

© 2013 Walter de Gruyter, Inc., Boston/Berlin

Printing: Hubert & Co. GmbH & Co. KG, Göttingen

⊗ Printed on acid-free paper

Printed in Germany

www.degruyter.com

Table of contents

List of abbreviationsix

Keywords for Vowelsix

Transcription conventions.....x

Chapter 1 Introduction 1

1.1. Scope of the investigation.....2

1.2. Overview of the book3

Chapter 2 ELF, intelligibility and misunderstandings4

2.1. ELF and World Englishes.....4

2.2. The Lingua Franca Core (LFC)7

2.3. Intelligibility9

2.4. Misunderstandings12

2.5. Repairs14

2.6. Accommodation.....16

2.7. Conversation Analysis17

2.8. Conclusion19

Chapter 3 Data and methodology.....20

3.1. CMACE.....20

3.1.1. Speakers.....21

3.1.2. Recordings23

3.1.3. Transcription.....24

3.2. Analysis27

3.2.1. Instances and tokens27

3.2.2. Classification30

Chapter 4 Pronunciation	33
4.1. Consonants.....	34
4.1.1. TH.....	34
4.1.2. Initial [h].....	40
4.1.3. [n],[l], [r] and [w].....	41
4.1.4. Initial consonant cluster simplification.....	44
4.1.5. Final consonant cluster simplification.....	47
4.1.6. Dark-L.....	51
4.1.7. Aspiration and voicing.....	55
4.1.8. Fricatives and affricates.....	58
4.1.9. Other missing consonants.....	61
4.1.10. Consonants: summary.....	63
4.2. Vowels.....	63
4.2.1. NURSE.....	64
4.2.2. TRAP.....	65
4.2.3. FACE.....	68
4.2.4. Vowel length.....	68
4.2.5. Vowel reduction.....	70
4.2.6. Miscellaneous vowels.....	71
4.2.7. Vowels: summary.....	73
4.3. Spelling pronunciation.....	73
4.4. Stress.....	74
4.4.1. Word stress.....	74
4.4.2. Utterance stress.....	77
4.5. Rhythm, intonation and speaking rate.....	79
4.5.1. Rhythm.....	79
4.5.2. Intonation.....	80
4.5.3. Speaking rate.....	81
4.5.4. Syllables.....	83

4.5.5. Laughter	85
4.6. Phonetic accommodation	85
4.6.1. Listening accommodation	86
4.6.2. Speaking accommodation	87
4.7. Summary of pronunciation	87
Chapter 5 Lexis, grammar and code-switching	92
5.1. Lexis	92
5.1.1. Words	92
5.1.2. Phrases	94
5.1.3. Idioms	98
5.1.4. Shifted meaning	100
5.1.5. Polysemes	105
5.2. Grammar	107
5.2.1. Plural nouns	108
5.2.2. Articles	111
5.2.3. Verb suffixes	114
5.2.4. Missing verbs	117
5.2.5. Prepositions	119
5.2.6. Word order	120
5.2.7. Other grammar issues	121
5.3. Code-switching	123
5.4. Miscellaneous	128
5.5. Summary of lexis, grammar and code-switching	130
Chapter 6 Repairs	131
6.1. Self-initiated repairs	131
6.1.1. Correcting oneself	131
6.1.2. Unprompted paraphrase	132
6.1.3. Asking for help	136

6.2. Responses to misunderstandings	138
6.2.1. Asking for clarification	139
6.2.2. Correcting	144
6.2.3. Silence.....	145
6.2.4. Backchannels	147
6.2.5. Selecting part of the utterance	150
6.2.6. Changing the topic	152
6.2.7. Laughter	154
6.2.8. Non-awareness.....	156
6.3. Avoiding misunderstandings	157
6.3.1. Topic fronting	157
6.3.2. Lexical repetition	159
6.3.3. Echoing.....	162
6.3.4. Collaborative completions	164
6.4. Summary of repairs.....	167
Chapter 7 Implications for pedagogy.....	168
7.1. Implications of the findings	1699
7.2. Pronunciation teaching	172
7.3. Materials for ELF-based teaching.....	174
7.4. Teaching accommodation	175
7.5. Testing	1777
7.6. Prognosis for the future.....	177
Appendix The tokens of misunderstanding in CMACE	179
References.....	191
Author Index	202
Subject Index	204

List of abbreviations

ACE	Asian Corpus of English
CA	Conversation Analysis
CAA	Civil Aviation Authority
CMACE	Corpus of Misunderstandings from ACE
COCA	Corpus of Contemporary American English (available from http://corpus.byu.edu/coca/)
ELF	English as a Lingua Franca
FASS	Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences
ICE	International Corpus of English
LFC	Lingua Franca Core
RP	Received Pronunciation
UBD	University of Brunei Darussalam
VOT	Voice Onset Time

Keywords for Vowels

The following keywords are used for referring to various vowels. Not all the keywords suggested by Wells (1982) are listed, as only some are referred to in this book. The RP British English pronunciation of each keyword is shown after it.

FLEECE	/i:/	NURSE	/ɜ:/	FACE	/eɪ/
KIT	/ɪ/	STRUT	/ʌ/	GOAT	/əʊ/
DRESS	/e/	BATH	/ɑ:/	PRICE	/aɪ/
TRAP	/æ/	LOT	/ɒ/		

In addition:

TH	represents the sound at the start of words such as <i>thin</i> and <i>this</i>
dark-L	represents the [ɫ] in a syllable coda, such as in <i>call</i> and <i>world</i>

Transcription conventions

The transcription conventions used in this book are adopted from the VOICE project (VOICE 2011).

(.)	short pause (less than 0.5 seconds)
(2)	pause of about 2 seconds
hh	audible intake of air
@@@	laughter (each '@' indicates one syllable)
<@> words </@>	words spoken accompanied by laughter
<coughs>	non-linguistic sound
word:	word that is extended
word::	word that is extended considerably
(word)	uncertain transcription
WORD	word (or syllable) said with extra emphasis
.	falling intonation
?	rising intonation
<1> words </1>	overlapping speech
word	word that is misunderstood
<spel> u k </spel>	word that is spelt out
<un> xxx </un>	unclear speech; each 'x' indicates one syllable
...	indicates some omitted material
[MIn:name]	the name of a participant; names are removed to protect anonymity
FTw, MLs	refers to a female (F) or male (M) participant, with the country shown after the initial F or M, as follows:
	Br : Brunei Ch : China Hk : Hong Kong
	In : Indonesia Jp : Japan Ls : Laos
	Ma : Malaysia Ng : Nigeria Tw : Taiwan
Ch+Br : 55	refers to a recording involving the two people indicated by the initials; the number shows the time in seconds from the start of the recording

Chapter 1

Introduction

This book is about misunderstandings in English as a Lingua Franca (ELF), so it is best if my use of these terms is immediately explained.

First, misunderstandings. In this book I will use the term to include all cases where a listener does not understand something that is said to them. Note that this does not necessarily involve a breakdown in communication, as the interaction often proceeds quite smoothly even when a few words are not understood. Nevertheless, in considering what contributes to intelligibility, it is informative to analyse the words that are not understood even in cases where the listener can in fact grasp the overall gist of the utterance and so the conversation appears to continue without a problem. The methodology of identifying such instances of misunderstanding will be discussed in Chapter 3.

Next, ELF. Seidlhofer (2011: 7) defines it as “any use of English among speakers of different first languages for whom English is the communicative medium of choice, and often the only option”. Note that this is a fairly broad definition, as it includes native speakers so long as their interactional partners are not native speakers. An alternative is that by House (1999: 74) who defines ELF interactions as “between members of two or more different linguacultures in English, for none of whom English is the mother tongue”. This alternative definition excludes native speakers.

Actually, the concepts of mother tongue and native speaker are not easy to define (McKay 2002: 28; Davies 2003). For example, there are some people in Brunei who grow up speaking English at home and it may be their best language although they also regularly speak Malay. So should they be classified as native speakers or not?

In describing my data, I will make reference to the Three Circles model of English proposed by Braj Kachru (1985). The conversations analysed in this book do not include speakers from Inner-Circle countries such as Britain, the USA or Australia; but I will not worry about whether the participants are native speakers or not.

So the term ELF as it is used in this book can be understood as follows: it is the English used by speakers from postcolonial Outer-Circle countries such as Brunei, Malaysia and Nigeria as well as Expanding-Circle places such as Taiwan, Japan and Laos when they are conversing with speakers from other countries in the Outer or Expanding Circles.

I should emphasize that this indicates the scope of the data analysed in this book but it does not attempt to provide a definition of ELF. Other researchers will adopt alternative, perfectly valid definitions of ELF that are appropriate for their work, and in many cases they will include speakers from the Inner Circle to a certain extent. Furthermore, the focus on speakers coming from different countries is not one shared by all researchers into ELF. It just characterizes the data on which my research is based.

This book, then, is about the factors that cause misunderstandings to occur in spoken interactions in English between people from different countries in the Outer and Expanding Circles. In addition, it considers how those misunderstandings are dealt with and how misunderstandings in ELF conversations are avoided.

1.1. Scope of the investigation

Most people would probably agree that intelligibility is of primary importance in ELF interactions: if you cannot be understood, then your language use is not successful. However, intelligibility is actually a complex, multifaceted concept (Nelson 2011), something I will consider in greater depth in Chapter 2.

The research in this book builds on the seminal work of Jenkins (2000) in analysing what enhances and what hinders intelligibility in ELF interactions, though I will extend the investigation beyond her main focus on pronunciation to consider grammatical and lexical issues, and also to discuss how misunderstandings are dealt with and avoided.

Much research on misunderstandings in ELF tends to investigate breakdowns in communication: it analyses data to find out what causes a breakdown in communication to occur and how it is repaired. This book is rather different. Most of the participants themselves were subsequently involved in the transcription or else they contributed to the analysis by providing invaluable feedback about what they had said and also what they had not understood. This has allowed me to find numerous instances where a participant does not understand something but where the conversation continues with no apparent problem, and I only know about the misunderstanding as a result of the subsequent feedback from the participants. This provides a rich source of data on intelligibility. Even though the majority of the instances that I will analyse involve no overt breakdown in communication, nevertheless it is important to consider which features of speech have an impact on intelligibility, and what it is about the pronunciation, lexis,

grammar, and general patterns of usage that have caused certain words or phrases not to be understood by the listeners.

At this point, it is important to emphasize that misunderstandings are very much the exception rather than the rule in my data, and the conversations that constitute my corpus generally proceed smoothly. I will therefore endeavour not just to consider features of speech that cause misunderstandings to occur but also those that serve to enhance intelligibility. Examples of non-standard features (in terms of Inner-Circle Englishes) that might be suggested as improving intelligibility in an ELF setting are: the occurrence of a full vowel rather than a reduced vowel like [ə] in the first syllable of a word such as *computer* or *consider* and in function words such as *of* and *at*; the use of a plural suffix on logically countable words such as *furnitures* and *equipments*; and prominent topic fronting often accompanied by a resumptive pronoun, as in *my sister, she lives in Singapore*.

1.2. Overview of the book

In Chapter 2, I will consider the background to this study, including the concepts of intelligibility, misunderstanding and repair, and I will also provide a brief overview of Conversation Analysis. Chapter 3 describes the Corpus of Misunderstandings from the Asian Corpus of English (CMACE), including the speakers, the recordings, and the methods of identifying and analysing misunderstandings. In Chapter 4, the role of pronunciation is investigated, and then in Chapter 5, other features that sometimes cause misunderstandings are discussed, particularly grammar and lexis. In Chapter 5, I will additionally consider code-switching. Then in Chapter 6, I analyse how misunderstandings are dealt with, occasionally by the interactants asking for clarification though more usually by them adopting a ‘let it pass’ strategy (Firth 1996) in the hope that things will sort themselves out naturally. Chapter 7 deals with the pedagogical implications of my research and offers a few conclusions. Finally, a full listing of all the tokens of misunderstanding from the CMACE corpus is provided in the Appendix.

Chapter 2

ELF, intelligibility and misunderstandings

The patterns of usage found in English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) have been treated as a serious topic of investigation particularly since the publication of Seidlhofer (2001), and the concept of a limited set of pronunciation features for ensuring intelligibility in ELF interactions, the Lingua Franca Core (LFC), has been the focus of substantial discussion since the publication of Jenkins (2000). Nevertheless, the status of ELF and especially the proposed LFC continue to be controversial, and many writers have criticized them in derisive terms reminiscent of the “half-baked quackery” used by Quirk (1990) to dismiss the emergence of varieties of World English as models for teaching English around the world.

This chapter reviews the status of ELF, in particular how it differs from World Englishes (Kachru 2005: 15). Then there is an overview of the LFC and a discussion of some of the hostility that has been targeted at it. Next I will consider the nature of intelligibility, including the distinction between intelligibility, comprehensibility and interpretability proposed by Smith (1992), and I will offer a brief overview of some research on the relative intelligibility of different varieties of English around the world. Closely linked to intelligibility is the concept of misunderstandings, and their nature will be discussed before I consider repairs and the typical ways that misunderstandings are dealt with and avoided. One way of avoiding misunderstandings is by means of accommodation, the adaptation of one’s listening or speaking to the needs of one’s conversational partners, so some basic concepts in accommodation will be discussed. Finally, I will offer a brief overview of Conversation Analysis (CA), the discipline that often provides the basis for research on misunderstandings and repairs, and I will consider the ways in which research into ELF interactions may differ from analysis of the patterns of native-speaker conversations that are usually investigated in CA.

2.1. ELF and World Englishes

The term English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) has been in use at least since the mid-1990s (Jenkins 1996). However, it has only been widely adopted as a formal term to describe English as it occurs in international settings since

2000, partly as a result of Barbara Seidlhofer's (2001) paper. One may note that although one of the most prominent figures in this field of study, Jennifer Jenkins, discussed the term ELF in her 2000 book (Jenkins 2000: 11), she chose at the time to use the alternative term English as an International Language (EIL) and only adopted the term ELF more widely in later publications (e.g. Jenkins 2005). However, research on ELF is now firmly established, with its own journal (*Journal of English as a Lingua Franca*), a dedicated series of conferences (the fifth ELF conference was held in Istanbul in May 2012), and a burgeoning array of monographs (e.g. Jenkins 2007; Smit 2010; Kirkpatrick 2010; Seidlhofer 2011; Cogo and Dewey 2012) as well as edited volumes (e.g. Mauranen and Ranta 2009; Archibald, Cogo, and Jenkins 2011).

One problem with the term ELF is that the concept of a lingua franca often has negative connotations (Seidlhofer 2011: 80), referring to an impoverished code that has limited domains of use and is merely adopted as a last-resort means of communication between speakers with no other means of talking to each other. In fact, recent work on ELF shows that it can be immensely sophisticated, characterized by highly resourceful patterns of interaction. It is therefore inappropriate to regard it as an impoverished code, and furthermore it is of considerable interest to investigate the innovative ways that ELF speakers ensure that they can interact successfully.

In this respect, I will now briefly discuss one feature of language usage: the occurrence of idioms. While one might expect ELF speakers to avoid the most obscure English idioms as well as colourful but opaque sayings transferred from their respective first languages, one actually finds that they often incorporate quite a lot of idioms into their English and they even sometimes develop fresh ones during their interactions. In fact, it has been suggested that ELF speakers may be particularly adept at this innovative extension of language usage. For example, Seidlhofer and Widdowson (2009) show how participants at an international conference created and then adopted the idiom *endangered fields* (by deliberate analogy with *endangered species*) to refer to areas of study that were perceived to be under threat. So, far from being an impoverished code, we generally find that ELF is rather creative, partly because it adopts expressions and patterns of usage from a wide range of different backgrounds, and also because its interactants frequently do not feel constrained by native-speaker normative rules.

Indeed, it has been suggested (e.g. Cogo and Dewey 2012) that ELF interactants tend to pay little attention to standard grammar as they focus much more on the most effective ways of getting their message across, and the patterns of English that they adopt can be highly sophisticated. One of

the goals of the research in this book is to investigate the extent to which the use of non-standard grammar as well as idioms might result in misunderstandings among ELF interactants from different backgrounds.

It is important to distinguish the study of ELF from that of World Englishes, as the two reflect quite different perspectives. The World Englishes paradigm investigates new varieties of English as independent, named, regional varieties, such as Singapore English, Indian English and Nigerian English, and it generally focuses on features of pronunciation, lexis, grammar and discourse that make each variety distinct from the others (Kirkpatrick 2007; Jenkins 2009). One of the key aspects of studies into World Englishes is how they emerge with their own independent identity, with endonormative standards of pronunciation, lexis and grammar that are not linked to the standards found in traditional Englishes from places such as the UK and the USA (Schneider 2007). In contrast, research into ELF typically considers how people from different countries interact. In other words, while studies of World Englishes generally focus on the distinct features of national varieties of English, research on ELF usually considers common patterns that are shared by speakers from disparate backgrounds.

Nevertheless, it is fundamentally incorrect to suggest that research on ELF is proposing the emergence of a single variety of English. Indeed, even though it seeks to investigate some of the shared patterns by which people from different backgrounds communicate, it always acknowledges and indeed celebrates the fact that there continues to be wide variation in the ways that English is used around the world.

A model that has been highly influential in the study of World Englishes is that of the Three Circles of English (Kachru 1985, 2005), in which the traditional varieties of English such as those of the UK, the USA and Australia are classified as being in the Inner Circle, postcolonial varieties such as those of Singapore, India and Nigeria are in the Outer Circle, and varieties in places with no colonial background and where English is taught as a foreign language such as Japan, Germany and Brazil are in the Expanding Circle. While there are some issues with this model because it is geographically and historically based (Jenkins 2009: 20–21) and it fails to reflect some of the dynamic ways that English is nowadays being used around the world (Cogo and Dewey 2012: 9), it still offers a constructive way of conceptualizing some of the different kinds of English that exist. In this book, I will make reference to the Three Circles, specifying, for example, that all the speakers in the recordings on which my research is based are from the Outer and Expanding Circles.

Despite its wide acceptance nowadays, the study of ELF still encounters substantial opposition, particularly from those who believe that we should continue to focus on native-speaker norms and patterns of English usage. Such opposition, even entrenched hostility, is especially targeted against the LFC, so I will discuss that in the next section.

2.2. The Lingua Franca Core (LFC)

The Lingua Franca Core (LFC) represents a finite set of pronunciation features which, it is claimed, are necessary for achieving international intelligibility in spoken English. It is further suggested that non-core features which occur in native-speaker pronunciation are not needed for maintaining intelligibility, and indeed some features of pronunciation (such as the use of reduced vowels in the weak forms of function words) might actually interfere with international intelligibility. As a result, it is proposed that it is not necessary to teach non-core features, though some learners may decide that they want to approximate to native-speaker patterns of speech, and this choice should of course be respected.

The features of the LFC were set out in Jenkins (2000), and were then summarized in various subsequent papers and books (e.g. Jenkins 2005: 201, 2006: 37, 2007: 23–24). The following are considered core features:

- all the consonants of native-speaker English except [θ] and [ð]
- aspiration on initial voiceless plosives
- initial and medial consonant clusters
- vowel length distinctions
- the quality of the NURSE vowel
- the placement of the intonational nucleus

In contrast, the following features are outside the LFC, so there should be flexibility in how they are realized:

- the TH sounds
- final consonant clusters
- dark-L
- vowel quality (except for the NURSE vowel)
- vowel reduction (especially in the weak forms of function words)
- rhythm
- word stress
- the shape of the intonational contour (rising, falling, etc.)

While many people would accept that some features of pronunciation are more important than others, and furthermore they would agree that there is no need for learners always to mimic speakers from the UK or USA too closely, the details of what should be included and what might be excluded from the LFC remain contentious. For example, many teachers assert that word stress is vitally important; and furthermore excluding the quality of vowels from the LFC would be alarming to many teachers and learners. In contrast, not all teachers would agree that vowel length distinctions and aspiration on initial voiceless plosives are essential for a speaker to be intelligible in international settings. It is one of the main goals of the current study to provide further data that allows us to extend the evaluation about which features of pronunciation should be included in the LFC and which might be excluded.

The LFC proposals were derived on the basis of just 40 tokens of misunderstanding between speakers from Japan and Switzerland who were engaged in comparing different versions of a map with each other (Jenkins 2000: 85). Only 27 of these tokens involved phonology, so there is clearly a need to extend the research, to analyse more instances of misunderstanding from a wide range of speakers in different conversational settings, and a few other studies have done that. Matsumoto (2011) basically concurs with the findings of Jenkins, though the suggestion that the final [t] in *present* is a core feature (p. 102) is a little surprising given that it is part of a final consonant cluster which is usually considered non-core. Osimk (2011) shows that the voiceless TH sound at the start of *things* is understood better when it is pronounced as [t] than when it is [θ] for listeners from Spain, Italy, France and Germany, though the performance when it is pronounced as [s] is not so good; and she also confirms that initial voiceless plosives are recognized best with substantial aspiration. However, McCrocklin (2012), challenges the LFC proposals when she asserts that word stress is important for intelligibility, based mainly on evidence from studies of listening by native speakers, though she provides no new data from ELF settings to support this claim. Unfortunately, there have not been many other attempts to replicate Jenkins' original findings (Jenkins, Cogo, and Dewey 2011: 288).

Varying attitudes have been reported among international students towards different features of the LFC. Fowler (2010) reports that, while the majority of international students believe that use of [θ] and [ð] for the TH sounds is important, most of them do not feel that use of weak forms is helpful. There is some logic to this: pronunciation of voiceless TH as [t] instead of [θ] can be regarded as a loss of information, as it results in *tin*

and *thin* not being distinguished; but the avoidance of weak forms retains useful distinguishing information, so for example *have* and *of* will always be differentiated (while they may both be said as [əv] by speakers in the Inner Circle).

In fact, the attitudes of ELF speakers towards the TH sounds may depend on how they are realized. Shaw, Caudery, and Petersen (2009: 195) found that, over a period of several months, exchange students in universities in Sweden and Denmark stopped using [s] and [z] for the TH sounds, but the use of [t] and [d] remained stable. This finding supports the suggestion of Osimk (2011) that the latter pronunciation is more acceptable in ELF settings.

Although it seems that some international students may welcome the LFC proposals, many English language teachers have less positive attitudes. For example, Scheuer (2005) asserts that LFC-based teaching is harmful for students, and Sobkowiak (2005) insists that it is not suitable for adoption in Poland. Jenkins (2005) contends that this opposition arises because of misconceptions about what the LFC represents, and Kirkpatrick (2007) argues that ELF-based teaching should be empowering and liberating for non-native English teachers. But perhaps we should not be too surprised if teachers are reluctant to adopt quite radical proposals that seem to challenge so much that they believe in.

There is, therefore, a need to consider in depth the extent to which LFC-based teaching might interfere with intelligibility, or whether conversely it might actually enhance the ease with which speakers can make themselves understood in international settings.

2.3. Intelligibility

Smith (1992) makes a helpful distinction between three different kinds of understanding:

- intelligibility: recognition of words and utterances
- comprehensibility: understanding the meaning of words and utterances
- interpretability: understanding the meaning behind words and utterances

In other words, intelligibility refers to our ability to identify the words in an utterance, comprehensibility is about whether we know what the utterance means, and interpretability is concerned with the pragmatic implication of an utterance.

While these three concepts usefully remind us that intelligibility is a multifaceted concept, so it is not just about correctly identifying words, in fact applying the terms when dealing with real data can be problematic. For example, Nelson (2011) discusses the three-way distinction in some detail, and he suggests (p. 63) that the following quote from a novel by Chinua Achebe raises issues for interpretability: *I want one of my sons to join these people and be my eyes* (meaning ‘I am sending you as my representative’). But is it really true that this would be hard for people from other cultures to understand? Although some people around the world might find it an odd way of saying something, there does not seem to be much difficulty in comprehending what it means. In contrast, Nelson claims (2011: 108) that when his Australian-born sister-in-law noticed some yoghurt was spoiled and said that it was *off*, this was not an issue for intelligibility, but rather a “lively and interesting” way of expressing herself. But on what basis can we determine that saying some food is *off* is understandable to people from other backgrounds while asking someone *to join these people and be my eyes* causes problems for interpretability?

This illustrates that identifying the interpretability of utterances is tough, as it is difficult to know the extent to which people really understand the implications of everything that others are saying. Pickering (2006) similarly notes that the concept of interpretability is hard to measure. For this reason, in my research on misunderstandings, I will be focusing mostly on intelligibility at the word and phrase level: I classify something as an instance of misunderstanding if there are some key words that the listener cannot identify or does not understand, even if at the wider level they may be able to follow the gist of the utterance quite successfully. And the two principle questions I investigate are: which phonological, lexical and grammatical factors have an influence on intelligibility? And how are misunderstandings dealt with and avoided?

Munro, Derwing, and Morton (2006) also make a useful but different three-way distinction between intelligibility, comprehensibility, and accentedness. Intelligibility involves the recognition of words and sentences, so this is similar to the way the term is used by Smith (1992). However, the other two terms are different: comprehensibility is concerned with the ease with which listeners understand an utterance; and accentedness is the degree to which the pronunciation of an utterance deviates from a norm.

The research of Munro et al. is based in Canada, and their classification only really makes sense in an Inner-Circle setting where a norm is reasonably well specified, as it is not clear what accentedness would mean in many Outer-Circle contexts, a point that Munro (2008: 193) acknowledges when

he notes that the distinction between a foreign and a native accent is blurred in the context of nativized varieties of English. For example, if one asked listeners in Singapore to estimate the accentedness of an utterance, some of them would judge RP British pronunciation to be more accented than Singapore speech, while others would make the opposite judgment. Therefore, while Munro et al. make some insightful observations about the multifaceted reactions to accented speech, for example showing that familiarity with a variety of English does not always enhance the intelligibility of utterances in that variety, I will not adopt their classification here.

It is of course important to recognize that intelligibility is not just about whether something is understood or not, and Munro and his colleagues conduct valuable research into the ease with which listeners understand various kinds of speech. However, assessing the comprehensibility of conversational data remains a problem. While it is not too difficult to determine whether listeners understand an utterance, for example by asking them to transcribe the words that they hear, it is rather harder to measure the ease with which interactants in a conversation understand the words, and any such evaluation is inevitably rather subjective. Some interesting work in this respect has been done by Björkman (2009), who uses questionnaires to determine how irritating certain non-standard features of speech are judged to be by ELF listeners in a Swedish university, and she finds (p. 242) that disrupted word order is the feature which is most often reported to be irritating, while tense usage and non-marking of plural nouns are among the features that are judged to be the least irritating.

Quite apart from the classification of the different aspects of intelligibility, there seems to be widespread agreement that English spoken by people from the Inner Circle is not necessarily more intelligible than that produced by people in the Outer and Expanding Circles. For example, Smith and Rafiqzad (1979) report that the speech of someone from the USA was found to be less intelligible than that of someone from Malaysia, and Smith and Bisazza (1982) found the same when comparing an American speaker with someone from India. Furthermore, there is plenty of anecdotal evidence that many ELF speakers have problems understanding people from the Inner Circle. House (2003: 567) reports that few misunderstandings emerge in ELF discourse in contrast with the many misunderstandings she found in her native–non-native data. And Shaw, Caudery, and Petersen (2009: 192) quote exchange students at universities in Sweden and Denmark who observed that although Americans and Australians were friendly, they were hard to understand, partly because they did not pronounce all the sounds. In fact, there is widespread agreement that ELF speakers are able to

make their speech more intelligible if they do not try to approximate native-speaker norms, often because they are good at adopting suitable accommodation strategies such as repetition and paraphrasing (Cogo 2009: 257).

One might expect that familiarity with a variety of English should improve the degree to which it is intelligible. However, in a review of research on intelligibility in ELF, Pickering (2006) concludes that this is not necessarily true. She also notes that there is a wide range of factors that influence intelligibility, including the attitude of the listener, familiarity with the speaker or the topic, and level of tiredness.

Something that might be discussed in connection with intelligibility is the concept of fluency. Most speakers of English hope that their speech is judged to be fluent, and achieving fluency seems to be one of the central goals of language teaching. But what do we actually mean by fluency? Is it connected with rate of speaking? Or with linking words together? Or with avoiding pauses? In fact, Hüttner (2009) observes that the concept of fluency becomes even more problematic in an ELF setting. And one might observe that all three features just mentioned may under some circumstances interfere with intelligibility. In fact, speaking more slowly, avoiding too much linking between words, and using appropriate pausing would seem to be quite advantageous in making oneself easily understood. And, as will become apparent, a fast speaking rate is one of the factors that contributes most often to misunderstandings occurring.

One other aspect of fluency suggested by Prodromou (2008) is the easy use of idiomatic fixed chunks. However, although use of these established phrases certainly facilitates the production of speech, it can also lead to misunderstandings if listeners do not know the idioms. I will discuss the occurrence of unfamiliar idioms in Chapter 5.

2.4. Misunderstandings

Misunderstandings of course occur in all kinds of communication, native-speaker as well as ELF. The question arises, therefore, whether misunderstandings are more frequent in ELF settings or not. Conventional wisdom suggests that they are. Yet research indicates that this common-sense assumption is not borne out in reality, as ELF speakers tend to be particularly adept at avoiding misunderstandings, and ELF discourse is actually usually rather successful (Mauranen 2006; Kaur 2010: 205). It is, nevertheless, of considerable interest to investigate what kinds of misunderstandings occur, what causes them, and how they are dealt with.