

# The globalisation of English: vocabulary

**Robin Walker** continues his series on English as a lingua franca by looking at lexis.

The work of Jennifer Jenkins that I described in my previous article on teaching pronunciation for English as a lingua franca (*MET* 24: 4) not only served to shake things up for the teaching of pronunciation, it was also a catalyst for action in other areas of research into English as a lingua franca, notably grammar and vocabulary. If a phonological core could be identified for pronunciation, it was argued, it might be possible to determine a similar core for the lexicogrammar of ELF. And, if corpus linguistics had revealed often unsuspected truths about how native speakers really used English words, phrases and idioms, presumably a corpus of non-native speaker spoken communication could do the same for ELF.

The first such corpus was the Vienna-Oxford International Corpus of English (VOICE: <https://www.univie.ac.at/voice/>), set up by Barbara Seidlhofer in 2005 in order to collect and describe ELF lexicogrammar. The VOICE project ran for eight years, in which time it brought together just over one million words of spoken ELF in three different domains of use: professional, educational and leisure. The data all came from naturally occurring, non-scripted face-to-face interactions, and as with the data from NS corpora, it gives fascinating insights into how users of ELF make use of their resources in English (and other languages they know) in order to ensure maximum communicative efficiency, even if this is at the expense of formal, native-speaker norms of correctness.

In 2008, the ELFA project (English as a Lingua Franca in Academic Settings: <http://www.helsinki.fi/englanti/elfa/>) produced a second, one-million word corpus of spoken ELF, although this time, as the name indicates, limited to the educational domain. As with the VOICE corpus, ELFA is freely available to researchers, and is now supported by the Written ELF in Academic Settings (WrELFA) project, a logical extension to work on spoken English as a lingua franca.

These and other smaller corpora initially sought to describe ELF grammar and vocabulary, and in the early 2000s it was thought that with enough data it would eventually be possible to codify ELF in much the same way that linguists had codified Outer Circle Englishes such as Nigerian English or Indian English. However, this direction of study was soon seen to be flawed, and increasingly researchers shifted their attention away from the specific forms and the possible codification of an ELF variety, and towards the processes that lay beneath those forms, together with the identification of the ways interlocutors make use of English when employing it as a lingua franca. That is to say, ELF as a variety of English was abandoned for ELF as a way of using English in international contexts in order to achieve maximum clarity and communicative effectiveness. The problem with varieties was that by definition they are stable, linguistically and geographically identifiable variations on what is considered to be Standard English. In contrast, analysis

of the data coming in to the VOICE and ELFA projects made it clear that the ways in which speakers made use of ELF were anything but stable, at least in terms of their linguistic form.

In retrospect, the dynamic and variable ways in which speakers of ELF make use of the language system should not have come as a surprise. If it was possible to identify a *lingua franca core* for pronunciation, this was largely because phonology is an essentially closed and relatively small system. The same cannot be said of the vocabulary of English (or indeed any language); a characteristic of living languages is the way that their lexis grows and changes, evolving constantly in order to allow users to deal with changes in the world around them. In order to understand the nature of the lexicogrammar of ELF, Seidlhofer argued in 2009, we need to move our attention away from the individual linguistic forms that speakers use, or the frequency with which they use them, and focus instead on the communicative functions that these forms fulfil.

This shift away from a focus on (correct) form towards a focus on processes involved in creating meaning is important for us as teachers in ELT classrooms. The Non-Standard forms recorded in the data of VOICE, ELFA and similar projects are simply surface manifestations of deeper underlying processes, and it is only through comprehending these deeper processes that we can modify our classroom practice in order to better serve learners who need to use English for lingua franca communication.

## Lexical innovation in ELF

The last few months have seen constant references to Brexit, the UK departure from the EU. But only two years ago, the word did not exist. In fact, *Brexit, vape, selfie stick, dronie* (a video selfie taken by a drone) and *Vlogger* (a teenager whose videos attract millions on YouTube) were among 30 terms in a wordsearch published by *The Guardian* (2014) as a celebration of the buzzwords that defined 2014.

As I said earlier, languages are naturally and necessarily open to the creation of words and expressions in order to express new concepts, or be able to name new objects or inventions. One of the fascinating outcomes of the study of the lexicogrammar of ELF, however, has been the confirmation that as users of the language, non-native speakers are just as capable of creating new words and idioms, that is to say capable of lexical innovation, as native speakers.

From an EFL/ESL perspective, these non-native speaker coinages are usually explained as errors, or, at best, as interlanguage. However, work by researchers in projects such as VOICE and ELFA, shows that there are clear regularities underlying the sometimes surprising forms these ELF innovations take. Pitzl *et al* (2008), for example, identified a number of categories of ELF lexical innovation, of which the use of prefixes and suffixes were the two most dominant. Among other things, prefixes can add an element of time (e.g. *premeditated* or *postgraduate*), place (e.g. *overlay* or *underline*), or quantity (e.g. *outpace*, *overcharge*) to a base word, negate it completely or add a sense of repetition. Pitzl and her colleagues found abundant examples of negation in ELF coinages such as *non-confidence*, *non-formal* or *non-graduate*, as well as examples of the concept of repetition expressed in innovations such as *re-enrol*, *re-orient* or *re-emplace*.

Whilst prefixes add an element of meaning without changing the base word, suffixes are normally seen as creating a new word class. The suffixes *-ment* and *-ness*, for example, generate nouns (e.g. *enrichment* or *coldness*), whilst *-able* and *-al* create

adjectives. It should not surprise us too much, then, to hear users of ELF talk about *increasement*, *forbiddenness* or *linguistical*, three of the 85 examples of affixation that Pitzl *et al* (2008) found in their analysis of some 250,000 words from the VOICE project.

As before, from an EFL/ESL perspective all of these examples constitute errors since they do not conform to native-speaker norms. From an ELF perspective, however, they are legitimate innovations, which, despite being ad hoc, obey the underlying rules of word formation for English, even though the person who has exploited the rules in order to create the term is a non-native speaker. In this respect, for classroom teachers, the work on word-building that is traditionally seen as suitable for upper-intermediate and advanced students, needs bringing in earlier given its potential for creating meaning. Similarly, learners who demonstrate any ability to use affixes to generate the meanings that they need should be praised for their command of the language rather than corrected for the ‘non-native speakerness’ of their innovations.

## Idiomatcity in ELF

Idioms and idiomatcity lie at the very heart of native-speaker use of any language, and consequently have received a great deal of attention from materials writers, teachers and learners alike. Indeed, language learning progress is often measured, consciously or otherwise, by competence in the appropriate use of idiomatic language. At the same time, second language use of idioms is fraught with difficulties. On the one hand, the meaning of idioms can seldom be grasped from dissecting the whole into its constituent parts. Expressions like *to go out on a limb* or *by the skin of your teeth* are quite opaque for learners (as they are for many native speakers: do my teeth really have ‘skin’?). In addition to this, using the right idiom in the right way, at the right time, with the right people, is not easy. Moreover, as Luke Prodromou has pointed out (2007), native speakers can be quite ‘protective’ of their language’s idiomatcity, and while they themselves happily ‘play’ with idiomatic expressions, they are often

reluctant to accept similar play from non-native speakers.

Everything seems to suggest then, that idiomatcity in ELF, with its focus on communicative effectiveness, will be quite limited, and one study shows that ELF speakers tend to use fewer idiomatic and/or formulaic expressions than native speakers. But despite this, the VOICE and ELFA data offer multiple examples of ELF idiomatcity, although as with lexis, what is revealed by analysing these examples is that whilst their linguistic form is Non-Standard in native-speaker terms, their communicative function is clearly regulated.

In an in-depth analysis of idioms in ELF, Pitzl (2009) showed that these functions not only fulfilled obvious roles such as providing emphasis, elaborating a point, or talking about abstract concepts, but also roles like furthering ‘interpersonal rapport in dealing with a tricky situation, making a sensitive proposition, bringing in your own culture, and adding humour to an interaction’ (2009: 317). Moreover, Pitzl goes on to argue that rather than trying and failing to use native-speaker idioms, interlocutors in ELF are often ‘waking up’ the metaphors that lie dormant in these idioms, and are taking advantage of this metaphoric value, since ‘the capability of metaphor processing is common to speakers of all languages and is thus shared by all ELF speakers’ (2009: 306).

In one example of idiomatcity at work in ELF two Koreans (S1, S2) were in a business meeting with three Austrian colleagues (S3, S4, S5). The Korean company had used an image that they should have had permission for. Unaware of this copyright issue, the company had produced a display of the product they were marketing, and this had been distributed in Korean stores. A discussion followed as to what to do given the infringement of the copyright laws:

S4: you have it in the stores since WHEN? since a couple of months  
 S1: only er one and a half month.  
 S2: months  
 S4: yeah then i think in THAT case **we should not wake up any ... any DOGS** by going now  
 SX: <unintelligible>

S4: NOW since it's in the  
 S1: okay  
 S4: in the trade  
 S3: yeah  
 S4: NOW to the licenser and ask for  
 permission because if they say no  
 you have to remove everything

Although on the surface the expression *we should not wake up any dogs* appears to be a failed attempt at the English idiom *Let sleeping dogs lie*, and therefore from an EFL/ESL perspective is incorrect, it was successful in the context in which it was used. The *Cambridge Idioms Dictionary* gives the meaning of *Let sleeping dogs lie* as to 'not try to change a situation because you might cause problems', and this is exactly what S4 suggests to the other members of the meeting, and also what they understood.

Interestingly, there is a similar idiom to *Let sleeping dogs lie* in German. The expression *schlafende Hunde soll man nicht wecken* means, literally, 'sleeping dogs should one not wake', and Pitzl (2009) suggests that beneath the native-speaker *Let sleeping dogs lie* there might be a more widespread image that is not unique to English-speaking cultures. In another example she repeats this argument about pan-cultural metaphors underlying idiomatic expressions in different languages. The expression *put my hands into the fire for it* was used in a meeting between Dutch and German business colleagues to mean the same as the native-speaker *to put yourself on the line*. However, as before, the ELF expression 'translates' perfectly well not only into German (*Dafür lege ich meine Hand ins Feuer*), but also into Dutch (*de hand voor iemand in het vuur steken*) and Spanish (*poner la mano en el fuego*).

Idioms in ELF, then, are unlikely to replicate the linguistic form of their native-speaker counterparts, but will carry a similar meaning, with the underlying metaphor being reintroduced by means of a variation of the original expression. In addition, ELF idiomatic language will also sometimes be characterised by metaphoric expressions that have been created by transplanting other language idioms into English. Finally, ELF users may come up with entirely novel idioms, with a metaphorical image being created

'online' as a conversation develops.

Whatever the source, ELF will not be devoid of idiomaticity, and the idiomatic expressions we encounter when using ELF cannot meaningfully be judged as successful or not because of their proximity to native-speaker idioms. This means that in the classroom we need to encourage the creative use of idioms, rather than the memorisation of existing and future native-speaker idioms that are not internationally transparent in their meaning, and which as a result may not be communicatively efficient in a predominantly non-native speaker environment such as ELF.

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Native speakers constantly create meaning in new ways. They coin new phrases as the need arises, often from playing with relatively simple language to produce lexical innovations such as *sheeple*, *docudrama* or *contactless*. With such a constant influx of new words and expressions, communication would be threatened if it were not for the fact that native speakers are skilled at using context to help them determine meaning when they come across lexical innovations for the first time.

In classes where the focus is on English as a lingua franca, learners should be encouraged to do the same as native speakers in terms of both creating and dealing with lexical innovations. In this sense in terms of production, we need to equip learners with words rich in potential meaning, rather than burden them with memorising the latest crop of native-speaker idioms and expressions. Parallel to this, we need to instil in learners the confidence to use context to help them access the meaning(s) in their interlocutors' utterances. This is not an easy task, but it would be wrong to allow learners to think that a good command of native-speaker idiomaticity is the best route to effective communication when English is used as a lingua franca.

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