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The Seidlhofer Effect: Gaining traction for ELF in language planning and educational change

While preparing this paper I observed the following:

At the steamy and crowded visa issuing office of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar, in central Bangkok, Thailand, a long line of Thais and tourists wait patiently to lodge their application for a short-term entry permit to visit Myanmar. In between writing installments to this paper about Barbara Seidlhofer and her immense contribution to our understanding of how communication is achieved in situations such as these, I found myself finalizing an application for a multi-entry visa, and observing the interaction of Myanmar officials with the mass of intending visitors to their country. The default language is English, very occasionally some use some Thai, some of the officials are Thai nationals and they can identify a Thai name on the application and switch to Thai for a greeting, but often revert to English to transact the exchange. In truth, the default is clearly ELF, and this is its natural home. There is even rarer use of Burmese, since few co-nationals seek visas. The routines of negotiating a visa involve pointing to signs written in Thai, Burmese and English, multilingual greetings and negotiation, code-switching to English even in Thai or Burmese-begun conversations, and prominent use of English terms or phrases. English technical terms function like nominal baubles in the flow of talk: "Work is Prohibited!", reads one officer loudly to the drumbeat of an official stamp, then directly to the applicant "No Work!". Work is Prohibited lays down the law, and fulfills the man's duty, No Work, communicates the message. Functional ELF and formal English co-exist in a dynamic diglossia, but they are both embedded in talk in Thai and Burmese.

The routines and practices of ordinary conversation in multilingual settings require systematic study, such as Barbara Seidlhofer would do, and not casual observation, as I have done, but even casual observation confirms that English here is a tool under the control of users devising and negotiating its patterns and rules for their immediate needs. In this hot and steamy Bangkok room, Myanmar officials talk to Thais, Japanese, New Zealanders, Australians, Norwegians, Portuguese and Taiwanese. The shared working assumption is that a code of relatively unproblematic communication, day in day out, at the morning application lodging session, and the afternoon visa retrieval session, is available to them all and that it is 'some kind of English'. No one calls it ELF, or anything other than English. But it isn't any inner circle English, the norms of this English, its words and the overarching communication pattern of which this 'some kind of English' is a part, is, essentially, ELF. An official reproached an applicant at one stage (I didn't hear the initial communication) with: "Just, say in English". Even for Southeast Asian neighbours, Myanmar and Thailand, one of which proclaims its defeat of British colonial control and the other boasts its resistance to it; ELF serves quotidian dealings on official business of state.

1 Scholarly research and practical effects

What are some policy and political consequences of knowledge generation in English as a lingua franca (ELF) (Lo Bianco 2014)? The question points to more general links, actual and potential, between scholarly work of academic researchers, with its increasingly refined concepts and empirical grounding, and the practical effects of the almost ubiquitous use of English as an auxiliary language

across the world, a kind of unplanned Esperanto. It is these links that I discuss in this chapter, drawing on aspects of language planning theory to try to understand connections between academic ideas and practical action.

If we take a broad definition of language planning, we need to include both its textual form, meaning the laws and regulations enacted on language questions, and the processes of debate and argument that surround the textual, which we can call the discursive form of language planning. The picture won't be complete without including the actual practices of language use, since these influence both debate and law making.

Some processes of academic argument and language practice solidify into language policy, i.e., into settled positions such as official determinations and powerful procedures on questions of language (Lo Bianco 2010a, 2010b). Making academic knowledge count in the powerful domains where official language decisions are made can be likened to traction, i.e., to gaining a secure footing in an argument and influencing the eventual practical outcome of a policy conversation.

2 English neutrality: qu'est que c'est?

English in its global role can't claim the pristine neutrality that Esperanto would and does, since English carries within its grammatical sinews the imprint of its cultural and territorial origins (Wierzbicka 2006). When taught as a foreign language, learners are invited to access the cultural codes of its grammar, native communication forms, and its canonical literature. In 'second' rather than 'foreign' language teaching of English, cultural content is often treated as an obstacle to effective mastery, rather than an object of study in its own right. ELF displaces attention away from inherited culture to the culture in interaction of practical functional usage of English by speakers, regardless of their formal competence levels.

Typically, in English taught as a foreign language, EFL, the culture of Anglo- and other native Englishes is not only not neutral; it is a key attractor to its study. It is precisely the particularity of English the learner wishes to access, the teacher wishes to impart, the curriculum designers promote. Typically, in English taught as a second language, ESL, the inherited culture of and in English, its predisposing meanings and nuances, its quirks, as it were (Macpherron and Randolph 2014), are there to be explicitly targeted to enhance comprehension and effective communication.

Proponents of invented languages often rely on a neutrality claim. Essentially this holds that an artificial or invented language is neutral and a natural human language can never be neutral due to its historical roots, native speakers and institutions, but also because there are asymmetrical associations between native speakers and new learners. These asymmetries are of various kinds, such as the fluency advantage, the norm setting privilege, the correctness judging authority that native speakers enjoy over non-native speakers. In addition to these powerful ways that native speakers are positioned in relation to new learners there are many costs involved in language mastery which new learners must bear but native speakers rarely need to; expenditures of time, money, but also of opportunities forgone, often into adult years, of formal study. There are also wider economic benefits that accrue to native institutions, publishers, teachers and societies, which profit from through provision, certification, assessments and cultural production.

Many intellectuals, most famously the inventor of Esperanto, Ludwig Zamenhof, from the middle of the 19th century all across Europe could perceive that a global age was imminent. The idealists among them devoted themselves to inventing forms of communication suitable for such a world. Mostly imagined their invented solution would be an auxiliary code of communication to neutralize the clear

advantages of a natural language with its native speakers and institutions, invariably that of a more powerful nation and its individuals. The language planning the many inventors engaged in however has failed to furnish the world with a convenient, neutral, widely accepted auxiliary language, and instead language politics, imperial history, global economic and unequal technological arrangements in the world have favoured the emergence of a natural language, English, with all its asymmetries of power and privilege to occupy the functions of the widespread lingua franca. Under these circumstances it is inevitable that questions, of 'neutrality' and bias will continue to be raised and calls made for a more equitable and 'neutral' communication order. What is or could be the role of ELF in such a context?

3 Towards ELF

Barbara Seidlhofer's work is present in this context in a 'scientific' way, but it also shapes the language planning being done to reconcile and accommodate to the new language arrangements of our world, language planning processes that must continue for some generations into the future. Academic work 'shapes' practice, through processes of traction, as discussed below. Seidlhofer's work has deeply influenced world thinking on the fact that English has garnered this role of widespread if not yet fully global auxiliary code of communication, and her focus on ELF is an acknowledgement that it isn't – and can never be – neutral in the way the idealist language inventors of the 19th century thought a shared and common language of humanity should be. While contemporary global English cannot be described as 'shared and common language of humanity', it has the largely uncontested role of the predominant lingua franca. This fact, and this role, and its unplanned (though certainly not unpromoted and not disinterested global function, see Phillipson 1992), creates ethical as well as scholarly questions, and poses deep challenges for global language policy.

In her teaching and research on discourse analysis, corpus linguistics, sociolinguistics, *pragmatics* and phonology, Barbara Seidlhofer has addressed a wide range of mainstream academic linguistic questions, such as pronunciation and summarization but she has ranged well beyond these for example, examining controversies in applied linguistics (Seidlhofer 2003). However, she is most recognized and has had most impact with regard to this precise problem of how to understand English as a lingua franca (Seidlhofer 2011). It is these questions and challenges that Barbara Seidlhofer's work on ELF has brought into prominence both in her own writing and as the founding director of the *Vienna-Oxford International Corpus of English* (VOICE), funded by the Austrian Science Fund (FWF) from 2005 to 2013, to facilitate the empirical analysis of naturally occurring spoken ELF, a domain where the problem of how to account for culture, advantage and neutrality abounds.

4 Language planning's everywhere

Even if it lacks a precise and conscious purpose such as the clear mandate of VOICE, the assembling of corpora is always an act of language planning; explicit knowledge of language and especially of its natural, functional tendency towards variation generates descriptive concepts and interpretations of phenomena that influence how communication is understood and represented. If these scholarly characterisations gain traction, they percolate beyond academic life and scholarly discussions. An explicit language planning process to influence practice in education, publishing, or formal policy would sponsor mechanisms to allow academic distinctions, terms, concepts and so on to reorganize the existing stocks of knowledge, conceptual systems and ultimately the practices and policies of non expert policy makers. The entry point to those conversations must be the concrete problems of contemporary language usage, of intercultural and international communication, which of course range well beyond any kind of English alone, and will always be located in multilingual contexts, posing problems in language education, language use and language policy.

The slow transfer of knowledge, from language focused research to domains whose focus of activity is not language, but the transaction of business, the imparting of skills, the production and marketing of entertainment, the enforcement of law or the delivery of health and medical services, is a process of making explicit knowledge of language count. In these domains, English is not only an auxiliary language, but communication itself is perceived to be instrumentally organized, in the service of disciplines, professions or activities with their own rich stocks of concepts, concerns and categories of understanding. The move from language to 'practice' requires gaining a hearing, being enfranchised to speak and be heard. The most direct route to this role, in other words, the fastest way to influence policy, is evaluate practice. When academics are invited to evaluate practice the voice of the researcher can gain authority by being admitted to policy making conversations. A credible critique of practice in the terms important to the professional field requires researchers to stick close to their mastery of knowledge, their technical skill. Occupying a voice and a presence in policy conversations requires being admitted through having consequential knowledge. Policy conversations are a particular kind of discussion. A policy conversation can be seen as a search for solutions, and a search for solutions follows from an acceptance of what constitutes the problem. At its most conventional, policy making is a process of responding to named, agreed problems.

5 Influencing policy conversations

A policy conversation usually comprises two types of interlocutors, either directly present or through delegates: a non-elected official and an elected representative. The official participates on the basis of the responsibility they hold for implementing decisions taken by political authorities. Elected officials participate in policy conversations on the basis of the sovereignty citizens entrust in them through elections. Neither official nor politician claims, or desires, expertise in the way a scholar is associated with expertise, i.e. expertise arising directly from research they conduct, supervise or otherwise produce or possess.

Policy conversations gravitate around problems that arise in interaction between citizen subjects and their political representatives, and are reviewed or modified when rival political representatives challenge current arrangements. This process of challenging current arrangements occurs in the *agitational space* of discursive politics, that is argument around change, and it involves struggle for political advantage. Gaining advantage confers the authority to engage in decision-making. Yet the politician, having gained this authoritative role exercises it, usually, 'on advice' sourced from the non-elected official, whose expertise is usually generic in nature and premised on delegation from the sovereign citizens. Politicians, of course, additionally source advice from ideology producers and enhancers in their political constituencies, their party, the party committee, the party platform, and then interpret the multiple sources of these according to their own interests, needs and abilities, and what the non-elected official systems allow. The latter are constrained by the need to meet criteria of efficiency and effectiveness in the management of public finances, in the running of authorized programs. Some areas of policy that involve language questions are education, immigrant selection, and visa issuing, marketing and conducting foreign trade, citizenship processes, innovation and labour market planning.

In academic circles there is a tendency to repudiate policy conversations as instrumentalist or crudely political, by which is meant interest-laden or even corrupt. These are contrasted with the substantive and qualitative domain of scholarly life. This depiction relies on a classic binary, the dichotomy between technical and political domains. Yet few fields of endeavor are wholly technical or wholly political, and the outcome of some decades of general policy analysis shows clearly that rather than a dichotomy, for the most part, there is a fused continuum between purely technical and purely political

extremes. Policy conversations and decision-making processes in general are typified by elements of information, ideology and interests (Weiss 1983). No actor within these processes is wholly characterized by and few conversations are devoid of elements of knowledge, even when their prime focus is how to wield power, make decisions, deploy resources and gain advantage for having done so.

6 Policy conversations involving ELF

Barbara Seidlhofer's approach to language study has been to focus squarely on variation, on linguistic diversity, how to account for it, describe it, and what the consequences of the inevitability of such variation are for systems of education, publishing or governance. Many discussions in applied linguistics are animated by concern that globalisation will lead to linguistic and cultural homogenization. In her work Seidlhofer (2008b: 33.1) addresses these concerns directly: "diversity is a necessary consequence of language spread, in the sense that English will naturally vary as it is appropriated and adapted to serve the needs and purposes of communities other than those of Inner Circle native speakers".

Throughout the large body of her writings it is clear that she is a variationist, for whom language variation is unavoidable, being a result of the multiple contexts and purposes of its use and the identities of its users, and it is also clear that ELF is not a transitional stage to a better learned, more masterful, and native-like English for the millions of its speakers across the world. This latter claim, in truth an empirically demonstrated fact, is a radical challenge to conventional ways to think about language.

This is true for any language of course, but the global role of English makes things more complicated. English will continue to have its proud past owners, its native speakers, who must increasingly accept that they don't own global English. Unlike an invented language, English as international language involves and will also involve co-existing variant and the original canonical forms, which themselves are also developing.

In the policy conversations that increasingly arise around global English the message from Seidlhofer and her colleagues is a direct challenge to what is taken to be the proper way to think and talk about language. ELF, like any language put to diverse uses will, through the process of appropriation by new speakers, in new contexts and for new purposes, be made to adapt, the form will bend to the function, to serve needs of communities far away in time, place and culture from the originating and 'natively using' communities in the "Inner Circle".

This ELF is "democratized and universalized in the 'exolingual' process of being appropriated for international use" (Hülmbauer, Böhringer, and Seidlhofer 2008: 27). But what does it really mean to say that a language has been "democratized"? To claim that a language has been universalized is more readily comprehensible; this describes a spatial distribution sufficient that the language is encountered all over the globe and in many fields. To say that a language has been "democratized" requires substantial reflection. Are communicative norms or wider codes of any language, are its standing and use, ever "democratic"?

In the seminal work of Braj Kachru (1990 [1986]) and his three circles of English the expanding or outermost circle was characterized as "norm dependent", whereas the inner circle, of old native speakers, was a "norm providing" source. Seidlhofer and other ELF scholars argue that this norm supply system breaks down in relation to ELF because users don't rely on, absorb, acknowledge or even are aware of native norms. Instead such users deploy spoken ELF in what are locally and immediately functional ways. Generating, and negotiating effective communicative norms *in situ* that

serve the situated purpose makes such speakers not imperfect learners of standard or native speaker English, but competent, fully developed users of ELF, which is one part of their multilingual communicative repertoire. ELF therefore can only be understood within multilingual settings, not as a subtractive or replacing code but a supplemental resource in contact situations.

In this conception, Seidlhofer's (2011) sophisticated conception of variation, ELF is a meaning-making resource for polyglot individuals in multilingual settings, which bolsters communication. In this way ELF intensifies and diversifies the number and range of conversations and exchanges that are possible across many boundaries of incomprehension that would otherwise exist. The knowledge that ELF is available to speakers fosters efforts at communication since the expectation arises that communication practically anywhere is possible. In this sense ELF is a social semiotic resource of the global era, but one that is embedded in an already richly diverse multilingualism.

This is a different, though compatible, notion from the critique of the role of Anglo-English in academic scholarship that is posed in Wierzbicka (2006) or, more radically, in Wierzbicka (2014). Wierzbicka's aim is not to "dethrone English in contemporary scholarship and other areas of global communication [. . .] [but] an attempt to dethrone English as the putative language of human cognition" (Wierzbicka 2014: 196). This dethroning would not deny a role for "mini or minimal English", acceptable as "the paramount auxiliary language of interpretation, explanation, and intercultural communication" as opposed the "historically shaped Anglo-English" which should not be accepted as the "voice of Truth and Human Understanding" (Wierzbicka: 2014: 196). These rejections are of the "conceptual prison" of Anglo-centrism, and what Wierzbicka is calling for as "minimal English" is not the same as a sociolinguistically grounded and variationist ELF, instead it is built from "semantic primes", a small number of semantic universals, and other categories of words to combat Anglo and Euro-centric conceptualisations. ELF, as a meaning making pragmatic resource, a portable auxiliary ability which ELF researchers observe, describe and account for, however, shares some spiritual common ground with Wierzbicka's intended de-centering.

7 Gaining Traction

ELF scholars define English functionally rather than formally, and usually cite information about the unprecedented scale or indisputable extent of English's status as global lingua franca, and especially that non native speakers greatly exceed the number of native speakers who use the language. These are premises for the culturally substantive claim of "dissociation" of the language from its originating cultural matrix, its "lingua-cultural roots" (Hülmbauer, Böhringer, and Seidlhofer 2008: 25).

But what are the language planning consequences of ELF research? What do ELF'ers desire to see change from the empirical documentation of how English as a lingua franca operates, and especially their demonstration that its norms and procedures are under the control of its competent, and multilingual, users?

Academics are increasingly called upon to make their research count. The insistence of this demand suggests a reproach against ivory tower isolation. Yet, at least within the human sciences, how do we understand what making research, i.e., new knowledge, 'count', actually means? The term I use for this is the *traction potential of knowledge*. Traction potential describes the likely impact of new academic knowledge when it is introduced into policy-making discussions.

There are vast spaces of the world where forms of Arabic, Malay, Chinese, Spanish, Portuguese, Wolof, Swahili and other languages, and smaller environments where far more circumscribed ones, function with lingua franca characteristics. ELF is one linguistic resource among these others, with

complex relations between source English and other languages, and the lingua franca functions of those other languages, and therefore form only one element in the communication repertoire of multilingual communities and polyglot individuals. Nor do interactants lack other tools to facilitate communication, including mobile, immediate online translation devices and apps.

Contemporary views of language policy and planning pay considerable attention to processes of discursive change, especially how argument shapes thinking about the deployment of public resources, in areas such as what research receives funding, or publishing decisions, admission procedures for university study, or immigration rules and regulations. This, in turn, involves understanding the roles of interactants not as undifferentiated communicators, but as agents with different positions, i.e. policy makers, be they public officials in a ministry of government or publishing agents responsible to a board of directors and shareholders, or owners, concerned therefore with a competitive market for sales and profits. Each of these has his or her own stocks of knowledge and operates with unique purposes. Academic scholars who, too often in my view, imagine themselves as having no interests, or being aligned merely with a search for truth and knowledge, are however perceived by policy makers to have clear interests. These interests can be ideological in nature or relate to personal advancement, professional pride, satisfaction, or commercial profit. While it is simplistic to imagine researchers as devoid of interest or ideology, their primary orientation and presence in policy conversations tends to be around furnishing information, or knowledge, whose purpose is usually to reorganize existing understandings of the problem being discussed or to chart new directions and in some way to inform decision making.

Possibly the earliest tangible sign of substantial traction is the take up of terminology from academic/scholarly settings and conversations to the realm of politics and policymaking. This transfer of terms is a kind of code switch, allowing the more precise meanings of researched knowledge to take root in the more agitational space of policy decision-making.

8 In conclusion

ELF must make room for itself by carving space in a crowded field: those who advocate standard language, those who repudiate English and its growing international functions, and also those who merely fear that recognition of its international functions or even substantial research on ELF lends policy and political legitimacy to the domination of global communication by English.

In a 2010 article, suggestively entitled “Giving VOICE to English as a lingua franca”, Seidlhofer (2010) asks whether English is a national language applied globally and therefore subject to critique as linguistic domination, or a new vehicle of communication. Steering a path between this Scylla and Charybdis choice, she moves from Graddol’s (2006) conception of ELF as a new language, deftly weaving through the conceptual and terminological profusion of these discussions, between a ‘domination position’ and a ‘historical process’ position. These positions are stances as much as evidence based findings, and are concerned with the origins of the current state of the world’s communication regime. Seidlhofer goes on to make the point that ELF is a “naturally adaptive process of language dynamics” (Seidlhofer 2010: 151), and the naturally occurring speech events that make up VOICE, effectively represent a ‘policy’ result.

In some of her work Seidlhofer (2008a, 2009) steps into that space where the technical seeks to shape the political. These articles accelerate her traction potential by directly focusing on the problems of global communication and the policymakers’ dilemma, but they also mark out the distinctive voice of the researcher, entering discussions about what is to be done after research evidence has been accumulated, research that sustains a strong finding about the locally controlled resource of ELF. Here

the roles of researcher, practitioner and policy maker or rather policy 'influencer' are along a single continuum.

In common with other researchers, probing into how ELF works for Seidlhofer (2008b: 33.3) involves "investigating variation as the process of the adaptive use of linguistic resources" in empirical documentation of how speakers actually use the language, what strategies and moves they make in their interpersonal interactions. The clear aim is not to document linguistic forms that settle into some kind of standard, which is partly why ELF researchers repudiate the idea that ELF can be seen as a 'variety' of English, but rather to explore its pragmatic functioning to establish meaning and serve the strategic purposes of those using/appropriating ELF in real world communication events (Seidlhofer 2008b).

These documentations expose the 'emic' or insider view of the linguistic form, and serve to bolster Seidlhofer's view that these speakers make English, in its lingua franca manifestation, work for them, their purposes and needs, and that in this process more than communication of messages occurs. Instead, ELF communication also is found to carry, signal and even create social and personal identities for its users. Pragmatic and discourse variation is premised on a view that norms are not stable, but are plastic and malleable, and therefore are changed, transformed, subverted in the process of communication and identity negotiation and identity display.

ELF is sometimes misunderstood, or misrepresented, as serving a promotional function on behalf of English as an international language. ELF researchers therefore, or in any case, devote considerable attention to the activity of change and adaptation of received norms to serve situated needs and purposes defined by interactants without reference to, often without awareness of, and certainly with little concern for, issues of deviation, or standards held up by 'native speakers' of English. They also stress ELF as an additive resource used by multilinguals to expand their communication possibilities. The clearest enunciation of these points comes in Seidlhofer's (2008b) response to a position paper on global communication which challenges ELF (Clyne and Sharifian 2008).

A major challenge for researchers who want to 'leave the lab' and influence policy is to negotiate the sometimes hostile terrain of politicised administration and public policy formulation. Many language planners study interaction between the professional communities of knowledge generators and decision makers, effectively an intercultural encounter not unlike an interaction between different ethnic cultures. Notions from inside ELF research are gaining traction in policy conversations. ELF research has demonstrated the adaptability, innovation, communicative dexterity, flexibility and resourcefulness of ELF communication. In this work, and throughout all her work, we can identify growing traction for key ideas in ELF: a true and impressive Seidlhofer effect, relevant to both the lab and Bangkok visa office.

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