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The cultural and intercultural dimensions of English as a Lingua Franca

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The cultural and intercultural dimensions of English as a Lingua Franca is a challenging collection which questions certain orthodoxies deemed to be counterproductive and of the past, such as the uncritical use of the concept of culture, the obsession with cultural differences and the straitjacketing of individuals. This volume also reminds us that culture is not always congruent with nations or ethnic groups as, “a volatile and mobile, fluid and invisible frontier can separate those who seem near, and unite those whose language and culture seem to separate” (Augé 2010:7 translated). It is therefore necessary to promote a situated understanding, which does not try to simplify and essentialise ‘other’ cultures.

This collection is also highly readable, as it sheds light on the interconnections and inter-relationships between interculturality and ELF in ways that have not often been foregrounded previously. In fact, earlier attempts to examine lingua francas have generally tended to focus more on the linguistic, syntactic, phonological and pragmatic elements of a language, as well as on intelligibility and other sociolinguistic features (see e.g. McGroarty 2006). However, using and understanding language in communication obviously goes beyond static, reified, normative and discrete forms of language and interaction to account for individuals’ (inter)subjectivities, which are influenced by a multiplicity of factors. This is why O’ Regan suggests, for example, using the term lingua franca Englishes (p. 212) to capture simultaneously the singular and the plural of intercultural encounters where more than one variant in English is present (including the personal imprint provided by each speaker). LFEs, like other lingua francas, are not cultural vacuums, as in all contexts of language use, language and culture are fundamentally connected. There is in fact no such thing as ‘neutral’ communication as all communication involves participants, settings, purposes, linguistic and other communicative medium choices, none of which are culturally neutral (Baker, 2015).

In the field of ELF studies, Jenkins, Cogo and Dewey (2011: 296) are among the first who appear to make a move into the field of interculturality when they discuss how ELF is not a neutral medium and can be used for a range of purposes, “including the projection of cultural identity, the promotion of solidarity, the sharing of humour”. Along these lines this edited volume sets out to explore and seek to understand both interpretively and critically how language and its problematic associated term ‘culture’ are constructed and reconstructed, negotiated and renegotiated through communication in intercultural encounters, thereby fully acknowledging the importance of problematising the cultural cul-de-sac. Indeed, work on interculturality nowadays requires reversing the usual direction of thought which has been polluted by essentialist and culturalist approaches to the self and other. While in the past it was always assumed that interactants would consider differences in their cultural background as relevant (cf. Holliday, 2013), evidence from this volume makes us realize that the participants’ awareness of their interlocutors’ different

cultural backgrounds may motivate them to jointly construct new communication practices and norms.

It is therefore important to work from a “diverse diversities” approach (Dervin 2008), i.e. an approach that attempts to complexify the way one observes ELF interactions. The concept of intersectionality, an analytic framework that allows the interrelating of dimensions such as gender, ethnicity, race, class, status, disabilities, language, sexuality, etc. is a fruitful path to diverse diversities. If researchers complexify their analyses by means of intersectionality, they may be able to exit the minuscule and biased box of culture that is imposed upon them.

This edited collection consists of three sections which investigate the interactions and inter-relationships among the broader concept of interculturality (and its related elements or dimensions of language, culture, identity, etc.) and English as a lingua franca, considering possible pedagogical implications and offering implications for new directions in ELF research, by means of ethnographic and discourse approaches, corpus-based and conversational analyses.

The first section, *The interconnections and inter-relationships between interculturality and ELF* contains three chapters which convincingly argue that the relationship between language and culture is contingent and emergent and not between any particular communities. In the first one Karen Risager proposes a new definition for the term ‘linguaculture’, or culture in language (p. 47). She argues that as language users transport their language resources in new cultural and migratory contexts, their linguaculture(s) influence their use of other languages they know. Therefore she claims that rather than being merely connected with a single country, a linguaculture is both individual and collective, in that it is generated thanks to the interaction with others and the context surrounding us. In fact, an individual’s linguaculture is first and foremost tied to the languages(s) one has learned first in life. Learning other languages later in life means building on the linguaculture of the first language, as personal connotations to and memories of words and phrases are transferred and a kind of language mixture develops, where the new language is supplied with linguacultural matter from the first language(s) (p. 42).

In the same vein and drawing on Baxter’s claim that linguistic fluency in English does not ensure effective intercultural communication (1983: 290) Richard Fay, Nicos Sifakis and Vally Lytra urge for a repositioning of English language education in order to embrace the intercultural communication aspects rather than privilege the linguistic ones.

Finally, in the third chapter Will Baker argues that the key notions of variability, fluidity and emergence in ELF, according to which any description of features of ELF are viewed as snapshots of an ongoing process (Jenkins et al. 2011, Seidlhofer 2011) are likely to be equally applicable to understanding the relationship between culture and language in ELF. In fact, his data show ELF users drawing on multiple cultural frames of reference in the same conversation and moving between and across local, national and global contexts in dynamic ways, thus contributing to the creation of a ‘third culture’ (Kramsch, 2011) which must be seen less as a space than as a symbolic process of meaning-making that goes beyond the dualities of national languages.

In section 2, *Grounding conceptual understandings of interculturality in ELF communication*, the readers are confronted with the data emerging from five different case-studies. By focusing on naturally occurring interactions that took place in the kitchen of a British hall of residence, Chris Jenks counters House's (2003) claim that ELF interactions are culturally neutral and shows that national identities can be strategically used to co-construct an understanding of each other and carry out practices and actions. The students involved in the exchanges rarely see themselves as 'global' citizens' or members of a lingua franca community, and their national identities are often used as social categories to engage in the intercultural interactions.

On the other hand, in Anne Kari Bjørge's study participants who came from so-called direct communication cultures (Hall, 1976) do not necessarily use this kind of communicative style when negotiating disagreement, thus showing a certain degree of cultural hybridity, not dissimilar from the attitude displayed by the students involved in the naturally-occurring spoken interactions analysed by Jagdish Kaur. In fact, the students in Kaur's study seem inclined to suspend recourse to cultural norms and practices, jointly seeking out or creating shared practices to facilitate communication in the lingua franca. This brings Kaur to assume that in intercultural settings misunderstandings may normally stem from reasons no different from those contributing to misunderstanding in intracultural communication (e.g. mishearing, ambiguity and lack of world knowledge) rather than being culture-based.

However, as Tiina Räisänen warns us, on the grounds of the evidence provided by a diachronic study focusing on a group of Finnish engineers, identity work and processes of enregisterment, i.e. the ideological identification of the content and value of particular language forms (Agha, 2007), are bound to change as individuals gain experience in intercultural encounters and are socialized into new ways of speaking.

Moreover, at times ELF can also be utterly removed from any reference to intercultural awareness, but used instead to convey indexical information about the speaker. This is what happens in Eric Henry's intracultural case study set in a Chinese city, where ELF is not directed at intelligibility, but is used to signal to the listeners the membership of a certain class/group.

Of course it is important for the readers to learn about these results, which will nonetheless need to be confirmed by further research. In fact, the scope of some of the above case studies is still quite restricted and indeed Bjørge's study only draws upon students' simulated negotiations in an oral exam situation or as part of coursework.

However, a certain and firm indication that can be drawn from this second section of the edited collection is that any nation-based cultural traditions cannot not be automatically transferable to an ELF context where cultural hybridity may come into play in participants' communicative exchanges.

Finally, in the commentary O'Regan offers a jarring reminder that we should always be vigilant of the dangers of words, in their rigidity, sedimentation and fashion. He challenges the legitimacy of the concept of ELF as a contemporary monolingual construction and instead argues for the term lingua franca Englishes (LFEs). He follows Pennycook, who states that the distinction between English as a lingua franca and lingua franca English is

important because: “the former tends towards an understanding of a pre-given language that is then used by different speakers, while the latter suggests that LFE emerges from its contexts of use” (2010: 684). He then criticises contemporary ELF research for its focus on global, mostly white elites and laments the little attention that has so far been dedicated to the marginalized of the world. However, he does not seem aware that are studies which have investigated the language of immigrants, like the one by Guido in 2008).

In actual fact, the collection as a whole is not always aware of other relevant publications in the field. If on the one hand this does not take away any of its worth, on the other hand, it could not be denied that it appears at times somewhat out of touch with the latest publications and runs the risk of introducing as groundbreaking critique issues that have already been thoroughly discussed and debated.

The critique offered by O'Regan and the various outcomes which emerge from this volume point to the limitations of the theoretical concepts of intercultural competence and intercultural dialogue, but also open up new lines of investigation towards capabilities (rather than competences) and towards ethical and responsible communication.

Approaches to language, culture and intercultural communication that, like the ones presented in this collection, emphasize the complexity and fluidity of relationships do not offer easy clues as to what should be taught or to the aims of language education. In fact, it is imperative to remember that “the strong links that have traditionally been assumed to exist between language, culture, identity, and territory do not actually hold in an era characterized by global networks of interaction and electronic communication and a massive increase in migration and social mobility” (Dorn *et al.*, 2014: 409).

In highlighting the inherent variety of communicative practices and cultural characterizations, the contributions to this edited volume validate alternative and diverse approaches to ELT that will allow its readers, be it teachers and learners, to challenge existing models and to approach the subject in a manner that better reflects the realities of their communicative and educational needs and aspirations.

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