

# IDENTITY THROUGH ENGLISH AS A LINGUA FRANCA

Snodgrass N., Iskakova G.

al-Farabi KazNU, Kazakhstan, Almaty,

nathan@centralasiaresearch.org, [gulnaz\\_iskakova@mail.ru](mailto:gulnaz_iskakova@mail.ru)

В статье рассматриваются способы, по которым английский язык как лингва франка дает информацию об идентичности. Делается обзор английского языка в качестве лингва франка и категории создания идентичности. Английский язык как лингва франка описывает языковые столкновения, в которых межактанты, не являющиеся носителями английского языка, общаются на английском языке.

This article discusses ways that English as a lingua franca (ELF) informs questions of identity. An overview of ELF and identity construction categories is given. ELF is used to describe language encounters in which non-native English speaking interactants communicate in English.

**Ключевые слова:** английский язык, лингва франка, идентичность, конструкция, гладкость речи, практикующий, изучающий

**Keywords:** English, lingua franca, identity, construction, fluidity, practicer, learner

## 1. Introduction

The past decade has seen a sharp increase in discourses on the topic of English as a lingua franca (ELF), at least in part due to Jenkins' seminal work in 2006. In her words, "ELF refers to English when it is used as a contact language across lingua-cultures whose members are in the main so-called nonnative speakers." [4] The fact that both communicants are entering the conversation in a language which is not their primary one (as well as the unique position of English in international and intercultural relations) allows for new forms of identity to be expressed. The purpose of this article is to give an overview of some of the ways that ELF informs questions of identity.

## 2. Concepts of identity construction

Theories of identity have been debated since ancient times and include such diverse viewpoints as primordialism (focusing on ancestry and biological characteristics), essentialism (essential properties without which someone would not be who s/he is), and constructionism. Today's world, especially in light of migration patterns and communication technology such as the Internet, strongly supports the view that identities are social and psychological constructs. Not only that, but they are fluid, not permanent; dynamic, not static. [5] Identity extends beyond the mere "individual conception of the self" to include cultural, religious, political, and social aspects. This is not only multi-faceted (with these different spheres), but multi-layered as the individual navigates the social definition of the "self" in relation to inner groups and larger society. [1]

Some of the more visible categories of identity would include family, race, ethnicity, country of origin, place of residence, gender, religion, socioeconomic class, and mother tongue. Less obvious categories might include the fact of living with a disability, an accomplishment (such as having a particular level of education), a particular passion (such as being a fan of a sports team), a character trait (such as being a person who works hard or keeps promises), or, for the purposes of this article, being able to communicate in English.

## 3. English language

The spread of the English language has so far been unprecedented. Initially growing due to the British colonial empire (and subsequent Commonwealth), it received a second boost with the "rise of the United States." Over time it supplanted French to become the ironically-titled "lingua franca" of international diplomacy, trade, banking, tourism, technology, and more. To date, English is the official language in 25 countries and co-official in 17 more. [3] As such, it comes of use in some unexpected ways. For instance, a study of the East Asian core of Japan, Korea, and China noted that "in many ways English is the only viable medium of communication between the three language groups... This has led some to conclude that autochthonous languages are, rather paradoxically, the real barrier to full Pan-Asianism." [7]

Christopher Jenks states, "The widespread use of English has – for better or worse – shaped the social and communicative norms and practices of many people the world over, and the likelihood of this continuing for the foreseeable future raises questions concerning English ownership, linguistic imperialism, language attrition, and mutual intelligibility, to name a few." [5] Even in a post-colonial world, English can still provide access to power. In no way does this imply any "superiority" of this language over any other. The argument of this article is that English's current role in the globe gives an opportunity to examine identity questions in a new way.

## 4. Encounters of English as a lingua franca

Not surprisingly, there are numerous, competing definitions and explanations of this globally-recognized language. "World English," "International English," and "Global English" have all been used to explain various indigenized (or not) interactions with English. An often-helpful conceptualization is Kachru's concentric circles which delineates between English-speaking countries with an "inner circle" (such as Australia), an "outer circle" (such as India), and an "expanding circle" (such as Pakistan). Each has a corresponding level of English language institutions and proficiency spread. [6]

ELF is different than these terms primarily in its *exclusion of mother tongue speakers*. ELF encounters require that English is a non-primary language for all participants. This model of inquiry has the effect of leveling the

participants. One side can not claim greater cultural authority over the word choice and syntax than the other. In this environment, people communicate differently, and it is these differences which are of interest.

In broad terms, ELF undermines the argument of linguistic causality.

Language *influences* our perception of the world but it does not restrict it. In other words, we are all capable of perceiving the world in different ways to those suggested by any one particular language or variety of language... Conceptions of English as a lingua franca... while not denying the influence of the so-called 'inner circle, native speaker countries,' reject any idea of an inevitable link between English and these countries and cultures. The multitude of users of English and the huge diversity of contexts in which English occurs underscores that in global settings there will be many varieties of English and that correspondingly there can be no one culture of English. Thus, statements proposing that the English language somehow 'contains' English culture must be rejected as essentialist when we examine English used as a lingua franca in intercultural communication." [2]

This is not to argue that there is such a thing as a culturally "neutral" language. All communication involves inherently non-neutral human beings in social settings. Indeed, any "culturally literate person understands that his or her native tongue is not neutral, but a specific medium directly influencing one's entire life." [1] It is for this reason that Lee Kwan Yew, Singapore's first Prime Minister, insisted on bilingualism. ("English will not be emotionally acceptable as our mother tongue... Mandarin is emotionally acceptable as our mother tongue... Through Mandarin... children can emotionally identify themselves as part of an ancient civilisation.") [9] The point at hand is that the breadth of ELF speakers negates the possibility of one culture dominating the discourse.

It is estimated that, in face-to-face interactions, 65%-93% of meaning is communicated nonverbally. Since removing communicants from their primary languages does not eliminate their expression or interpretation of nonverbal cues, ELF encounters provide a rich soil for the study of coding and decoding gestures, body language, facial expressions, inflection, pauses, tone, volume, accent, and more. [10] This is especially poignant given that nonverbal communication is often "perceived as more believable than verbal communication when the two are incongruent." [8] Even more revealing is the use of English—a language coming out of a low context communication culture—by those from high context communication cultures such as Japanese.

More detailed studies on ELF have shown that new categories of identity come to the forefront. The status of being a "practicer" of the English language—someone whose learning is not complete but who is actively participating in communication—is of great importance. Secondly, national/regional identity remains important, but does not receive nearly the attention as when one participant is speaking a mother tongue. Interestingly, their status as "global" speakers of English do not come up. However, language competency is a primary topic and is seen as a question which is open for public evaluation. As such, ELF encounters are a setting of public vulnerability. Interactants will use their non-membership in the category of "native speaker" to explain language deficiencies. This shows that language is not merely for communication, but a source of identity as well. [5]

Given that categories of identity include actions and activities, not merely perceptions, ELF also provides a forum in which roles can become more fluid. For instance, the "teacher/student" relationship is built on certain roles which remain rigid in many settings. When all interactants are "practicers," any one could easily assume the identity of teacher, provided that the others interpret the actions accordingly.

## 5. Conclusions

There are several concluding inferences to draw. First, there is great opportunity, even need, for more empirical study to be done on this topic. Each of the identity categories mentioned could merit its own research. Second, certain categories which one would expect to find only in academic settings (such as "learner") are present in non-academic ELF encounters. Third, a strong support is given opposing the argument that language is merely for communication, and that identity is not derived, in part, from it.

Fourth, the fluidity of the roles and identities which is present in intercultural communication through ELF challenges our understanding of the relationship between language and culture. [2] At very minimum, it must be stated that intercultural awareness is now a required skill set for those who wish to engage in the global platform of ELF. This is particularly true as it relates to nonverbal communication.

Finally, it is clear that ELF allows for new categories of identity. This sheds further light on the question of how human beings construct their own identities. In a small sense, it is one more affirmation that "to learn another language is to gain another soul."

## Literature:

1. ATAY, DERIN ; ECE, AYSE: Multiple Identities as Reflected in English-Language Education: The Turkish Perspective. In: *Journal of Language, Identity & Education* Bd. 8 (2009), Nr. 1, S. 21–34.
2. BAKER, WILL: Intercultural awareness: modelling an understanding of cultures in intercultural communication through English as a lingua franca. In: *Language and Intercultural Communication* Bd. 11 (2011), Nr. 3, S. 197–214.
3. DOGANCAI-AKTUNA, SERAN: The Spread of English in Turkey and its Current Sociolinguistic Profile. In: *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development* Bd. 19 (1998), Nr. 1, S. 24–39.
4. JENKINS, JENNIFER: Current Perspectives on Teaching World Englishes and English as a Lingua Franca. In: *TESOL Quarterly* Bd. 40 (2006), Nr. 1, S. 157.
5. JENKS, CHRISTOPHER: 'Your pronunciation and your accent is very excellent': orientations of identity during compliment sequences in English as a lingua franca encounters. In: *Language and Intercultural Communication* Bd.

13 (2013), Nr. 2, S. 165–181.

6. KACHRU, B.B.: Standards, codification and sociolinguistic realism: The English language in the outer circle. In: QUIRK, R. ; WIDDOWSON, H. G. ; CANTÙ, Y. (Hrsg.): *English in the world: teaching and learning the language and literatures*. Cambridge ; New York : Cambridge University Press for the British Council, 1985 — ISBN 0521304830, S. 11–36.

7. TAK-HUNG CHAN, LEO: Under the shadow of three lingua francae: repositioning translation in East Asia. In: *Asia Pacific Translation and Intercultural Studies* Bd. 1 (2014), Nr. 1, S. 12–27.

8. VARGAS-URPI, MIREIA: Coping with Nonverbal Communication in Public Service Interpreting with Chinese Immigrants. In: *Journal of Intercultural Communication Research* Bd. 42 (2013), Nr. 4, S. 340–360.

9. WEE, DESMOND: Singapore language enhancer: identity included. In: *Language and Intercultural Communication* Bd. 9 (2009), Nr. 1, S. 15–23.

10. WOOD, JULIA T.: *Interpersonal communication: everyday encounters*. 7th ed. Aufl. Boston, MA : Wadsworth, 2013 — ISBN 9781111346409.