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INVESTIGATING COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE (COPS) AND TRANSIENT INTERNATIONAL GROUPS (TIGS) IN BELF CONTEXTS

1. Introduction

When professionals are asked about how things 'are done' in their business context, their institution or their profession, they tend to be able to identify certain types of practices and behaviors as common or uncommon. They can usually point out official and unofficial 'codes of conduct' that are – or are not – acceptable and appropriate in their area of business. Alongside various kinds of social behavior, most business professionals can inform 'newcomers' to their business context as well as scholars about what they see as fitting use of language – and possibly also *languages[1] – in their professional context and what they consider to be essential for effective business communication. Especially, the role of *English as a corporate language alongside and in relation to other (local) *languages has been and continues to be widely investigated. In consequence, it is not surprising that the study of *English as a lingua franca in business contexts (BELF) has emerged as a prominent strand in ELF research from relatively early on (see e.g. Louhiala-Salminen et al. 2005; Nickerson 2005; Pitzl 2005; 2010; Gerritsen and Nickerson 2009; Wolfartsberger 2009; Pullin 2010; 2013; Kankaanranta and Planken 2010; Cogo 2012; 2016c and many others).

A concept that has been very influential in ELF research is the notion of Community of Practice (CoP). Building on propositions by Lave and Wenger (1991) and Wenger (1998), the Community of Practice was essentially conceived as a theory of social learning, but soon received increasing attention also in sociolinguistics, especially by Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1992) and Eckert (2000) (see also e.g. Holmes and Meyerhoff 1999; Meyerhoff 2002). As ELF researchers were beginning to voice their dissatisfaction with the traditional notion of a speech community as being unsuitable to describe constellations of ELF speakers, House (2003) was the first to mention the potential relevance of CoPs for ELF research. Although, contrary to House's (2003) original proposal, there was soon common agreement that the concept of a CoP would not be suitable to describe a global community of ELF speakers 'as a whole' (cf. Ehrenreich 2018, 37), the CoP nonetheless became increasingly important in ELF as an evolving field of research, especially when referring to ELF use in particular domains and situations. Influential contributions like Seidlhofer (2007), but also Dewey (2009) and Ehrenreich (2009) discussed and theorized the relevance of CoPs for ELF and also happened to coincide with the emergence of other prominent themes in ELF research, such as an increasing emphasis on function over form, situationality and accommodation (cf. Pitzl 2018b, 27–28 for a more elaborate discussion).

In the past 15 years, the CoP has thus become a widely used term in ELF literature, referenced in far too many publications to list here. It has been anchored in BELF research especially through the work of Ehrenreich (2009; 2010; 2011; 2018) and more recently also Cogo (e.g. 2016a), but has implicitly been present in many other BELF scholars' work as well. Despite the unquestionable relevance and impact of the CoP, most ELF scholars who have worked with the concept extensively (e.g. Smit 2010; Kalocsai 2014; Vettorel 2014) "add the caveat that communities of practice need to be treated as more fluid than originally envisaged" (Baker 2015, 92). In recent years, many researchers are likely to agree that "groupings of ELF users are not necessarily 'communities' in Wenger's sense, […] and do not necessarily engage in 'shared practices'" (Jenkins 2015, 61) and that "the CoP framework, as currently theorized, does not account well for the kinds of transient and ad hoc encounters that are arguably equally (or more?) common in ELF communication" (Jenkins 2015, 66).

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[1] Following the convention established in Pitzl (2018a; 2018b), the terms **language/s* and **variety/ies* and labels for individual *languages are written with an *symbol to convey a post-structuralist understanding of these terms that emphasize their non-boundedness and non-homogeneity.

Responding to the need for alternatives to CoPs (cf. e.g. Jenkins 2015, 76), a need which seems to have been 'lingering' in ELF research for a number of years, scholars have recently proposed other concepts to address this perceived gap. This article draws on and expands ongoing work on Transient International Groups (Pitzl 2018b; see also Pitzl 2016b; 2018a), and partly also to Transient Multilingual Communities (Mortensen 2017), and it relates this work to business contexts and to the notion of CoPs. In doing so, propositions concerning Transient International Groups (TIGs) are not intended to replace the CoP framework, but seek to offer an alternative perspective that puts a greater emphasis on individual interactions and thus can be applied also to fleeting and on-off situations. Conceptual as well as methodological suggestions made concerning TIGs thus constitute an attempt to fill what seems to be perceived as a theoretical as well as methodological gap in current (B)ELF research.

The article first offers a review of the role of CoPs in BELF research, focusing on the commonly cited three CoP criteria of mutual engagement, joint enterprise and shared repertoire (Section 2). Subsequently, Section 3 highlights some key aspects of the TIGs framework, concerning conceptualization, key aspects and methodological implications. Special prominence is given to the role of metadata and implications for data analysis (the micro-diachronic approach). The aim of the article is to show how exploring TIGs alongside CoPs can help us gain a more sophisticated understanding of the organizational and social dynamics that influence communication – not only in (B)ELF settings, but in many multilingual, inter/transcultural and/or inherently short-lived or unstable social contexts.

2. The Community of Practice (CoP) in BELF research

In business contexts, the link between CoPs and ELF communication was most prominently and initially investigated by Ehrenreich (e.g. 2009; 2010; 2011), but has since been also explored by others (e.g. Cogo 2016a; 2016b).[2] Ehrenreich's (2009) study of how *English/ELF is used – and perceived – by a group of business executives in a multinational corporation located in Germany set the tone for subsequent discussions of CoPs in BELF contexts and certainly contributed to the prominence of the CoP in ELF research more generally. Noting that "the concept cannot usefully be applied to ELF speakers in general, but rather unfolds its analytical potential when applied to particular CofPs in which ELF is used for communication" (Ehrenreich 2009, 130–131), Ehrenreich underscores that the CoP approach cannot be applied to the abstract level of a hypostatized global community of ELF speakers, but can reasonably be used only to study CoPs in particular (B)ELF contexts. Discussing Wenger's (1998) three CoP criteria of mutual engagement, joint enterprise and shared repertoire, Ehrenreich (2009, 131–134; see also 2018, 39–44) relates these criteria to her German BELF contexts. The subsequent discussion is structured along the same lines, pointing out potential limitations of the CoP approach with regard to each criterion.

2.1 Mutual engagement takes time

Concerning *mutual engagement*, Ehrenreich states that "[f]or a community of practice to evolve as a coherent group, its members need to interact on a regular basis" (Ehrenreich 2018, 39). In business contexts, this means that "diverse and complex interpersonal relationships develop, in which collegiality and competition are played out in various and highly dynamic ways" (Ehrenreich 2009, 131–132). Crucially, she notes that the business executives she interviewed tend to be members of several CoPs simultaneously (Ehrenreich 2009, 131; 2018, 41), often in different roles "as core or peripheral" (Ehrenreich 2018, 41), "fairly neophyte" (Ehrenreich 2009, 132) or "experienced" (Ehrenreich 2009, 132) members.

All these observations are certainly apt and thus underscore the relevance of the CoP approach for some BELF contexts. At the same time, they also draw attention to potential limitations of the approach: mutual engagement (i.e. the formation of interpersonal relationship through repeated interactions) needs *time*. In some professional contexts, like service encounters in shops or at hotel receptions, in medical consultations or in courtroom proceedings, interactants may be unacquainted. Speakers may well only spend a few minutes together and never meet again. The CoP criterion of mutual engagement, needed for the formation of

[2] It is important to note that "empirical work that does not explicitly apply the community of practice framework may nevertheless offer de facto portrayals of exactly such communities, their members and their shared repertoires" (Ehrenreich 2018, 39). Examples of such studies are Kankaanranta and Planken (2010) and Räisänen (2013) (cf. Ehrenreich 2018, 39).

interpersonal relationships, is thus absent in these contexts. If investigations of professional BELF contexts are to include these different types of fleeting constellations (e.g. professional-lay interactions between service providers and clients/customers), the CoP approach will be of limited usefulness. Though the professionals participating in the contexts may indeed be members of various professional CoPs, other speakers who participate in the interaction may not. Thus, the participants observed in an interaction are certainly not members of the same CoP, nor will they ever form a common CoP.

2.2 Joint enterprise: Multiplicity, complications or lack thereof

Let's turn to the second CoP criterion of *joint enterprise*. In many BELF contexts, the overall goal of companies and thus the general joint enterprise of individual CoPs and teams within companies might be described as "'profit-making' [which] defines their everyday practices" (Ehrenreich 2018, 41). The general aim of 'profit-making' does not only apply to the corporate contexts studied by Ehrenreich (2009; 2010; 2018), of course, but also in many other BELF publications (e.g. Louhiala-Salminen et al. 2005; Pitzl 2005; 2010; 2016a; Kankaanranta and Planken 2010; Pullin 2010; 2013; Cogo 2012; 2016a; 2016b, 2016c; Franceschi 2017). At first glance, the joint enterprise criterion might thus seem not very problematic for many business contexts. In comparison to leisure settings, business professionals at least implicitly or explicitly share the common goal of 'making money' (if nothing else). Yet, this assumption becomes questionable in service encounters and other professional-lay interactions again. In these situations, only one party (i.e. the service provider) might be intent on profit-making and/or fulfilling some job-related goal, whereas the other party (e.g. a client or customer) might actually spend money.

A possible response to this objection might be to posit that, for example, in a service encounter all parties share the goal of successfully completing the transaction (i.e. giving/receiving the service). One might be tempted to argue that interactants share a joint enterprise. Yet, if the service provided *by means of* and *through* linguistic interaction is in itself actually *the only joint enterprise* that participants share, a so-called 'joint enterprise' could be evoked for any interaction. Any chance encounter on the street that prompts a short conversation could be claimed to constitute a 'joint enterprise' (e.g. in the sense of participants having 'a chat with a stranger'). Needless to say, such a broad interpretation and operationalization of joint enterprise would erode its meaningfulness as a characteristic of CoPs. It would make the term "explanatorily vacant" (Meyerhoff 2002, 528; cf. Ehrenreich 2009, 132; 2018, 42), circular and thus no longer useful for deciding on whether or not a social constellation constitutes a CoP. Therefore, a joint enterprise indicative of a CoP clearly needs to be more than just interaction.

A further complication to identifying a joint enterprise with regard to a particular group of speakers is that, as pointed out above, business professionals usually tend to be members of multiple business CoPs simultaneously.[3] This makes it difficult – and sometimes impossible – to determine at which organizational level (or levels) employees actually collaborate and share an enterprise *in a particular interaction*. In addition to a general corporate level, at which profit-making may be the general goal of a company, different departments, divisions, teams and project groups *within* a company tend to have sometimes clearly defined, but sometimes also very implicit and vague joint enterprises. These lower-level joint enterprises might be compatible or in conflict with the explicit or implicit joint enterprises of other divisions, teams and projects – even within the same company. So if the complexity and 'messiness' of company-internal structures and goals is taken seriously (for example with regard to different levels of hierarchy), there will almost always be grey areas concerning joint enterprises: multiplicity of memberships may make it difficult to determine one specific joint enterprise that all participants in an interaction actually share. This is particularly so if we bear in mind that many BELF interactions (such as sales and client meetings) involve employees of different companies. Although this does not automatically preclude a joint enterprise, it increases the likelihood of different aims. Competition and competitiveness are likely to play a role alongside goals that are shared.

2.3 The limitations of shared repertoire

The third criterion of a CoP is a *shared repertoire*. Ehrenreich (2009, 141–144) illustrates this dimension with the example of a telephone conversation between a German business executive and his Chinese colleague.

[3] See similar remarks in Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1992) and Meyerhoff (2002) concerning contexts of interaction and relevance of CoPs more generally.

In her discussion, she links several characteristics of this phone call to Wenger's (1998, 125) list of indicators for CoPs. These include

> a less than rudimentary 'introductory preamble' (turns 2-5) [that] is a 'very quick setup of [the] problem to be discussed' (Wenger 1998, 125). […] '[K]nowing what others know' facilitates several 'shortcuts to communication' (Wenger 1998, 125). These features account for the fact that for outsiders, i.e. non-members of this community, it is almost impossible to make sense of this conversation, even though it is of a fairly general nature and includes virtually no technical jargon. For the two interlocutors, however, mutual understanding is possible on account of their shared repertoire resulting from a *longstanding working relationship*. (Ehrenreich 2009, 142, my italics)

All these observations are acute and indeed relevant for BELF contexts in which speakers are able to draw on a "longstanding working relationship" to make communication as efficient as possible. Yet, both Wenger's (1998, 125) and Ehrenreich's (2009) accounts underscore again that the formation of a CoP, including the development of a shared group repertoire, *takes time*. Many of Wenger's (1998, 125) indicators, such as "local lore" or "inside jokes," clearly require shared history. Other aspects such as the "the ability to assess the appropriateness of actions and products" (Wenger 1998, 125) or "shared ways of engaging and in doing things together" (Wenger 1998, 125) will evolve and may change over time. That is to say, although members of a CoP may be able to report on BELF context-specific appropriate social and linguistic practices, these practices and shared repertoires will have developed over time.

2.4 Participants as 'representatives': The implicit illusion of stability

In summary, although the CoP framework certainly has relevance for BELF contexts, it also has clear limitations, especially when it comes to fleeting or short-time constellations or interactions that involve members of different CoPs. As a result, the CoP criteria seem most operational in professional contexts that have a certain amount of stability, longer duration and maybe a shared space (e.g. a workplace) or at least an institutional or organizational frame. In a way, we could say that a CoP is very likely to have a sort of professional habitat, i.e. a sense of a "territory the interaction is felt to be happening on" (Pölzl and Seidlhofer 2006, 173). Such a professional habitat might give interactants a sense of belonging to a CoP that is somewhat independent of the regio-cultural territory where interactions takes place.

Considering all these aspects, it is not surprising that the CoP perspective in (BELF) research often goes hand in hand with an ethnographic approach. In data collection, an emphasis is put on participants' views, gleaned for example through interview data, focus groups or reflective post-hoc activities. Though participants' perspectives are usually accompanied by observation and may be complemented with 3rd person data (such as field recordings), the focus of analysis is often on participants' perceptions. Thus, when short portions of transcripts are used to illustrate linguistic features or shared practices in the examined CoP, the aspects highlighted will often have been reported in interviews and are prompted by the 2nd person perspective. Detailed (longitudinal) descriptive analyses of spoken interactions are usually not the main focus of studies carried out using the CoP framework.

This may be partly because, although CoPs are obviously much smaller and localized than traditional speech communities, investigating a CoP still seems to come with an implicit assumption that a community (even a CoP) is somehow stable and, in a way, pre-exists the individual. As a theory of social learning, the CoP model for example centrally relies on the distinction between experts and novices, masters and apprentices and core and peripheral members (cf. e.g. Ehrenreich 2018, 39, referring to Holmes and Meyerhoff 1999, 174). Individuals (like business professionals) are seen as being socialized into one or more CoPs and, through this process, they become peripheral or eventually core members of said CoP (Wenger 1998, 7; Holmes and Meyerhoff 1999, 174; Ehrenreich 2018, 39).

When the CoP is studied and becomes a site of research, individuals are (implicitly or explicitly) cast as 'representatives' of this CoP.[4] Especially in interview situations, participants take on – or are assigned – the

[4] There are few studies that have been able to adopt a longitudinal approach to data collection in order to investigate also the initial phases of how CoPs actually forms. In those that have done so, such as Smit (2010)

role of experts who act as informants about the commonly established social and linguistic practices of the CoP. I do not wish to diminish the relevance and importance of insights gained in this way. The findings obtained in studies informed by the CoP framework are highly valuable and have been – and will continue to be – extremely important, especially for (B)ELF research. Ethnographic portraits and explorations that these studies yield demonstrate how social prestige in (B)ELF-CoPs can be attached to certain ways of behaving, communicating and of language use that are different from what 'societies' more generally consider prestigious.

Especially with regard to multilingual communities, many CoP studies provide concrete ethnographic evidence that the sociolinguistic norms of (B)ELF-CoPs may orient to something other than 'monolingual' L1 norms, or so-called standard language use, for example when it comes to judging communicative appropriateness. Yet, if we want to fully embrace and describe the fluid, dynamic, unstable and fleeting nature of (B)ELF interactions that happen not just within, but especially also between and outside CoPs, we will need alternative conceptualizations and new research tools that allow us to do so. Recent propositions concerning the study of Transient International Groups (TIGs) (Pitzl 2018b) and Transient Multilingual Communities (Mortensen 2017) are a first step in this direction.

3. Transient International Groups (TIGs): Focus on interaction and micro-diachronic development

The study of Transient International Groups (Pitzl 2018b; see also Pitzl 2016b; 2018a; under review) seeks to develop conceptual and methodological alternatives that can be applied to the study of more ephemeral multilingual contexts, including (B)ELF settings. In contrast to work on Transient Multilingual Communities (see e.g. Mortensen 2017), which has similar overall interests but is strongly rooted in linguistic anthropology, the study of Transient International Groups draws on interactional sociolinguistics, discourse and conversation analysis and pragmatics but also integrates techniques from (qualitative) corpus linguistics (see Pitzl 2018a, 83–89). Although it partly builds on methodologies and descriptive insights gained on the basis of VOICE (Vienna-Oxford International Corpus of English), the study of TIGs is not per se a corpus approach, but an attempt to highlight the group and development dimension of (ELF) interactions in multilingual contexts for the purposes of scholars' individual research endeavors.

The emphasis for the study of TIGs is naturally-occurring 3rd person attested data, i.e. primarily speech events that are audio or video recorded and subsequently transcribed in detail in their entirety. This emphasis on recorded interactions does not preclude multi-method approaches in which individual researchers might incorporate interview data, focus groups or questionnaires, or analyze documents and other kinds of elicited or observed material from their research context. Yet, in contrast to studies relying on a CoP approach, the nexus of analysis for TIGs is spoken face-to-face interaction (3rd person evidence).[5] In order to examine and describe ELF interactions as TIGs, conceptual and methodological tools are being developed. These currently relate to two main dimensions: metadata (i.e. how we talk about, conceptualize and portray groups of multilingual speakers) and data analysis (i.e. how we investigate communication and language across time in these groups empirically). Both dimensions are briefly discussed below.

3.1 Metadata about TIGs: The need for group parameters

Starting with the first dimension, I would like to suggest that conceiving of an interaction among multilingual (ELF) speakers as a Transient International Group has to do with finding new ways of systematizing information *about* the interaction. I am summarizing this dimension under the headline *metadata*, a term that is commonly used by corpus linguists (see Burnard 2005) and is re-appropriated here in order to highlight that the categories we use to talk about our data are far from trivial. In other words, the kind of information we provide about a BELF interaction (but also about any other speech event) reflects the researcher's analytic take on things and conveys an implicit understanding about what is – but also what is not – important to say about the data. This holds true not just for corpus projects where metadata always need to be neatly structured

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and Kalocsai (2014), considerable emphasis is still on 2nd person elicited data and on long-term observation rather than on spoken interaction.

[5] At the current stage, the focus is spoken face-to-face interaction but this could eventually be expanded to include spoken and/or written computer-mediated or mobile phone-mediated group interactions (e.g. via Skype or WhatsApp) that take place alongside spoken interactions in TIGs.

and consistently provided for each corpus text, but also for qualitative data collection carried out by individual scholars.

Without referring to these as 'metadata,' it is common for BELF researchers to provide descriptions of their data. In doing so, they tend to identify aspects like the domain, setting, regio-cultural context or the purpose of an interaction. This kind of information about a speech event is usually accompanied by information about participants. Details about speakers tend to include categories like age, gender or profession. If speakers are multilingual, as is the case in BELF contexts, participants' L1 backgrounds (and sometimes nationalities) are provided. On occasion, speakers' multilingual repertoires might be described in more detail and researchers might offer information beyond speakers' L1s and primary regio-cultural backgrounds. In business settings, additional information about speakers' professional roles and responsibilities, company-internal hierarchies or event-specific tasks (such as one speaker chairing a meeting) may be given.

All these details are relevant if we want to get a sense of the kind of data examined in a study. Yet, as outlined, they tend to provide information about essentially two aspects: properties of the speech event (setting, domain, purpose etc.) and properties of individual speakers (age, gender, L1s, professional role, etc.). What hardly gets addressed in metadata as currently provided are properties of the speakers *as a group*.[6] The TIGs framework encourages scholars to pay more attention to this group dimension and seeks to establish additional parameters that might allow us to get a sense of our data and the interactants within them *as a group* (rather than as a more stable or bigger community).

Since TIGs are sites of transient language contact, a concept that goes beyond Mauranen's (2012, 2018) second-order language contact,[7] it is suggested that Individual Multilingual Repertoires (IMRs) of speakers form a situational (shared) Multilingual Resource Pool (MRP) in each interaction (see Pitzl 2016b, 296–299; 2018a, 192–199 for a more detailed discussion). Crucially, what is shared initially in a situational MRP expands and develops over time. This fact, if taken seriously, has implications for data analysis (see Section 3.2). Conceiving of groups of multilingual speakers as TIGs, schematic visual representations of speakers' IMRs and resulting MRPs have been suggested (see Pitzl 2018a, 194–220; 2018b; under review). As schematic and approximate as these visualizations may be at the current stage, they draw attention to the *number of speakers/interactants as a group parameter* by representing each speaker visually.

Such visual tools emphasize that TIG constellations differ with regard to the degree of diversity that speakers exhibit as a group, for example concerning the extent to which their IMRs overlap, i.e. are *shared with some speakers, but possibly not with others*. Making use of this group parameter, it has been suggested that TIGs might be more or less *symmetrically bilateral* (see the data examined in Pitzl 2016a; 2018a, 200–203), *asymmetrically bilateral* (see the data examined in Pitzl 2018b) or *diverse* (see the data examined in Pitzl under review) with regard to the *languages and IMRs brought into contact in a particular interaction. The main aim of proposing these kinds of group distinctions is to heighten our awareness that different TIGs – and thus different BELF interactions – exhibit different kinds of diversity. Although more fine-tuning of group distinctions is certainly needed, this might be a useful category to compare and synthetize findings on (B)ELF data with in the future.

At present, schematic visualizations have been used only to represent speakers' multilingual repertoires (IMRs and resulting MRP). The same principle could, however, also be used for visualizing other parameters of a group. In relation to BELF interactions, additional categories of metadata about a TIG could include

- speakers' familiarity with a particular domain of business or a particular profession,
- speakers' institutional affiliations (i.e. representing the same or different companies, organizations or teams),
- speakers' institutional ranks and/or roles (e.g. the degree of overlap/diversity with regard to hierarchy levels),

[6] Although researchers might occasionally (already) mention aspects such as the number of speakers, their level of acquaintedness or hierarchy relations (i.e. group parameters), there is, at the moment, little systematicity as to when and how this is done. There is even less systematicity concerning when and how such group characteristics are actually drawn upon in interpreting and analyzing data.
[7] See Pitzl (2018a, 193–194) for a more detailed discussion.

- speakers' degree of acquaintedness (e.g. high levels of familiarity and sharedness with some interactants as opposed to first time contact with other interactants that happen within the same speech event).

With regard to each parameter, it might be useful to think about (and possibly represent) the degree of diversity (vs. homogeneity or bilateralness) that a TIG exhibits. Even if representations are only schematic and approximate for now, they have the potential to open up currently unexplored – but possibly insightful – points of connection between existing studies. There is a wealth of qualitative findings about (B)ELF interactions that might be related to each other and integrated more fully through a more structured approach to metadata, especially with regard to group characteristics.

3.2 Data analysis of TIGs: A micro-diachronic take on synchronic data

The second dimension that investigating (B)ELF interactions as TIGs addresses is data analysis. As outlined above, the nexus of analysis for TIGs are recorded and transcribed spoken interactions (which may be complemented with observations or elicited data). In addition to finding ways of talking about these data systematically (i.e. establishing categories of metadata that address group parameters), it constitutes a major challenge to analyze (B)ELF interactions in ways that neither generalize nor simplify and reduce the interactional, communicative and linguistic complexity that is observable in these interactions.

Many existing BELF studies that analyze 3rd person-observed data (such as meetings) tend to adopt qualitative discourse and/or conversation analytic approaches (see e.g. Bjørge 2010; 2012; Cogo 2012; 2016b; Pitzl 2005; 2010; 2016a; Planken 2005; Pullin 2013; 2010; Wolfartsberger 2011), sometimes combined with corpus linguistic methods (e.g. Franceschi 2017). These kinds of analyses have brought about valuable insights on the nature of BELF use in particular contexts. Yet, if we are to fully address the fleeting and unstable nature of many (B)ELF interactions between and outside CoPs, it would be desirable to explore the chronological development of communication and language use in these contexts in more detail through concrete empirical descriptions.

For this purpose, the TIGs framework suggests a micro-diachronic approach to the analysis of spoken interaction (Pitzl 2018b; under review). Building on the research findings and methodological insights gained in previous (B)ELF studies, the micro-diachronic approach is informed by conversation analytic, interactional sociolinguistic, discourse analytic and discursive pragmatic methods, which are combined with corpus linguistic tools (such as specific searches triggered by qualitative observations or the reliance on annotation already available in corpus transcripts). What makes the approach micro-diachronic is that detailed qualitative data analysis, manual and (semi-)automatic annotation of a linguistic phenomenon in spoken interaction are combined with the close-meshed structural annotation of time segments and/or utterance sequences.

The combination of content and structural annotation and the use of QDA (qualitative data analysis) software make it possible to supplement traditional methods of analysis and presentation (such as discussing data extracts and examples) with novel tools and visualizations that contextualize characteristics of spoken interaction within the interaction as a whole as well as within its chronological sequence. Novel tools thus include holistic overviews as well as micro-diachronic charts (see Pitzl under review). Both kinds of analytic tools can be used to investigate a particular linguistic phenomenon (or phenomena), but can and should be employed also to provide interaction and participation profiles of data. In addition to categories of metadata (e.g. number of speakers, bilateralness vs. diversity of a group), interaction and participation profiles provide concrete empirical information on the interaction as such. First and foremost, they offer details on the degree of interactivity (such as the number of utterances or turns in a certain amount of time) as well as on the extent with which individual speakers do/do not actively participate throughout an interaction or different phases thereof (see Pitzl under review). This kind of information is extremely useful for multi-party conversations for example, where it is obvious that some speakers will be participating more actively (i.e. saying more) than others. It makes it possible to substantiate general observations along these lines with concrete evidence and eventually might allow for the dynamics of group interaction to be incorporated to analysis. It makes findings more comparable across contexts and data sets and provides a useful backdrop against with the prominence or salience of an investigated phenomenon can be discussed.

Looking at how a particular linguistic phenomenon is used *not just* within an interaction as a whole, *but also throughout* the duration of the interaction (for instance in different phases) has the potential to allow us to trace and visualize initial stages of situational norm development, especially in fleeting contexts outside of CoPs. Aspects like creativity and accommodation (especially convergence) become observable micro-diachronically and can be investigated empirically in real time with regard to different lexicogrammatical and/or pragmatic phenomena. As the micro-diachronic approach is supported by use of software, it will also be possible to systematically compare analyses of different phenomena throughout the same interaction in order to get a sense of how they are related or might mutually influence each other. Although centrally emerging from research on ELF and proposed with an eye to studying TIGs, this kind of analysis might open up new ways of enquiry for sociolinguistics and pragmatics more generally.

4. CoPs and TIGs: An outlook for BELF research

This article has discussed the research potential but also limitations of the Community of Practice (CoP) approach with regard to BELF contexts. It has subsequently introduced propositions for an alternative framework for the study of Transient International Groups (TIGs), in particular with regard to metadata and data analysis. Although it would be possible to examine in more detail whether and when a group of speakers does (or does not) constitute a TIG, the suggestions concerning TIGs put forward in this paper focus on methodology more so than on establishing TIG criteria. The *key issue is not whether a group of speakers is (or is not) a TIG*, *but* whether some of the *methods and analytic tools* suggested might be useful for studying a particular group of speakers in a particular BELF context.

As we have seen, some BELF contexts are stable enough to be studied in a CoP framework, with individual participants acting as representatives of these communities (e.g. in interviews). Whenever business interactions are too fleeting or unstable (e.g. happen only once), involve representatives from different business CoPs (e.g. representatives from different companies or professions meeting for the first time), or take place at the interface of professional and private communication (e.g. service encounters and other professional-lay-interactions), alternative approaches are called for, since the CoP framework does not apply. This article has attempted to offer a glimpse at what such an alternative approach might look like. It is clear that much more work needs to be done in order to systematize and develop research protocols for the study of TIGs. Nonetheless, it is hoped that the present discussion has demonstrated the potential of situated micro-diachronic analyses and of systematic metadata. Categorizing data according to group parameters might make it possible to gain insights about linguistic, interactional and pragmatic processes also in temporary and fleeting BELF contexts, in a way that complements – but does not replace – CoP studies.

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