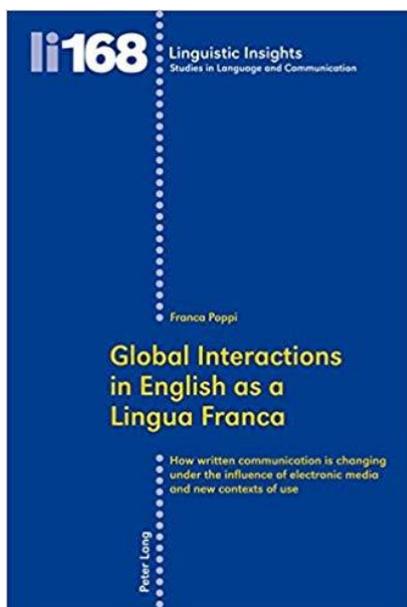# Global Interactions in English as a Lingua Franca. How Written Communication is Changing Under the Influence of Electronic Media and New Contexts of Use

Franca Poppi

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Review by Marco Bagni[*]

This book is a collection of various stand-alone studies in the use of ELF in dynamic, temporary, and formed ad-hoc "communities of practice" (Wenger 1998). Poppi's specific focus is on the innovations and changes in the English language as it is adopted and adapted by non-native speakers from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds "for whom English is the communicative medium of choice, and often the only option" (Seidlhofer 2011, 7).

The main point that Poppi makes is that the non-native speakers "should […] be recognized as users, in their own right, of a common code which is used as an instrument for making oneself understood in international encounters" (62) and not as learners of a second or foreign language.

By drawing on the notion of the "double imperative" Seidlhofer (2009) herself derives from Widdowson (1990), Poppi's studies in ELF and BELF prove how all the participants in the interactions she analyzes feel the need, on the one hand, to mark their identity according to a 'territorial imperative,' while on the other hand they also seek the need to accommodate to each other, thus meeting a 'cooperative imperative.' Whereas the different uses of English as a lingua franca present a wide range of variation, with the risk of mutual incomprehensibility, cooperation obtained by means of pragmatic strategies between the participants in the linguistic exchanges that take place within the ELF/BELF web-based communities of practice that Poppi analyzes, minimizes precisely this risk. Most importantly, all the studies collected in the book reveal that cooperation entails a

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lowering of the standards of acceptability, to admit and legitimize levels of linguistic competence that in the ELT perspective may be dismissed as instances of interlanguage or 'learnerese.'

In the introduction (Chapter I, 15-36), Poppi presents the theoretical and conceptual framework of the various studies, with a focus on the radical transformations brought about by the advent of the Internet that are specifically relevant to the main argument of the book. This chapter includes a brief discussion on the decisive role of English as a language for international communication in the globalized world, a brief summary on the two-dimensional web-genre model (Akehave and Nielsen 2005) and an overview of the different models that have been devised to account for the spread of English around the world.

The main body of the book is arranged in two parts: the first one is dedicated to interactions in English as a lingua franca, the second one is a collection of studies on the use of English as a lingua franca in corporate websites and email communication in business environments.

Chapter II of part one presents an analysis of a small corpus of interviews and a panel discussion recorded from BBC World and CNN International, where native speakers interact with non-native speakers. Written communication is the focus of the other chapters (III, IV and V) of part one, where Poppi presents an analysis of a selection of online newspaper articles from one region of Kachru's outer circle and one from the expanding circle (1985), with the aim of identifying the interplay between the local and the global – the territorial and the cooperative imperative – as it is recorded in the language forms and effectuated by means of pragmatic strategies. The three newspapers selected for each chapter are, respectively, *The Hindustan Times*, *The Baltic Times* and *The China Daily*. Each of these studies begins with an overview of the historical context, with a focus on the processes that have come to define the role, the functions and the increasing importance of the English language in each of the contexts considered.

When accounting for the global dimension of English, although she traces it back to the British Empire and the power and influence of the USA, and mentions the opposing perspectives of Phillipson (1992) and Crystal (2003) on imperialism and the spread of English, Poppi builds her initial argument on Friedman's post-modern notion of globalization as a 'flattening of the world' (2005), which conveys the idea of the globalized world as a level playing field, a view that seems to have been overtaken by recent political and economic developments and that cannot account for the unequal distribution of power characterizing the contemporary world. Such issues of societal power remain in the background, as they are beyond the scope of Poppi's analysis, which is aimed at providing empirical evidence of how non-native speakers are capable of establishing themselves as effective users of ELF. Also, as outmoded as Friedman's view may seem, it nonetheless serves the purpose of pointing to a link between the changes in communication practices as a result of the Internet revolution and the increasing need for a contact language of global dimension.

Poppi also summarizes two of the most popular models for the spread of the English language in the world: Kachru's classification on the basis of birthright, with both the well-known model of the concentric circles (1985) and its revised version (1992), and Modiano's classification based on different levels of proficiency (1999a, 1999b). Despite their obvious limitations in accounting for the highly complex sociolinguistic variation of the many 'Englishes' around the world, both interpretations serve the purpose of discarding the distinction between the native and non-native speaker and support the functionalist perspective inherent in Poppi's approach. Both models pave the way for a new understanding of English as a contact language, in which matters of primary as opposed to secondary acquisition of the language and of strict adherence to a codified standard are put aside, in favor of a claim for the legitimization of the non-native speaker.

The issue of societal power as it is reflected in native speaker ideology resurfaces, however, and Poppi is well aware of that, when she states that "insistence on native-speaker norms is a powerful gate-keeping device that has little to do with comprehensibility but a great deal with other factors which may be linked with issues of political, economic and social supremacy or prestige" (62). In this respect, the first study on spoken interactions is particularly revealing, as it shows how the cooperative imperative clearly emerges in the verbal exchange between a non-native and a native speaker, by way of accommodation strategies of which the most frequently used are 'gambits' and 'back channels' (44-51). These strategies represent a form of control to which the non-native speaker subjects his/her speech in order to make up for his/her lack of confidence in his/her competence (Bourdieu 1991). What remains implicit in Poppi's analysis is that this lack of confidence depends on the perceived unequal relationship between the different (native and non-native) linguistic competences and the different value they usually receive in interaction, that is, when the orientation towards

cooperation that Poppi identifies as the distinctive quality of successful ELF interactions is not sought for. On the part of the native speaker, the frequent use of 'supports' (49-50) serves precisely the purpose of tipping the perceived imbalance of power between the different linguistic competences.

In chapter III, Poppi introduces a brief discussion on the nativization process of the English language varieties in the outer circle and the status of a linguistic innovation. After remarking the impossibility of determining the exact number of speakers of English in the world, she quotes (67) Crystal (2006) who claims that one out of four people in the world is able to communicate in English "to a useful level" (425). This sounds rather imprecise, since it is not clear what exactly is meant by 'useful,' in the face of the countless and varied domains and contexts of use of English throughout the world, the different levels of proficiency required to be able to function in each of these and, most of all, of the various scopes and types of proficiency of the English users. By drawing on Bamgboșe (1987), Poppi stresses the need for an internal criterion to decide on the status of an innovation, whose acceptability and spread ultimately depend on the existence of an authority that elevates its status from that of an occasional deviation. Whereas in the Business and World sections of the *Hindustan Times* Poppi finds no features of a localized variety of English, these abound in the sections dealing with the local and national news. What she identifies are instances of culturally determined innovations that signify aspects of the local cultures and traditions that the English language in its standard forms would not be capable of expressing. The fact that these deviations from the native norm are legitimized as innovations depends precisely on the authoritative principle, represented in this case by the popular newspaper itself. In order to establish whether these innovations have spread and have become stable features of an indigenized variety of English, further and more comprehensive studies in diachronic perspective would be needed; as the author herself states (71), her study focuses on two small corpora collected at two different time intervals, with only a four-year gap in between them.

In chapter IV, Poppi focuses on how English is adopted and adapted in the only pan-Baltic newspaper in English, by analyzing a selection of articles published in 2006 in which she is able to "observe several instances of the process of nativization […], due both to transfer from the local languages as well as to the local cultural environment and communicative needs" (106) and which qualify this use of ELF as a hybrid language. The author highlights a "tendency to turn national expressions and concepts into English in a way which might sound deviant to the native speaker, but has proved to be communicatively effective" (108). Once again, the main point is proved, that is, hybrid ELF forms and structures are perfectly capable of expressing local needs while also guarantee international intelligibility.

The same coexistence of the need to adhere to the local cultural realities and to ensure international intelligibility is found in the selection of articles of *The China Daily* analyzed in chapter V. What is perhaps the most interesting finding of this study is that these articles as the ones from *The Baltic Times*, both belonging to countries of Kachru's expanding circle, "display a stronger tendency towards deploying accommodation strategies which are meant to make comprehension easier for an international audience" (123). This leads the author to conclude that, whereas the readerships of the Indian newspaper, where English also functions as an intra-national contact language, can be referred to the notion of a speech community, the readership of its expanding circle counterparts rather refers to a community of practice.

A specific kind of community of practice, i.e. the business community, identifies the domain of use of English as a contact language in all the studies of the second part of the book, which is introduced by a discussion of the changes undergone by business communication in the era of the Internet (chapter VI). In chapter VI the definition of BELF as opposed to EFL (Charles 2007) is also provided, together with the notions of corporate identity and reputation.

In chapter VII Poppi analyzes the English language forms and structures of a corpus of texts retrieved from the Tetra Pak company's global website and concludes that "the company creates its own community of practice by modifying the common lingua franca without the need to resort to NS [Native Speaker] style guides" (162).

The case presented in chapter VIII is devoted to an analysis of BELF in the "About Us" sections of seven selected European companies from the energy sector and shows that companies tend to "privilege accuracy of contents rather than formal accuracy" (177).

The last two chapters present an analysis of BELF in email communication. In chapter IX Poppi investigates politeness strategies, such as 'solidarity enforcement' and 'conflict avoidance' (Jung 2005), used in emails

sent by Chinese and Japanese employees to their Italian colleagues, while in chapter X she presents an analysis of business emails sent by the Italian employees of an internationally operating company.

A conclusion the author draws from the findings of these case studies is that BELF users are highly influenced by their own linguistic and cultural background. This is particularly evident in the English forms produced by the Italian employees' emails that show a high degree of influence from their L1. However, as all the studies of the second part show, ELF users in business communities of practice are concerned with "getting the job done" (Ehrenreich 2009), that is, in making communication effective regardless of deviations from the NS norm.

By elaborating on the pioneering studies of Kankaanranta and Louhiala-Salminen (2007) and in line with the most recent developments in BELF research (Cogo 2016; Kankaanranta and Salminen 2013) Poppi emphasizes precisely the pragmatics of BELF communication, whose success rests on the interactants' ability to adopt adequate communication strategies, regardless of their adherence to native-speaker rules of grammatical correctness. In this way, the author clearly avoids the pitfall of considering ELF as a hypostatized code, thus anticipating an interest in the processes rather than the features of the use of English as a lingua franca, as her focus on politeness strategies, cooperation and conflict avoidance show.

However thought-provoking and inspiring, the chapters of the second part do not always relate their findings to the preliminary concepts exposed in the introductory chapter, while recalling other concepts already presented in the first part. The reader may be left with the impression that the studies presented in the second part do not form a cohesive whole and it is not easy, on first reading, to identify a guiding principle.

On the whole, the book has the merit of clarifying the sociolinguistic context within which the ELF and BELF models operate, i.e. the community of practice, which, as clearly emerging from Poppi's analysis, represents some sort of 'zona franca' where the 'native/non-native' hierarchy is suspended and no authority negatively sanctions deviations from NS norms; consequently, all users of ELF can lay claim to equal status, regardless of their linguistic and cultural background and their level of proficiency in English.

However, the sheer number of the texts collected and analyzed and the different cultural contexts in which they are situated, as well as the number of topics touched upon throughout the presentation of the data, prevent any attempt to generalize the results, as the author herself points out. While avoiding over-generalizations, Poppi puts forth interesting ideas and insights that can stimulate students and researchers to engage in further research into the use of English as a lingua franca, particularly in business contexts.

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