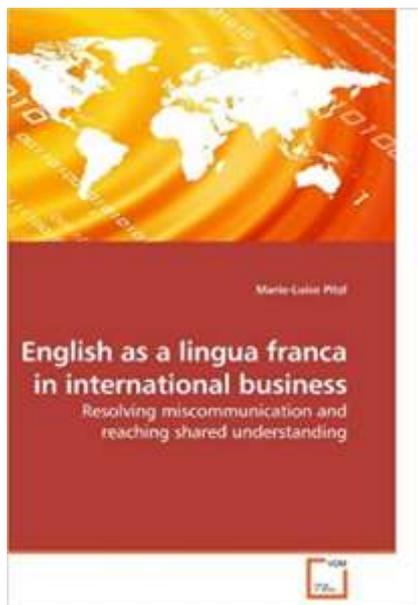




English as a Lingua Franca in International Business: Resolving Miscommunication and Reaching Shared Understanding

Marie-Luise Pitzl

Saarbrücken, VDM, 2010, pp. 192



Review by Monica Antonello*

In this volume, Marie-Luise Pitzl offers an insightful analysis of miscommunication, in particular in ELF business contexts. Pitzl's work outlines how miscommunication has been theorised and how it is negotiated in ELF, providing data from two business meetings recorded by the author in Luxembourg and in Austria.

Chapter 1, "Introduction," presents the topic and the structure of the book, addressing the research questions of the study: the author aims at investigating which types of miscommunication are present in her data and how they are managed by ELF users in communication. Recalling how English has reached the status of a global language, Pitzl points out her purpose to contribute to research in ELF, especially focusing on miscommunication in business contexts.

In Chapter 2, "The jungle of theory: a critical overview of different approaches to 'miscommunication,'" Pitzl outlines how miscommunication has been theorised in various disciplines, offering an extensive overview of different approaches to the topic. First, she describes the negative connotation given to miscommunication by researchers in Pragmatics and Conversation Analysis: although they have contributed to develop research on miscommunication by providing terminology in the field and by defining the structure of repair sequences, they strongly regard miscommunication as an unfavourable phenomenon that directly corresponds to communicative failure. Secondly, she adds that scholars in Intercultural Communication studies and Sociolinguistics share this negative view on miscommunication, attributing its origin to cultural and social differences. Lastly, a different viewpoint is described, providing an example of a more positive approach to the matter: the dialogical theory tradition conceptualises miscommunication as an enriching process in which communication and miscommunication are set on a continuum and for this reason they are intrinsically linked

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in any interaction. This last approach is the one endorsed by the author, in that she believes that miscommunication does not always correspond to a complete breakdown in communication and it does not always need repair. Following on from research in ELF, Pitzl highlights how understanding is a collaborative process where all participants have an active role; she also underscores that not every instance of miscommunication leads to a negative outcome, rather, negotiation could help develop better mutual understanding and stronger interpersonal relationships.

In Chapter 3, “Finding a non-native speakers’ path: an ELF perspective on ‘miscommunication,’” Pitzl describes ELF research and how her work is positioned in this field. She considers ELF as an additional language that is used as a common means of communication when speakers do not share their mother tongue (Seidlhofer 2001). Pointing to the necessity to expand on empirical research in ELF, in her study Pitzl aims at developing deeper insights on ELF negotiation, especially in business contexts. After illustrating her position in and towards ELF research, the author defines the core terms of the study. She describes ‘miscommunication’ as any instance of “understanding problems” (Bremer 1996) experienced by the participants, setting the analysis of the data within a predominantly emic attitude. Secondly, she explains how non-understanding and misunderstanding are differentiated processes: the former corresponds to a lack of understanding which speakers are aware of, while the latter is a misinterpretation of the message which speakers are unaware of. Successively, she offers a deep analysis of how miscommunication can be negotiated and the signals to be taken into account, discussing two main models of reference: the procedures in non-understanding addressed by Vasseur, Broader and Roberts (1996), and the meaning negotiation sequences examined by Varonis and Gass (1985). Furthermore, she provides an extensive description of a case of global miscommunication and of the micro- and macro-contextual factors that play a role in meaning negotiation, outlining the concepts of frame, footing, contextualisation and explaining the function of shared knowledge, culture and institutional conditions. Additionally, the author highlights the issues that the analyst could encounter when facing miscommunication, especially when identifying misunderstandings or when addressing strategic miscommunication, two covert phenomena often difficult to detect in data.

Chapter 4, “The data: business meetings among ELF speakers,” describes the data used for the study, i.e. two business meetings taking place in English in two companies, one in Luxembourg and one in Austria. Pitzl points out that her choice to use this kind of data was determined by the necessity for speakers in these contexts to reach a certain goal and by the consequent unlikeliness for them to withdraw from negotiation or to dismiss potential problematic issues in communication. The author then outlines the structure of the two meetings analysed and describes the macro-contextual factors that characterise the data: the degree of formality, the objectives, and the participants’ roles and relationships in the two meetings, providing a wide series of examples.

In Chapter 5, “Analysis: types of ‘miscommunication’ in ELF and their interactional management,” Pitzl describes the kinds of miscommunication she found in her data and how such instances are managed by the speakers. She first explains in detail how ‘local non-understandings’ and ‘local misunderstandings’ are negotiated, providing an extended exemplification of resolution sequences. She also discusses other aspects of meaning negotiation, that is, how self-initiated negotiation could help prevent miscommunication and how strategic miscommunication and the issue of intentionality are very difficult to detect from the analyst’s point of view. Finally, Pitzl presents an instance of ‘global misunderstanding’. She states that this kind of miscommunication happens on a more ‘global’ discourse level, when participants misunderstand each other but they remain unaware of the problem for a while. She clarifies that a possible cause may be that the participants in that particular situation did not share the same ‘frame’ and thus acted on different premises, one thinking of giving supportive advice, the other thinking of being reproached.

Lastly, in Chapter 6, “Conclusion,” the author summarises her findings, focusing on how negotiation sequences develop and are managed in the data and explaining how problems are solved in instances of non-understanding, misunderstanding and global misunderstanding. Finally, she comments on the possible developments that this kind of investigation could have when using a larger set of data, that is, on how this qualitative study could help better identify and comprehend miscommunication in ELF contexts when applied to corpora such as VOICE (Vienna Oxford Corpus of International English).

This volume offers an interesting and stimulating reading for researchers focusing on miscommunication and ELF, especially in business contexts, since it provides an exhaustive and multi-faceted analysis of



miscommunication. Pitzl examines this issue from an original and perceptive standpoint, highlighting how miscommunication and communication are intrinsically linked in any communicative act: since understanding is always partial, and speech acts are ambiguous by nature, a complete absence of miscommunication may not be possible. However, the author underscores how miscommunication can instead help in deepening social relationships and in enriching interactions. This study has greatly contributed to expand research on ELF by providing an insightful analysis of meaning negotiation and negotiation sequences in ELF contexts, highlighting how miscommunication in ELF takes place and is negotiated through a collaborative process and how ELF speakers manage communicative difficulties in interaction. In addition, Pitzl presents an important point of view on strategic miscommunication, usually dismissed in research due to its very covert nature, that is, the role of the analyst and the impossibility to always identify the speakers' intention when communicating; through a varied range of examples it is shown how strategic miscommunication and unintentional non-understanding may be very similar in how they appear in data. The volume has hence represented a remarkable and thorough contribution to the understanding of ELF and its dynamics in communicative events, especially in business contexts.

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