Communities of Practice and English as a Lingua Franca

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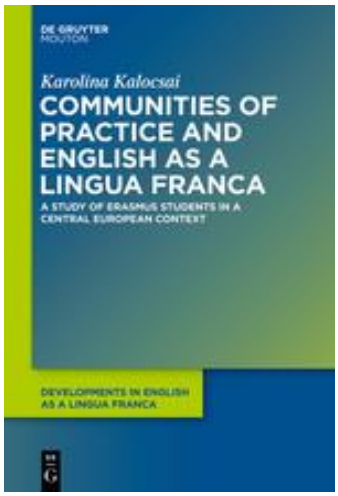

Reviewed by Paola Vettorel[1]

This volume focuses on the social practices in connection to the use of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) within a specific community of users, that is, a group of Erasmus exchange students at Szeged University (Hungary) during one academic year; the study was conducted between 2006 and 2010 and involved 142 participants. Two main and intertwined conceptual frameworks underlie the ELF-oriented/based paradigm of the book: on the one hand, culture and language are conceptualized as an emergent and fluid space that is at the same time local and global, and realized on stratified scale levels (Pennycook 2007; Blommaert 2007). On the other hand, ELF is set within a 'Communities of Practice' (CofP, Wenger 1998) conceptual and methodological framework, where ELF identities are socially and linguistically created (and re-created) as social practice. A thorough ethnographic and data-driven approach guides the analysis and interpretation of how the language is employed by this community of ELF users in social situations, providing a deep insight into their identity, social and linguistic construction of a "third-place" (Kramsch 1993) community of practice.

The theoretical framework is outlined in the "Introduction" (Chapter One), together with the setting and the research questions, that are focused on the Szeged Erasmus students' self-perceptions as a community of practice, in the shared repertoire of "tools and resources" they employ "to engage in their jointly negotiated practices reflecting a shared goal"; their 'competent' uses of ELF within this community, and on the effects their use of "different linguistic resources […] have on the overall practices of the group" (p. 9), as well as on their identity construction of membership to the group.

Chapter 2 illustrates the *Theoretical Framework* underlying the book, which interweaves ELF current studies with a Community of Practice and Conversation Analysis frameworks. The Community of Practice model (Wenger 1998, Lave & Wenger 1991) is first presented, with its three core dimensions – 'mutual engagement', 'joint enterprise' and 'shared repertoire of negotiable resources' (Wenger 1998); the characterizing aspects of learning – occurring in practice (doing), taking place within the community (belonging), involving "the construction of identities" (becoming), as well as building and internalizing meaning (experiencing) (14) are also illustrated. Previous approaches to this model are then explored, focusing particularly on language practices and L2 socialization processes and outcomes, that are

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profoundly different from L1 ones. Sociolinguistic aspects deriving from the global spread of English and resulting in the *Global Englishes paradigm* are then examined, highlighting how ELF, while belonging to this paradigm in its connections to globalization processes, "is considered a unique phenomenon" (21) as to fluidity and flexibility, since linguistic and "cultural practices are continually renewed and cooperatively modified to create new meanings and identities, while at the same time meeting local needs" (21). The methodological and theoretical assumptions of ELF are then examined in detail, outlining the approaches to language and discourse that have informed ELF research in terms of variation, variety, language adoption and adaptation, and in the co-construction of norms and language use that are locally relevant in the fluidity and variability of ELF discourse, interactions and contexts. Main issues in the debate over (non)nativeness / L1-L2 speakers are discussed, including problematic points in SLA perspectives, learners' (lingua)cultural identities and voices, and the dichotomic separation between L1/L2/Lns; alternative views from ELF research are then presented. Among the latter, we find the need to use different categories like those of expert / bilingual English speakers (Jenkins 2009), and to take into account that ELF use is locally-situated, within the specificity of different communities of practice: the different linguacultures of the participants play a very important role in ELF interactions, contributing to create a "local 'ELF culture'" (31) both in linguistic and (inter)cultural terms. ELF research has shown that effective communication and mutual intelligibility, rather than compliance to NS norms, are prevalent objectives in ELF talk, and are realized through several communicative processes and strategies that are collaboratively and locally learned, negotiated and enacted. It is also argued that these sociolinguistic competences – most importantly awareness of language variability, intercultural awareness and communication strategies – ought to be taken into account in language teaching, first of all in teacher education.

A detailed overview of the cooperative strategies as emerging from ELF and Conversational Analysis (CA) research findings is then presented, focusing in particular on the role of strategies for meaning negotiation and interaction, pre-emptive moves, repetition and code-switching. Drawing on several research studies, it is shown how these strategies all work towards joint construction of effective communication, as they are employed in a proactive way either to anticipate or to solve potential disruptions in conversation. Where code-switching (CS) is concerned, a review of recent literature is followed by a discussion about the role of CS in ELF. Rather than a compensatory strategy, CS represents in ELF a multilingual "resource which speakers creatively exploit for communicative and other goals," that is, "to express linguacultural and ELF identities" or "to enhance intelligibility beyond cultural differences" (49), as well as to specify an addressee, to appeal for help and to introduce another idea (Klimpfinger 2007, 2009; Cogo 2007) and to enhance accommodation (Cogo 2007, 2009). The chapter closes with a brief overview on the use of humour as a collaborative way of creating solidarity among participants in ELF as in other interactional contexts.

Chapter 3 ("Methodology") provides a detailed account of the methodological approach adopted in the research study. The Communities of Practice framework, with its strong orientation on ethnographic research tools and techniques, is here combined with the CA method in data analysis. The research study is set within a social constructivist perspective, and takes into account both an emic and an etic perspective on the researcher's side – an active participant in the community under investigation - which was carried out also through data triangulation. Data collection tools included observation and fieldwork, audiotaping of data, prompt-emails by the researcher for students' journals, online materials (mailing lists and online posts), ethnographic, retrospective and interactional interviews, as well as casual conversations among the participants. In the author's words, the study "has adopted an emic, contextualized, naturalistic, long-term and longitudinal perspective" (55). Both the research context and data collection are illustrated in detail: the 142 Erasmus exchange participants came from several universities, with different linguacultural backgrounds, and spent one or two semesters in Szeged (Hungary). Data analysis was carried out with an inductive technique in three main stages: alongside data collection (mainly transcription of oral data), it involved the researcher's reflective practices (working hypotheses, researcher's reflective journal), and a "constant comparative method" (73), that is, coding schemes for all data (non-linguistic social practices, views on non-linguistic social practices, interactional patterns, language use, emic views on linguistic practices). Ethical research matters are also examined.

Chapter 4 – "An ethnographic account of the Szeged Erasmus community" – focuses on the three main dimensions of Communities of Practice as related to the group, illustrating how each is built in non-linguistic terms. Data shows that the participants' main goals were to improve their English (and their self-confidence in English), to practice other L2s or learn Hungarian, the local language, together with making new friends with people of different cultures (the local ones included); to have fun, as well as to attend courses they deemed relevant for their studies, or to start to work on their thesis. As to the first CofP dimension – the joint enterprise – several processes contributed to the building and negotiation of a shared goal in this community; in the first place, the creation of social ties within the "Erasmus Family" often also worked towards the re-negotiation of 'work' goals, as well as the wish to make contact with the local community. Meeting and making friends, as well as creating a strong local Erasmus network, became the main shared goal for almost half of these Erasmus students.

The dimension of Mutual Engagement, which involves regular participation in the community activities, meetings and shared practices, was also a characteristic of this Erasmus group. Recurrence in terms of participation to meetings, as well as of the people attending and in the activities proposed, were key elements, although in different degrees: "Erasmus Sharks" (86) took part in all social activities, 'central members' met regularly, while 'peripheral members' participated less frequently. Partying constituted the main opportunity for social contact, either in its institutionalised form (European Club Evenings were organized once a week by the Erasmus local social coordinators, and managed in turn by students of different nationalities), or in parties organized by the students in their flats, that included dining together, playing games and going clubbing. These often very intense social activities were an integral part of the community Mutual Engagement in that they were a way of keeping in touch on a regular basis. Organising trips to various locations in the area was another important element in this respect since it helped in developing ties among the community members. Two main kinds of relationship were identified: one related to the "Erasmus family" feeling, i.e. a sense of belonging to the group that manifested itself in different and intense forms (for example, feasting birthdays, giving personal farewell presents, keeping ongoing contact on Facebook, and in a sense of nostalgia once the students returned back home); the other, friendship, refers to the closer relationships that developed between people for a variety of reasons – same L1, shared accommodation, or because they got to know each other well – and helped in overcoming loneliness, promoted a sense of well-being in their Erasmus stay and fostered self-confidence.

The third dimension, the development of a shared repertoire of resources, is visible in the shared non-linguistic routines that became part of the aforementioned activities, from partying (structure of parties, games, food and drinking, staying over at the friend's flat, etc.) to travelling (sleeping in one big room, going sightseeing, etc.) as part of 'having fun together' and 'doing crazy things' (97-98).

These practices were enacted and shared both by the students who stayed only in the first semester, and by those who arrived in the second semester; the students who were spending a whole year in Szeged acted as 'expert members' in the socialization of the newcomers into the community of practice. All in all, the members in this CofP successfully contributed to the development of "a happy and a safe place" (99), which on the one hand met their needs, and on the other grew around their goals (meeting friends, having fun) through learning and developing a shared set of non-linguistic and linguistic resources.

Chapter 5, "Building an Erasmus family through ELF," complements the previous chapter by providing a detailed analysis of the linguistic practices used by the participants in the creation of the community- and friendship-based "Erasmus Family." Such practices involved several 'rituals' (greetings, leave taking, addressing, congratulating, apologizing, thanking, as well as more fun-oriented ones like swearing and teasing), but also "party conversations" and longer and more personally engaging ones, defined "real conversations." The linguistic practices were gradually built as shared resources within the community, and were often based on code-switching / translanguaging; drawing on the several languages (L1s, ELF and Lns) present in the community, the participants exploited the multilingual repertoires at their disposal in their linguistic rituals. The chapter convincingly shows how English was negotiated by members of the CofP as the main shared communicative resource of the group, primarily since it "was 'the only way' they could talk to each other" (103), to the point that, when people of the same L1 communicated in their mother tongue which other people who were present would not understand, they were repeatedly invited – often through joking routines – to resort to English so that nobody would be excluded from the conversation (although individual

arrangements for the use of languages other than English among groups of friends were also made). A set of linguistic "shared negotiable resources" (110) was thus created, involving English but also Hungarian as the 'language of the habitat', and a variety of other languages. Routines, such as greetings and other small rituals (e.g. teasing and swearing) became an integral part of everyday life, partying included. Processes of mutual accommodation played a major role in group construction and maintenance, and, even when some of the participants did not particularly like them (e.g. party conversations or 'standard' ritual greetings in their low level of personal involvement), they were still widely adopted because of their social networking function. Addressing, teasing and swearing in particular had in the great majority of cases a focus on fun, and were often based on one or more languages; this helped to develop a sense of belonging, rapport and friendship. The same, at a deeper level, can be said for "real conversations," where participants dealt with more personal topics, which helped "to establish common ground with some of the members of the community." Certainly, the chapter shows how English as a lingua franca, Hungarian, but also other languages part of the multilingual repertoires of the participants were interwoven in the creation of shared practices, in line with ELF research on code-switching (e.g. Cogo 2007, 2009). Most participants showed a great interest in other languages, taught each other 'shared routines' in their L1, L2 and Lns, and many were also very keen on learning and practicing Hungarian for which they attended classes, too. For many of these Erasmus students one of the main goals was 'to improve their English', and to become more self-confident and fluent in the language. This may also have played a part in the choice of having English as the main communication code; as the author notes, had their experiences in learning English included an ELF-oriented perspective, "some of them may have felt less need to spend their time to learn English in Szeged, and could have further improved their multilingualism instead" (136).

Chapter 6 – "Creating humour in and through ELF" – focuses on the participants' linguistic practices in creating humorous effects in 'new' rather than ritualised ways, that is, jointly and cooperatively constructing humour "on a moment-to-moment basis in the unfolding of the interaction" (139). These kinds of practices would either involve content (humour through ELF) or style (humour in ELF); the first was realized mainly through narratives, teasing, irony and 'naughty conversations', while the second took place via code-switching, the use of paralinguistic features and word play.

Narratives included telling personal stories, that were enjoyed thanks to the craft in story-telling that characterized these episodes. At times these narratives dealt with the Erasmus students' shared experience of being in a "strange/foreign land" and with their self-perceived "bad English" (and lack of skills in Hungarian), particularly at the beginning of their stay (142-143). Humour was never disrespectful, but rather playful (even when it implied teasing) and very frequently cooperatively created; this contributed to the creation and reinforcement of a friendship-based, intimate community who liked to have fun also through language manipulation, irony, 'naughty' conversations and word play. Code-switching appears widely employed to reach humourous effects, too, for example in games (chains of switches involving the participants' multilingual repertoires) and other social activities, in smaller as in bigger group gatherings. Thus, "by practicing humour the members simultaneously practiced solidarity and rapport, which helped then create a fun and a family and friendship support system at the same time" (p. 168). The language strategies involved in using language to create humorous effects were not plain ones, and often involved translanguaging, too, showing how the participants appropriated the common communication code – English – to their communicative and bonding needs, rather than 'just' abiding to NS norms.

Chapter 7– "Improving on communicational understanding and gaining self-confidence in ELF" – deals with the ways in which improving the participants' communication skills in English – that, as mentioned, was one of their main goals – contributed to the creation of shared practices and resources. Drawing from different data sources (extracts form conversations and interviews), it is shown how collaborative practices were enacted both in word search and meaning negotiation when non-understandings occurred. While at the beginning of their stay the students felt uneasy and often embarrassed about their 'poor' competence in English, as time went by they realized that this was a common feeling. Mutual understanding was naturally and cooperatively reached, to the point that they "had the impression that they [non-understandings and word search moments] were rare" (175). This also helped them to gain self-confidence in using English, supporting new members in their insecurities, too. The chapter provides many exemplifications for collaborative word search (explicit, implicit, construction of local meaning), showing that in this case too the

multilingual repertoires of the speakers were exploited and meaning effectively and jointly co-constructed, contributing to the creation and reinforcement of solidarity and rapport. As to non-understandings, paraphrase, repetition, also through expansion or clarification, were common practices, together with code-switching and translanguaging, all accompanied by accommodative strategies. As the author notes, the data analysis "offers a link between the practices of word search and non-understanding on the one hand, and the students' growing sense of confidence in their language skills, on the other" (196) – an area that would deserve further attention in ELF research. In line with previous findings, "when the participants were negotiating moments of word search or non-understandings, they simultaneously created and solidified the goal of building a family and friendship support community with a focus on self-confidence" (196). It is also argued that, within their ELF and multilingual practices in word search and collaborative resolution of non-understandings, the participants took on the role of non-native, L2 learners. By explicitly requesting help for words they did not know, and through their interest in 'practising' (Pölzl 2003) new language expressions, as well as explicitly signaling lack of comprehension, they acknowledged their language learner roles, naturally supporting each other in their language competence and cooperatively resolving 'difficulties' in a natural way. The development of communicative "expertise was a joint undertaking" (199): sharing all their (native and non-native) language resources also "helped the speakers develop an ability to communicate more self-confidently in ELF" (199).

Chapter 8 – "Conclusions and implications" – recapitulates findings for each of the research questions, reiterating how the Erasmus Community of Practice in Szeged jointly created a set of negotiated social and linguistic practices towards the common goals of an "Erasmus Family," finding and giving each other support, friendship and having fun together. Together with English as a lingua franca as their main communication code, both the local language – Hungarian – and the L1s, L2s and Lns part of the participants' repertoires were widely used in several everyday routines as well as language play practices in constructing 'collaborative humour'. Cooperation and accommodation were the main characteristics in meaning negotiation, where shared practices played a major role, also in code-switching; language support was always provided among and by the participants in a natural way, and this helped also to improve their (L2 learners') self-confidence in using English as the in-common communicative code. In their bonding humorous practices in particular these ELF users appropriated the language beyond NS norms, and drew upon their multilingual repertoires "to create new meanings" (207) for their communicative needs, within shared practices. Methodological implications in the combination of the CofP and CA analytical tools for ELF research are outlined, focusing in particular on how such a combination can "help illuminate the social character of language with a particular emphasis on the interactional nature of language ideologies" (p. 209). Besides, it is argued that the rich data emerging from a CofP approach can help shed light on language use, language ideologies and attitudes, as well as on social activities and views, beliefs and attitudes related to these social and linguistic practices.

The study has several implications for ELF research, including how ELF identities are shaped within CofPs through a combination of 'learner' and 'proficient user' aspects, as well as in the focus on the joint, collaborative meaning negotiation and co-construction practices emerging from findings, that are at work in the creation of local meaning, and local identities too.

The ways in which English as a lingua franca has been shaped by the Szeged Erasmus community could also offer important suggestions for language policies, above all for University and European international programs in language teaching terms. It is suggested that preparation language courses within an ELF perspectives should be carried out by universities sending, and hosting, Erasmus students, alongside the promotion of closer contacts with local students' networks, and with the local language and culture. From a linguistic point of view, it seems fundamental on the one hand that a multilingual perspective, where English in its lingua franca role is part of the participants' multilingual repertoires, is taken into account. On the other hand, given the likelihood that ELF will continue to represent the main shared code in international settings – for study as for work – it appears extremely important to include the teaching of effective communication strategies such as the ones emerging from this study. This would prepare L2 users to communicate internationally, as well as to benefit from their Erasmus stays all around Europe in terms of self-confidence in using English and other languages.

The volume is complemented by 7 appendixes related to the research ethnographic tools employed in the data collection phase, as well as the coding schemes used in data categorization and analysis.

To sum up, this volume certainly represents a welcome addition to research into ELF practices, first of all for its methodological approach that combines the CofP perspective with CA in analyzing ELF, shedding light on both linguistic and non-linguistic practices of a specific ELF group. The study effectively shows how a community is created through social and linguistic shared resources, relying on English as a common communication code, but including other languages, too, as shared resources in transactional as well as affective, social and witty humorous dialogic interactions. As the author summarises, "[b]oth the Szeged Erasmus students and Smit's (2010) international students adopted English (used) as a lingua franca as the key shared practice not because of laziness to use other languages, nor because of lack of interest in learning other languages; rather, the goal was to provide each (potential) member of the community with access to shared practices" (134). The inherently multilingual setting of this CofP, where the plurilingual repertoires of its participants and their exploitation and 'natural' (not flagged) use of several languages, are incorporated into 'routines' for social, shared practices. This shows once again how ELF users adopt English for their communicative purposes, adapting it to their social and (multi)lingual aims. These findings have important implications at several levels, from language teaching, to reflection on aspects related to the Erasmus program, such as the need to familiarize students with the specificities of communication in multilingual environments, at the same time creating opportunities of socialization with the local people, language, and culture.

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