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Special Section

Negotiating Meaning in Business English as a Lingua Franca Comunicare in contesti BELF

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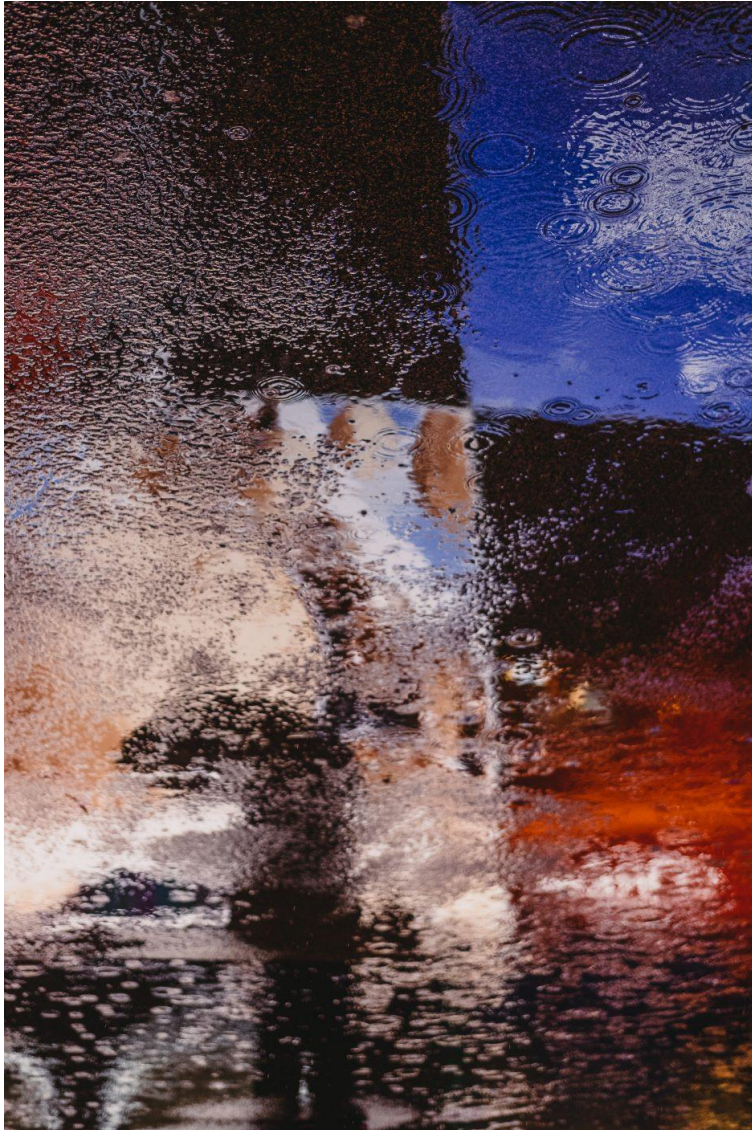


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INTRODUCTION

The use of English as the global lingua franca of communication has grown exponentially over the last 50 years, across a number of domains. Internationally-oriented business communication is no exception, with English as a Business Lingua Franca - BELF - increasingly operating as the main working language among professionals at a global level.

Accordingly, within ELF studies, Business English as a Lingua Franca has developed into an important area of research particularly over the last 20 years, now spanning across different contexts, from face-to-face encounters to digital communication in inter/transnational workplaces, increasingly including also local, in-house settings and language policies in multinational corporations.

Flexibility and dynamicity in the use of the speakers' (pluri)lingual resources as well as co-operation in meaning co-construction have been shown to characterise both ELF and BELF, together with a focus on communication strategies rather than on conformity to native-speaker norms. In BELF contexts the knowledge of business-specific content, practices and vocabulary, together with intercultural awareness and a focus on clarity, are additional important elements, alongside pragmatic competence and the use of communication strategies, particularly in the exploitation and integration of the different linguacultures involved in BELF settings. BELF research findings have also been explored in their implications for teaching business English particularly as to curriculum and materials design (e.g. Kankaanranta and Louhiala-Salminen 2018).

This special section of Iperstoria aims at contributing to BELF research by exploring aspects related to how communication takes place in international business-related contexts, with a particular focus on Communication Strategies and on the relevance they have in BELF. Meaning-negotiation enacted through a variety of strategies and moves is indeed a common thread running through the majority of the contributions included in this issue, which explore BELF communication from a variety of perspectives - from methodological approaches to (inter)cultural aspects and pedagogical implications - in different settings, including more recent developments such as social media. It is precisely this variety of settings and perspectives that shows what a vibrant area of research BELF is.

Another common thread is multilingualism and translanguaging practices, together with the role the different linguacultures play in BELF, which has been shown to be one of its characterising elements and is foregrounded in the present studies, too, as for example in Tiina Räisänen's contribution where knowledge of Chinese represents a strategic resource, and, more generally, in Franceschi's contribution. Particularly interesting is also the way in which different languages are employed to reach a wider international audience in social media contexts, with a variety of functions, as discussed by Brunner and Diemer in their investigation of Instagram. Indeed, one of the areas that will probably expand in BELF research is that of digital communication: the growth of communication means allowed by technology is increasingly connected to the interactive affordances of social media. Other important areas in BELF communication are those of transcultural practices and intercultural awareness, also in connection to the global/local dimensions, and aspects related to groupings as Communities of Practice and Transient International Groups, as emerging from Pitzl's paper.

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Last but not least, business ELT – as general ELT - seems to be slowly starting to acknowledge the reality of BELF, where effective communication is not achieved by adhering to NS normativity, but rather by employing a range of skills, such as multicultural competence, competence in BELF, business know-how, among others, as explored in the contributions by Palmer Silveira, Vettorel, and Caleffi and Poppi.

The issue opens with Marie-Luise Pitzl's contribution "Investigating Communities of Practice (CoPs) and Transient International Groups (TIGs) in BELF contexts". While outlining the relevance that the notion of Community of Practice has had in BELF research, Pitzl sets forward a series of problematic aspects in applying CoP criteria to (B)ELF settings and interactions, and proposes an innovative framework based on the concept of Transient International Groups (TIGs), which includes smaller and less stable groups operating through (B)ELF. Adopting such a framework, where CoPs and TIGs are seen as complementary, would allow a more sophisticated and accurate understanding of communication in BELF as well as in multilingual and intercultural settings, particularly as to aspects related to organization and social dynamics, which have important implications also in terms of metadata and data analysis.

Marie-Luise Brunner and Stefan Diemer's paper "Meaning negotiation and customer engagement in a digital BELF setting: A study of Instagram company interactions" provides a qualitative analysis of posts and comments by some European companies in this social network, focusing in particular on customer engagement strategies and on meaning negotiation of technical vocabulary. The authors demonstrate how these strategies are characterised by the use of emotional framing, as well as plurilingual resources, which are dealt with through rapport strategies comparable to the ones observed in other BELF contexts. The use of multiple languages besides English is frequent, and intercultural negotiations seem to be prompted by culture-specific images, with a high level of engagement. Business-specific vocabulary also leads to meaning negotiations through interactive clarification strategies, an aspect that has also been documented in other BELF contexts, given the central role of specific terminology in this domain.

In "Cultural knowledge as a resource in BELF interactions: a longitudinal ethnographic study of two managers in global business" Tiina Räisänen discusses the role of culture and cultural knowledge – the latter intended as 'perceived cultural practices and differences' - in effective management of business interactions when socialising into an unfamiliar linguaculture. After outlining different approaches to 'culture', the author investigates the relevance of cultural knowledge in BELF discourse as emerging from a longitudinal ethnographic study including interview data from two Finnish professionals operating in a Chinese context. Findings reveal that, both in terms of differences and similarities, cultural knowledge acts as an important resource in managing interactions in relational and transactional terms, together with Communication Strategies such as repetition, paraphrasing and summarizing, the use of metalanguage, of directives and humour, as well as speaking slowly, to ensure understanding and clarity. The study also confirms BELF in its multilingual dimension, since knowledge of local languages (Chinese in this case) is clearly an asset.

The interplay between intercultural and Communication Strategies is discussed in Juan Carlos Palmer Silveira's contribution "Introducing Business presentations to non-native speakers of English: Communication Strategies and Intercultural Awareness". After outlining characteristics of effective business presentations, the paper deals with 81 students' presentations during Master Programme classes, recorded over a period of 5 years; for these students English is frequently an additional language, that will play an important role in their professional career. Data shows how effectiveness in these presentations is achieved through several means. Findings reveal that participants are aware of the intercultural nature of the setting, and use communication strategies to effectively deliver the intended message to their linguaculturally diversified audience.

Communication Strategies in professional interactions are examined in Valeria Franceschi's "Enhancing explicitness in BELF interactions: self-initiated communication strategies in the workplace". The focus of the paper is on how speakers proactively use accommodation strategies to increase clarity and explicitness in the professional settings data of the VOICE (Vienna-Oxford International Corpus of English) corpus. Findings show that self-initiated strategies are widely and naturally used to this aim, with different functions - to highlight key points, to simplify and clarify information, and to reformulate concepts – preventing and avoiding potential problems in communication. Strategies related to making business-related terminology more comprehensible are also present, although less frequently used; in all cases interactions are



characterized by a highly cooperative behavior, oriented at enhancing comprehensibility also of specificities and nuances by all participants.

Pedagogical implications of BELF studies, in particular in ELT business materials, are investigated in the last two contributions. The focus of Paola Vettorel's paper, "BELF, Communication Strategies and ELT Business materials" is two-fold: on the one hand, the analysis aims at exploring whether the different layers of the Global Communicative Competence (GCC, Louhiala-Salminen and Kankaanranta 2011) model are taken into account and, more specifically, on the inclusion of Communication Strategies as identified in BELF research in a set of recently published business ELT materials. As to GCC, findings show that only some aspects are accounted for, such as business-know-how, without however being integrated and presented from a BELF-perspective. The same can be said for Communication Strategies: despite being presented in these materials, they are not consistently dealt with, and opportunities for reflection on their relevance in BELF communication are not provided.

Paola Caleffi and Franca Poppi's contribution, "The training of Business professionals in ELT materials: a focus on email writing", deals with Business ELT email writing textbooks published between 2004 and 2017. Indeed, digital communication, including emails, has become integral part of business communication, and requires interactional and intercultural skills similar to the ones in face-to-face interactions. In this paper, the materials are analysed from a diachronic perspective in order to investigate whether changes in perspective as to language and to the inclusion of pragmatic and interactional skills for business professionals are taken into account. In this case too, findings show that, although the multilingual and multicultural nature of business communication start to be acknowledged, the general orientation is still towards nativeness, with GCC skills not being adequately accounted for.

Five book reviews complement the studies included in the Issue, spanning over a period of time that further testifies to the growing interest in how English is used in business contexts, and to the development of BELF-oriented research.

Monica Antonello reviews Marie-Luise Pitzl's 2010 book *English as a Lingua Franca in International Business: Resolving Miscommunication and Reaching Shared Understanding*, drawing attention above all on the relevance of the novel perspective on (mis)communication outlined in the volume, and how it can be fruitfully applied to meaning negotiation in (B)ELF interactions.

Marco Bagni's review of Franca Poppi's 2012 volume *Global Interactions in English as a Lingua Franca. How Written Communication is Changing under the Influence of Electronic Media and New Contexts of Use*, highlights how the different contexts and data taken into examination are analysed from an ELF perspective, with the first part including also nativised settings and the second focusing on a novel perspective on corporate digital communication from a pragmatics point of view.

Sebastian Malinowski reviews *The Use of English in Institutional and Business Settings. An Intercultural Perspective* (2007), edited by Giuliana Garzone and Cornelia Ilie. The contributions in the volume deal with different aspects of international communication through English, with a focus on inter/cross-cultural issues in professional business settings.

Dora Renna's review of *Intercultural and International Business Communication. Theory, Research and Teaching* edited by Juan Carlos Palmer-Silveira, Miguel F. Ruiz-Garrido and Immaculada Fortanet-Gómez (2008) illustrates the multifaceted complexity of aspects interweaving in business-related communication, particularly when English is the language of global communication.

The section is closed by Ting Shawnea Sum Pok's review of *English in Business and Commerce: Interaction and Policies; English in Europe* (2018, edited by Sherman Tamah, and Jiří Nekvapil. Two common aspects emerge from the thirteen contributions: a multidisciplinary approach involving linguistics and business, and the need for a more multilingual stance, where English is to be considered in its lingua franca role rather than a 'native' variety.

To conclude, the contributions in this issue all confirm that effective communication is essential in BELF, where communication strategies, accommodation moves and multilingual repertoires are all key parts of the effective enactment of strategic competence towards meaning co-construction and mutual understanding. Overall, the contributions also point to new perspectives in research, both methodologically and in terms of settings, from digital media to the pedagogical implications that BELF research can have for ELT Business, particularly as to materials development.



Works Cited

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