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ELF and the alternatives

1 The dominance of English

Many people view the use of English worldwide – in international politics, diplomacy, law, business, media, tertiary education, scientific research, etc. – as an irreversible phenomenon, and a positive one which potentially permits everyone to communicate effectively across borders. For example, Philippe van Parijs (2011: 31) describes the dominance of English as furthering "egalitarian global justice." He argues that "the powerful dynamics that currently drives the spreading of competence in English should not be resisted or reversed, but on the contrary welcomed and accelerated" for democratic reasons: it is emphatically a good thing if everybody can communicate directly with each other (2011: 50). The use of English as a lingua franca creates and expands a trans-national demos, "without the cumbersome and expensive mediation of interpretation and translation" (2011: 31). It "enables not only the rich and the powerful, but also the poor and the powerless to communicate, debate, network, cooperate, lobby, demonstrate effectively across borders," which is "a precondition for the effective pursuit of justice" (2011: 31).

Some people regard the English used as a language of wider communication by non-native English speakers (NNESs) as instantiations of English as a foreign language (EFL), which can be expected to contain errors resulting from imperfect learning. Others prefer to describe it as English as a lingua franca (ELF), in which speakers choose not to imitate the lexicogrammatical norms of any given native English variety – or indeed any nativized or indigenized variety – but rather adopt ways of speaking which aid intelligibility and successful communication. This gives rise to a great deal of linguistic variation and the use of non-standard (or at least non-native) morphology, lexis, phraseology, and syntax, or what Widdowson (2003: 48–49, emphasis in the original) describes as "the *virtual* language, that resource for making meaning immanent in the language which simply has not hitherto been encoded." On this account, ELF is *different* from English as a

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native language, but not *deficient*, and what is intrinsic to it – what Firth (2009: 150) calls the "lingua franca factor" – is not any specific language or discourse forms, but rather "the inherent interactional and linguistic variability that lingua franca interactions entail," and the "lingua franca outlook" on language that ELF users adopt (which may in fact resemble the linguistic outlook of many other plurilingual communicators). Van Parijs (2011: 33) argues that "there are as many legitimate ways of using [English] as there are people who bother to use it," and that NNESs should use English with their own distinctive accents and styles, and not allow native English speakers (NESs) to hog speaking time. He further states that NNESs have many advantages over NESs in terms of cultural sensitivity and linguistic accommodation in transnational and intercultural communication. In all of this he echoes arguments made by most of the prominent ELF researchers (e.g., Jenkins 2000, 2007; Seidlhofer 2001, 2011; Kirkpatrick 2007, 2010; Mauranen 2012).

There are, of course, other people who oppose the dominance of English as the world's lingua franca, because they favour linguistic diversity, because they see English as the vehicle of American imperialism and neoliberalism (Phillipson 1992), or because the exclusive use of English clearly entails "a considerable transfer of material and symbolic advantages to [its] native speakers" (Gazzola and Grin 2013: 94). Proponents of linguistic diversity thus propose alternatives, including multilingualism, with everyone using the language(s) of their choice (which therefore requires interpreting and translation); receptive multilingualism, in which speakers use a language different from their hearers, but still understand each other without the help of an additional lingua franca or the need for translation; and the use of an auxiliary language such as Esperanto. In this short *Topic & Comment* paper I will consider the potential scope of these possible alternatives to the use of English (whether EFL or ELF), particularly in Europe, and suggest that they are far more likely to complement English than to displace it to any great extent.

2 Translation

A lingua franca would obviously be unnecessary if everybody used their first or preferred language and relied on translation, and indeed, in many circumstances, using an L1 is preferable, as most people can express themselves best in their mother tongue, and find working in an L2 much more tiring. Unfortunately, both interpreting and translating can be prohibitively expensive, and the latter time consuming. While there are clearly good reasons for multilingual regimes in public and democratic bodies, whatever the cost (Gazzola and Grin

2013), many other organizations and institutions (in business, the media, universities, scientific research, etc.) expect their staff to be able to work (and publish) in English.

Nicholas Ostler (2010), on the other hand, expects the use of low-cost *automatic* translation to increase, hence his title *The last lingua franca: English until the return of Babel*. He believes that English will go the way of all the widespread lingua francas that preceded it, but in this instance Babel will return because machine translation will make the use of many languages in international communication possible: "Recorded speeches and printed texts will become virtual media, accessible through whatever language the listener or speaker prefers. In such a world, English might have – and might need – no successor as the single language of the future mass-connected world" (2010: xix). However, while Ostler may be right about the fate of all dominant languages, he seems to have inordinate faith in the necessary colossal advances in speech recognition and computer translation. Most people involved in translation, with machines or otherwise, believe that accurate, instant translation of idiomatic language is about as likely as the arrival on Earth of Douglas Adams's (1979) convenient ear-hole-sized translating Babel Fish (see, e.g., Wilks 2009; Bellos 2011: Ch. 23). Ostler also disregards the fact that (in oral interaction, if not with speeches and texts) many people might well prefer to have a real conversation, whenever possible, to speaking and then reading or listening to a reply produced by a handheld translation device.

3 Code switching

Ad Backus et al. (2011) are developing a "toolkit" for multilingual communication in Europe, in which they consider the use of ELF as well as other regional lingua francas, code switching, and receptive multilingualism, a partial alternative to both translation and lingua francas, in which interlocutors use different languages while still understanding each other.

Despite books with titles like *English-only Europe?* (Phillipson 2003), Backus et al. (2011) state that many other languages are used as lingua francas in Europe, including German over a wide area, and Russian (at least by older people) in the former Soviet Union and Warsaw Pact countries. On other continents, many other major languages also serve as regional lingua francas, including Chinese, Swahili, Spanish, Portuguese, French, Hindi, and Bahasa Indonesia.

Yet people don't always stick to one language at a time. Code switching offers various communicative advantages, such as using an expression that seems appropriate but which is only available in one language, and it is common among

plurilingual speakers (including ELF speakers) in Europe, particularly those who share cognate and/or typologically similar languages (MacKenzie 2014: Ch. 2), although it is far less common among ELF speakers in Asia, where neighbouring languages tend not to have lexical and typological similarities (Kirkpatrick 2010: 91).

Code switching can involve more than two languages. Lüdi et al. (2010) give some fine examples of language mixing recorded in the Swiss army (in an office rather than on a battlefield), including someone saying *"Ah. Voilà, allora questo è il, der Titel? auch vielleicht, l'abbiamo elaborato assieme . . ."* etc., and indeed Hülmbauer (2011: 154) asserts that "a notion of plurilingualism which is still defined as using 'one language at a time' (OLAAT) is clearly outdated. What seems more appropriate is an 'all language at all times' (ALAAT) approach, taking language in a holistic sense."

However, code switching and language mixing are often confined to informal situations; the established norm in more formal domains tends to be the exclusive use of a single language, frequently ELF. Yet Backus et al. (2011: 20) suggest that if code switching functions "for daycare centers, some classroom interaction in schools, community organizations, shops and markets, work settings, and public transport," there is no good reason why it could not also be used in "classrooms, official services (city hall, police, tax office, etc.), staff meetings in business, parliament sessions, and written media."

Unfortunately, Backus et al. are forced to concede that language users (certainly including teachers and government officials) are *not* invariably maximally cooperative, especially "when they are not communicating on their own behalf but as a representative of an organization, a nation or some other collective group" (2011: 8). In such circumstances, "the need to assert authority, superiority, authenticity, priority or some other contested kind of social identity" often gets in the way of taking the option "most likely to lead to successful communication" (2011: 8). In other words, they stick to their own first language. This is also what is recommended by supporters of receptive multilingualism.

4 Receptive multilingualism

Towards the end of *The search for the perfect language*, Umberto Eco (1995: 344–345) states that "Today, more than ever before [. . .] European culture is in need of a common language that might heal its linguistic fractures," although "at the same time, Europe needs to remain true to its historic vocation as the continent of different languages, each of which, even the most peripheral, remains the medium through which the genius of a particular ethnic group expresses itself,

witness and vehicle of a millennial tradition." According to Eco (1995: 351), receptive multilingualism could reconcile these two needs: people could "meet each other and speak together, each in his or her own tongue, understanding, as best they can, the speech of others," with the result that "even those who never learn to speak another language fluently could still participate in its particular genius, catching a glimpse of the particular cultural universe that every individual expresses each time he or she speaks the language of his or her ancestors and his or her own tradition."

Receptive multilingualism (hereafter RM), in which people speak their own language but are able to understand the language of their interlocutors, is indeed a potential alternative to a lingua franca, particularly for speakers of typologically similar or cognate languages. Where there has been L2 learning (or acquisition), RM can also function with languages that do not belong to the same language family; examples here might include French and German in Switzerland, French and Flemish in Belgium, Finnish and Swedish in Finland, and *any* language combination in cross-generational communication in migrant families (most often with the younger generation speaking the majority language and the older generation speaking the minority or immigrant language).

RM has long been practised in Europe, especially in cross-border communication by people with similar dialects in geographical dialect continua (see Trudgill 2002: 115–121), but it was greatly reduced by the homogenizing language and education policies of modern nation-states. Today, however, it is still a definite possibility for many people. To take some European examples (as Europe is the continent in which RM has the greatest potential), this applies to many speakers of neighbouring Romance, Germanic, and Slavic languages, in which listeners can expect to find sound correspondences, cognate lexis, and morphological and syntactic regularities common to the language family.

Receptive knowledge of a language is a dynamic phenomenon, and something that can be taught and acquired. Rehbein et al. (2011: 249, emphasis in the original) have proposed *lingua receptiva* ("LaRa") as an alternative name for receptive multilingualism, one which specifically relates to its receptive component: "the ensemble of those *linguistic*, *mental*, *interactional* as well as *intercultural competencies* which are *creatively* activated when interlocutors listen to linguistic actions in their 'passive' language or variety." However speakers are not disregarded: their perception of the hearer's response influences the way they construct their utterances, and they "apply additional competencies in order to monitor the way in which hearers activate their 'passive knowledge' and thus attempt to control the ongoing process of understanding" (2011: 249). Hence – as in the use of ELF – speakers can attempt to simplify their language, reduce communicative asymmetries, and reformulate, repair, recapitulate, and rephrase as

necessary, and make phonological, lexical, morphological, and syntactic adaptations towards what they imagine hearers are better able to understand. Hearers can use both non-verbal and verbal signals to steer the speaker's production, as well as adopting what Firth (1996: 243) calls the "let it pass" principle: i.e., when faced with "non-fatal" problems in understanding, the hearer "lets the unknown or unclear action, word or utterance 'pass' on the (common-sense) assumption that it will either become clear or redundant as talk progresses." Yet to what extent such jointly negotiated interaction allows the expression of what Eco calls the "particular genius" and "cultural universe" of a language is debatable.

In fact, Rehbein et al. (2011) make several somewhat unverifiable claims for LaRa. For example, they state that both code switching and code mixing "focus on speaker-oriented linguistic activities," and that ELF, too, "presupposes a focus on speaker" (2011: 258), whereas LaRa focuses on the hearer. Matthey (2008: 115), in contrast, suggests that passive bilingualism seems to be entirely in the service of the speaker's expressive needs, rather than the co-construction of meaning. Rehbein et al. also claim, with no attempt at justification, that "in LaRa, the interactants use L1 to verbalize what they would not be able to verbalize in ELF" (2011: 258), indirectly implying that LaRa might only be used when interactants' English is inadequate to a task. They argue that because LaRa involves the simultaneous use of two languages, it promotes the idea of cultural and linguistic diversity, whereas Lüdi et al. (2010: 75) suggest, on the contrary, that RM is "another manifestation of a monolingual ideology in the sense that accepting to understand another language could be the condition for refusing to speak it actively."

Unfortunately, there is an inherent inequality in RM or LaRa. Although ELF interactants often differ in their proficiency in this additional language, in RM each participant is, by definition, required to activate comprehension processes in a language they master less fully than the speaker. As Matthey (2008) argues, RM is hard to reconcile with the awareness that cooperative intercultural communicators generally try to accommodate to each other's uses, or to converge towards a common language, whenever possible. If this is not possible, making some attempt to use the interlocutor's language, if only briefly, by mixing languages and code switching, generally goes down well.

In non-conflictual situations, many speakers adjust their accent, dialect, lexis, grammar, phraseology, etc., or even change language completely, so as to approximate the patterns of interlocutors. Trudgill (2010: 189) describes accommodation as "a deeply automatic process [. . .] the result of the fact that all human beings operate linguistically according to a powerful and very general maxim," which Keller (1994: 100) phrases as "talk like the others talk." Trudgill (2010: 189) states that "Keller's maxim, in turn, is the linguistic aspect of a much more general and seemingly universal (and therefore presumably innate) human tendency

to 'behavioural coordination,' 'behavioural congruence,' 'mutual adaptation' or 'interactional synchrony,' as it is variously called in the literature. This is an apparently biologically given drive to behave as one's peers do." Certainly some of the pragmatic strategies identified by ELF researchers – including *other-repetition*, *speaker paraphrase, participant prompting, participant paraphrase*, *lexical anticipation,* and *lexical suggestion* – tend in this direction (see Firth 1996; Mauranen 2006; Kirkpatrick 2010: Ch. 6). On the contrary, speaking different languages, e.g., in a negotiation or in a parliament, might provoke a "them and us" feeling.

In short, although there are contexts in which RM or LaRa are potential alternatives to the use of a common language or translation, these are relatively limited in scope. RM, like code switching, can indeed be part of a plurilingual speaker's "toolkit" for certain circumstances, but probably in addition to English rather than as an alternative to it.

5 Esperanto

Given the necessarily restricted opportunities of using receptive multilingualism, another possible alternative to the dominance of English would be an invented auxiliary language, most plausibly Esperanto. Such a language would be a fairer lingua franca than English, as it would not benefit a particular group of native speakers, with a culture and linguistic history and preferred ways of speaking that might intimidate L2 learners. Esperanto also has obvious advantages, notably its morphological, syntactical, and lexical simplicity and regularity, and the straightforward relationship between its oral and written forms (compared, say, to English, French, and languages with non-alphabetic writing systems), which make it "about 7–8 times cheaper and faster to learn than any other language" (Grin 2011: 62).

On the other hand, learning English enables you to speak with, and to access the cultural productions of, a culturally heterogeneous speech community of over 350 million native speakers and over a billion non-native speakers, including a great many bands, singers, rappers, movie directors, actors, artists, authors, athletes, and so on, who are likely to appeal to teenage language learners. Given the current position of English, both the motivation to learn Esperanto and the opportunities to use it are lacking. Esperanto would have to be learned from books, while English can to some extent be absorbed passively from ineluctable exposure to global media. English also provides more opportunities for active use, and exposure and use are much more potent forces than grammatical simplicity and ease of learnability.

Moreover, Esperanto is clearly not in any way a "neutral" language. Although it contains Latin, Germanic, and Slavic ingredients, these are in very unequal proportions: about 75% of the lexis of Esperanto is from Romance languages (Janton 1993: 51), which is only 20–25% more than in English. And neither English, nor Romance, Germanic, and Slavic cognates, are a neutral choice for Estonians, Hungarians, Maltese, etc., let alone speakers of non-European languages. Outside Europe, millions of adult Africans and Asians who have already learned one or more European languages for international communication are unlikely to want to swap them for another one, even if it is much easier.

More importantly, the study of almost any natural language, particularly one used as a lingua franca, shows that the simplicity and regularity of Esperanto would not survive if it became a widely used second language. The language's current speakers – a relatively small number (probably a million or so) of educated, motivated, idealist, polyglot, planned language enthusiasts with a strong group identity, a strong sense of linguistic loyalty, and highly developed metalinguistic awareness – clearly do *not* have the same sociological profile as the immense majority of speakers of massively used languages of wider communication, such as the reported billion or more NNESs. Fiedler (2002, 2006) explicitly describes Esperanto speakers' linguistic loyalty and their sense of group identity as functions of their being a minority or a "microsociety," an identity which would suffer "extensive dissolution" (Fiedler 2002: 76) if Esperanto were to be further disseminated.

Fiedler also describes Esperanto's self-regulation. Given its grammatical simplicity – a mere 14 lexicogrammatical rules (plus 2 phonetic ones) – grammatical issues largely take care of themselves. However the need (or desire) for neologisms can lead to disagreements about lexis. Being aware that the major advantages of their language are its simplicity, stability, and lack of exceptions, Esperanto speakers are said to tend towards "hypercorrectness," which Fiedler (2002: 82–83) describes as having a far greater stabilizing effect on the language than the *Akademio de Esperanto*, one of whose aims is "to conserve and protect the language according to its norms and to control its development" (Fiedler 2006: 79). Both this attitude, and the very existence of the Akademio, are the converse of "the inherent interactional and linguistic variability" that Firth calls the "lingua franca outlook," and the claim by various researchers that "error" is not a relevant concept in the ELF context (e.g., Björkman 2008: 36; Cogo and Dewey 2012: 78). In fact, in this respect Esperanto and ELF would appear to be diametrical opposites.

Yet such hypercorrectness would necessarily dissipate if Esperanto were widely taught in schools and began to spread more widely. Given its extreme morphosyntactic simplicity, Esperanto provides far less scope than most natural

languages – and particularly ELF – for exploiting the unused latent possibilities of a "virtual language." It clearly lacks the kind of incongruous, idiosyncratic grammatical elements that many ELF speakers use differently from NESs – countable and uncountable nouns, nouns that don't take articles, the third person singular -*s* inflection, irregular past tenses, complicated aspectual forms, unpredictable verb complementation patterns, complex uses of prepositions, etc. (see MacKenzie 2014: Ch. 4, and the references therein). Because of its youth and its regularity, Esperanto also lacks a stock of conventionalized phraseological units and opaque, non-compositional, metaphorical idioms that L2 learners and users might vary, getting them "slightly wrong," but also – importantly – "approximately right," as Mauranen (2012: 144) describes ELF speakers as doing.

But if it were used by a far broader range of speakers, Esperanto would be likely to go the way of most other European languages, and start filling up with loan words. Although Esperanto *can* make words by combining roots, lengthy compounds would almost certainly have to compete with shorter loans from languages already widely known by less purist and linguistically loyal Esperanto speakers, notably English, today's most widespread lingua franca. Languages borrow both necessary "cultural" words – the first lexicalizations of new concepts that fill a gap in the recipient language – as well as "prestige" loans which do not add new concepts, and have parallel expressions in the recipient language, but come with particular conversational or stylistic effects. Their prestige derives from imitating elements of a dominant language, such as English in the media and various entertainment industries today. Moreover languages in countries where the general level of English is high also tend to borrow more abstract English words, not connected with cultural novelties (MacKenzie 2012). New Esperanto speakers who also spoke English would be likely to do the same thing. Thus the small and easily learnable core of Esperanto roots would very likely be augmented by a stock of borrowed and altered words, and manifold local variants. To put it another way, a much more widely used Esperanto would probably turn into a kind of Esperanglo.

Fiedler (2006: 77) states that "the mental presence of the native language always dominates" in Esperanto, and that "mother-tongue interference can be observed at all levels of the linguistic system" (2006: 82), but with plurilingual speakers, other languages are mentally present, too, and in most cases one of these is English. Plurilingual speakers tend to borrow and code-switch, and to use calques and transliterated collocations and idioms, especially among cognate or typologically similar languages, as well as, in many cases, approximating and coining words, and generally experimenting with language. All of these processes have been widely documented in ELF, and many ELF speakers appear to be the

antithesis of the hard core of idealist, linguistically loyal and hypercorrect Esperanto speakers. Seidlhofer (2011: 171) argues that ELF differs from Esperanto – and also Ogden's (1938 [1930]) "Basic English" and Quirk's (1982) "Nuclear English" – precisely in its vitality, which "as with any other natural language, has to do with the way formal linguistic properties are made to function, and are exploited and adapted to serve communicative purposes." Any increase in the vitality of Esperanto would necessarily go hand in hand with the adaptation and extension of its formal properties, leading to the kind of creativity, dynamism, flexibility, fluidity, hybridity, indeterminacy, instability, mutability, unpredictability, and variability which characterizes ELF.

The truth, pure and simple, is that Esperanto is only pure and simple, and planned and pristine, because it is spoken by a small number of people. If it was widely learned as a living language in childhood, the quantity of creative adjustments would increase. Very frequent forms would tend to become shortened and irregular (along the lines of *I dunno*, *Ché pas*, *Weiss nicht*, *keine Ahnung*, etc.). If many parents began to speak Esperanto to their children, because of its usefulness and prestige, it would change even more. Moreover, if Esperanto did become an L1 – for more than the current few hundred families (Corsetti 1996: 265) – it would lose its neutrality and merely replace English as a lingua franca that was also some people's mother tongue. Thus many of the current advantages of Esperanto would only be transitional.

6 Conclusion

There is a limited range of contexts – chiefly among neighbouring, cognate, and/or typologically similar languages – in which code switching and receptive multilingualism or *lingua receptiva* are possible, and could indeed be bolstered by training and official encouragement, but for broader international communication, regional lingua francas and a more widespread lingua franca remain necessary. There have been many lingua francas over history, which have always benefitted their native speakers (Ostler 2005, 2010). Despite the intrinsic unfairness of this state of affairs, it seems unlikely that either language policy – such as a concerted international programme to teach Esperanto – or machine translation will overturn it in the foreseeable future. Consequently, ELF probably has a long future ahead of it as a major component of plurilingual communicators' repertoires.

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