

## THE CULTURAL AND CREATIVE USE OF ENGLISH AS A LINGUA FRANCA

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**Abstract** – This paper argues that just as globalization calls for a reconsideration of conventional ways of conceiving of communication and community, so the use of English as a global lingua franca, ELF, prompts a rethinking of the associated concepts of culture and creativity. With globalization has come a realization that cultures, like communities, are continually adaptive and emergent networks of social interaction, not the bounded entities that they once were thought to be. Similarly, ELF interaction can be described as a process of pragmatic creativity and cultural adaptation which effective communication requires in a globalized world. As such, ELF is expressive of new realities but not those represented by verbal art, but the actual immediate realities of the here and now. Thus ELF it is argued is a naturally creative process which provides for the communicative needs of culturally complex and variable communities of users. As such it is not the creative use of language as it is in verbal art for the representation of an imagined counter-reality, but for the expression of the actual everyday social experience of ELF users of different linguacultural backgrounds around the world.

**Keywords:** English as a Lingua Franca; communication; community; culture; creativity; representations of reality.

In Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream*, the fairy Puck proudly tells his master Oberon:

I'll put a girdle round about the earth  
In forty minutes.

In Shakespeare's time, this was magic: something only fairies could do, impossible for mere mortals. In our time it is an everyday reality: on the internet we can put a digital girdle around the earth in seconds. We girdle as we google. The globalized world we now live in is very different from that of the Elizabethan age – indeed very different from any other age – and it calls for a radical reconceptualization of traditional notions of time and place, and also of community and communication. One major reason why we can now put a girdle around the earth so easily is that along with this international digital *medium* of communication there is also an international linguistics *means* of communication available to exploit it. This is English, English as a lingua franca, ELF.

But obviously this is not at all the English of Shakespeare. Nor, perhaps less obviously, is it the language of the English, or any other community of its native speakers. It is indeed not really a kind of English at all but the variable use of the language as an expedient communicative resource. As researchers of ELF have pointed out, its very use raises the question as to what it means to talk about English, or any other language, as if it were a bounded entity and the property of a well-defined community of users. Neither communication nor community can any longer be defined in traditional terms when referring to the use of ELF in a globalized world.

Closely related to ideas about communication and community, and therefore of direct relevance to an understanding of ELF, are two other concepts which I would like to explore speculatively on this occasion. One of them is *culture* and the other *creativity*. Both are regularly invoked in the work of researchers in ELF, who argue that it is of its very nature both ‘creative’ in its non-conventional exploitation of linguistic resources, and ‘intercultural’ in that it mediates between people from different linguacultural backgrounds. But what exactly does this mean? Behind the customary terms used in the study of language, as I suppose in other disciplines, often lurks an unresolved conceptual complexity. I suggest that this is the case with these terms ‘creativity’ and ‘culture’.

Creativity first. The term, oddly enough, has been used to refer to what is distinctive in two directly opposing approaches to the description of language. The arch formalist Chomsky (1965, p. 6) on the one hand claims that his Generative Grammar

accommodates the creative aspect of language.

By this he means that abstract rules of syntax can be applied to produce or generate an infinite number of sentences. In this sense creativity is a matter of recurrent acts of conformity to rule. On the other hand, a Functional approach sees creativity as the non-conformist exploitation of rules in actual usage, the attested instances of linguistic production as recorded in language corpora. So on the one hand, creativity is an abstract property of linguistic competence, on the other hand it is an actual property of communicative performance. However, in both cases, the property is taken to be an intrinsic and defining feature of language. Thus with regard to actual usage, as Ronald Carter (2004, p. 13) puts it:

linguistic creativity is not simply a property of exceptional people, but an exceptional property of all people.

Since this is a property of all people, it is hard to see how it can be exceptional – on the contrary it would be entirely usual and commonplace. In this view, everybody is creative. It is a feature of the ordinary pragmatic use of language and there is nothing unusual or extra-ordinary about it.

But this is again directly contrary to a third concept of creativity, that which is associated with literature, with verbal art. Here creativity is indeed defined as an unusual and abnormal use of language which only exceptional people can produce. So the term ‘creative writing’, for example, has specific reference to prose fiction, plays, poetry. Being creative in this artistic sense is not at all the same as being creative in the general pragmatic sense – indeed, particularly in poetry, it depends on using language in an unusual, abnormal way, on *not* being creative in a general pragmatic sense. If every use of language were poetical, there would be no poetry. I will henceforth use the term ‘pragmatic creativity’ to refer to its everyday occurrence, and the term ‘poetic creativity’ to refer to its realization in the verbal art of poetry.

The two concepts of creativity, pragmatic and poetic, correspond closely to different ways of thinking about culture. The concept of ‘culture’ has, of course, always been notoriously elusive of definition but we can, I think, accept the broad distinction that is generally made. On the one hand there is what has been called culture with a small c. This has to do with the ideas, values, conventions of behavior which are customary in a particular community. This is what sociologists and sociolinguists are concerned with and which I will henceforth label ‘societal culture’. Since this has to do with what is usual practice in everyday life, societal culture encompasses pragmatic creativity – people

exercise this kind of creativity in the ordinary activity of communicating with others in their community.

The second way of conceptualizing culture is that it has to do not with what is ordinary but on the contrary with what is extraordinary, not with the expression of everyday life but with the innovative representation of an alternative reality. Culture in this sense, culture with a big C, is music, dance, visual and verbal art, dissociated from the contexts of conventional social custom, discontinuous, often quite remote, from the familiar round of daily routine. This, of course, is how culture is conceived in the popular mind. For tourists arriving in Italy, for example, the culture they have in mind is certainly not ‘societal’, not the customary contemporary way of life of the Italian people, but ‘artistic’: the paintings of Botticelli, or Leonardo da Vinci. And as far as the written word is concerned, this culture is to be found in the sonnets of Petrarch or Dante’s *Divine Comedy* rather than in the pages of *La Repubblica*. The point to be made about ‘artistic culture’ is that it exists precisely because it is essentially different from ‘societal culture’, the representation of what Seamus Heaney has called a ‘counter-reality’.

Heaney uses the term in reference to poetry. This, as verbal art in its quintessential form, is what I shall be particularly concerned with here. Just as societal culture is served by pragmatically creative uses of language, so the artistic culture of poetry is served by poetic creativity. As I have said, if pragmatic creativity is a common feature of all language use, then it must sustain the usual purposes of communication in the contexts of everyday life, which is why the evidence of such creativity in English is so abundantly available in language corpora like the British National Corpus or the Bank of English. Since such corpora are designed to capture the features of normal usage, they do not as a rule include poetry and so reveal little of poetically creative uses of the language.

So what I am suggesting is that the terms *creativity* and *culture* are both used as labels for two quite different and indeed conflicting concepts and that we need to make a distinction between societal culture, which is served by pragmatic creativity, and artistic culture, which is served by poetic creativity.

Creativity, whether pragmatic or poetic, is not a property of the text but of its discursive interpretation. The recognition of creativity in uses of language depends on their being noticed as acts of intended non-conformity, deliberate departures from an expected norm. In the pragmatic case these departures are intended to have a particular perlocutionary effect – to make an utterance emphatic, ironic, amusing and so on. To be non-conformist in this way is to act against what the philosopher Paul Grice (1975) has called the Co-operative Principle. This he expresses as a set of default assumptions represented as maxims that people normally subscribe to when they communicate. When a maxim is violated, the effect is what Grice refers to as an “implicature”. The maxim that is of particular relevance to creativity is the so-called “maxim of manner”, which calls for perspicuity of expression. Thus when people communicate they would normally be expected to conform to this clarity condition, avoid obscurity and ambiguity and make their meanings as transparent as possible. Creative uses of language go against this maxim since they are of their nature non-conformist and unexpected and so they quite naturally give rise to implicatures.

But it must be stressed that these maxims relate to presuppositions of familiarity. So for example if in conversation with a fellow native speaker of English I were to say that somebody *had been barking up the wrong tree*, or *had shot himself in the foot*, since these are familiar idiomatic phrases they would not be noticed as maxim violations and there would be no implicature. If, however, I wanted to give a more incisive edge to my meaning, I could play on words, as the phrase goes, and creatively adjust the wording of

these idiomatic expressions. I might say *'he is not just barking up the wrong tree but up the wrong wood'* or *'he has just shot his whole family in the foot.'* Such rewordings do give rise to implicatures in that they depart from the customary patterns of use in order to achieve a special effect.

Such manipulation of established patterns of usage, however, is not only a feature of pragmatic creativity. It of course also occurs in what I call poetic creativity. Consider, for example, how the common phrase *'happy as the day is long'* is variably exploited by Dylan Thomas in these lines in his poem *Fern Hill*:

Now as I was young and easy under the apple boughs  
About the lilting house and happy as the grass was green,

And as I was green and carefree, famous among the barns  
About the happy yard and singing as the farm was home...

Under the new made clouds and happy as the heart was long,  
In the sun born over and over,  
I ran my heedless ways...

*Happy as the grass was green, happy as the heart was long*: here again the effect of the verbal manipulation crucially depends on a familiarity with the conventional idiom: *happy as the day is long*. For anyone who does not have that familiarity – a non-native speaker of English, for example – there is no such effect and the creativity fails.

How then is all this relevant to an understanding of the use of English as a lingua franca? Whether pragmatic or poetic in purpose and effect, both kinds of linguistic creativity necessarily involve the exploitation of the possibilities for meaning making which are virtual in the language code to produce patterns of language which do not conform to normal conventions of use. Much of ELF use can be described as creative in this general sense. Here are some examples from VOICE, the corpus of spoken ELF interactions compiled by Barbara Seidlhofer (2011) and her colleagues:

The point of the whole things about quota it's a very good idea but in the same time it's like knife with double blade  
I feel that many times I am pulling the brakes and I'm really and I'm consciously doing it because I know time is needed  
We have the problem in front of us we have to face it and sooner or later it will explode hopefully not in our faces but it will explode. I mean there are so much sort of positioning around this.

Here too we find creativity in that it too exploits the potential of English in non-conformist ways. There is, however, a crucial difference. Consider again the pragmatic and poetic non-conformities I have discussed so far – *he has just shot his whole family in the foot, singing as the farm was home*. These are deliberate departures from a norm which is assumed to be known to the recipient – *he has shot himself in the foot, happy as the day is long* – and they are intended to be recognized as such, otherwise, as I have said, there is no implicature and the creativity fails. But this bilateral condition of mutual norm recognition typically does not apply in contexts of interaction between ELF users. If one or more than one of them is a non native speaker, as is frequently the case, they exploit whatever linguistic resources they have at their disposal to get their meaning across and whatever non-conformities they produce are not usually intended to be noticed as such, and even if they are, the recipient may well not be able to ratify the intention. If the condition of mutual norm familiarity is not met, there is no implicature. In what sense, then, can ELF

usage be considered creative?

According to the co-operative principle, an implicature comes about when a departure from the default norm is intended and recognized as such. The usual assumption is that this norm is preconceived, a schematic construct already known by the participants as a basis for their co-operation. But when ELF users co-operate in their communication, since they come from different linguacultural backgrounds, they cannot rely on such shared preconceptions. How then do ELF users from Lecce and Leicester, for example, or from Bangkok and Barcelona manage to communicate? The answer, I suggest, is that they negotiate pro-tem norms online in the adaptive, emergent process of their very interaction. The co-operative principle still applies, as it must apply to all communication, but it is acted upon in ways that do not require conformity to conventional native speaker ways in which the principle is put into practice.

Most discussion of verbal communication deals with how meanings are achieved by speakers of the same linguacultural community – native speakers who have what is referred to as the same communicative competence. What we see in ELF use is how communication is achieved when this condition of shared competence does not apply – when users of English have to create the conditions for effective communication reactively and adaptively as they go along. By means of this pragmatic creativity, ELF users engage in the same kind of social interaction as native speakers do within their own communities. However, they do not do so in accordance with the conventions of the societal culture of a native speaking community. Coming as they do from different linguacultural backgrounds, when ELF users interact they constitute a microcosmic pro-tem community of their own and this calls for the negotiation of common ground by reconciling different cultural conventions. What emerges in this process is a kind of extempore hybrid culture, a mode of social behavior which is specific to a particular and often transient community of ELF users.

Communities and cultures are not, of course, usually conceptualized in this miniature and transitory way, but as stable and large scale phenomena. But I would argue that an understanding of the nature of creativity in ELF leads to a reconsideration of these concepts too. As I indicated earlier, globalization has already brought about a realization that communities are not bounded entities but continually adaptive and emergent networks of social interaction. The same can be said of cultures. Although they too can be thought of as stable constructs defined by certain commonalities, they are, in fact, only temporary states of affairs, the present result of a historical process whereby individual experiences are abstracted into social conventions. And of course this process of variable acculturation never settles into a state, but continues as it adapts to new experience. So cultures can be seen as transient formations of shared perceptions and conceptions that emerge and vary in the process of communicative interaction. It may be convenient, and for some descriptive purposes entirely appropriate, to think of them as distinct and stable entities, but culture too, I would argue, is correspondingly a property of the communicative process: it is something that is performed and adaptively transformed on line as discourse participants converge on common ground.

The culture that evolves in ELF interaction through this natural process of pragmatic creativity is societal in the sense that it has to do with everyday communal reality. But it is not the everyday of the native speaker – it does not reflect or sustain customary shared ways of thinking or behaviour that constitute the societal cultures of particular communities. In this sense it represents alternative realities. But these are not the imagined counter-realities at a remove from the contexts of everyday life that are poetically created by verbal artists to represent their individual vision, but the actual

immediate realities of here and now in a globalized world in which everybody is involved and implicated – the realities of international business and diplomacy, of values and ideologies in conflict and refugees in distress – realities that are of their nature constituted of different and often conflicting societal cultures and that can only be engaged with by reconciling these differences in some way.

And ELF, I suggest, provides a way. English has always been put to creative use: pragmatically in the communal process of social discourse and poetically in individual works of verbal art. But demands are now made on its creativity as never before as it is called upon to service the communicative needs of a culturally complex and variable community of users. This is the new globalized reality that English as a lingua franca has to express – not a counter reality that is the figment of the imagination of individual verbal artists but one that is an actual everyday social experience. As I said at the beginning, what for Shakespeare was something magical that could only exist in the imagination – putting a girdle round about the earth – has now become a commonplace reality – we girdle as we google. As the poet Tennyson puts it “the old order changeth yielding place to new” and the conventional old order of conceptualizing community and culture and creativity also need to yield to new ways of thinking more appropriate to the world we now live in. A brave new world? I am not sure how brave it is, but it is one we have somehow to come to terms with. And understanding ELF, I suggest, offers us a way of doing so.

**Bionote:** Henry Widdowson is Honorary Professor at the University of Vienna and Professor Emeritus at the University of London. He is renowned in the fields of applied linguistics and language teaching, and is the author of numerous seminal books and articles, including *Text, Context, Pretext: Critical Issues in Discourse Analysis* (2004), *Defining Issues in English Language Teaching* (2002), *Linguistics* (1996), and *Practical Stylistics: An Approach to Poetry* (1992).

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