

## ○ OF NORMS AND MINDSETS

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I agree with Michael Clyne and Farzad Sharifian that the spread of English as an international language calls for “a mindset appreciative rather than fearful of diversity”, and that in this respect at least globalisation represents a welcome challenge. I am not clear however that the mindset expressed in the position paper (henceforth PP) is conducive to such an appreciation of diversity. There seems to be little recognition in this PP that diversity is a necessary consequence of language spread, in the sense that English will naturally vary as it is appropriated and adapted to serve the needs and purposes of communities other than those of Inner Circle native speakers. In discussing the issue of norms, the authors focus on the extent to which these variable uses of the language are acceptable as measured against the “standard”. But the main issue as I see it is whether it makes any sense to evaluate this variable usage by invoking the notion of a standard norm at all.

To begin with, the notion is itself extremely vague. It could be argued that the authors can hardly be blamed for this shortcoming, as there is no clear consensus among linguists about the meaning of the term “Standard English”:

It is ... somewhat surprising that there seems to be considerable confusion in the English-speaking world, even amongst linguists, about what *Standard English* is. One would think that it should be reasonably clear which of the varieties of English is the one which has been subject to the process of standardisation, and what its characteristics are. In fact, however, we do not even seem to be able to agree how to spell this term - with an upper case or lower case <s> ... (Trudgill, 1999, p. 117)

Nevertheless, the argument presented in the PP crucially depends on at least some working definition of the term. In the PP, “standard” and “core” (with and without scare quotes) seem to be interchangeable terms. Sometimes they are identified with native speakers in the Inner Circle, sometimes referred to as “Anglo”, but nowhere is a standard norm defined. Obviously if the norm is undefined, there is no way of identifying degrees of conformity or acceptability with reference to it. But even if it were defined, it would represent a set of conventions adopted by a particular English speaking community as

suited to its purposes and would have no necessary relevance for other users of the language. This is, of course, what Widdowson was getting at years ago (originally in 1994) in his discussion of “The ownership of English”:

The very idea of a standard implies stability, but language is of its nature unstable. It is essentially protean in character, adapting its shape to suit changing circumstances. It would otherwise lose its vitality and its communicative and communal value. ... the users of the language exploit its protean potential and fashion it to their need, thereby demonstrating a high degree of linguistic capability ... the innovation indicates that the language has been learnt, not just as a set of fixed conventions to conform to, but as an adaptable resource for meaning making. And making meaning which you can call your own. This, surely, is a crucial condition. You are proficient in a language to the extent that you possess it, make it your own, bend it to your will, assert yourself through it rather than simply submit to the dictates of its forms. (Widdowson, 2003, pp. 41–42)

What needs to be considered, then, is the essentially emic question how effective a particular use of language is, in a particular context with particular interlocutors, not whether it can be “accepted as standard” (PP, p. 28.7) – this is surely what an appreciation of diversity entails.

And this applies to all uses of English, in whatever Kachruvian circle they occur. Languages are intrinsically unstable, so usage is always variable. The authors seem to think of norms as fixed, but of course they are not, they are continually in flux – which is why they are so difficult to define. Variation will always occur as a fact of linguistic life and a language could not function pragmatically if it did not, so it really makes no sense to ask a question like “how much grammatical variation is possible” (PP, p. 28.6). Variation is simply a term used to refer to the natural adaptive use of linguistic resources, the functionally motivated use of linguistic forms. I suggest that the first crucial question to ask is why this natural process should be accepted as entirely normal, not only possible but necessary, for *some* users of English but not for others – others who happen to be the majority. The second question I would wish to ask, as somebody interested in sociolinguistics and intercultural pragmatics, is: if non-native users can function effectively in the language without replicating (ideal or not so ideal) native speaker behaviour by conforming to prescribed norms, how do they do it?

It is this second question that researchers in English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) are essentially concerned with; but by addressing it, they also tackle the assumptions behind the first. They are investigating variation as the process of the adaptive use of linguistic resources, and doing so empirically by studying how ELF speakers actually use the language to interact with each other. The authors of the PP appear not to be familiar with this research, so it is important to point out that quite unlike “Globish” or Ogden’s Basic English, which have no empirical basis whatever, it does not seek to propose or promote a “common core variety” of international English, a set of linguistic forms comparable with other varieties, like “American” English. In fact, the primary concern of our research is not to document what linguistic forms occur in ELF but how they function pragmatically in the achievement of meaning, how they are used strategically to co-construct discourse.

Over the last few years, descriptive work on ELF has gathered considerable momentum. Most of these studies are qualitative; they take an emic perspective and observe people absorbed in the ad-hoc, situated negotiation of meaning. They show interactants making use of their multi-faceted plurilingual repertoires in a fashion motivated by the communicative purpose and the interpersonal dynamics of the interaction. ELF users can be seen exploiting the potential of the language, fully focused on the purpose of the talk and on their interlocutors as people, not on the linguistic code itself. To mention but a few examples, some studies have focused on the crucial role of accommodation in ELF talk (e.g. Cogo, 2007 and Cogo (forthcoming); Seidlhofer (forthcoming, a). Others explore how speakers signal their cultural identities in various ways, e.g. by making code-switching an intrinsic part of many interactions (Klimpfinger, 2007; forthcoming), by creating their own on-line idioms (Pitzl, forthcoming; Seidlhofer and Widdowson, 2007), new words (Pitzl et al., 2008) and, more generally, their own inter-culture (Pözl, 2005; Pözl and Seidlhofer, 2006; Thompson, 2008). The interdependence of form(s) and function(s) is at the centre of studies looking at various aspects of lexicogrammar, such as Breiteneder (in press), Hülmbauer (2007; forthcoming), Dewey (2007a; 2007b), Ranta, (2006), Seidlhofer (forthcoming b). Other studies show ELF users successfully resolving instances of miscommunication when they occur (Pitzl, 2005, Watterson, 2008), establishing rapport (Kordon, 2006), and employing communicative strategies such as repetition (Lichtkoppler, 2007), silences (Böhringer, 2007) and considerate and mutually supportive communicative behaviour overall (e.g. Kaur, 2008; Pullin-Stark, forthcoming, (Rischner, 2006). There are also ethnographic, even longitudinal, studies investigating the use of ELF in various settings, such as Björkman (2008), Schaller-Schwaner (2008), Smit

(forthcoming) in higher education and Ehrenreich (forthcoming) in multinational corporations.

What all these studies have in common is that they document ELF users' degree of independence of ENL (English as a native language) norms: they show ELF speakers using the underlying resources of the language, not just the conventional ENL encodings, and adjusting and calibrating their own language use for their interlocutors' benefit.

So it is quite wrong to suggest that the focus of ELF research is "on the limited areas of grammatical and phonological variation" or that its view of language is "reminiscent of interlanguage studies of the 1970s and in which language was treated as if it only consisted of the formal features of syntax and phonology" (PP, p. 28.7). This is simply not the case. The communicative acts observed in these ELF studies are entirely different from calling up elements of a foreign language as they were learnt at school and pressing them into service as "correctly" as possible in a quasi display of successful, i.e. "error-free", "learner language" (Ranta, forthcoming; Seidlhofer, 2001). Like the authors of this position paper, the focus of our attention is on "pragmatic and discourse variation" (PP, p. 28.7). Unlike them, however, we are not concerned with whether or not this variation is "acceptable" in reference to native speaker/"core"/"Anglo" norms of linguistic and rhetorical behaviour, but with how people from diverse linguacultural backgrounds appropriate and adapt English for their own communicative purposes.

With reference again to mindset, the main difference between us, I suppose, is that the authors of this paper take a normative view of English and I do not. For them, the central issue about English as an international language is how far established norms should be/need to be conformed to. Where this norm has to do with linguistic forms, their question is how far deviations from the standard are admissible, and whether an alternative "core" can be discovered or devised. Where this norm relates to discourse function, their question is how far international users of English should subscribe to conventions of use marked by the cultural values of its native speakers. In both cases the assumption seems to be that norms are stable, more or less fixed, and the choice is either to accept or reject them. My view, supported by what has already emerged from our empirical research on ELF, is that norms are unstable, negotiated online, continually shifting and changing, and that in the variable process of language use people do not just conform but adapt their linguistic and cultural behaviour as appropriate to their communicative purposes. Far from this showing "a shallow understanding of language" (PP, p. 28.11) this view is consistent with sociolinguistic perspectives on language variation and change – aspects of diversity which presumably we all agree should be appreciated.

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Cite this article as: Seidlhofer, Barbara. 2008. 'Of norms and mindsets'. *Australian Review of Applied Linguistics*, International Forum on English as an International Language, special issue edited by Sharifian, Farzad; Clyne, Michael. 31 (3): pp. 33.1–33.7. DOI: 10.2104/ara10833.