

COMMUNICATIVE ‘SUCCESS’, CREATIVITY AND THE NEED FOR DE-MYSTIFYING L1 USE

Some thoughts on ELF and ELT

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Abstract – This article tries to make explicit and question some myths about L1 communication that are hidden or implied in statements made about ELF and about language teaching/learning. One of these myths has to do with the nature of communicative ‘success’ that is not rarely equated, in a far too simplistic fashion, with the absence of miscommunication. The second has to do with the nature of creativity and the role that creative intent plays in the evaluation of linguistic products, such as newly coined words, as creative. The contribution identifies and explores the idealized views of L1 communication that these two myths create. It argues that it is essential for ELF research and ELF researchers to recognize these myths and idealizations and to dismantle them, especially with regard to pedagogical implications of ELF.

Keywords: miscommunication; creativity; ELF; success; myths

1. Myths about communicative ‘success’ and miscommunication

Much has been written about ELF in the past two decades. In many publications, scholars describe different lexicogrammatical characteristics or pragmatic processes in ELF data. In reporting on a particular phenomenon, many authors point out that ELF is communicatively ‘successful’. Although these remarks are fairly pervasive, they are often made just in passing. Hence, the question of what qualifies as ‘success(ful communication)’ in an ELF interaction – or *any* interaction, for that matter – hardly ever gets addressed.

Occasionally, scholars mention lack (or scarcity) of ‘communication breakdowns’ or misunderstandings in this respect. Wittingly or unwittingly, they thereby say, more or less explicitly, that the absence of miscommunication is what makes a communicative event ‘successful’. In forging a link between these two aspects, they reinforce a position that sees ‘good’ (as in: ‘successful’) communication as characterized by the absence of miscommunication. This position tends to go hand in hand with the (usually well-hidden and implicit) assumption that miscommunication should – and in

fact can – be avoided by speakers; not just on occasion, but in general.

At the same time, many (ELF) researchers are likely to agree that misunderstanding, non-understanding and negotiation of meaning are part of communication. If we accept that all “language use and communication are in fact pervasively and even intrinsically flawed, partial, and problematic” (Coupland *et al.* 1991, p. 3) and that “conversation proceeds on the assumption that a certain vagueness is normal” (Wardhaugh 1998, p. 252), the absence or scarcity of miscommunication cannot be what defines whether or not communication is ‘successful’.

The range of phenomena that can be grouped under the umbrella term miscommunication can have very different causes and consequences (see e.g. Pitzl 2010). Miscommunication is not one clearly identifiable phenomenon, but can manifest in very different ways that have “widely varying degrees of severity” (Coupland *et al.* 1991, p. 3). Thus, the occurrence of some kind of miscommunication is not per se ‘dangerous’ or ‘threatening’ to a conversation. It does not automatically make an interaction unsuccessful. The occurrence of miscommunication is just normal; not for ELF communication specifically, but for communication in general.

In addition, we should keep in mind that not every instance of miscommunication is ‘problematic’ or undesirable, in the sense that it should not have happened. Some instances of miscommunication may be necessary, extremely productive and useful. If a link between ‘communicative success’ and miscommunication is to be established at all, then the key issue would need to be how miscommunication is ‘dealt with’ by interactants. How do speakers react to miscommunication once it – inevitably – occurs? What happens when speakers realize that there has been a mis- or non-understanding?

Some negotiation sequences triggered by the occurrence of an understanding problem may actually contribute to communicative success. Linell (1995, p. 185-184) describes this in the following way: “Indeed, salient (and perhaps fruitful) misunderstandings occur, because parties try to understand each other, and hence such episodes may increase the depth of understanding in ways that, without them, would be difficult to come by.” So whether, and to what extent, one conceives of communicative ‘success’ as being linked to miscommunication is a very complex issue. It should certainly not be reduced to a simple formula in which the absence of miscommunication equals successful communication.

These arguments about the ‘normalness’ or ‘neutrality’ of miscommunication are neither novel nor very recent. Linell’s (1995) and Coupland *et al.*’s (1991) remarks date back more than 20 years, before ELF research started to gain momentum. And so do Sarangi’s (1994) remarks about the danger of “analytic stereotyping” in intercultural communication research:

Rather than studying miscommunication in its own terms or for the undoubtedly valuable sake of coming to grips with communicative success, studies of the type identified in the previous subsections [e.g. studies in contrastive cross-cultural pragmatics] use 'miscommunication' to reify cultural differences. Put very strongly, it is through the occurrence of miscommunication that cultural differences become real and take on a life of their own. This leads to what I call 'analytic stereotyping' of intercultural events. Analysts operate with a prior definition of the situation and its participants as (inter)cultural and subsequently play upon a principle of cultural differences in accounting for instances of miscommunication. (Sarangi 1994, p. 413)

I have already discussed elsewhere at greater length why a 'neutral' and more differentiated view of miscommunication is of particular importance for ELF research (e.g. Pitzl 2005, pp. 52-53, 2010, p. 9-14, and 18-22, 2015, pp. 94-96). In a similar fashion, I have argued why we need to avoid the 'analytic stereotyping' that Sarangi (1994) describes when researching ELF as inter- or transcultural communication (Pitzl 2010, pp. 14-18, 2015, pp. 103-105). ELF interactions are not per default (more) problematic or challenging because they are 'intercultural' or because they are ELF. As shown in many descriptive studies, instances of miscommunication in ELF interactions are not primarily due to cultural differences or linguistic 'deficits' (e.g. Deterding 2013; Kaur 2009, 2011; Mauranten 2006; Pitzl 2005, 2010; Watterson 2008).

2. ELT, L1 and ELF

Nevertheless, an influential language policy document like the *Common European Framework of Reference* (CEFR) may give us – i.e. researchers, but especially also language educators and language learners all over the globe – precisely this idea. When the CEFR talks about misunderstanding, this is primarily as being caused by two factors: limited language proficiency and cultural differences of interlocutors (see Pitzl 2015, pp. 107-118 for a detailed analysis). Progressing through the CEFR proficiency levels, learners are portrayed as getting better and better at avoiding mistakes and "errors which cause mis-understanding" (Council of Europe 2001, p. 28). Communication at levels C1 and C2 is presented as becoming increasingly 'flawless' (i.e. *mistakes* and *errors* are hardly used in C1/C2 descriptors) and 'repair-free'. As the 'proficiency' in a 'foreign language' increases, as portrayed in the CEFR, miscommunication and repair seem to disappear. Although the recent Companion Volume to the CEFR (2017) explicitly states that the C2 level of 'Mastery' does not describe a "near-native speaker" (Council of Europe 2001, p. 35), the idea of L1 communication – or at least:

extremely ‘proficient’ communication – as reference point or goal for learning is inherent in the notion of C2 Mastery. And this communication is presented as being more or less repair- and miscommunication-free.

Once we take a minute to ponder the implications of this, it becomes obvious that this is, of course, a utopian portrayal of communication. From our own experience in everyday interactions especially also in our L1(s), we know that we often struggle to clear up a misunderstanding, or try to navigate through the consequences of one, when nothing was linguistically (or even pragmatically) ‘wrong’ with the language use that led to it. Not rarely do we have to resolve potentially severe and tricky instances of miscommunication in fairly close personal relationships where, in addition to having a shared language, we also know our interlocutors extremely well. Still, we miscommunicate on occasion. So irrespective of whether you refer to it as L1, native, near-native, C2 or use any other label: increased language ‘proficiency’ does not lead to an ‘end point’ of being skilled or knowing a language at which miscommunication is simply absent. It never will be. And it does not need to be. Because communication is not necessarily ‘successful’ when it is miscommunication-free. And it is not necessarily ‘problematic’ if it involves instances of miscommunication.

Much of this has been said before, so why say it again? The issues I have summarized above have come up in several lectures and subsequent question-answer-sessions I witnessed throughout the past year. It was these discussions that prompted me to address these issues again in this condensed fashion, because it seemed that they had not been fully resolved. Or rather, it seems to me that an awareness of their existence is not as widespread as one would hope. Especially researchers and practitioners who have been involved in language education and who become interested in ELF may be influenced by these implicit and well-hidden beliefs. The myths that idealize (L1) communication have been present in ELT/FLT (English/Foreign Language Teaching) for decades. Because of their implicitness, it is understandable that they may have occasionally been carried over into discussions about ELF. Yet, I would argue that it is of crucial importance for us to detect these myths and become aware of their existence, so that we can begin to disentangle and dismantle them. It is time for us to start de-mystifying L1 communication – in the context of FLT, in the context of researching ELF, and even more so when we think about pedagogical and practical implications of ELF for ELT. One of these myths has to do with accepting that miscommunication is part of any communication and does not evaporate with increased language ‘proficiency’. Another one of these myths has to do with who gets to be considered creative in language use (and who does not).

3. Myths about creativity

Introducing, explaining and exemplifying the distinction between norm-following and norm-developing – or rather norm-transcending – creativity (see e.g. Pitzl 2012, 2017, *forthc.*), I have on several occasions shown a list of words coined by ELF speakers that make use of the verb suffix *-ate*. In addition to the words *pronunciate* (Pitzl *et al.* 2008, p. 29), *conspirating*, *examining*, *financiated* (Seidlhofer 2011, pp. 102-103), *prolongate* and *determinate* (Vettorel 2014, p. 127), this list includes the words *accreditate*, *accredited*, *combinated*, *combinates*, *examimates*, *fragmentated*, *identificate*, *imagine*, *improvisate*, *presentate*, *registrate*, *reorientate*, all of which are used by speakers in VOICE. The point I usually wish to make with this group of examples is that the same form, i.e. each of these words, can be norm-transcending as well as norm-following (and potentially even norm-reinforcing) at the same time.

At the level of lexis, each of these words is a new form that is norm-transcending. The word does not 'exist' when it is coined by a speaker. At the level of morphology and suffixation, the same forms are creative in a norm-following way, since they all make use of the *-ate* suffix in a regular fashion. The bound morpheme *-ate* is used like one would expect it to be, in analogy to existing and codified words. In the case of the *-ate* suffix, it is possible to find quite a relatively high number of different words that are newly coined by speakers in VOICE. Thus, one might muse that the verbal suffix *-ate* is fairly productive in ELF data and appears in/leads to a range of newly created words. Somewhat paradoxically, this would mean that each of these newly coined creative norm-transcending words actually also strengthens the suffix *-ate* as a marker of 'verbness'. Thereby, the same form is not just norm-transcending and norm-following, but may in fact also be norm-reinforcing, in that its frequent use in novel forms might reinforce the regularity and productivity of *-ate* as a verbal suffix. (see Pitzl *forthc.*, ch. 1).

There are two types of reactions that I have, on occasion, received in response to this argument and to this collection of words taken from ELF data. Both of these seem to be linked to an implicit idealized view of L1 communication that has to do with how creativity is viewed in relation to L1 as opposed to so-called 'non-native' or 'foreign language' use. The first is a comment (often from audience members involved in language education) that these new words would not be considered severe problems if they were used by language students/pupils in school. They would be 'okay', they probably would be 'tolerated' by a teacher and not be marked as mistakes/errors (or at least not as severe ones, maybe just as minor one). The other reaction is a comment usually made by an audience member who is involved both in language education as well as linguistic research. This comment usually

challenges whether these words should in fact be seen as creative. Especially in comparison to the instances of much more ‘colorful’ creative idiom variants and unique metaphors used in VOICE that I tend to show in my talks, aren’t these words with *-ate* actually quite regular and systematic, and hence not really creative, I get asked. Does it make sense to refer to them as creative?

To the first comment I usually respond that I would encourage language teachers to not just ‘tolerate’ such novel words when they are coined by their students, but to become aware of the amount of successful language learning that has gone into coining words like *prolongate* or *improvisate*. Explicit comments made by teachers should not just be about what these forms are not (i.e. existing or ‘correct’), but also about what these forms actually are, namely concrete evidence of learners having grasped certain principles of word-formation, suffixation and meaning-making through the combination of different morphemes. As Seidlhofer (2011, p. 186) puts it, in many situations “learners’ non-conformities are to be categorized not as errors but as evidence of successful learning”.

My response to the second comment tends to be that the systematicity and regularity – and hence perceived ‘un-creativity’ – of these words is easy to see when they are grouped in one paragraph (as I have done above). But this is not how these new forms appear in naturally-occurring ELF language use; and this is not how they are created. Each word is an individual instance of a different ELF speaker coining a new form in a particular context that is brought about by the creative combination of individual morphological elements. This is not to say that the speaker intended to create a new word; but whether or not they intended to, they did. Only frequent re-use and uptake of these individual word forms by other speakers in the same (and other) contexts might eventually make them ‘un-creative’, i.e. part of the present-day lexicon.

Now, how does this link to the argument concerning the need for demystifying L1 communication? I propose that these comments are likely to be made about these examples because they are instances of ELF use, words coined by ELF speakers, many of which do not have ‘English’ as their L1. I would be extremely surprised to encounter the same reactions if the list of words shown above was taken from L1 ‘English’ corpora. Lexical creativity and word-formation are areas that tend to be often evoked when researchers want to illustrate the general creativity and variability of human language. Especially the link between creativity and productivity is something that researchers have repeatedly discussed in this respect (see e.g. Bauer 2001, pp. 62-70, 2005; Clark 1994; Hohenhaus 2007; Pitzl 2013, pp. 10-14). Claiming that L1 use – or particular forms coined by L1 speakers – is creative seems much less debatable than claiming that ELF use – or particular forms coined by ELF speakers – is creative.

Just like remarks in which communicative 'success' is equaled to the absence of miscommunication, comments that question the creativity of words like *prolongate* or *improvisate* might be informed by hidden, but pervasive myths about (L1) communication and creativity. One of these myths is the assumption that creativity, including linguistic creativity, by L1 speakers is always intended or intentional. In this idealized view, when an L1 speaker says *prolongate* or *improvisate*, they are fully aware of what they are doing; they are intentionally creating a new word in 'their' language, it is assumed. However, once we pause to ponder this for a few seconds, we realize that both common sense as well as research tell us that this is not necessarily the case.

Nonce formations (as word-formation researchers tend to refer to them) do not just appear as intentional creative coinages in L1 use. They may appear as byproducts of the need to close a momentary lexical gap (Clark 1994, p. 785) in a conversation, as "survival words" that speakers invent "as a kind of survival mechanism to ensure that the conversation continues to flow" (Carter 2004, p. 98). To use Crystal's (1998, p. 31) words: "When a word is on the tip of the tongue, and despite our best efforts we cannot recall it, an invented word can get our meaning across." All three authors cited here (i.e. Clark, Carter and Crystal) do not refer to 'learners' or ELF users. They refer to lexical creativity in L1 use, pointing out that new words can be creative (since they expand the boundaries of lexicon) without being intentional instances of creativity. If this applies to L1 speakers, the same 'courtesy' should be extended to ELF users and language learners. The principles that allow for intentional as well as 'accidental' creativity are the same. The words *prolongate* or *improvisate* are likely to be intelligible to readers/listeners in most L1 and ELF contexts because they are, at the same time, norm-following at one level and norm-transcending at another level. Whether they are intentionally or 'accidentally' coined is largely irrelevant in this respect.

4. Concluding remarks: De-mystifying (L1) communication

Miscommunication and creativity are two very different phenomena. Yet, they both draw attention to the fact that the same forms and/or communicative processes tend to be evaluated differently depending on who they have been produced by. Despite the past two decades of descriptive ELF studies, there is still a lot of work – and a lot of 'convincing' – to be done. Efforts to gradually deconstruct and dismantle notion of the 'native speaker' as a target for language learning have been underway for decades and there is

a long list of scholars who have discussed this extensively. Slowly, these efforts are taking effect here and there (for example, in the absence of the term ‘native speaker’ in the new CEFR Companion volume). Still, there is more convincing to be done, so (ELF) researchers’ efforts need to continue in this respect.

What I have tried to argue in this paper is that, in addition to the L1 user (i.e. the person, the speaker), we also need to increase our efforts to demystify (L1) communication. Both the absence of miscommunication and intentionality of creativity tend to be idealized for (L1) communication in the context of language teaching. Describing what language learners should strive for and how they are supposed to progress over the course of time (passing through different levels) creates imagined scenarios of (L1) language use in which ever-greater ‘proficiency’ seems to allow for complete control (i.e. intentional creativity) and consistent unambiguity (i.e. absence of miscommunication) in language use. Researching ELF and integrating ELF findings into ELT discourse, it would seem of utmost importance for us to realize – and make others aware – that communication is never quite as utopian. Linguistic creativity can be accidental, not just intentional. Miscommunication is always part of communication, but this is not always a ‘problem’. This holds true for all language use, including L1 use. Making scenarios of communication less utopian and more realistic might be another contribution that ELF research can provide to language education.

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