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## ENGLISH AS A LINGUA FRANCA AND THE FACTORS AFFECTING INTELLIGIBILITY OF NON-NATIVE SPEAKERS OF ENGLISH IN INTERNATIONAL CONTEXTS. A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF CURRENT TRENDS AND RESEARCH RESULTS

### Streszczenie

Język angielski stał się we współczesnym świecie najbardziej rozpowszechnionym środkiem komunikacji, który jest używany we różnorodnych aspektach życia i funkcjonuje jako lingua franca. Obecność języka angielskiego w niemal wszystkich krajach świata powoduje coraz częstsze pojawianie się pytań dotyczących standardów lingwistycznych, których należy przestrzegać przy jego nauczaniu. Dyskusja ta dotyczy w głównej mierze stosowania tradycyjnych wzorców wymowy, które są z jednej strony przestrzegane jako te, które są powszechnie rozpoznawalne i uznane, z drugiej jednak strony część badaczy twierdzi, iż nie spełniają one już oczekiwań wielojęzycznego świata i powinny być zmodyfikowane przez nowe odmiany języka angielskiego. Różnorodność odmian języka angielskiego, połączona z rosnącą wielojęzycznością oraz wielokulturowością jego użytkowników, stanowią podstawę wielu badań mających na celu określenie czynników wpływających na wzajemne zrozumienie się współczesnych użytkowników języka angielskiego.

### Introduction

Among numerous languages spoken worldwide English is believed to be the one that has gained the status of a modern lingua franca, as it is “the common language of choice, among speakers who come from different linguacultural backgrounds”<sup>1</sup> and it refers to certain situations which are “interactions in English be-

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<sup>1</sup> Jenkins, Jennifer: English as a Lingua Franca: Interpretations and attitudes. In : World Englishes 28(2) (2009). P. 200.

tween members of two or more different language communities, for none of whom English their mother tongue"<sup>2</sup>. English is present in a variety of contexts spanning from strictly professional uses to purely personal situations. English has indisputably become the media for communication in scientific areas, such as information technology, engineering, chemistry, physics or telecommunication, to name just a few. Additionally, English is the language that is most frequently favoured by global trade, the world of politics, mass media, pop culture and finally internet users as a means for unrestricted international communication. The widespread existence of English has triggered some serious questions concerning the model of English that should be taught, the role of native speakers in the changing world of English-language education and finally the issue of intelligibility in plurilingual communicative situations.

## **The world of English**

Traditionally, certain countries had the dominant role regarding the norms of English that should be implemented into the teaching process. According to the famous division introduced by Kachru (1985), those countries are typically referred to as the inner circle and they encompass those areas where English is the primary native language, namely Australia, the USA, the UK, Canada, New Zealand and Ireland. The countries of the outer (or extended) circle constitute another area that can be classified according to the role played by the English language. Those territories (India, Singapore, Malawi and over fifty others) have had a long history of English usage, which usually appeared as a result of political or colonial dominance imposed by English-speaking countries. In those places English was typically considered to be the language of the ruling and educated classes and it thus was assigned the official role, whereas indigenous languages were commonly used for everyday communication in non-official contexts. Frequently, this dominant function of English was introduced for the sake of political stability.

Among the countries of the outer circle, where English is used as a second language, the decision to give English the official status has usually been made in order to avoid the problem of having to choose between competing local languages. English is perceived to be a 'neutral' language in this respect<sup>3</sup>.

With time, however, the languages began to be interconnected and eventually due to their close-knit coexistence in those multilingual settings the appearance of pidgin languages could be observed. In some locations such pidgin languages are even replacing indigenous languages in their communicative functions, just to name

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<sup>2</sup> House, Juliane: Developing pragmatic competence in English as a lingua franca. In: *Lingua Franca Communication*. Frankfurt: Peter Lang 2002. P. 246.

<sup>3</sup> Crystal, David. *English as a Global Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2003. P. 85.

Singlish as an outstanding example. The countries of the expanding (or extending) circle form the third group where the rapid spread of English can be perceived. In those countries the popularity of English has stemmed not from political subjugation, but from technological and economic advances combined with entrepreneurial activities and expanding globalization. English functions there as a foreign language but it is mostly viewed as the international language that guarantees the fruitful communication on international levels. It is believed that the number of non-native speakers (NNSs) currently using that language has almost threefold outnumbered the number of its native speakers (NSs). Some researchers even assert that in the current linguistic situation, where bilingualism and multilingualism are such a common occurrence, it would be quite unlikely for a non-native speaker to have an opportunity to interact with a native speaker and the communication acts will be most probably restricted to interaction between non-native users of English.

Speakers of ELF [...] use their English primarily (or entirely if one takes the 'purist' interpretation of ELF) to communicate with other NNSs of English, usually from first languages other than their own and typically in NNS settings. They need therefore to be intelligible to, and to understand, other NNSs rather than to blend in with NSs and approximate a NS variety of English. Instead, ELF speakers have their own emerging norms<sup>4</sup>.

Moreover, it should be taken into consideration that many countries of the outer and expanding circles have developed their own variations of English which, while being utterly understandable in a given area, can be the source of misunderstanding or even communication breakdown for speakers who are not acquainted with that particular regional version and its phonetic, lexical, grammatical and semantic modifications. Consequently, the revision and extension of speakers' abilities might be a desired option: "speakers of local varieties of English will need to be proficient in two varieties of English: their local variety and an international variety, and they should also have the ability to code switch from their local varieties to an international one"<sup>5</sup>. Due to the multitude of existing varieties of English, some researchers advocated a startling approach in which English shouldn't be treated as a homogenous entity but as "a heterogeneous language with multiple norms and diverse grammars"<sup>6</sup>. Even if we do not witness and experience such extreme transformations of English as in case of Franglais, Chinglish, Japlish, Spanglish or Indian English, the problem of successful communication still remains a vital issue. The research concerning the intelligibility of non-native speakers in the communicative situations of English as a lingua franca is of exceptional difficulty, as:

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<sup>4</sup> Jenkins, Jennifer. ELF at the gate: the position of English as a Lingua Franca. In: *Humanising Language Teaching* 7(2) (2005) retrieved 10 August, 2011 from <http://www.hltmag.co.uk/mar05/idea.htm>.

<sup>5</sup> Acar, Ahmet. Standards and competence in English as an international language pedagogy. In: *Journal of English as an International Language* Vol. 2 December 2007. P. 76.

<sup>6</sup> Canagarajah, Suresh. Changing communicative needs, revised assessment objectives: Testing English as an international language. In: *Language Assessment Quarterly* 3 (3) (2006). P. 232.

Here, unlike traditional speech communities where an established (native speaker) variety constitutes the reference point for its members, the norms are not pre-established, and they are not exornormatively imposed but they are negotiated by its users [...] for specific purposes [...] by making use of the members' lingua-cultural resources<sup>7</sup>.

## Types of research

A great amount of research concerned the influence of phonological features on the intelligibility. One of the most-widely discussed studies in that field was designed by Jenkins (2003). Through her observation of spontaneous speech of non-native speakers she was able to single out the most frequently – occurring mistakes, on the basis of which it was possible for her to point to those which were detrimental to communication and those which did not affect communication in a negative way. Consequently, she was able to determine a set of phonological features that a lingua franca speaker is supposed to be familiar with in order to be intelligible. The name for those features is the Lingua Franca Core, which is “the most fully researched and detailed attempt that has as yet been made to provide EIL speakers with a core intended to guarantee the intelligibility of their accents”<sup>8</sup> and consists of such linguistic aspects as: substitutions of dental fricatives, the lack of reduced vowels, the significance of nuclear stress and the distinction between short and long vowels. Apart from those aspects, Jenkins presents other features of English pronunciation that can be implemented into the speech of a non-native speaker but they are not crucial to determine intelligibility. Her approach has been immensely criticized for the attempt to oversimplify the process of English learning and trying to exclude from it the sounds and other phonetic features that have always been considered to be the core of English pronunciation. Jenkins provoked also a heated debate concerning the significance of native speaker norms in pronunciation teaching. Her opponents hold the view that despite the international fashion to retain one's L1 accent, standard English pronunciation systems, such as Received Pronunciation and General American, should prevail because of their international availability, comprehensibility and teaching preference. Nevertheless, recent researches seem to prove that some non-native accents in English are found to be socially more and more acceptable and more easily understandable than native English accents. The opinion that the inner circle countries are the norm-providing territories exerting their strict linguistic influence over other locations appears to be slightly obsolete. English as a lingua franca is currently undergoing the process of transformation and it rightfully belongs to all its users.

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<sup>7</sup> Cogo, Alessia: Strategic use and perceptions of English as a lingua franca. In: *Poznań Studies in Contemporary Linguistics* 46(3) (2010). P. 296.

<sup>8</sup> Jenkins, Jennifer. *World Englishes*. London: Routledge 2003.

The loss of ownership is of course uncomfortable to those, especially Britain, who feel that the language is theirs by historical right; but they have no alternative. There is no way in which any kind of regional social movement, such as the purist societies which try to prevent language change can restore a past period of imagined linguistic excellence, can influence the global outcome<sup>9</sup>.

Another group of researches dealt with the issue of shared or different L1 linguistic backgrounds and their impact on NNSs' intelligibility in English. Depending on the research, the results proved the initial assumption that having the same L1 enhances the intelligibility of English L2. This so called Interlanguage Speech Intelligibility Benefit (ISIB) (Bent and Bradlow 2003; Munro, Derwing and Morton 2006; van Wijngaarden 2001) helps speakers of the same L1 have a successful communication in L2 because they share the same linguistic knowledge and experiences characteristic for their native language and thus they are more likely to comprehend and interpret the mistakes or linguistic deficiencies of their interlocutors. On the other hand, there have been some studies that indicated that sharing the interlanguage can actually act as a major disadvantage in communication (Major et al. 2002).

Discrepancies like these suggest that the interlanguage speech intelligibility benefit is likely mediated by more factors than merely the native language backgrounds of talkers and listeners. Among other things, critical factors may include L2 proficiency of the listeners [...] and L2 proficiency of the talkers<sup>10</sup>.

Additionally, some further researches treated the interlanguage speech intelligibility benefit for non-native speakers and listeners as two separate phenomena (Hayes-Harb, Smith, Bent, Bradlow 2008).

Even if speakers do not share their L1s or lack profound knowledge concerning the linguistic and cultural background of their interlocutors, they tend to employ a number of strategies in order to negotiate the meaning and thus to be communicatively successful. In the case on non-native speakers interacting together, negotiation of meaning is more frequent and less intimidating than in the case of interactions with native speakers, as non-native interlocutors are characterized by "shared incompetence"<sup>11</sup>. Pitzl<sup>12</sup> also states that negotiation of meaning can have a beneficent effect on the interaction as it positively influences the relationship between the speakers and helps to overcome artificial interpersonal boundaries. Having the sense of safety, communication participants can resort to scaffolding and

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<sup>9</sup> Crystal, D.: *English as a Global Language*. P. 141.

<sup>10</sup> Hayes-Harb, Rachel, Smith, Bruce L., Bent, Tessa, Bradlow Ann R.: The interlanguage speech intelligibility benefit for native speakers of Mandarin: Production and perception of English word-final voicing contrasts. In: *Journal of Phonetics* (36) (2008). P. 666.

<sup>11</sup> Varonis, Evengeline M., Gass, Susan. Non-native/Non-native Conversations: A Model for Negotiation of Meaning. In: *Applied Linguistics* 6 (1985). P. 71.

<sup>12</sup> Pitzl, Marie-Luise. Non-understanding English as a *lingua franca*: examples from a business context. In: *Vienna English Working Papers* 14 (2) (2005). Pp. 50–57.

accommodating techniques so that they might help their communication partner to develop the thought fully. The whole process bases on mutual effort, understanding, respect and linguistic democracy.

In community that promotes monoculturalism and monolingualism, the dominant group forces the dominated group to accommodate and acquire the dominant way of life. However, a multicultural society affirms cultural and linguistic differences and rejects a one-way accommodation<sup>13</sup>.

Apart from that, paraphrasing, information checks, signaling of mistakes and repetitions are also considered a helpful solution of a crisis striking communicational situations. It can be claimed that irrespective of the arising problems speakers are determined to make the communication act efficient, as stated by Kaur: "It is likely that the participants' anticipation of difficulty in understanding, arising from the lingua franca context, gives rise to increased efforts in maintaining shared understanding"<sup>14</sup>. Interesting findings can be noticed in the pioneering research conducted by Firth<sup>15</sup> who observed the use of English as a lingua franca in international business telephone conversations during which the employees of a Dutch company negotiated with their foreign customers conditions of sale and delivery. Among many others, one communication strategy, the "let it pass"<sup>16</sup> principle, seemed to be employed particularly willingly. Generally speaking, it was activated when a part of the utterance was unclear or too complicated for the listener who then decided to ignore it in that particular moment hoping that this phrase or word is not necessary to the overall understanding or will be clarified as the conversation continues. Hulmbauer<sup>17</sup> observed that the desire to be communicative could prompt the speakers to the creation of some erroneous, simplified forms or new lexical items that could carry an outstanding communicative potential. The international settings of lingua franca communication acts combined with speakers' different native languages also commonly result in the implementation of plurilinguality. Klimpfinger<sup>18</sup> states that mixing two or more languages is a natural phenomena in ELF contexts.

<sup>13</sup> Kubota, Ryuko. Teaching world Englishes to native speakers of English in the USA. In: *World Englishes* 20 (1) (2001). P. 50.

<sup>14</sup> Kaur, Jagdish: Pre-empting problems of understanding in English as a Lingua Franca. In: *English as a Lingua Franca: Studies and Findings*. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Press 2009. P. 120.

<sup>15</sup> Firth, Alan: The discursive accomplishment of normality: On 'lingua franca' English and conversation analysis. In: *Journal of Pragmatics* 26(2) (1996). P. 243.

<sup>16</sup> Tamze 237–259.

<sup>17</sup> Hulmbauer, Cornelia. "We don't take the right way. We just take the way that we think you will understand" – The Shifting Relationship Between Correctness and Effectiveness in ELF. In: *English as a Lingua Franca. Studies and Findings*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing (2009). Pp. 323–347.

<sup>18</sup> Klimpfinger, Theresa. "She's mixing the two languages together" – Forms and Functions of Code-Switching in English as a Lingua Franca. In: *English as a Lingua Franca. Studies and Findings*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing (2009). Pp. 348–371.

The excessive use of above mentioned strategies, combined with the non-native accent can substantially influence the perception of intelligibility by a native speaker of English. It is also agreed that the speaker's attitude can be the factor responsible for the favourable or negative assessment of a non-native utterance. Listeners presenting biased feelings tend to be overly critical and overrate the unintelligibility of non-native speakers, especially when they display a strong L1 regional accent, as seen in Lippi-Green (1997) and Lindemann (2002). Familiarity or prolonged exposure to a given ethnic or regional accent can constitute an additional aspect affecting the perception. The better the listener is acquainted with the accentual variety, the better his understanding of the utterance, which view was presented in the studies carried out by Derwing and Munro (1997), Smith (1988) and Kenworthy (1987).

There is another collection of studies that assess intelligibility, this time on the basis of absence or presence L2 segmentals and suprasegmentals. There is a lot of disagreement which of those two aspects plays the more important role in facilitating intelligibility of non-native speakers. Hahn (2004)<sup>19</sup> and Pickering (2001)<sup>20</sup> discovered that the appropriate use of suprasegmentals can increase the intelligibility of non-native speech. Moreover, if used correctly, suprasegmentals can eliminate the misunderstanding caused by mispronouncing segmental features, which is supported by Kjellin (1999). As far as the use of segmentals is concerned, an interesting observation was made by Jenkins (2000) who compared L2 English interactions of two groups of speakers – those having a common L1 and those having a totally different linguistic background. A greater amount of phonological deviations was found in the L1-shared communication acts than in the L2-different conversations, which might indicate that speakers of the same L1 present more tolerance towards mutual phonological deficiencies. A further group of studies dealt with speaking rate and its connection with intelligibility of native and non-native speakers, just to name Zhao (1997) and Conrad (1989). Obviously, the results confirmed the hypothesis that when rates slow down, comprehension noticeably improves.

## Conclusion

As it has been presented, there is a multitude of factors responsible for intelligibility and comprehensibility or their lack. Obviously, intelligibility and comprehensibility can be influenced by speakers linguistic background, their experience connected with the use of a foreign language, as well as by the occurrence of phonetic, grammatical and lexical mistakes. Additionally, intelligibility and comprehensibility can be affected by the use of negotiation of meaning, scaffolding techniques

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<sup>19</sup> Hahn, Laura D. Primary Stress and Intelligibility. Research to motivate the teaching of Suprasegmentals. In: TESOL Quarterly 38(2) (2004). Pp. 201–223.

<sup>20</sup> Pickering, Lucy. The Role of the Tone Choice in Improving ITA Communication in the Classroom. In: TESOL Quarterly 35 (2) (2001). Pp. 233–255.

and the overall atmosphere created by the participants of the communicative act. Undeniably, speakers' positive attitude enhances communication efficiency, as in such a case the speakers are determined to avoid communication breakdowns and display far more tolerance towards mistakes or slips of tongue. It should be also remembered that present-day communication in English tends to question the validity of native norms, as it is no longer restricted to the interaction between native speakers and non-native speakers and the vast majority of communication acts takes place among non-native participants. Thus, the widespread use of local varieties of English, along with some pidgin lexical and grammatical elements, combined with the retention of the native accent can also be the factors that play an important role in determining intelligibility. International and intercultural communication that is based on English functioning as a lingua franca seems to be a highly complex and challenging issue. Nevertheless, linguistic and cultural sensitivity appear to be the crucial aspects in the world of multilingualism and multiculturalism. In the world of the constantly-changing English language, interlocutors' mutual understanding, respect and willingness to communicate form the basis for a successful international communication.

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