UNIWERSYTET JANA DŁUGOSZA W CZĘSTOCHOWIE
Studia Neofilologiczne. Rozprawy Językoznawcze 2025, vol. XXI

http://dx.doi.org/10.16926/sn.2025.21.04

Received: 28.06.2025
Accepted: 8.07.2025

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LINGUA FRANCA OF THE 21ST CENTURY: THE MULTILINGUAL AND MULTIMODAL DIMENSIONS OF INTERNATIONAL TECHNICAL PROJECTS IN THE CAUCASUS

How to cite [jak cytować]: Gonczar, H. (2025). Lingua franca of the 21st century: The multilingual and multimodal dimensions of international technical projects in the Caucasus. *Studia Neofilologiczne. Rozprawy Językoznawcze*, *21*, 69–86.

Abstract

The article examines the multilingual and multimodal challenges of international hydroengineering projects in the Caucasus region where English serves as a lingua franca among professionals with diverse native languages. Based on the case study, the analysis reveals the strategies employed by the team members. The findings suggest that, beyond ELF, to reach mutual understanding and manage tasks, they employ code-switching, intercomprehension, focusing on the Slavic languages, and multimodality, specifically visual mode (e.g., technical drawings, diagrams, and gestures). The study also highlights how linguistic functions correlate with the members' professional roles and how their cross-cultural characteristics influence the choice of communication strategies.
Keywords: Lingua franca, multimodality, business communication strategy, cross-cultural teamwork, technical project, the Caucasus.

Introduction

In today's globalised and digitalised world, English occupies a vital role in a range of spheres, from the education to energetics, facilitating communication among participants in multinational technical projects. English has

become a necessary tool for many businessmen because many international companies have made it their official corporate language, often completely replacing their local native language. Such a decision is supported by the European Union documents (the European Commission, 2008). It can be explained by the primary goal of any business to achieve its purpose in a short time, which presupposes the necessity for negotiations in the clear, unambiguous language.

The history shows that since the end of World War II, the English language has been gaining significance (Hoffmann, 2000; Seidlehofer, 2011), so it has become widely used as the primary lingua franca not only in Europe. As A. Mauranen indicates "even though North America in particular plays a role in maintaining interest in English as lingua franca has taken on a life of its own. Most of its use today is by non-native speakers and the number of people speaking it as a foreign language or second language has surpassed the number of its native speakers" (Mauranen, 2005, p. 1).

Recently, international technical projects have become a good platform for collaboration among workers from many countries, creating a specific linguistic environment. When crafting job advertisements, the international employers consider "the ability to articulate technical concepts accurately in English is pivotal for avoiding misunderstandings and ensuring seamless collaboration within multinational teams" (Gonchar, 2024, p. 145). Although there has been an increasing interest in the use of English as a lingua franca (ELF), however, far too little attention has been paid to the problem of coexisting with two or more shared languages that can be used as a lingua franca. Additionally, nowadays international business communication cannot be studied without considering multimodal resources, primarily visual ones, such as technical drawings, charts, diagrams, and presentations.

The aim of the study is to explore multilingual and multimodal practices in international technical projects in the Caucasus, focusing on the simultaneous functioning of several shared languages, and their functioning as lingua franca resources within a multicultural engineering environment. The research could contribute to the broader theoretical understanding of ELF communication within the framework of multimodal technical discourse. The main questions addressed in this paper are: a) to analyse the role of English as a global lingua franca in multinational technical projects across the Caucasus region; b) to examine the use of other languages as a regional lingua franca; c) to identify multilingual communication challenges and strategies from the multimodal perspective used to compensate for limitations in linguistic competence; d) to assess the implications of multimodal communication for international teamwork.

Research methodology

According to the aim and objectives of the study, it employs a case-study analysis, examining the international Uch-Kurgan HPP rehabilitation project, which involves engineers from different countries, including Poland, France, Ukraine, Kyrgyzstan, Georgia, and China, none of whom are native speakers of English. The importance of this research lies in highlighting the dynamic communicative oral and written practices (technical documentation, correspondence, PowerPoint presentations, transcriptions of online meetings, and short offline conversations) within the framework of an intercultural technical environment. To describe the data collection, it is essential to mention all the participants' profiles that cover key team positions:

— Project Manager (France) – oversees the entire project, monitors deadlines, ensures coordination across team members;
— Site Manager (Ukraine) – is responsible for all daily on-site activities, implementation of technical plans, and time management;
— Chief Engineer (Poland) – ensures engineering standards are met, provides technical solutions and leads technical planning;
— Local Engineer (Kyrgyzstan) – mediates the international teamwork;
— Technical Specialist (Kyrgyzstan) – develops technical designs, collaborates with the chief engineer, and provides the technical specifications;
— Technical Specialist (China) is responsible for services essential to the technical project related to the delivered equipment and technical specifications;
— Administrative Coordinator (Kyrgyzstan) – handles project documentation and scheduling;
— Supplier (China) – is responsible for providing materials and equipment;
— Health &Safety Officer (Georgia) – ensures all the operations meet safety standards and procedures.

From this perspective, the data will be analysed using an integrated framework combining multimodal discourse analysis, cross-cultural and sociolinguistic analysis. The research is also grounded on Edward Hall's typology to gain a deeper understanding of the features of intercultural communication within the multinational technical project.

This study meets the strict ethical standards, including obtaining the informed consent from all the participants, and respecting for workplace confidentiality and professional boundaries during data collection and analysis.

Theoretical overview

A) Defining language as a lingua franca in multinational technical projects across the Caucasus region

The concept of a lingua franca has been traced to early colonial times. However, the broad use of the term "a lingua franca" is equated with the definition given by the experts in the report in the UNESCO meeting about the use of vernacular languages, where it is characterized as "a language used habitually by people whose mother tongues are different in order to facilitate communication between them" (UNESCO, 1952: 689). Although later, many attempts were made to precise the notion of a lingua franca, the generalizability of much published research on its definition is problematic.

Referring to Firth's theory (1996), a lingua franca is defined as a "contract language between persons who share neither a common native tongue nor a common national culture, and for whom English is the chosen foreign language of communication" (Firth, 1996, p. 240).

Another point of view was presented by B. Seidlhofer and Kirkpatrick. Seidlhofer defined a lingua franca as "a way of referring to communication in English between speakers with different first languages (Seidlhofer, 2005, p. 339). In her article "*Closing a conceptual gap. The case for a description of English as a lingua franca*" (2001), B. Seidlhofer claims that this term is "understood in the strict sense of a word, i.e. an additionally acquired language system that serves as a means of communication between speakers of different first languages, or a language by means of which the members of different speech communities can communicate with each other but which is not the native language of either – a language which has no native speakers" (Seidlhofer, 2001, p. 146). The scholar focused on the fact that "ELF interactions often include interlocutors from the Inner and Outer Circles" (Seidlhofer, 2004, p. 211–212).

As Hulmbaur et al. state, ELF is more often analysed and defined functionally by its use as a medium of intercultural communication rather than formally (Hulmbaur et al., 2007, p. 27).

A. Mauranen states that English "has established itself as the global lingua franca, that is, a contact language between people who do not share a native language. Such spreading of one originally ethnic language over the world is unprecedented" (Mauranen, 2005, p. 1). The scholar points out its "globalizing culture, a heterogeneous mixture of cultures and cultural encounters" (Mauranen, 2005, p. 2).

J. Jenkins, in her book *English as a Lingua Franca: Attitudes and Identities* (2007), examines the use of English in international communication and turned to the study of how non-native speakers adapt the language in a way that meets practical communicative needs in a multicultural context. This

analysis shifted the focus from considering English as a standardized system to understanding it as a flexible tool that can be modified by its users when used.

In her seminal study *English as a Lingua Franca, Bilingualism and Multilingualism: How Do These Areas of Studies Relate?* (2019), Jane Helen Gomes de Lima discusses the evolution of the ELF concept and its relationship with bilingualism and multilingualism. The scholar traces the development of ELF research, from its initial focus primarily on language form, in line with World English research, to an understanding of ELF as a multilingual practice, where English functions as one of many language options available in the repertoire of multilingual users, rather than as the only choice. The author mentioned a developed linguistic awareness of the bilingual or multilingual users of English as a lingua franca. She states that it is much easier to find a way to express their ideas clearly. They feel when in their conversation they should simplify their speech or change their vocabulary, or, for instance, speak more slowly. This makes communication in English as a lingua franca more effective (Gomes de Lima, 2019).

It plays a crucial role in business, where English is widely used as a lingua franca because, as Ellis and Johnson consider, English satisfies the main condition for successful business: "a sense of purpose". Furthermore, Kankaanranta and Planken (2010) provide three primary factors relevant to the use of Business English as a lingua franca: the shared special field of expertise; the shared business domain with profit-oriented principles goal-base genres, and time-constrained processes; and the length of the relationship with the communication partner (Kankaanranta & Planken, 2010, pp. 394–398). The mentioned features form the specificity of the professional discourse.

Within the regional context, as in the territory of the post-Soviet space, the reality is more complex. In our research, the analysis of hydroenergetics brings its own peculiar features because this sphere is considered a priority sector for international collaboration development in Central Asia. For example, Kyrgyzstan is a country in Central Asia where hydropower resources are concentrated. In Kyrgyzstan, "there are large rivers, such as Naryn, Chu, Talas, Sary-Zhaz, Karydarya and others, which are flowing in the basins of Syr-Darya and Amu-Darya. Natural resources have a significant impact on the socio-economic development of the state. At the present stage of economic development, sovereign Kyrgyzstan pays more attention to the study and rational use of water and hydropower resources (Urmambekova, et.al., 2017, p. 60). This region, including five countries – the former republics of the Soviet Union – the Republic of Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, the Republic of Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan, is a geopolitical and unified cultural and spiritual space, in which more than 100 million people live" (Babazhanova et al., 2017; Kaliakparova et al., 2017). Although Russian has remained the primary language of technical documentation in this re-

gion since the Soviet era, today's situation has changed. Nowadays, most local engineers from Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan are proficient in English due to their extensive experience working in the multilingual environments of international projects, which allows all documentation to be written and handled in English.

B) Engineering-specific multimodal analysis

This study shows that each member of the engineering team plays a distinct communicative role within their job description, employing a range of communication strategies to ensure mutual understanding and overcome language barriers.

Besides verbal strategies, team members use multimodal communication tools, including technical drawings, sketches, diagrams, maps, physical demonstrations, and gestures. These multimodal resources are essential but not optional or complementary because accurate interpretation of technical information is critical.

According to G. Kress, the term multimodality refers to "an individual's use of different modes (i.e. channels of communication) to convey meaning. Such modes can consist of those that are linguistic, visual, aural, gestural, or spatial in nature" (Kessler, 2022, p. 1). From the multimodal perspective, Kress & van Leeuwen defined "meaning" as one "made in many different ways, always, in the many different modes and media which are co-present in a communicational ensemble" (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001, p. 111).

The integration of multilingual and multimodal strategies reflects the adaptive and collaborative nature of communication in international engineering teams. In today's digital age, it is not uncommon to see engineering meetings where participants literally rely on visualization to "build understanding" - not only in a metaphorical sense but also in a visual-spatial sense. During the discussion, it has become a tradition to present project ideas in the form of presentations, where all the main elements are visualized, and this is already an integral part of communication. In this regard, modern researchers (Goodwin, 2000; Norris, 2004) conclude that any engineering interaction is a multimodal process by its nature. In particular, Goodwin, in his work, introduces the concept of "professional vision" as the ability to see and interpret the surrounding world of objects through specialized symbolic systems, such as drawings and technical diagrams. According to him, such "vision" is formed through the collective use of multimodal resources. The scholar suggests that "professional vision is the socially organized ways of seeing and understanding events that are answerable to the distinctive interests of a particular social group" (Goodwin, 1994, p. 606). Additionally, in his study, S. Norris highlights the hierarchy of modalities, in which language often gives way to actions, gaze, spatial arrangement of participants and in-

teraction with material artefacts. The scholar argues that "meaning in interaction is made through the coordinated use of multiple semiotic modes, including language, gestures, gaze, posture, and the manipulation of physical objects. These modes are not merely add-ons to talk but fundamental components of the communicative process (Norris, 2004, p. 4).

Case study

A case study analysis of multilingual communication challenges from the multimodal perspective aims to reveal the strategies used to compensate for limitations in linguistic competence. As was mentioned, according to their positions, each team member plays a distinct communicative role, employing different strategies to enhance effective communication. The choice of the set of strategies – such as, for example, code-switching, paraphrasing, simplifying technical jargon, or translanguaging - is usually explained with the various communicative goals, the level of the interlocutors' linguistic competence, their cultural peculiarities, and the specificity of professional environment. To identify the peculiar challenges of communication within the international technical project comprehensively, it is worth analysing the multilingual and multimodal practices based on the following real-life dialogues.

Dialogue 1 represents a brief conversation between Chief Engineer (Poland), Site Manager (Ukrainian), and Local Engineer (Kyrgyzstan) on the site, based on their recollections**:**

> **Chief Engineer (PL):** *Zobacz* (**points to the drawing**) [*Will you see*], *this elbow … here needs 45°, but not even 50°, and not 60°. Could you check the original specs? You have them.*
>
> **Site Manager (UA):** *Ага, бачу* **[*Got it. I see*].** *OK. I have looked at it. On the drawing was written 45-50°, but in fact смонтували* [*have assembled*] *45°*.
>
> **Chief Engineer (PL):** *OK. But… let's update the As-Built drawing, and mention this in the deviation report. I guess it would be a good decision*.

During this conversation, the Chief Engineer demonstrates a bright example of intrasential code-switching. Knowing both English and Slavic roots well, he starts with the clear for both of them word "*Zobacz*", which have the same Slavik root [bacz] meaning and sounding practically similar in the Polish and Ukrainian languages. The Site Manager naturally inserts a Ukrainian verb "*бачу"* (*Engl.,I see*) using the same root. In his English utterance he adds the Ukrainian verb "*смонтували".* He pronounces the verb "*смонтували"* [*zmontuwaly*] (*Engl., "have assembled"*) purposefully for the pragmatic economy and as domain-specific because contextually the term

meaning a precise engineering action cannot be easily replaced with a short and exact English equivalent. It shows that the Slavic roots ("*zmontowali*") remain a technical register understood for the people speaking Slavic languages, namely Polish and Ukrainian. Additionally, the short Ukrainian interjection "*Aza"* that means *"Got it"* serves as a natural signal of understanding and is used as a transition to the following English phrase. The Chief engineer clearly understood this interjection because the similar interjection "*Aha"* exists in his native Polish. The dialogue indicates one more strategy – linguistic intercomprehension (Meisel, 1994). This phenomenon means understanding without direct translation based on the typological similarity of closely related languages within the Slavic language group.

Both participants of the conversation use English as a Lingua franca effectively in the professional context. The fluency and functionally appropriate code-switching demonstrated the hybrid nature of workplace lingua franca usage (Seidlhofer, 2011). When discussing the technical question, the Chief Engineer pointed to a technical drawing, using it as another tool for explanation. The appeal to the visual mode is an important action that helps both economise the time and provides a reliable source of information used to confirm a correct understanding of the discussed technical problem.

The second dialogue represents the Morning Coordination online meeting, to which are all the members of the international project engineering team are invited.

Project Manager (France): *Good morning everyone! Can we start? Let's begin with a brief update from the site?*

Site Manager (Ukraine): *Yes, I'm ready to inform. Morning. Yes … so… equipment from China not arrived on Monday as expected. The problem is on the border. We all know that we wait two more days already. And technical works on hold* (showing both the Gantt chart and timelines). *Maybe our Chinese partner need look through the charts …, do you have them?*

Technical Specialist (China): *No, I don't have the charts because I have read the Contract terms. Yes, yes, yes … Maybe not so good situation … We had logistic delay – sorry. The port problems plus delay with border questions. We send confirmation, no?*

Administrative Coordinator (Kyrgyzstan): *Yes, but only tracking. No customs paper. Without this, we cannot register on site. Such situation we have got now…*

Chief Engineer (Poland): *If we won't receive equipment by Monday, we will … must change full installation schedule. I suggest we prepare the supporting Plan. Also maybe change drawings. You can see it in these drawings* (showing the drawings).

Technical Specialist (Kyrgyzstan): *Should I modify the wiring layout? Because if we move units B and C, the specs must update.*

Safety Officer (Georgia): *Sorry, excuse me … минуточку … I would like us to be careful! New layout means new risk assessment. I would like two days minimum for this.*

Project Manager (France): *Yes, we must be careful! It is clear. So – please prepare the following today. I ask Site Manager to send photos of unloading area, for customs. And.. Chinese specialists, your group should check with your office and customs. You must do everything to push for faster delivery*.

Site Manager (Ukraine): *Photo OK… You mean now, yes, OK.*

Project Manager (France): *Yes please. Just informal, not official, yes?*

Site Manager (Ukraine): *OK. OK. I'll send. But let's return to our technical situation?*

Chief Engineer (Poland): *Let me add a few comments* (showing the drawings). *To make my idea clear, I'll show everything using the drawings and graphs.*

The linguistic analysis reveals the range of peculiar features associated with the use of English as a lingua franca. The omission of auxiliaries (e.g., *equipment from China not arrived on Monday as expected*), verb aspect (e.g., '*We wait two more days*' instead '*has not arrived*"), and elliptical structure (e.g., '*No customs paper'*), and reduced phrasing (e.g., '*Photo, OK*") are the widely used errors of simplified syntax. Another common ELF feature is overextending the use of "will" for emphasis (e.g., *If we won't receive equipment by Monday…"*) or blending modalities (e.g., "*we will … must change full installation schedule"*) that do not block understanding. One more characteristic feature is connected with misuse of articles (e.g., missing *the: "full installation; Let's begin with update from site"*) and prepositions (e.g., *we wait* (*for*) *two more days. Send* (*art*) *photo of* (*art*) *unloading area*). The cases of lexical approximations are "*push for faster delivery"* instead of "expedite" or "*two days minimum*" instead of "*at least two days*".

The specific use of grammar is connected to the expressiveness of politeness or impoliteness, and cultural sensitivity. The dialogue demonstrates a range of typical ELF strategies. For instance, the participants rarely use modals like "can, could or would" in their phrases, which are typical for ELF but sound a bit rude for the native English speakers. The phrases such as "*maybe*" and "*it is possible*" are characteristic mitigations for ELF in Western business communication. For example, the Chinese representative uses it ('*May be not so good situation…*') to avoid a direct confrontation and personal discomfort. Meanwhile, repetition ("*yes, yes, yes"*) is considered a usual ELF pragmatic marker used to express emotionally coloured agreement. Additionally, the use of "*I suggest …*" demonstrates another typical strategy, aiming to shift to problem-solving and move forward. Clarification (*You mean …*) is often used to confirm timing or clear understanding the instructions. The reformulation (*If we don't receive equipment…*) lays out implications clearly. Additionally, the tag question ('*yes'*) put by the Project Manager, aims to clarify the task, deadline, or procedural step. It is worth noting that the interlocutors do not use idioms or complex phrases, which points out the ELF tendency to prioritize clarity over grammar nativeness.

Interestingly, the single brief code-switching example (the Slavic-root word (RU: "*Минуточку', PL., "Minuta", Engl. Minute* (*Engl.: Just a moment!/ One Minute!*") serves as the Health & Safety engineer's request to catch the participants' attention to his information and interrupt them politely. This example illustrates the case of intercomprehension, which can be explained by the use of the Slavic-root word (which is understandable for the Ukrainian and Polish participants) in emotional situations addressed to those who share one of the Slavic languages. It allows us to conclude that English is used as the official and task-focused language, while the Slavic-root words appear covering the informal sphere.

The team staff is distinguished from the participants who belong by birth to different cultures. Some of them represent the high-context cultural type (China, Georgia, Kyrgyzstan), but the other demonstrate low-context communication (Poland, Ukraine). For instance, the high-context cultural type representatives' phrases ('*I would like us to be careful!*; '*I would like to have two days minimum*') are relational, indirect, tending to politeness.

The example of a code-switching strategy is used to reflect interpersonal warmth and soften interruption of the dialogue. This word based on the Slavic root is clear for both Ukrainian and Polish team members, and is employed as a marker of the low-contest style of communication.

The Chinese traditional cultural style model '*apology followed by a factual explanation and a rhetorical question'* is brightly represented in the dialogue (e.g., "*We had logistic delay – sorry. The port problems plus delay with border questions. We send confirmation, no?*). And on the contrary, Ukrainian and Polish people's speech (e.g., "*We must change…*', *We must be careful!* '*We wait two more days…'*) tends to be direct, concise and task-oriented. The use of the modal verb "*must*" demonstrates a strict goal-driven style. It brings one more difficult task for the Project Manager to find a balanced communication type bridging both styles.

It is essential to consider the strategic use of multimodality, namely a visual mode. The dialogue shows the desire of many its participants to refer to a photo or technical drawing in their speech. The analysis indicates that for many engineers of Slavic and Central Asian cultural context countries whose English proficiency is quite limited, multimodal tools such as technical drawings, maps, sketches, diagrams serve multiple aims, namely, to overcome the lack of vocabulary, to clarify, to explain in detail, and to save time. However, according to the Chinese (in East Asia engineering cultural context) practice, they prefer using written documents, explanations, instructions or formal schemes to the spontaneous use of visuals. In addition, it is important to note that the Chinese engineering standards for technical drawings and charts differ significantly from those in Europe.

Dialogue three is interesting from the perspective of Slavic language intercomprehension and linguistic inference. The conversation during a technical site inspection between the Chief Manager (Poland), Site Manager (Ukraine), and Local Engineer (Kyrgyzstan) represents an example of effective communication due to the mutual intelligibility of the Slavic languages (Polish, Ukrainian, and Russian). In order to illustrate it on the phonological level clearly, in this study we use the method of transliteration.

Chief Engineer (says in Polish, pointing to the hydro facility): *Czy beton już związał? Bo potrzebujemy cztery dni.* (Engl., *"Has the concrete cure yet? We need at least four days"*).

Site Manager (says in Ukrainian): *Так, треба ще чотири дні, ми робили пробу. Але міцність добра.* [It sounds like: *Tak, treba czotyry dni, my robyly probu. Ale micnist' dobra*]./ (Engl.: *Yes, we need at least four days more. We have done the test. The strength is good*.).

Chief Engineer (says in Polish): *Dobra? OK, super! A czy był robiony test ciśnieniowy?* (Engl.: *Good? OK, great! And has a pressure test been done?*)

Site Manager (says in Ukrainian, while holding the diagram in hand and they all are looking at it closely): *Так. Ми подавали воду – тиск тримав стабільно. Тут, дивись, маю діаграму*. [It sounds like: *Tak. My podawaly wodu – tysk trymaw stabilno/ Tut, dyvys', maju diagramu*]. (Engl.: *Yes, we filled it with water – the pressure held steady. Look here, I have got the diagram*.)

Local Engineer (speaks English inserting Russian words): *I haven't caught every word, but understand the main idea about pressure*. *Тест был и все ОК.* (Engl.: *I haven't caught everything, but you spoke about the pressure test. The test was done and everything was OK*).

Chief Engineer (says in Polish): *OK. W takiem razie możemy zacząć izolację hydrauliczną.* (Engl.: *All right. In that case, we can start the hydraulic isolation*).

Local Engineer (says in Russian): *Изоляцию? Можем.* (Engl.: *Isolation? We can*.)

As the analysis demonstrates, the Chief Engineer uses his native language, Polish, assuming intelligibility with Ukrainian and Russian. Meanwhile, the Site manager, whose mother tongue is Ukrainian, gives spontaneous answers in Ukrainian without switching to ELF. The Local Engineer, who speaks Russian a little, uses it to interpret the main idea and code-switches to confirm his understanding of the discussed problem. Such a conversation is possible due to the range of key factors. First of all, it is shared Slavic lexical roots: *"*[*dobry*] (*PL*)*/ dobra* (*UA*)*"*, "[*chtery dni*] (*PL*)*/* [*chotyry dni*] (*UA*) *"tak* (*PL*)*/ /так* (*UA*])*", "*[*trzeba* (*PL*)*/ /treba* (*UA*)]*", "*[*my*(*PL*)*/ /my* (*UA*)*/ my* (*RU*)]*", "*[*mozhe* (*PL*)*/ /mozhe* (*UA*)*/ mozhem RU)", "*[*izolacja* (*PL*)*/ izolyatsiia* (*UA*) */ izolyatsiya* (*RU*)*",* etc. The second factor is the use of the English-based international terms (e.g., "*Super, OK, test, diagram, hydraulic, isolation*") within the professional context. And the third key factor is connected to the multimodal character of communication. The use of surrounding visual ob-

jects at the site, technical diagrams and drawings help them to understand the context clearly.

Let us analyse one more dialogue, presenting a brief exchange of views.

Site Manager (Ukraine): *I think let`s upgrade the schedule at the end of the week*.

Administrative Coordinator (Kyrgyzstan): *Так, тогда я проверю drawings and hop on a call for Zoom on Friday? Yes?* [Engl. transl.: *Yes, then I'll check the technical drawings and hop on a Zoom call for Friday, yes?*].

Site Manager: *Так, ще одно важливо. Check, what about winding isolation*. [Engl. transl.: *Yes, one more essential thing. Check if there is any delay with the winding isolation work*].

Chief Engineer (Poland): *To jeszcze … rzeczywiście jest ważne! That is important!*

Administrative Coordinator: *Там все ОК*. [Engl. transl.: *Everything is OK there*].

This brief dialogue illustrates the natural adaptation of the participants to the multilingual project reality. In this case, English is used as a lingua franca for professional communication. English integrating technical terms ("*drawings, Zoom call, winding isolation"*) serves as the primary means of communication to support understanding within all the international team members. Meanwhile, the participnats relying on lexical intercomprehension through the Salvic-root words (Engl., "*essential*": PL.,"*ważne"- UA., "важливо"* [*vazhlyvo*]*;* Engl., "Yes": PL.,"*Tak" – UA., "Так" – RU, "Так, да";* Engl., "*one morel*": *PL., "jeszcze" – UA., "ще"* [*shche*]) employ them to technical clarification and as routine statements. All the interlocutors belong to the same professional and linguistic community. In the dialogue the use of short confirming forms (*"Tak, Yes?, OK"*) is a universal feature of multilingual interaction, reducing the risk of misunderstanding and helping to maintain the workflow of professional communication. The Administrative Coordinator switching between the languages uses an English business idiom, "*hop on a call*" which cannot easily be replaced in Polish or Ukrainian. Here, there is also the typical for ELF communication error ("*hop on a call*" vs a correct option "*hop on a Zoom call on Friday"*)*.* The pragmatic function of intrasentential code-switching specifies using technical terms that do not have a full equivalent in the first language. The use of code-switching demonstrates the specific ELF role in promoting communicative efficiency and cultural comfort. Engineers with experience working in an international professional environment often use simple sentences or tenses to support mutual understanding among non-native speakers.

It is also essential to note that in ELF contexts, the imperative mood (e.g.,"*Check this", "Hop on a call*") is commonly used as a pragmatic strategy and never interpreted as rude, but instead, it is understood functionally and contextually. Imperative forms expressing instructions or orders are direct with simple grammar, and require minimal conjugation that helps avoid mis-

understanding and confusion. It proves the low-context and utilitarian function of ELF in the professional environments, where clarity, professionally-oriented goals prevail the Standard English norms, namely forms of traditional politeness.

Discussion

The analysis of the language practices and multimodal strategies in the dialogues indicates the crucial role of the cultural diversity of the project participants. From this perspective, the application of Edward T. Hall's theory of low-context and high-context culture allows us to interpret the style and nuances of expressions (Lewis, 2006).

According to E.T. Hall (1976), people may often expect the other interlocutor to "guess" meaning from the context, as not everything can be expressed directly in words (Hall, 1976). The continuum of contextual communication styles, as outlined in Hall's theory, is presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1
Continuum of contextual communication styles

French people are considered to be representatives of a medium-to-high-context culture with an emphasis on the subtlety of languages and style of expression. They take proud of their ability to understand the hidden meaning**.** However, their style of communication is more explicit and direct than in the Caucasus**.** Kyrgyzstan represents a high-context culture characterized by strong family traditions and ties. In their culture, interpersonal relationships are highly significant, with a focus on deep respect for hierarchy and elders. Georgia also tends to be a high-context culture, where people are very hospitable and devoted to their family values and hierarchy. That is why directness in speech is often perceived as impoliteness and even rudeness. R. Lewis mentions that it is essential in communication with Georgians to monitor emotions and true intentions in the situation (Lewis, 2006).

Polish and Ukrainian cultures are closely related, and both peoples value direct communication, but interpersonal relations and the private sphere are also significant for them. The Poles consider the tone and manner of communication, while the Ukrainians emphasise trust more than precise wording (Hall, 1976).

On the other hand, China is a notable representative of high-context culture, characterised by a collective approach, where the ability to avoid conflicts and maintain harmony is highly appreciated. Using ELF, they prefer to use polite forms of confirmation, agreement, or apologising. They traditionally often use tag-questions to seek confirmation and approval, while representatives of low-context culture countries utilise them to coordinate teamwork and clarify task requirements. The analysis has shown the more frequent use, among others, of code-switching and intercomprehension.

According to the aim of the study, it is worth noting that code-switching is a crucial pragmatic tool. Numerous scholars have attempted to define various perspectives on how this phenomenon occurs. For example, Charlotte Hoffman's approach is based on motivations rather than structural types (Hoffman, 2000). Sh. Poplack focused her investigation on the structural typology of code-switching, differentiating between intrasentential (within a sentence) and intersentential (between sentences) code-switching, as well as tag-switching (inserting fixed phrases from another language) (Poplack, 1980). In his study, J. Gumperz highlighted its pragmatic functions, such as managing relationships and expressing solidarity or group identity (Gumperz, 1982). The analysis has shown that in ELF contexts, English plays a primary role that reflects the emotional solidarity and ethnic identity of the interlocutors, very often filling lexical or conceptual gaps.

The analysis of the interactions between international project team members has revealed a correlation between their professional roles and the linguistic functions and strategies they employ. Project Manager and Chief Engineer, who are responsible for planning, coordination, and scheduling, tend to use ELF consistently. Their speech is an example of low-context communication, focusing on explicitly, clarity and goal-driven statements. The participants often employ code-switching between English and their native languages (Ukrainian, Polish, etc.). They switch to English for formal instructions, enhancing understanding in a multinational context, while using Slavic languages for clarification and local interactions. Technical specialists from China and Kyrgyzstan employ special constructions characteristic of high-context communication and visual modalities (e.g., technical drawings, diagrams, sketches). Health & Safety Officer emphasizes clear and procedural language and tends to be linguistically conservative.

In the analysed case, intercomprehension is used as a valuable strategy, shared among the participants who have one more common language. According to F.-J. Meißner (Meißner, 2008, p. 1) the term of intercomprehension "has widely been discussed as a method of acquiring receptive skills in various languages (Meißner, 2008; Lutjeharma, 2006). In the leading documents of the Council of Europe and the European Commission, the idea of intercomprehension is interpreted as the central one to European citizen-

ship (Beacco & Byran, 2003; Council of Europe, 2001; European Commission, 1995).

S. Santos Alves and L. Mendes suggest that intercomprehension "happens in multilingual contexts in which speakers produce discourse in their parent tongues and understand others in different languages" (Santos & Mendes, 2006, p. 213). F. Capuch & A. Oliveira (2005) define it as the process of meaning co-construction in the context of simultaneous use of different languages for pragmatic function in an actual communicative situation (Capucho, 2004). It is essential that "intercomprehension involves the active use of linguistic knowledge and skills, together with awareness of, and open attitudes towards cultural diversity. Relying on the mobilisation of previous knowledge and skills, intercomprehension depends on the interaction and building of relationships between languages" (Santos & Mendes, 2006, p. 216).

The analysis has demonstrated that in the technical environment, the project team members in their professional communication rely on the shared lexical roots (common for the Slavic languages and international words, grammatical structures, subconscious and conscious linguistic inference, and the same professional context with the crucial role of multimodal modes use (technical drawings, diagrams). Such a form of mutual understanding, without resorting to another meditative language (ELF), enhances efficiency and fosters solidarity, especially during informal exchanges or problem-solving situations. Through the strategic use of a combination of intercomprehension with a multimodal approach, the engineers successively implement several pragmatic functions, such as overcoming the vocabulary lack, saving time, clarification, detailed explanation, and building mutual trust and emotional comfort.

Thus, all the mentioned reduce the risk of misunderstanding. From the cultural perspective, code-switching to the shared Slavic languages points out shifts to informal and trust-oriented communication. And on the contrary, English is used as a marker of official style, observance of hierarchy and power distance. Additionally, multimodal resources serve as a bridge between the communicative norms within the technical project. The analysis has shown that in Slavic and Central Asian cultural contexts, the use of visuals (technical drawings, diagrams, hand gestures) is a reliable traditional practice during engineering discussions. However, in Eastern Asia (China), the use of such visuals does not play a leading role. They prefer verbal detalisation and written instructions.

The analysis of the dialogue participants' nationality allows stating that this aspect impacts switching between verbal explanations, code-switching, showing visuals, and predetermining the choice of a situationally adaptive strategy to reach mutual understanding.

Conclusions

The study has demonstrated that the members of the international technical project team working in a multilingual professional environment reach a mutual understanding by using English effectively as a primary lingua franca. The Case Study has indicated a shift away from Russian as the regional Lingua franca towards the dominance of ELF, accompanied by the use of lexemes with common Slavic roots that are easily interpreted in the professional context by project participants who are speakers of any Slavic language. The analysis has revealed the principles of selecting the priority strategies, including code-switching, intercomprehension, and a multimodal approach. The findings from this study provide additional evidence that the combination of linguistic intuition, technical context, and multimodal support helps build a strong communication ecology that encompasses much more than Standard English norms. That highlights the flexible, versatile, multimodal nature of professional communication within the framework of multinational technical projects of the XXI century.

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