

# English as a lingua franca vs. interpreting: battleground or peaceful co- existence?

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## Abstract

*The article addresses the contentious issue of the spread of English as a lingua franca in a number of domains – a trend that is not viewed very favourably by many interpreting professionals. After reviewing the development of English as a lingua franca (ELF) and its unique position in different domains, the advantages and disadvantages of ELF are discussed on a general level before approaching the topic from the interpreters' perspective. The negative stance taken by many interpreters towards ELF is viewed as a result of work-related as well as economic and psychosocial reasons. Against this backdrop the paper reports the first results of a study on the communicative effectiveness of English as a lingua franca vs. simultaneous interpreting. The findings indicate that under appropriate working conditions, in a given setting of technical communication, professional simultaneous interpreting can ensure a higher level of audience comprehension than the use of non-native English.*

## 1. Introduction

English has undoubtedly come to be the world's most important lingua franca and a sine qua non in most domains of public life – from politics to business, from education to science. The increasing use of English as a means of communication amongst speakers from different linguistic

backgrounds has led to a situation where non-native speakers make up as much as three quarters of all English users. From this unprecedented development one might conclude that communication using this vehicular language serves its purpose in most interactions.

On the other hand, non-native speakers (NNS) of English are currently the target of criticism by practising interpreters. Speakers using so-called BSE – bad simple English – have made it to the top of the list of interpreters' grievances. Most professionals complain that they have to struggle unendingly with non-native speech, are unable to deliver a high-quality interpretation, and consequently perform much lower than their standard. This additional stress factor for conference interpreting professionals has been investigated in several studies which will be discussed. Furthermore, the paper seeks to explore other potential motivations for this rejection of NNS. In addition, this article reports the first results of a recent study by the author in which the focus was shifted from the interpreters' to the listeners' comprehension of NNS and where the communicative effectiveness of a simultaneous interpretation was compared to that of an original speech in non-native English.

## 2. Definitions and status quo

The term *lingua franca* is employed to describe an auxiliary language used between speakers of different first languages, or as Crystal (1992: 35) puts it “[a] language which has been adopted by a speech community for such purposes as international communication, trade, or education, though only a minority of the community may use it as a mother tongue”.

In the context of English, ELF – *English as a lingua franca* – has become the most widely used term in the research community, but denominations such as *English as an international language* (EIL), *English as a global language*, *English as a world language* or *International English* are also commonly employed to describe the concept (cf. Seidlhofer 2004: 210).

Even though it is virtually impossible to determine the exact number of speakers of English, it is widely accepted that English is today's most important *lingua franca*. An often quoted reference is Crystal (1992: 121) with his conservative estimate of 800 million speakers of English and a more generous estimate of 1.5 billion users, only 350 million of whom speak English as their first language (L1). This distribution implies that English is more often used as a non-native language than as a native language. Only one out of four speakers is a native speaker (cf. Seidlhofer 2005). Thus, most interactions in English occur among NNS. Jenner (1997: 13) believes that up to 70% of all communicative situations in English take place in such a constellation.

This unprecedented spread of English has been explained with reference to both top-down and bottom-up processes. The former have to do with

the past importance of Britain as a colonial power and the leading role of the US in business, research and politics (cf. Dollerup 1996: 26, Mauranen 2003: 513), and the latter with the mass appeal of English-language media, entertainment and advertising (cf. Dollerup 1996: 26f). In this regard, Phillipson (2003: 72) speaks of the “prestige attached to English in the modern world, its association with innovation and a specific type of professionalism”. Indeed, in our increasingly globalised world, one could define English as a basic prerequisite for people wishing to act as conference delegates, economic players, politicians or researchers. Carmichael (2000: 285f.) even suggests that nowadays people without a basic command of English could be compared to the illiterates of Europe in the age of industrialisation.

### 3. ELF in business, science and politics

Following the increasing globalisation of the business world, English has become an indispensable tool for overcoming linguistic barriers between global business partners. Every business person has to have at least some command of English to be able to participate in international dealings (Gnutzmann and Intemann 2005: 21). Furthermore, a significant number of multinational companies have adopted English as their internal working language to facilitate corporate communication, even if their headquarters are not based in an English-speaking country. As a consequence it has become normal for business men and women to use English every day in meetings, negotiations or e-mail correspondence – be it in-house or cross-company communication. Although this does give rise to communication difficulties in some cases, at times also leading to considerable costs (cf. Vollstedt 2002), these seem to be outweighed by the advantages of using this auxiliary language. Several ELF studies showed that in business interactions *lingua franca* communication is often successful (cf. Pitzl 2005, Bohrn 2008). These studies, however, mainly focus on dialogic communication such as negotiations, and not so much on conference presentations or speeches in a business context.

The domain of science presents a similar scenario. While some 100 years ago German was still the dominant language of the sciences and medicine, English has gained prominence in the research community and in academia since the end of the World War II. This is of great relevance as universities enjoy high social prestige and act as multipliers of linguistic norms (cf. Mauranen 2006: 146ff). At Europe’s universities a trend towards English as the language of instruction can be observed (cf. Phillipson 2003: 77). However, English has become increasingly relevant not only for university-level teaching but also for academic publishing, where it has turned into a precondition for international reception and impact. Research papers or monographs published in other languages go

practically unnoticed. This was confirmed in a study carried out as early as 1992 which showed that 84% of the participating German researchers had already used English as a publication language. They had mainly chosen English to ensure the international flow of information. The second most often mentioned motive was that “important results might not be noticed, if they are not published in an international language” (Skudlik 1992: 402), while the third reason given was that English was *de facto* the working language in their field. As a consequence, English has also gained importance at the level of scientific conferences, where it is increasingly used as the only working language, often making interpreting redundant.

The impact of the advance of English in political settings can be aptly shown with reference to developments in the European Union, an institution that is also the biggest employer of conference interpreters in the world. While the principle of multilingualism – that is the use of all member states’ official languages – is laid down in the EU’s Treaty of Rome, its full implementation is not granted at all times (cf. Tosi 2005). In some institutions such as the Commission or the European Central Bank only a few of the official languages are used in everyday working routine. English, however, is one of the working languages in 96% of all institutions, and in eight of them it is the only one. Interpretation into and out of all official languages is guaranteed exclusively for meetings with a high symbolic value, such as the meetings of the European Council or the plenary sessions of the European Parliament (cf. He 2006: 26f). Many Council working groups use *interpreting upon request* – a scheme in which only delegations that explicitly request interpreting will be provided with the service (cf. Gazzola 2006: 394). A survey carried out by the Commission’s Directorate General for Interpretation (DG SCIC), which provides interpretation for all EU institutions except for the Parliament and the Court of Justice, showed that in their meetings only 57% of delegates had the possibility to listen to interpretation into their mother tongue. 75% of those who could not listen to their mother tongue listened to the interpretation into English, which may be seen as an indicator of the unique position of English (cf. SCIC 2010).

Furthermore, English has become the *de facto drafting language* for most texts elaborated in the EU institutions (cf. Phillipson 2003:120). This means that even in situations where interpretation is provided, negotiations are predominantly based on an English draft text.

Moreover, one cannot fail to notice that the role of English in the EU is constantly increasing also at an unofficial level. It has become indispensable for communication outside meeting rooms and for networking purposes: the famous corridor talks predominantly take place in this lingua franca. In general, however, politics and international organisations still seem to constitute a domain where interpreting is preferred to relying solely on the use of ELF (cf. Hasibeder 2010).

#### 4. Pros and cons

This unprecedented linguistic development has not failed to provoke reactions ranging from great enthusiasm to extreme rejection. Many native speakers fear that their language will fall apart and Shakespeare's English will be divided up into mutually unintelligible varieties (cf. Widdowson 1994: 383). However, non-native speakers also often condemn global English, complaining that it invades their own language to the point that young people are no longer able to express themselves properly in their mother tongue. Another argument raised against the dominance of English is that it gives native speakers an undeserved advantage in negotiations, presentations or on the labour market (cf. Knapp 2002, Van Parijs 2004). Furthermore, several critics argue that ELF can at times be completely unintelligible and that meetings and conferences often collapse because of misunderstandings caused by ELF (cf. Harmer 2009: 193).

It should be pointed out, however, that this unique spread of English would most likely not have happened if ELF communication constantly failed to serve its communicative purpose. Researchers specialised in the field of ELF argue that communication in this lingua franca works more often than it does not (cf. Seidlhofer 2001: 137). ELF research as such established itself only in the 1990s and is, therefore, a young domain, still somewhat lacking in homogeneous theoretical and methodological approaches (cf. Lesznyák 2004: 43). Nevertheless, some concepts have become largely accepted in the community, such as the *let it pass* principle, according to which NNS' anomalies in grammar or phonetics are often accepted on the basis of the assumption that the meaning will become clear at a later point in time (cf. Firth 1996). Another widely recognised feature of ELF observed in many interactions is a cooperative attitude that often facilitates mutual understanding (cf. Meierkord 2000). Jenkins (2006: 36) argues that deviations from the native speaker (NS) norm are legitimate as long as they are intelligible to the interlocutors, suggesting that constantly comparing ELF to NS norms is not appropriate.

#### 5. The interpreters' view

It has been mentioned time and again that conferences increasingly use English as the only working language or the only working language besides the language of the host country (cf. Kurz 2005: 61, Skudlik 1992: 400).<sup>1</sup> On the assumption that also at conferences only a fourth of all

1 Strikingly enough, there are virtually no relevant statistics. An MA thesis by Hasibeder (2010) seeks to shed light on this development in the case for Vienna, one of the world's most popular conference venues, and finds that there is a general lack of concrete data on language use and interpreting at international conferences.

speakers are native speakers, interpreters are faced with NNS from a wide range of different linguistic backgrounds when interpreting from English. Both Pöchhacker (1994) and Kurz and Basel (2009) confirm this trend in their case studies of conferences, showing that most speakers who spoke English at these events were NNS.<sup>2</sup> As previously mentioned, their phonological, lexical and syntactical deviations from Standard English seem to be a major stress factor for interpreters (cf. Cooper *et al.* 1982: 104, Mackintosh 2002: 25, Neff 2008).

Most empirical studies using accented source speeches have revealed that this has an impact on the quality of interpreting. In her MA thesis, Kodrnja (2001, cf. also Kurz 2005, 2008) showed that information loss was markedly higher when interpreting a speech read by an NNS rather than an NS. For her experiment she divided the subjects into two groups, each interpreting half the speech as read by the NS and the other half read by the NNS, which allowed for intra- as well as inter-group comparisons. A questionnaire and follow-up interview additionally showed that the interpreters had the subjective impression that delivery speed was higher in the NNS part than in the NS part, even though this was not always the case. The group of interpreters used was, however, very small (n=10) and was made up exclusively of students.

In Sabatini's (2000) study, subjects had to complete three tasks: listening comprehension, shadowing and interpreting, all from two source texts by speakers with atypical accents (Indian, colloquial American). Here, passages of English with atypical features also caused omissions and comprehension problems during interpreting. The findings showed that the highest performance was achieved in the listening comprehension task and that the scores for shadowing and interpreting were quite comparable. Again, the group of subjects was very limited (n=10) and consisted only of student interpreters.

Basel (2002, cf. also Kurz and Basel 2009) demonstrated in her experimental study that the loss of information was higher when interpreting an NNS with significant deviations from the NS norm than when working from another NNS with fewer deviations. Furthermore, the results quite unsurprisingly indicated that professional interpreters are more efficient at coping with non-standard English than novices. Interestingly, interpreters with a knowledge of the NNS' mother tongue were more successful at overcoming linguistic difficulties caused by the NNS' grammatical and lexical divergences. The facilitating effect of knowledge of an NNS' L1 for comprehension has been mentioned in a number of studies in second language acquisition (cf. e.g. Bent and Bradlow 2003), though it has not been confirmed for all L1s and situations (cf. e.g. Major *et al.* 2002). As with most empirical studies using

2 This question is, however, not the focal point of either of the studies.

interpreters, the number of subjects in Basel's (2002) study was too low (12 novices, 6 professionals) to generalise from the results.

Two other studies exploring interpreters' renderings of an NNS speech have contradicted the above findings. In Taylor's (1989) experiment Italian student interpreters had *fewer* problems working from an English speech read by an Italian NNS than from the same speech read by an NS. The author himself, however, qualifies his results by acknowledging that the NNS read more slowly than the NS and that the interpreters and the NNS shared the same L1 which – as mentioned before – might facilitate comprehension. Regrettably, the subjects are only referred to as a *homogeneous sample*, and neither their exact number nor the experimental design are described in detail. Proffitt (1997) likewise reported some unexpected findings. Her six subjects – all professional, experienced UN interpreters – achieved better results when interpreting strongly accented statements than when working from NS source texts. In addition, the NNS texts – all original statements from UN meetings – were rated as *particularly difficult to interpret* by ten other interpreters in terms of sentence structure, accent and intonation. Nevertheless, the interpreters achieved higher ratings on Carroll scales for intelligibility and informativeness when working from the NNS input that they themselves criticised as particularly difficult. The author herself explains this by hypothesising that the interpreters increased their concentration effort when exposed to the difficult NNS speeches, relied more heavily on top-down processing and were thus able to produce a better result.

Irrespective of these results, interpreters invariably report that they struggle with NNS (cf. e.g. Wooding 2002) and often harshly criticise the spread of ELF. This raises the question why interpreters find it so hard to understand NNS of English when *normal* listeners – according to many ELF researchers – do not. To answer this question one only needs to compare the situations mainly examined by ELF researchers with interpreters' working reality. Most ELF studies have analysed communicative events such as group discussions, negotiations or business meetings, all of which are face-to-face interactions. Interpreters, however, usually work in conference settings with monologic speech events that offer little or no room for interaction. In these settings a *negotiation of meaning* – often reported as a facilitator in ELF communication – is simply not possible. Quite evidently, interpreters cannot make use of the previously described *let it pass* principle as they cannot allow themselves to leave long gaps in their delivery.

Another factor that increases the difficulty of NNS speeches is the lack of NS-typical cues that interpreters use and need for anticipation, undeniably one of the key strategies in simultaneous interpreting (cf. Pöchhacker 2004: 133ff). In many instances NNS use idioms and metaphors *creatively* (cf. Pitzl 2009), which can set interpreters on the wrong track and throw the interpreting efforts described by Gile (1995) off

balance. All this may explain why an overwhelming number of professionals find NNS so hard to interpret.

Another factor underlying interpreters' negative attitude towards NNS and ELF is linked to economic and psychosocial issues. If communication is increasingly possible in a common auxiliary language, the need for interpretation decreases (cf. Pöchhacker 2004: 200). Some researchers even mention this cost cutting factor as one of the greatest advantages of the spread of ELF (cf. Van Parijs 2004: 118).

A survey on attitudes towards ELF carried out among experienced conference interpreters (cf. Albl-Mikasa 2010) impressively showed that interpreters seem to be torn between the increasing difficulty to maintain high quality and the increasing need to display the high quality of their services. On the one hand, interpreters are nowadays predominantly hired solely for highly technical and complex events where they are often faced with NNS and the problems arising from ELF talk previously described. On the other hand, they have to cope with tougher competition for fewer jobs and with the growing need to argue why customers should invest in interpreting services rather than managing their events in *bad simple English*.

Another aspect that most likely influences interpreters' stance on the use of ELF is the assumption that clients are increasingly losing confidence in interpreting. This hypothesis is fuelled by delegates who do not make use of interpreting even if it is available and "prefer to deliver a speech in sub-standard English rather than resort to the services of an interpreter" (Kurz and Basel 2009: 189). The SCIC survey mentioned earlier, however, did not confirm this alleged distrust on the part of users. On the contrary, 85.5% of the EU delegates who had the possibility of listening to an interpretation into their L1 expressed a high level of satisfaction. Only 10% of those *speaking* another language than their mother tongue – even if they were not forced to – reported doing so because they were worried the interpreters would not convey their message accurately (cf. SCIC 2010). Based on these findings, the concern that users may be losing confidence in interpreters appears to be unfounded.

In summary, interpreters' primarily negative attitude towards ELF and NNS is determined by a large number of factors. These relate not only to the increased difficulty of work but also to existential fears of a profession that sees itself as an endangered species. Against this background, conference interpreters would surely welcome empirical evidence that can strengthen their case for interpreter use vis-à-vis ELF.

## 6. Experimental study

In considering the added value of interpreting in an ELF environment, one might first examine the arguments used by advocates of an English-only



conference world. Conference organisers often do without interpretation claiming that NNS experts understand presentations by NNS as well as an interpretation into their L1. Keeping in mind that these presentations mostly display monologic features, making it difficult or impossible to employ common ELF comprehension strategies, one might argue that this mutual understanding is often a myth. There may well be a lack of comprehension, but it would be covert and remain unexpressed by the delegates.

Some interpreters (cf. also Altman 1990: 26) argue that they may improve on a deficient NNS source text: “Anticipation and conscientious guesswork may even remedy some of the shortcomings of the [NNS] original and make the interpreted version better understandable than the source text.” (Kurz and Basel 2009: 193). However, this has yet to be thoroughly investigated. The present study therefore tried to put this claim to the test by examining the impact of English as a lingua franca not from the interpreters’ but from the listeners’ perspective. Some results of this research, which is part of my doctoral work,<sup>3</sup> will be presented here.

The aim of the study was to compare the communicative effectiveness of an NNS to that of a simultaneous interpreter rendering that speech into the audience’s L1 (German). The approach used to evaluate effectiveness was to test and compare the listeners’ comprehension of the NNS speech and its interpretation.

## 6.1. Subjects and material

The experimental audience consisted of 58 native-German subject-matter experts who can be assumed to understand a speech in English just as well as in their L1 – a claim frequently heard from conference organisers. In a simulated conference setting, the study participants were asked to listen to a presentation in their area of expertise and then to answer written comprehension questions. Half of the subjects listened to the original speaker, an Italian NNS (Group EN), while the other half heard the speech in a professional interpretation into German (Group DE). The subjects were business students who were parallelised according to their grade-point average and English skills and then randomised to ensure balanced groups.

The speaker was an Italian professor of business studies who regularly uses English when teaching at his university, at conferences and in research publications. He gave an unscripted speech on an innovative marketing topic. The representativeness and appropriateness of the speaker was additionally confirmed in a rating exercise by 46 experts in interpreting and ELF.

3 See also the homepage of the QuaSI project at the University of Vienna at: <http://quasi.univie.ac.at/subprojects/subproject-4/>

The interpreter was briefed on the topic of the speech, but delivered an authentic interpretation with typical interpretational features rather than reading from a translated script. The speaker's L1 Italian was one of her working languages.

The simulated conference took place in a lecture room with interpreting booths at the Center for Translation Studies at the University of Vienna. Both groups saw the original speaker on a video wall. The sound was transmitted to the subjects' headphones: while Group EN heard the original speech, Group DE heard the pre-recorded interpretation. In order to give the impression of a live interpretation an interpreter sat in one of the booths pretending to interpret.

The questionnaire the subjects were asked to fill in consisted of eleven comprehension questions on the content of the speech: eight multiple-choice questions and three open-ended, or half-open questions with clearly defined correct answers. All questions and response options – including the distractors – were worded using elements from the original speech and the interpretation, respectively, with the intention that the test would in fact test the subjects' comprehension and recognition, not their memory or reasoning skills. The instrument had been thoroughly pretested in cognitive interviews<sup>4</sup> with experts and used in a pilot study. The maximum score achievable was 19 points.

## 6.2. Results

The comparison of the average scores of the two groups shows an exceptionally clear result: while Group EN listening to the NNS reached a mean score of 8.07 points, Group DE listening to the interpretation scored an average of 11.98 points (cf. Figure 1). A t-test showed this result to be statistically significant at the 5% level ( $t=-4,006$ ,  $df=56$ ,  $p=0,000$ ).

This result can be read as follows: the group listening to the interpretation into their L1 understood the content significantly better than the group listening to the non-native original speaker, even though the subjects were highly proficient users of English with relevant subject-matter expertise. This confirms the hypothesis stated above that interpretation can potentially increase the comprehensibility of an NNS speech.

It must be kept in mind that these results are limited in that they hold true only for one particular NNS with a certain L1, one group of listeners with a certain L1 and one particular interpreter who was able to render a high quality interpretation. They cannot be extrapolated to other contexts

4 In cognitive interviewing, cognitive processes that respondents use to answer questions and that are usually covert can be studied so as to detect cognitive as well as structural and logical problems in questionnaires (cf. Willis 1999).

and settings. The trend shown is, however, exceptionally clear and had been observed also in the pilot study (n=50) as well as in another small-scale study with a different group of experts (n=31).

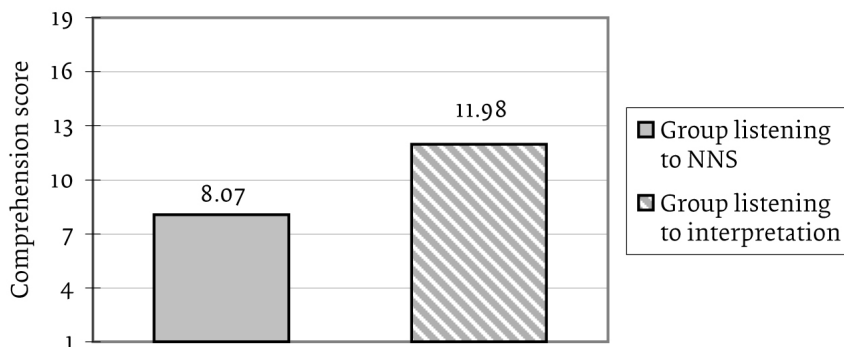


Figure 1 Comprehension test scores

## 7. Conclusions

English increasingly serves as the primary means of communication between speakers of different first languages and has become indispensable in a large number of domains. It is most likely that this development will continue. This spread of English has far-reaching consequences for the interpreting profession, ranging from more strenuous working conditions to a declining number of interpreted events and the fear of losing one's main source of income. Nevertheless, ELF and interpreting as alternative ways of overcoming language barriers are not necessarily mutually exclusive. The degree of effectiveness of ELF and interpreting greatly depends on the setting in which intercultural speech acts occur. If communication is characterised by dialogic features, ELF seems to serve its communicative purpose in most cases. In instances of monologic, unidirectional communication, however, the experimental study reported here indicates that interpreting still appears to be more effective. Nevertheless, it must be stressed that only high quality interpreting is likely to be more successful than the use of ELF. To guarantee such a high level of quality under the adverse condition of working from non-standard speech, interpreters must be trained to cope with deviations characteristic of NNS (Kurz and Basel 2009: 209, Proffitt 1997: 24). While it is fairly simple to put this into practice in interpreter training, it also seems necessary to convince practising interpreters of the need to constructively adapt to the new circumstances that they are not very likely to change. Clearly, there will be those who merely complain about this new development and wish back the old days. But interpreters with less negative bias towards ELF in general may be more effective in

convincing their clients of the superiority of their services over ELF communication in certain settings. This type of customer education seems vital to make clients aware of the circumstances under which the use of ELF might threaten their communicative goals and professional simultaneous interpreters can ensure cross-language understanding.

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