

Language Mediation and Aspects of Accommodation in the Use of ELF

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Abstract

There are numerous varieties of English spoken in Italy today, each associated with one or more of the various migrant communities living in the country. These manifestations of World Englishes reflect a wide range of lexical, syntactical, phonetic, pragmatic, interpersonal and cultural features. This paper argues that an interpreter or language mediator trained in standard English may not necessarily be able to comprehend or make him/herself understood adequately in other varieties of English. Thus, the recruitment of mediators/interpreters requires a certain amount of caution in terms of language choice. In order to investigate accommodation in the context of the use and interaction of English L2, and the challenges this poses for interpreters, we have analysed qualitatively a small corpus of language-mediated communication in English between migrants and institutional representatives. From these data a number of interesting findings emerged, the most significant of which was a high degree of context-governed accommodation strategies.

Keywords: ELF accommodation; mediation; schemata; nativization.

1. Setting the scene

Phenomena such as colonization, globalization and migration have strongly contributed to the acquisition of English as a first, second and foreign language and to the burgeoning of new Englishes all over the world (Crystal 1997; Trudgill *et al* 2002; Jenkins 2003). These Englishes have in time become codified and standardized to various degrees so that today we could indeed speak of English as pluralistic and also as having ‘multicultural

* Although the two authors have collaborated closely on the paper, Cinzia Spinzi is primarily responsible for sections 1, 4, 5 and Mette Rudvin for sections 2, 3, and 6. The conclusions (7) were written together.

identities' (Kachru 1985: 357). Although it is true that diasporic movements and language contact have led to dialectal variations over time, 'nativization' is also the result of the 'systemic' or codified imprinting of a speaker's mother tongue and – culture. It thus embodies deep functional and pragmatic variations which are governed by the need to express a range of socio-cultural and pragmatic identities. Varieties of standard languages (especially languages of former colonies) are sometimes described as 'cross-cultural', or 'nativized' – that is, the language has been adapted – semantically, grammatically – to its new terrain and culture (e.g., English in the Indian subcontinent or East or Central Africa), and reflects that reality and world-vision.

The language-culture interface becomes particularly interesting in the use of lingua francas. Here, a given language code, in our case English, standardized diatopically (a particular geographical variety of English that spreads and mutates into other geographical varieties) and diachronically (a particular time in history) evolves constantly into a proliferation of what we here choose to call, in its strict technical sense, 'mutant genes', interacting with each indigenous culture(s) and language(s).

In this work, we will be looking at examples of Nigerian English (hereafter NE), widely spoken in Italy, functioning as L2/Outer Circle. The Nigerian community is a representative example of the use of English as a Lingua Franca (hereafter ELF) and as a vehicular language in interpreter-mediated communication. The paper will be examining linguistic and pragmatic issues involved in the use of ELF in our data, focussing on the interlocutors' and the language mediators' tendency to accommodate his/her own speech. Accommodation is here intended as *adjusting speech to facilitate communication or changing one's speech to make it more intelligible, or sometimes converging one's spoken habits to resemble those of one's interlocutors* (see Cogo 2009: 254, our emphasis).

2. Nativization and cultural schemata

The ubiquitous notion of 'nativeness' in ELF literature ("nativization of discourse patterns" as in Kachru 1992), at the heart of the intrinsic bond between culture and language, reflects and is manifested in the macro- and micro community in which it is spoken and through

which it is activated. As Kirkpatrick remarks (2007: 31), all language varieties are actually ‘nativized’ in the sense that they reflect the local cultures of their speakers¹. Kachru was perhaps the first to draw attention to the fact that ELF varieties are adapted to local situations and to the language context. This process of nativization interfaces with the cognitive ‘schemata’ discussed by Guido (2008) where socio-cultural cognitive schemata ingrained in an individual’s native language(s) are transferred into the language patterns of the other L1/L2 language(s). By *schemata* we refer to those “cognitive constructs or configurations of knowledge which we place over events so as to bring them into alignment with familiar patterns of experience and belief” (Widdowson 1994: 54). In other words, these cognitive schemata or frames of reference allow for organization of information stored in the memory of community members and are included by Guido in the notion of “L1>L2” transfer.

3. Accommodation

We can draw some general conclusions regarding the use of ELF in language-mediated dialogues, namely the importance of and frequent recourse to accommodation (the degree of accommodation enhanced by the high emotional stress level of contexts such as the *Centro Identificazione e Espulsione* (hereafter CIE), the centre for identification and deportation, where emotional response is central to much of the discourse. In the literature on ELF we find ample references to accommodation strategies. Mauranen (2007: 244) discusses the importance of “adaptability and intercultural negotiation skills” as an essential requirement for successful communication in ELF settings whilst Jenkins (2000, 2006) also discusses the importance of intelligibility in interaction between interlocutors from a wide range of L1 backgrounds. Deterding

¹ The notion is, however, a slippery one. The degree to which a language or a language variety reflects contemporary local or national cultures embodies a wide range of variables that overlap and possibly clash due to the diachronic and synchronic interface of the numerous factors embodied in that particular language form: various diachronic strata of language conditioning, often due to colonial influences, ‘interference’ at the morphological and lexical levels from current rival local languages, and ‘interference’ at the socio-cultural level from current rival cognitive models, or ‘schemas’.

and Kirkpatrick (2006) and Cogo and Dewey (2006) also address the importance of accommodation (features of pronunciation and pragmatics are emphasized) whilst Seidlhofer (2004) discusses extra-linguistic accommodation cues such as identifying and building on shared knowledge, gauging and adjusting to interlocutors' linguistic repertoires, supportive listening, signalling non-comprehension in a face-saving manner, asking for repetition or paraphrasing. We see thus a combination of features that are pragmatic, affective, lexical, syntactical/discourse organizational (cohesion and information prominence), intonational (stress pattern) and based on speech-pause alteration organized into meaningful and manageable social categories for each of the interlocutors. In the case of interpreting and language mediation, the mnemonic function also comes into play in the interpreted segments.

Speech accommodation implements the broader strategies and goals of communication accommodation *tout court* that create a rapport between the interlocutors. Such goals could be: making them feel at ease, removing or creating distance, acknowledging social intergroup (dis)similarity, asserting their social, professional or private identities. In this matching process speakers are adapting their speaker-listener roles in a 'negotiative' communication process, assigning to themselves and others a distinct, context-dependant speaker/listener role with the aim of seeking social approval, seeking acknowledgment, and asserting or acknowledging a hierarchy through establishing similarity or distance, etc.

4. Data and methodology

The data for the analysis comes from the ICoMePs (Italian Corpus of Mediation in the Public sector), which is now at the pilot stage. In order to create a comprehensive corpus of mediated-interpreting in the public sector, the design includes dialectical variation (e.g. Nigerian English, Ghanaian English etc...); different registers (e.g. recordings of spoken mediation; interviews; written translation) and contexts of language use (e.g. courts, centres for identification, hospitals, etc.).

For the purpose of this research, we rely on two sub corpora: the first includes a 37-item online (Google drive) questionnaire for

interpreters/mediators working in Italian courts, detention centres and hospitals (13 respondents). The questionnaire was designed to analyse the respondents' main obstacles in the communication process, assuming cultural aspects as being relevant. Furthermore, the questionnaire was aimed at investigating the mediator's perception of behaviour associated with the strategies of accommodation, politeness and avoidance.

Before administering the questionnaires, we conducted a 2-hour semi-structured interview with a highly experienced Yoruba and NE language mediator (notes were taken but no recordings were made due to the sensitive material that emerged regarding the detainees) to establish the issues most pertinent to our research and most recurrent in the mediation process with this language combination.

The second sub-corpus contains audio-recordings obtained at the CIE in Bologna and Palermo of interpreter/mediator-communication in English (varieties of English) between detainees and institutional representatives. The recordings, amounting to 4 hours 45 minutes, were transcribed using the software WinPitch (www-winpitch.com)².

These centres, initially used for temporary detention, hold undocumented migrants while they are waiting to be officially identified. Migrants are detained for up to 18 months, according to current national law, in poor conditions and in a psychologically destabilizing environment where they have serious difficulties

² *Data limitations*: data collection in the domain of public services (health services, legal services, social services and especially trauma-related domains such as mental health, refugee work or detention centres such as the CIE) is notoriously difficult for obvious reasons of privacy and access (bureaucracy). One of the limitations of our dataset is precisely the size of the corpus (which is still at the pilot stage and in the process of being extended), a problem common to most researchers in this area. A second limitation is that, after a careful evaluation of the parameters of representativeness, we have chosen to include a recording of an interpreted session at the CIE of Bologna where the interpreter was one of the co-authors of this paper. The dialogue was transcribed and analyzed by the other co-author to optimize research objectivity. Despite these limitations, on the basis of extensive prior research and prior piloting among mediators and on the basis of the balanced composition of the dataset (online questionnaires, semi-structured questionnaires and transcribed recordings with comparable key parameters for the respondents) our dataset meets research criteria for objectivity and – albeit limited – representational solidity.

accessing basic services. Those services that are offered (basic medical assistance and, until recently at the CIE in Bologna and Modena, psychological and legal assistance) are offered in the Italian language and those detainees who do not speak sufficient Italian require the assistance of a language mediator or interpreter. At the time when our data was collected, there was one English-speaking mediator, one Arabic speaking mediator and one Moldavian mediator at the CIE in Bologna and one Nigerian mediator at the *Centro d'Accoglienza* (migrant reception centre) in Palermo.

Due to the practical organizational problems of a system as large and complex as that of a country's legal system, due to the inevitable 'physiological' organizational and human flaws within that system, and due especially to budgetary constraints, basic rights – including adequate access to medical and legal assistance – are indeed not always easy to guarantee, especially given the significant increase in migration to Italy during this last decade. Needless to say, the role of language mediation/interpreting is crucial in this context.

At the CIE in Bologna, the Nigerian community was the most highly represented due to the trafficking to Italy of young Nigerian women, many of whom still legally minors. From a linguistic point of view Nigeria is a multilingual country which comprises Arabic as a religious language, English as a national language, Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba as major local languages, twelve regional languages, 51 divisional languages, and 400-513 local languages (Brann 1989). Although English is widely spoken, the varieties differ according to the speaker's level of education (Bamgose 1982: 100-1). In Nigeria, English also plays the part of a lingua franca between minority speakers of Hausa, Igbo or Yoruba (Bamgose 1996: 131). The existence of Nigerian English is widely recognized in the literature (Bokamba 1982; Odumuh 1987, 1993) and as noted by Ogu "The varieties of English spoken by educated Nigerians, no matter what their language, have enough features in common to mark off a general type, which may be called Nigerian English" (1992: 88). By way of explaining the sociolinguistic environment, the mediator at the CIE in Bologna refers to 'high' (close to Standard English), 'low' (a simplified NE) and Pidgin English.

The transcribed encounters were investigated turn by turn in order to identify recurrent characteristics in discourse patterns and interactional organization. The tentative findings that emerged from

this data were later partly confirmed by the results of the interviews which functioned as a control study.

5. Analysis

This section explores the way in which the traumatic experiences of being detained at the CIE are represented in cross-cultural language mediated encounters between Nigerian women and social services, the psychologist in this case, by means of a lingua franca English. More specifically, it investigates the accommodative mechanisms and changes or adaptations of pragmatic features in the process of mediated-interpreting.

The Nigerian women in our sub-corpus did not participate actively in the conversations, especially in Exchange 2, even though encouraged to give feedback. Indeed, at times, the language mediator assumed conversational dominance to maintain discourse flow and communication (see Linell and Luckmann 1991).

From the very beginning of the encounter the language mediator, when explaining her role in that particular 'context of situation', tries to accommodate her English by taking a non-aggressive tone of voice, revealing self-denigration.

At the surface level of the language, the main feature of ELF in our data is the accommodation of lexis through the reiteration of the psychologist's role (e.g. job) as shown in the following example:

Exchange 1: (Psychologist: P_I; Nigerian woman: NW_I; Interpreter: INT_I;³)

(1) P_I: Allora S. mi presento mi chiamo B.

(2) INT_I: I'd like to introduce myself. My name's B.

(3) P_I: e di:: lavoro di professione sono psicologa

(4) INT_I: and my job is a psychologist, that's my work, that's my job

(5) P_I: quello che io faccio in questo posto è + cercare di fare due chiacchiere con tutte le persone che come te sono qui, perché desidero sapere da tutte le persone che vedo come stanno e quindi desidero sapere anche ++ insomma...stare qui dentro non è facile per cui ho il piacere di sapere come tutte le persone stanno e quindi lo chiedo anche a te

(6) INT_I: so what I usually do in this place my job here in this place is to talk to everybody and just have a conversation just talk a little a bit because

³ Notation symbols: : ; :: vowel lengthening; +, ++, +++, pause; (()) comments and interruptions; Capital letters, loud voice.

I really want to know from all of you is how you are because it's a difficult place so I want to know how you are feeling + how you are doing and that's what I'd like to talk to you about + to find out how you are.

Exchange 1 reproduces a typical instance of pragmatic strategies of accommodation in ELF, namely lexical repetition for the purpose of clarity and for explicitness (see Mauranen 2007). The language mediator's tone of voice is reassuring, she maintains some redundancy of the psychologist's discourse which aims at making the migrant feel at ease but at the same time the mediator cuts down parts of it such as discourse markers (e.g. *insomma* in turn 5) and substitutes it with a causal conjunction (e.g. *because* in turn 6) to make the discourse more explicit without signalling the topic change made by the psychologist. The frequent examples of this type found in the analysis of these encounters show how connective linkers, despite their relevant function to cohesion and logical construction of interaction, are intentionally left out because their absence does not compromise understanding. Data from the questionnaire confirms that when the mediator-interpreter does not fully understand something, repetition (50%) and explanation/clarification (50%) are resorted to.

Exchange 2:

- (7) Pr: Quindi tu dici che nonostante io sia qui da due mesi tutto sommato eehh riesco a dire che sto bene
- (8) INT1: Even if you've been here for two months, on the whole, I I can say that I'm feeling ok
- (9) NW1: No I've been here for two months often ok ++ MALE MALE si
- (10) INT1: so you're not ok
- (11) NW1: I'm not ok
- (12) INT1: no non sta bene non sta bene

In the above exchange, apart from reduplicated phrases, the Nigerian woman code-switches into Italian (e.g. *male male*) emphasizing her psychological and physical discomfort. It seems to us that that she is using this key word in Italian (*male*, pain) to make sure that the psychologist truly understands and appreciates her suffering. As Cogo maintains (2009), code-switching is another accommodative strategy for communicative efficiency and cooperation, signalling affiliation to the context of situation. Worth noticing is also the

continuous shift between the first and third person through a constant negotiation of pragmatic purposes against accuracy.

Exchange 3 (Nigerian woman: NG₂; Psychologist: P₂; Interpreter: ING₂)

(13) P₂: Mi interessa sapere le persone che come te stanno qui in questo luogo come stanno.

(14) INT₂: What I'm interested in is how you feel, how you are, how you are doing.

(15) P₂: perché questo luogo non è certo un hotel a 5 stelle e so che stare qui dentro non è facile.

(16) INT₂: because this place is not a luxury hotel and I know it's difficult to stay here.

+++ ((silence))

(17) P₂: Ecco perché voglio sapere le persone che come te sono qui come stanno

(18) INT₂: That's why I want to know how people who live here ...how they are

(19) NW₂: ((crying)) +++ I've got headache I cry everyday

In other parts of this transcription, alongside lexical simplification, we find the removal of redundancies in the service-providers constant repetitions, gap fillers (*eeeh*, *mmm*, *va beh*), discourse markers (*dunque*, *allora*; both lexically motivated for topic change or closer to gap-filling functions), and what seem to be professional routine question redundancies (that appear to be motivated by patient-reassurance as well as cognitive repetition in a context that may be fear-inducing and face-threatening and require precisely that form of repetition).

The language mediator's reformulation of these reassuring repetitions (evident from the psychologist's tone of voice and pause frequency and speed) (turns 14 and 17) was due in part to the cognitive-mnemonic dynamics of the interpreting act (the need to remember what had been said and repeat it in a coherent and plausible fashion) and also to the fact that through tone of voice, gaze, body language, etc. reassurance from service provider to patient had already been communicated and achieved. Thus, the removal of discourse markers and "ritual repetition" mentioned above had the aim of transmitting lexical content where the pragmatic content had already in part been established; a repetition of all the discourse markers and gap fillers and repetitions in the Italian original would

have had an artificial “theatrical” effect. These findings were borne out by the questionnaire where 62% of the respondents stated that they do not translate discourse markers and other items deemed to be unnecessary (“sometimes”, “most of the time”, “if it seems unnecessary”) and 15% leave out the discourse markers that make the utterance “too long”.

6. Discussion of the findings

Generally speaking, at the speech accommodation level, voluntary and involuntary “matching” strategies include adaptation of morphology (recourse to simple grammatical structures), pronunciation, utterance length/length of pauses. In the pre-interview, the strategies that were foregrounded by our informant were repetition (“I repeat more than three times for them to understand me”; I “go very slow” when speaking to Ghanaian and other African ELF speakers), reduction of speed and simplification of lexis/topic. These features were borne out by the questionnaire. 85% of the respondents reply that they use accommodating strategies to avoid misunderstandings and 70% reply that they and the non-Italian speaker “collaborate” to make sure they both understand fully what is being said.

Para-linguistic accommodation pragmatic features discussed in the ELF literature referred to above include 1) body language: gaze-smiling, body direction, gestures, facial expressions; 2) politeness strategies such as that of ignoring mistakes, redundancies; 3) affect-governed language. In the pre-interview, our informant signalled the tone of voice as the most important “reassurance function”. For example, the mediator specifies she uses a reassuring tone in high emotion situations and an authoritative tone for younger women, thereby establishing her socio-professional role as a point of reference for the female detainees. In this way, she says, she provides a reassuring maternal figure negotiating a fine balance of alignment between the institution and the detainees. In response to the question “which strategies do you use to signal respect and/or authority”, she replies that a range of features is resorted to: Eyes (gaze), tone, hands, “I work with the whole body”. She emphasizes several times the significance of politeness in this negotiation process. In the questionnaire, 38% reply that they adopt politeness strategies to speak to the non-Italian interlocutor. An overwhelming

majority (87%) of the respondents use body language to enhance communication to “make clearer” what they say.

The goal of an interaction (in our data a combination of transactional and interactional conversation) will clearly govern the communication and accommodation objectives and thus also the strategies resorted to. In the case of the CIE, the setting and context is professional-institutional-legal, a combination of formal/ritual and semi-spontaneous speech with the immediate aim of communication (i.e. language as intelligible communication taking precedence over language as an identity marker). The utterances are, however, frequently interspersed with phatic speech and affective discourse elements with the aim of creating a reassuring environment conducive both to the exchange of information and to a therapeutic aim. We find an interface of professional, legal and highly emotional discourse topics. Affective aspects of discourse (reassurance) conflate with the objective of mutual intelligibility (“faithful translation” and clarity) and of a transactional conversational goal (compared to spontaneous or semi-spontaneous non-mediated speech). In other words, the need to establish an affective rapport is so crucial in a setting where the state of mind and communicative ability and motivation of one of the interlocutors is deeply affected by the dramatic context: fear and vulnerability invite and do in fact elicit affect-governed accommodation strategies such as unthreatening, unassertive collaborative gaze, smile, tone of voice, and body language, as described by the informant in the pre-interview. In the transcribed dialogue, fear is externalized and vocalized/realized by sporadic intermittent bouts of crying. We also find examples of the mediator’s tendency to acknowledge the young woman’s seemingly increasing frustration at the psychologists’ purely interactional questions. The young woman was more interested in achieving a concrete goal – i.e. leaving the detention centre (repeatedly saying “I want to go”, “I want to leave this place”, “I want to be free”) and her discourse was subsequently more transactional.

The affective function of reassurance is crucial in a place such as the CIE. Convergence and the removal of distance together with the assertion of professional and age-based authority between the Nigerian mediator and the very young Nigerian detainees maximises intelligibility, but prior to that, this same convergence establishes

the very premises for communication through reassurance and the mitigation of the detainees' fear, apprehension and state of suffering⁴.

At the CIE, as in other similar contexts that are highly emotionally charged, the service providers depend greatly on the collaboration of their non-Italian speaking interlocutors, and the input of the mediators is thus crucial. The convergence – and thus persuasive function – inherent in communicative accommodation strategies becomes absolutely essential in order to establish trust, empathy, collaboration, communication and the exchange of information that allows the police forces to act on that information and protect the victims of these crimes and charge those responsible (see Maffei 2013).

In terms of identity-negotiation and “accommodative processes” (Giles *et al* 1991), we see a complex interface of professional, social, private and ethnic identities that are essentially context-governed (i.e. by the institutional setting). Thus, the ultimate aim of speech accommodation strategies in our data was that of convergence at a number of different levels and for a number of different specific purposes, the final being mutual intelligibility at speech/discourse level. We would suggest, however, that the emotional stressor comprised by the impact of affect (tension, fear, suffering, anxiety, etc.) becomes in essence a cognitive stressor that in itself may impede comprehension. The cushioning of this stress may therefore be a *sine qua non*, a precondition, for mutual intelligibility and communication. This emerged very clearly in the transcribed dialogue and in the pre-interview but should be tested further and also against findings in literature on conference interpreting, cognitive linguistics and psycholinguistics.

6.1. Cultural schemata

The establishing of a professional- and age-related hierarchy was emphasized repeatedly in the pre-interview by the mediator. One of the examples she gives as a way of establishing this hierarchy, at the

⁴ Needless to say, the narratives that unfold in these sessions are narratives of torture, rape, war, loss of relatives, exile, various crimes, and the arbitrary privation of freedom in the CIE detention centres, etc. In the process of recounting these narratives their discourse and para-verbal communication is clearly topic-governed.

same time maintaining the reassuring affect-feature above, was the ‘enactment’ of the kinship marker ‘mother’: “you are just like my daughter” the mediator says to a young female detainee.

The use of kinship markers as honorifics is used frequently in a wide range of languages, including Yoruba (Ajani 2007). In the constant reference to the use of ‘mother’ by the Yoruba-speaking language mediator to the younger female detainees, we find an example of (lexis driven) cultural schemata (defined in section 2) from the Nigerian culture. The use of this kinship marker has a number of interpersonal and discourse functions: 1) establishing rapport – familiarity and empathy, providing reassurance and setting the scene for a more relaxed conversation; 2) establishing social hierarchy; 3) establishing professional role and speaker hierarchy in the service provider – language mediator – detainee triad. Our informant stressed that through the use of the ‘mother-daughter’ relationship, she was able to achieve a number of functions that optimized her control of the situation and thus efficiency - not just at the communicative level but at the operative/functional level. In this way, she both allocated and claimed respect for herself (as an older woman, as a professional and older co-national) and for the younger woman who thus enjoyed her “protection”. This put her in a much stronger position to help the younger women to access legal, medical and other services.

Ajani 2007 also mentions a range of other culture-based elements influenced by the Yoruba language and culture in NE that function as cultural schemata and would significantly affect the translation process (for example, intensification through reduplication, unvaried tag-questions, avoidance of direct pronominal address in the second person singular, respect markers to conform to age-based hierarchies, and indirectness/avoidance of direct confrontation and face threatening acts). Reflecting on what also emerged in our findings above, he also reports the use of kinship honorifics, such as “my daughter”, as distancing devices and respect markers (devices that contain some flexibility, encompassing both familiarity, reassurance, group inclusion, respect, distance, etc.).

The data from the questionnaire confirms the importance of cultural aspects (69% reply affirmatively) as affecting comprehension and mutual communication. The respondents indicate “gender-related issues” (33%) and religious or spiritual issues (33%) as the

most prominent impacting factors, followed by “taboos” (14%), “age-related” issues (10%) and “hierarchy-related” issues (10%).

7. Conclusions

In the analysis of the recordings, speech accommodation was negotiated through frequent repetitions, the elimination of discourse markers (redundancy), code-switching, a reduction of speed of delivery and a reassuring tone of voice. The most prevalent pragmatic feature signalling accommodation to emerge from the qualitative control study was the use of politeness, in a range of manifestations, and the control of voice tone was the most prominent spoken discourse feature along with paralinguistic communication features of body-language. The most relevant example of cultural schemata in the data was that of kinship markers used to create a positive hierarchical rapport in order to enable communication. Finally, we would like to invite further research into the operative function of “cushioning” or “stress-mitigating” strategies in situations of extreme tension to facilitate interpreter-mediated communication.

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