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Misunderstandings in ELF- Revisiting the concepts of intelligibility, mutual intelligibility, and negotiated meaning

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Paul Lochland¹
Deakin University

Abstract

English today is mostly used around the world by non-native speakers (NNSs) to communicate with other NNSs without the presence or contributions of native speakers (NSs) (Strevens, 1992). With over one billion NNSs in the world (Crystal, 2003), a very different picture of a 'typical' English speaker begins to emerge, so perhaps it's a good time to revisit the concepts of intelligibility, mutual intelligibility, and negotiated meaning, and take a look at what they mean in English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) contexts. This paper also reviews what we know about the causes of misunderstandings in ELF interactions, looking specifically at pronunciation, lexiogrammar, and pragmatic strategies. It is concluded that lexiogrammar and pragmatic strategies may not be the leading causes of misunderstandings in ELF. On the other hand, pronunciation seems to be a deciding factor in whether or not communication in ELF is successful. Therefore, much can still be learnt about the features of pronunciation causing misunderstandings between ELF users. For example, little is known about the effect of short-term voice qualities, such as speech rate and clear speech, on intelligibility in ELF. Also, more experimental research is needed to explore possible differences in how NNSs and NSs perceive the intelligibility of foreign speech.

KEYWORDS English as a Lingua Franca, misunderstandings, lexiogrammar, pragmatic strategies, pronunciation, negotiated meaning, L2 speech, mutual intelligibility, intelligibility.

1. Introduction

Trying to quantify the spread of English speakers across the globe is not without its challenges. Firstly, there's the issue of defining a 'native' and 'non-native' speaker. There is also the controversy surrounding the method by which they should be counted. In 1985, Crystal argued that NNSs should not be determined by their engagement with particular English language

¹Paul Lochland is an educational designer, research fellow and lecturer in the School of Education at Deakin University, Melbourne, Australia. His research interests include: The perception of foreign speech, attitudes towards linguistic variation, and EAL pedagogical practices. Contact: p.lochland@deakin.edu.au

mediums, such as readership of English newspapers (cited in Strevens, 1992). Instead, he argued that NNSs should be determined by their use of English across all the macro-skills of reading, speaking, listening, and writing. Using a similar criterion for classification, Bowen (1976) reported that there was an equal number of native speakers (NS) and NNS. However, in just three decades, Crystal (2003) estimated there were over 1 billion NNSs in the world, which was three times the number of NSs. Despite the discrepancies in both qualifying and quantifying English speakers, it is safe to say that English is used by more people as an additional language (L2) than it is a first language (L1).

Traditionally, research has focused on the interactions between NSs and NNSs. However, given the magnitude of the worldwide NNS population, scholars have shifted their attention to the interactions between NNS. Most of this research has focused on ELF in expanding circle contexts. However, with the growing number of NNSs in an ever-smaller globalized world, ELF issues are popping up in some unexpected places, such as educational settings in English speaking countries. This matter concerns the interests of the business of educating international students. In Australia, international student education is worth over 6 billion dollars to the economy each year. Students find themselves in classes made of predominately NNSs from many different countries. Table 1 shows the percentage of international students from non-English speaking backgrounds at the top five universities in Melbourne, Australia.

Table 1

Proportion of International Students from NESB at Five Australian Universities from 2010-2011

Institution	Percentage of students from NESB	Total number of student enrolments (Australian campuses only)
Deakin University	17%	39,606
Monash University	20%	63,338
Melbourne University	21%	49,000
La Trobe University	30%	32,762
RMIT University	36%	36,489

Note. Sourced from Deakin University, 2011; La Trobe University, 2011; Marginson, 2011; RMIT, 2011.

Due to the realization that English has moved beyond the realm of expanding circle countries, and is no longer the domain of NSs, a growing number of researchers have turned their attention to the interactions between NNSs. Of particular interest is the commonalities that exist between different ELF contexts that have led many scholars to question contemporary theories about the English language. More importantly, these questions are

making people think about the nature of English conversations without a NS.

The purpose of this paper is to review the literature concerning the causes of misunderstandings in ELF, looking specifically at misunderstandings in relation to pronunciation, lexicogrammar, and pragmatics. These discussions are framed by the concepts of intelligibility, mutual intelligibility, and negotiated meaning.

2. Misunderstandings in ELF

2.1 Intelligibility and mutual intelligibility of L2 speech

Because written texts are likely to be influenced by the norms of standard varieties of English, most ELF studies to date have focused their attention on the understanding of spoken word. The pioneering work of Smith and Nelson (1985) divided the understanding of spoken word into three levels: Intelligibility, comprehensibility, and interpretability. *Intelligibility* refers to a listener's ability to accurately recognize and record individual words. *Comprehensibility* may be defined as the proposition that listeners have about the locutionary force of utterances. *Interpretability* is the proposition that a listener has about the illocutionary force behind an utterance. It may be argued that intelligibility concerns the understanding of speech sounds, comprehensibility is the understanding of language at the syntactic level, and interpretability is the pragmatic force of an utterance.

The intelligibility of English is a topic that has been widely discussed, especially in academic discourse about emergent varieties of English. Adding to what is already a complex topic is the synonymic use of the terms *mutual intelligibility* and *intelligibility*. However, the origins of these words differ greatly. One of the earliest uses of mutual intelligibility was in reference to the divergent forms of English, where it was defined as a difference between the dialects of inner circle Englishes (Agheyisi & Fishman, 1970, p. 143). Lehmann (cited in Hammerstrom, 2008, p. 35) also claimed, "mutually intelligible forms of speech are known as dialects, and [that] the term 'language' is used for mutually unintelligible forms of speech". However, as English began to spread around the world, academics began to shift their attention away from the comprehension of divergent Englishes, such as those spoken in the inner circle countries. Instead, their attention focused on convergent or outer circle, varieties of English. In tandem, there was also a shift in academic discourse. The concept of mutual intelligibility, which had appeared prominently in academic discourse about divergent varieties, was used to a far lesser extent in discussions about the comprehension of convergent English varieties. It is possible that some linguists may have been reticent to use the term 'mutual' when discussing the intelligibility of convergent Englishes, especially those they saw as the norm-dependent varieties of the expanding circle countries.

However, there has been growing concern about the lack of literature emphasizing the legitimate role NNSs play in the negotiation of shared

meaning. This has led to questions being asked about the presence of NS ideology in academic discourse. One such concern was that NSs are the sole indicators of intelligibility. For example, Smith and Rafiqzad (1979) have been praised for emphasizing that NNS-NNS interactions are just as important in discussions about the intelligibility of English as are the interactions between NSs-NNSs. While some recent studies have begun to recognize this importance (Munro, Derwing, & Morton, 2006), few studies to date have called upon NNSs to judge the intelligibility of L2 speech. Today, it is more common for mutual intelligibility and intelligibility to be used in discussions about the understanding of spoken word not only between NSs, NSs and NNSs but also spoken exchanges between NNSs.

2.2 Pronunciation

Nelson (2008) once stated, “we might need a word or two before we even realize that [an individual is] not speaking the language we expected, or several sentences before we hit an unfamiliar lexical item, but pronunciation is immediately salient” (p. 299). There has been extensive research investigating the numerous factors that influence the strength of a foreign accent. Some of these factors may include formal instruction, gender, and age. Regarding formal instruction, Derwing (2008) suggested that social identity, choice of instructional approach, and phonological distance between L1 and L2 will influence foreign accent acquisition. Moreover, it would appear that gender is not a predictor of accent strength (Flege & Fletcher, 1992; Olson & Samuels, 1973; Snow & Hoefnagel-HoKhle, 1977; Suter, 1976). Age is another factor that may influence one’s L2 accent. It has been suggested that there is an *Optimal Period* (OP) for accent free speech (Werker & Tees 2005) but there is little evidence that L2 speech will automatically be accent-free if it is learned before the age of about six years and that it will definitely be foreign-accented if learned after puberty (Piske, MacKay, & Flege, 2001). Other possible causes of accent strength include L2 exposure, motivation, language learning aptitude, and language use (ibid, 2001). Irrespective of how one develops a foreign accent, few would doubt the impact a foreign accent has on speech perception.

Although pronunciation plays a pivotal role in the understanding of L2 speech, the majority of research to date has focused on the perception of foreign-accented speech from a native listeners’ (NL) perspective. For example, Sheppard, Elliot and Baesa-Berk (2017) asked native-speaking English language instructors and university professors in the United States to score the intelligibility of non-native speaking international students. It is surprising this trend has continued in spite of arguments suggesting certain features of L2 speech may affect NLs and non-native listeners (NNL) differently (Kashiwagi & Snyder, 2010). However, some researchers have recognised this limitation and investigated the intelligibility of L2 speech from NNLs’ perspective. For example, a study by Matsuura, Rilling, Chiba, Kim and Rini (2017) asked not only NNLs to judge the intelligibility of Japanese- English, but also listeners from Indonesia, the Philippines, and South Korea. Likewise, Wilang and Singhasiri (2017) investigated the

intelligibility of Cameron-English and Vietnam-English from the perspective of L2 users from 21 non-English speaking countries.

Furthermore, it appears ELF users may be experiencing communication issues at the intelligibility level of understanding more so than the comprehensibility and interpretability levels. A study by Field (2005, p. 418) showed that NNLS “place greater reliance on interpretations at the word level”. Furthermore, Watterson’s (2008, p. 400) analysis of ELF conversations also found that NNLS experience “non-understanding at the level of individual lexical items”, and that 47% of the misunderstandings were due to intelligibility issues, compared with 23% and 30% for comprehensibility and interpretability, respectively. More recently, Becker and Kluge (2014, p. 56) concluded that “consonant and consonant clusters appeared to be fundamental for intelligibility in [ELF, including dental fricatives, which are] important segments for intelligibility.” This study, along with previous research by Deterding and Kirkpatrick (2006) and Deterding (2012), continue to validate Jenkin’s (2000) list of core pronunciation features crucial to intelligibility in ELF communication- the Lingua Franca Core (LFC). Hence, there tends to be certain features of L2 pronunciation that lead to greater instances of misunderstandings in ELF.

2.3 Lexicogrammar

Some scholars have claimed that grammatical deviation from Standard English is a major contributor to communication breakdown (Hulmbauer, 2009). However, studies by Jenkins (2000), Meierkord (2004, 2006), Seidlhofer (2009b), Bjorkman (2008), and Mauranen (2010, p. 18) have indicated otherwise. ELF speakers have been shown to utilize a number lexicogrammar features (see Jenkins, Cogo, & Dewey, 2011), which not only differ from the standards found in inner circle varieties of English, but these forms tend to facilitate effective communication between interlocutors rather than cause communication breakdown. It seems that the alternative forms of lexicogrammar used by L2 users may not be a major contributor to misunderstandings in ELF contexts.

2.4 Pragmatics

The pioneering works of Meeuwis (1994), Firth (1996), Meierkord (1996), House (1999), and later Lesznyak (2004), were some of the earlier studies into the pragmatics of ELF (as cited in Seidlhofer, 2001, p. 142). Meeuwis (1994) and House (2002) suggested that communication breakdown in ELF interactions may be due to pragmatic factors. Supporting this argument, Mauranen (2010) also stated, “Despite the approximate rather than accurate forms in standard language terms, comprehensibility is not adversely affected. Where comprehension mostly seems to break down is over pragmatic matters rather than lexicogrammatical accuracy” (p. 19).

While there has been a flurry of intercultural studies investigating the pragmatic strategies employed by ELF users to anticipate misunderstandings, avoid them, deal with them, and address them after the event, their results cannot be readily compared. This is due to differences in

methodological perspective and the way ‘misunderstandings’ have been defined and measured. As a result, some studies have found many instances of misunderstandings in ELF conversations (Deterding, 2013), while others have found relatively few (Mauranen, 2006b). This issue has been highlighted by Kaur (2017), who made the distinction between two types of communication breakdown- misunderstandings and non-understandings. Put simply, misunderstandings are events where people are aware they have not understood something, so they use a strategy to address this problem, such as repeating a word or phrase. In contrast, there are also situations where a listener is unaware they have missed the illocutionary force of an utterance. This is called non-understanding. These events are identified by looking for instances in the data where an interlocutor gives an unexpected response to an utterance.

Investigating the pragmatic strategies used by ELF users to cope with misunderstandings is to analyze the different speech acts they use to negotiate meaning. The term *negotiated meaning* was first used to talk about L1 development but is now being used to discuss ELF interactions. Some of its better-known synonyms include *shared meaning* (Smith and Nelson 1985; Watterson 2008) and *co-constructed meaning* (Cogo, 2010; Gumperz, 1992; Mauranen, 2009). The pioneering work of Varonis and Gass (1985) was one of the first studies to investigate the use of pragmatic strategies to negotiate meaning in ELF. They found that L2 speakers prefer to amend their own language use when coping with misunderstanding rather than correct the language forms of others, the latter being the *let it pass* strategy coined by Firth (1996, p. 243). However, a recent study by Pietikainen (2018) found that in private ELF interactions, such as those between ELF couples, direct clarification requests are quite common but interlocutors try to avoid imposing word suggestions on their partner. They also found that ELF users in these settings use a range of paralinguistic cues, such as pointing, showing, drawing, acting, deixis, and onomatopoeia, when dealing with misunderstandings (ibid, 2018, p.204). And contrary to Alptekin’s (2010) claim that “in the absence of native speakers and a native culture, [ELF] lacks idioms, puns, connotations, slang, humor, and culture specific pragmatic dimensions” (p. 111), Seidlhofer (2009b) found that ELF speakers co-construct idiomatic expressions as they come to a shared understanding of each other’s utterances. O’Neal (2015) also argued that ELF users tend to use different strategies, such as segmental repair, when negotiating their way through misunderstandings rather than adhering to one particular variety of English.

In addition to the noteworthy contributions made by Baumgarten and House (2010), Pickering, (2009), and Seidlhofer, (2009b), studies by Mauranen (2007, 2010) and Dewey (2007) found that ELF speakers use explicit communication strategies of topic negotiation, metadiscourse, and self-rephrasing in order to achieve communicative success in academic domains. Regarding the latter, rephrasing and repetition are two of the most common conversational strategies used in ELF. Cogo and Dewey (2006) and Watterson (2008) found that L2 users frequently use repetition as a strategy

in the negotiation of meaning when misunderstandings were caused at the intelligibility level. In addition, Hynninen (2011, p. 965) used the term ‘mediation’ to discuss “a form of speaking... where a co-participant intervenes in the course of the interaction by rephrasing another participant’s turn that was addressed to a third party”. It may be argued that ELF users rely heavily on repetition as a conversational strategy to cope with intelligibility issues, while rephrasing may be a strategy used to deal with communication breakdown at other levels of understanding, such as comprehensibility and interpretability. In sum, repetition and rephrasing may be useful strategies for helping interlocutors negotiate their way through the different levels of understanding in ELF.

While ELF users are known to use a range of pragmatic strategies to deal with misunderstandings, it has also been claimed that ELF users employ conversational strategies to “create supportive and cooperative communication and display community membership in discourse” (Cogo, 2010, p. 309). This is in line with Seedhouse’s (2004, p. 4) argument that ELF users have a “structural bias towards co-operation”. However, this position may not represent all aspects of negotiation. If the act of negotiation is considered to be a power play of tendered interests, then it is likely that ELF users will accommodate the linguistic features of an interlocutor in one interaction, while maintain their linguistic identity in another. This view is supported by Pözl (2003), who argued that cultural identities are asserted, accommodated, and negotiated in ELF. More recently, Seidlhofer (2009a, p. 210) argued that ELF users try to “strike a balance” between cooperative considerations, such as accommodating the linguistic features of others, as well as maintaining one’s own sociolinguistic identity. In sum, conversational strategies are used by ELF users to negotiate not only misunderstandings but also their sociocultural identities.

To summarize, many studies have looked at the pragmatic strategies employed by ELF users to anticipate misunderstandings, avoid them, deal with them when they arise, and even address communication breakdown after the event (Baumgarten & House, 2009; Cogo & Dewey, 2006; House, 2009a, 2009b; Mauranen, 2006a, 2009; Pickering, 2009; Polzl & Seidlhofer, 2006; Seidlhofer, 2009b; Watterson, 2008). However, the fact still remains that a misunderstanding has occurred, and perhaps avoiding or sidestepping the problem may not always be the answer to the problem. In fact, Watterson (2008, p. 400) noted that misunderstandings sometimes lead ELF users to abandon the topic of conversation all together, a situation he described as “hardly an ideal option in many real-world situations”.

3. Conclusion

This paper has reviewed the literature discussing misunderstandings in ELF. These discussions were framed by revisiting the concepts of intelligibility and mutual intelligibility, and highlighted some issues with traditional notions of negotiated meaning. The review started by looking at pronunciation as a major cause of misunderstanding in ELF. Specifically, foreign accents were considered to play a significant role in

communication breakdown between L2 users. Therefore, the conditions that bring about accented speech were also discussed. Next, it highlighted a significant gap in our understanding of foreign speech perception given that the vast majority of research to date has only investigated it from a NSs' perspective.

This paper also explored the possibility that misunderstandings in ELF may be the result of lexicogrammar and pragmatics. However, research findings have shown that despite changes to the forms of vocabulary and syntax, ELF users are still able to negotiate a shared understanding of the topic at hand. In fact, Cogo and Dewey (2006) pointed out that pragmatics and lexicogrammar are fundamentally interconnected. That is, shifts in the conversational strategies employed by ELF users lead to changes in lexicogrammatical forms and vice versa. It therefore stands to reason that variations in lexicogrammar and pragmatic alike may not contribute significantly to misunderstandings in ELF conversations (Firth, 2009; Seidlhofer, 2004).

There have also been a number of interesting studies into the strategies used by ELF users to, on the one hand, negotiate meaning, while on the other, try to maintain their sociocultural identity. It has been argued that in the absence of any particular standard of English, ELF users have greater flexibility in how they adapt the forms of English. It is in this use of English where L2 users develop the strategies they need to deal with misunderstandings. And this is the reason why L2 users are able to cope better with misunderstandings than those who are not used to negotiating their way through different varieties of English. The absence of a standard also creates a *standards vacuum*. As a result, there can be a power struggle when ELF users negotiate meaning and linguistic form, especially if someone believes their variety is the one to fill the void. In sum, if lexicogrammar and pragmatic strategies are not the leading causes of misunderstandings in ELF, then perhaps the sounds of Englishes are. Jenkins (2000) seemed to think so when she argued that pronunciation is the greatest barrier to successful communication in ELF interactions.

A number of research directions exist for future studies. Firstly, as the majority of research into the perception of L2 speech has been from a NL's perspective, very little is known about NNLs' perception of L2 speech. For example, relatively little is known about the impact of short-term voice qualities, such as speech rate and clear speech, on the intelligibility of L2 speech in ELF interactions. There are also long-term voice qualities that may have an impact on the intelligibility of L2 speech. For instance, NNLs and NLs may perceive the prosodic and segmental features of L2 speech differently. Consequently, there is still much to be learnt about the impact of phonology as well as other factors, such as motivation and attitude, on the intelligibility of spoken word in ELF contexts.

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