ELF and the inconvenience of established concepts

H. G. WIDDOWSON

Abstract

The purpose of this article is to put ELF in broader perspective and to speculate on how it raises general epistemological and practical issues in (socio) linguistics and language pedagogy. Such issues have not escaped the notice of ELF researchers, of course, and so this paper will have nothing to offer in the way of revelation. My intention is not to argue for the legitimacy of ELF study as such but to consider its effect as a catalyst for change in established ways of thinking. We can only make sense of the world by imposing our own order on it by devising abstract constructs so as to bring it under conceptual control. This is as true of linguistics and language pedagogy as of everything else: both of them necessarily disconnect the continuum of actual experience to make simplifying distinctions so as to come to terms with reality – distinctions between languages and varieties, for example, between competence and performance, between language learners and users. Making abstract distinctions of one kind or another is a necessary convenience and cannot be avoided, but having made them, we need also to consider how they are related and how far they remain convenient. What ELF research reveals so clearly is the need to review the distinctions that have become conventionally established in the description and the teaching of English.

Keywords: *conceptual constructs, competence, native speaker norms, conformity, communicative function, appropriateness, capability*

共通語としての英語（ELF） と既成概念の齟齬

この論文の目的はELFをより広い視点に置き、（社会）言語学や言語教育の分野でELFがもたらす認識論上および実際的な問題について考えてみることです。このような問題はもちろん今までもELF研究者た

Journal of English as a Lingua Franca 1–1 (2012), 5–26 2191–9216/12/0001–0005
DOI 10.1515/jelf-2012-0002
© Walter de Gruyter

Brought to you by | King's College London
Authenticated
Download Date | 7/5/18 4:23 PM

ちの注目するところであり、その点でこの論文は新しい発見を紹介するものではありません。私の意図するところはELF研究の正当性を論じることではなく、既定の考え方に変化をもたらすELFの影響について考えてみることです。私たちは世界を概念的に理解できるよう抽象概念を創り出し、規則を適用し、理解します。言語学や言語教育もその例外ではありません。両者とも現実と折り合うために単純な区別—例えば、言語とその変種、言語能力と遂行能力、言語学習者と使用者—をし、必然的に実際の経験では連続体として繋がっているものを切り離しています。ある種の抽象的な区別をすることは便宜上必要であり、避けることはできませんが、一旦区別をしたらこれらがいかに関連し、どの程度適切なものであるかもよく考える必要があります。ELFの研究が明確にしていることは英語の記述や教育で伝統的に確立されている区別を見直す必要があるということです。

キーワード:概念上の構築物、言語能力、母語話者基準、適合、伝達機能、適切さ、言語使用能力

1. Introduction

What I want to do in this article is to explore the wider implications of ELF, as both a phenomenon and an area of study, for an understanding of the nature of language and the conventions of linguistic description. In doing so I shall be taking up issues already raised in ELF research, particularly in Seidlhofer (2011), and relating them to the broader epistemological theme of how the way we think about things in general is conditioned and constrained by what is customary and schematically conventionalized as normal. This, of course, has always been a familiar theme in philosophy and the site of continual contention between scholars of opposing positivist and relativist persuasions. But it is a theme that, as I shall argue, takes on a particular relevance in relation to ELF.

2. Constructs of reality and convenient fictions

To begin then with a very simple formulation of the theme: how, in general, do we think about things, and what role does language play in the process? Let me take a literary quotation as a starting point:

. . . human kind
Cannot bear very much reality.

This is taken from T. S. Eliot's poem *Four Quartets*, a central theme of which is the elusiveness of personal experience and how limited language is in cap-

Brought to you by | King's College London
Authenticated
Download Date | 7/5/18 4:23 PM

turing it. And yet, language is just about everything we have got to deal with it. Individual experience, the implicit reality of our personal selves, is something we are aware of but can only be conveyed by being reduced to explicit conventional means. As George Steiner puts it:

> Each communicatory gesture has a private residue. The 'personal lexicon' in every one of us inevitably qualifies the definitions, connotations, semantic moves current in public discourse. The concept of a normal or standard idiom is a statistically-based fiction . . . The language of a community, however uniform its social contour, is an inexhaustibly multiple aggregate of speech-atoms, of finally irreducible personal meanings. (Steiner 1975: 47)

And so what we do, and what we have to do, is quite literally, to come to terms with reality by reducing personal experience to common knowledge by means of language. We impose a stability on what is continually in flux, or otherwise, in the words of Othello 'Chaos is come again'. It needs no chaos or complexity theory to tell us that natural phenomena, including human behaviour, are unpredictable, elusive of conceptual control. And yet control them we must in some degree for our very survival, and so we convert actual experience to abstract knowledge and encode it in language so that we have things to think and talk about and can impose some order on the world. But this order is bound to be a kind of fictional representation of reality. And this connects with what Eliot writes elsewhere in *Four Quartets*:

> . . . There is, it seems to us,
> At best, only a limited value
> In the knowledge derived from experience.
> The knowledge imposes a pattern, and falsifies,
> For the pattern is new in every moment . . .

What Eliot says here applies also to the experience and knowledge of language itself. Steiner refers to "the concept of a normal or standard idiom" as fiction because it fails to capture the facts of "irreducible personal meanings": it is a reduced version of the irreducible. But linguists **do** deal with such fictional concepts as a normal or standard idiom of the language of a community. They are in the business of imposing patterns on experience and these too are in this sense falsifications of limited value. The question is: what is it that sets the limits on value? Linguists, like everybody else, cannot avoid imposing patterns on experience and deriving abstract constructs to think with – they cannot make sense of language unless they do. This, as Thomas Kuhn (1970) points out, is how any disciplinary enquiry makes sense of experiential data: it establishes paradigms of normality which set conceptual limits as a necessary condition for enquiry, but which, at the same time, necessarily constrains its scope. For such constructs and patterns, such paradigms of enquiry, can only have a relative validity: they are what Seidlhofer (2011: 70) refers to as "convenient

Brought to you by | King's College London
Authenticated
Download Date | 7/5/18 4:23 PM

fictions", representations of reality which are suited to certain purposes, relevant to certain circumstances. This is what sets the limits on their value.

So, as far as English is concerned, the question is what value these constructs have for an understanding of how the language is now known and experienced. As Seidlhofer points out, the radically changed circumstances of the use of English as a lingua franca should prompt us to think again about how convenient conventional constructs are, what relevance established ways of thinking have for the purpose of understanding ELF as a mode of use and its implications for the teaching of English as a subject.

3. Concepts of competence and native speaker norms

One construct in particular that ELF prompts us to think again about is the familiar one of competence and its connection with performance. Non-native users of ELF can be, and usually are, characterized as incompetent when their performance does not conform to standard native speaker norms. The criterion applied to their achievement in learning is taken to apply equally to what they do with this learning in actual use: non-conformity is equated with incompetence. Yet, as research in ELF makes abundantly clear, such 'incompetence' does not prevent ELF users from performing very competently as communicators. They do not know English in the same way that native speakers know it, so how **do** they know it? Do they have a different kind of competence, and if so, what is it? What, after all, **is** competence – a cue for Chomsky to make an appearance in this paper.

For the concept of competence was, of course, identified by Chomsky as the proper object of linguistic description and he defined it as the perfect knowledge of a language of "an ideal speaker-listener, in a completely homogeneous speech community" (Chomsky 1965). This has often been roundly condemned as an arid formalist abstraction that fails to capture the experienced reality of language as a means of communication in social contexts. There is no such thing as an ideal speaker-listener or a homogeneous speech community: it is a fiction. Very true. But this does not invalidate the construct as a convenient abstraction. The question is: how convenient is it, for whom and for what purpose.

Sociolinguists, like Labov, naturally take a very different view of what the proper object of linguistic description should be:

> The object of linguistics must ultimately be the instrument of communication used by a speech community; and if we are not talking about that language, there is something trivial in our proceedings. (Labov 1970: 33)

Since Chomsky is obviously not talking about "**that** language", his proceedings would in this view be dismissed as trivial. But we need to note that Labov's

Brought to you by | King's College London
Authenticated
Download Date | 7/5/18 4:23 PM

own proceedings are themselves not fiction-free in that he retains the abstract construct of a speech community. For there **are** no distinct speech communities out there, just as there **are** no distinct languages or varieties of language that these communities speak until sociolinguists define them. Although sociolinguists may deplore the formalist constructs of ideal speaker-listeners and homogeneous speech communities, similarly ideal constructs are still tacitly presupposed in their descriptions of different languages and varieties and speech communities. They too deal in convenient fictions. As indeed one of the most distinguished among them openly acknowledges. In reference to how distinct varieties are separated out from the continuity of linguistic variation, Peter Trudgill makes the point:

> How we divide these continua up is also most often linguistically arbitrary, although we do of course find it convenient normally to make such divisions and use names for dialects that we happen to want to talk about for a particular purpose *as if* they were discrete varieties. (Trudgill 1999: 122)

As I have argued earlier, there is nothing at all reprehensible about such pretence. It is a methodological necessity and without it we would be hard put to it to make any sense of the world at all, linguistic or otherwise. But it is also important to recognize that these distinctions can only be of relative validity.

In the light of this, it is interesting to consider how Trudgill himself makes use of these convenient distinctions and for what purpose. He is co-author of a book (now in its fifth edition) called *International English*, subtitled *A guide to the varieties of Standard English* (Trudgill and Hannah 2008). In reference to 'British English' the authors say:

> As far as grammar and vocabulary are concerned, this generally means Standard English as it is normally written and spoken by educated speakers in England and, with certain differences, in Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland, The Republic of Ireland, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa. (Trudgill and Hannah 2008: 5)

These "certain differences" are taken to define the international varieties of this Standard. But which differences are certain cannot be identified with certainty. It may suit the purpose of a guide to present variation in English as if there were distinct varieties but, as Trudgill himself says, which variable data counts as evidence of a variety and which does not is ultimately a matter of arbitrary and convenient decision. It may also suit the purpose of a guide to presuppose that there is a pre-existing and stable standard norm against which differences can be measured, and to presuppose furthermore that these differences are normal in the usage of educated speakers who are native to these countries located in what Kachru refers to as the 'Inner Circle'. Unless such a norm is presupposed, there can be no way of identifying which variations count as permissible variants of the standard and which do not. The difficulty here, of course, is that

Brought to you by | King's College London
Authenticated
Download Date | 7/5/18 4:23 PM

whereas these different countries can be objectively identified by reference to secure geo-political criteria, there are no such obvious criteria for defining who is an educated speaker, or even indeed who counts as a native, let alone what constitutes the standard language. So it is impossible to establish distinctive varieties on empirical grounds: they are essentially abstractions, convenient fictions.

The process of distinguishing those differences which are distinctive and variety-defining from those that are not would seem to be closely akin to Chomsky's proposal for establishing the grammaticality of sentences. Here is Chomsky again:

> The fundamental aim in linguistic analysis of a language L is to separate the grammatical sequences which are the sentences of L from the ungrammatical sequences which are not sentences of L and to study the structure of the grammatical sequences. (Chomsky 1957: 13)

Similarly, it would seem that the fundamental aim in describing varieties of Standard English (henceforth SE) is to separate out the acceptable variants of SE from the unacceptable variants, and to study the features of the acceptable variants. In both cases, there is the presumption that there is a stable norm by reference to which certain linguistic features can be identified as legitimate and clearly distinguished from those which are not. It is, of course, the same presumption that provides the basis for identifying the non-standard English of ELF users as deviant and evidence of incompetence.

4. Standard English and the elusive native speaker

But the norm is elusive. As has been frequently pointed out, distinguishing grammatical from ungrammatical sequences turns out, to say the least, to be a difficult thing to do. Thus linguists may claim grammaticality for the examples they cite, selected conveniently to lend support to their analysis, only to find that other linguists challenge the claim. Alongside the asterisk * denoting ungrammaticality might appear a question mark ? signifying 'not entirely sure', or two question marks ?? signifying 'not at all sure: perhaps grammatical – up to a point.'

Up to a point. But up to what point? This is the question that is considered by Geoffrey Sampson in an intriguing article entitled 'Grammar without grammaticality' (Sampson 2007). Quoting the statement from Chomsky we have already cited, Sampson proceeds to argue against the position that there is a clear-cut distinction between what is a grammatical sequence in a language and what is not. He takes a quotation from a novel by John Mortimer entitled *Dunster*, in which occurs the sequence:

Brought to you by | King's College London
Authenticated
Download Date | 7/5/18 4:23 PM

But then, as I have made it clear to you, I worry.

This, Sampson says, does not correspond with his own usage. He would have omitted the *it* and written:

But then, as I have made clear to you, I worry.

Which, then, is the grammatical sequence?

Bearing in mind that this second sequence would probably be favoured as the correct option, do we then mark the first sequence with an asterisk * – definitely ungrammatical, or at the very least a question mark ? – grammatical up to a point. Sampson feels it would be inappropriate to make judgements of this kind in this case:

> Mortimer is highly educated (Harrow and Brasenose) and has lived by the spoken and written word, combining a career at the Bar with a prolific and successful output of intelligent fiction . . . And Penguin books normally seem to be carefully copy-edited. On the face of it, one would expect that if Mortimer and Penguin between them let a sentence into print, I ought to be happy with it from a grammatical point of view. (Sampson 2007: 3)

Here again, the educated native speaker is invoked as representing the authoritative norm. And Mortimer, one might add, is not only "highly educated" but has been honoured by his monarch and is a knight of the realm. Obviously a man with such impeccable credentials cannot possible be charged with improper linguistic conduct. There must be some way of granting grammatical status to his sentence. And Sampson does indeed find a way. By means of a somewhat intricate syntactic analysis, he is able to conclude that in spite of appearances the Mortimer sequence does actually conform to grammatical rule after all. So it is not that one of these sequences is grammatical and the other not, but that both are permissible variants. It just happens that Mortimer has chosen one, Sampson the other. And by reference to corpus data, Sampson illustrates that this is not an exceptional case: variants of this kind, each an equally valid alternative, are of quite frequent occurrence. Sampson elucidates the way he sees things by means of an extended metaphor:

> The grammatical possibilities of a language are like a network of paths in open grassland. There are a number of heavily used, wide and well-beaten tracks. Other, less popular routes are narrower, and the variation extends smoothly down to routes used only occasionally, which are barely distinguishable furrows or, if they are used rarely enough, perhaps not even visible as permanent marks in the grass, but there are no fences anywhere preventing any particular route being used, and there is no sharp discontinuity akin to the contrast between metalled roads and foot-made paths – the widest highway is only the result of people going that way much more often and in far greater numbers than in the case of narrow paths. (Sampson 2007: 10–11)

Brought to you by | King's College London
Authenticated
Download Date | 7/5/18 4:23 PM

This, I find, an attractive image, almost allegorical in its appeal – it conjures up a Bunyanesque allegorical vision of a field full of pilgrim-like language users all taking various paths across the grassland towards . . . well towards what? Not Bunyan's Celestial City, but some destination or other, one would suppose. At the very least, one assumes that the different routes would have to get to the other side of the field. Those that go round in circles, or end up where they started would not, presumably, be considered a legitimate part of the network of pathways, but what of those that meander into detours? What latitude is allowed for divergence? And since 'there are no fences anywhere preventing any particular route being used' does any path taken across the grassland count as a route, no matter how indirect? And what of paths that have not yet been taken but might be? No allowance seems to be made for grammatical possibilities other than those that have been attested as actual usage. But whose usage? Who is to be recognised as relevant for deciding on paths which count as legitimate variants and which do not? Who are the pathfinders?

What started Sampson on his enquiry into variation, it will be recalled, was the dilemma posed by an apparently ungrammatical expression used by a highly educated native speaker, John Mortimer in his novel *Dunster*. The statistical analysis that gives rise to this vision of a network of pathways is based on a corpus of native speaker written English. Throughout the discussion, reference is made to speakers of English, but it is clear that this is shorthand for educated native speakers/writers of the language. It is their usage that is taken to be the norm, and only the variants they produce, which Sampson calls 'Dunsters', are recognised as legitimate paths through the grammatical grassland. So it is that Mortimer's *as I have made it clear to you* is said to be an admissible variant of *as I have made clear to you* on the grounds that as he is highly educated he can be trusted to produce exemplary English – "a model", says Sampson, "for the kind of English I think of myself as aiming to speak and write." (Sampson 2007: 3).

But what if this expression were to be produced by somebody without such impeccable educational credentials? Or what if an expression is in a kind of English that Sampson would not wish to aim to speak and write – *as I have made you clear*, for example? Would this be considered a 'Dunster' as well? Presumably not: you cannot do a 'Dunster' unless you are both educated and a native speaker.

These are the same conditions of acceptability that have to be met for variants to be given the status of Standard English in Trudgill and Hannah's guide. They too invoke the notion of the educated native speaker, but without giving any indication as to how one might determine whether a speaker counts as educated or not. Everybody attending school is educated up to a point, but at what point do they become educated enough to be categorised as users of Standard English? Presumably they would not all need to have gone to Harrow and

Brought to you by | King's College London
Authenticated
Download Date | 7/5/18 4:23 PM

Brasenose College Oxford. Perhaps some other prestigious private (so-called public) school would do, or some other university? And what of non-native speakers, users of ELF for example, who get educated in English? May it be that some kinds of education can cancel out the handicap of non-nativeness? If so what kinds?

A moment's reflection makes it obvious that the concept of the educated native speaker is simply an idealized construct, a convenient abstraction which is, paradoxically enough, on a par with Chomsky's ideal speaker-listener. The difference is that Chomsky is quite explicit that his speaker-listener is indeed a non-existent ideal abstraction, accessible only to intuition, whereas Trudgill and Hannah, and Sampson too, seem to assume that educated native speakers actually exist as an observable group of language performing people in the real world, although they do not feel obliged to provide any criteria for identifying who they are.

They feel no obligation, I think, because the concept of a standard language or variety is already established by fiat and does not need to be inferred from an analysis of actually occurring language data. For what constitutes a standard is not the language produced by its native users, educated or not, but that which linguists have codified. What makes a language or a variety standard is, as indeed Trudgill and Hannah themselves acknowledge, that:

> it has been subjected to a process through which it has been selected, codified and stabilized, in a way that other varieties have not. . . . whose grammar has been described and given public recognition in grammar books and dictionaries, with its norms being widely considered to be 'correct' and constituting 'good usage' (Trudgill and Hannah 2008: 1–2).

In other words what is standard is decreed by authority, although which authority is left unspecified: the language "has been subjected to a process . . . has been selected, codified and stabilized" by some unmentioned agency. In effect the standard is a construct based on what linguistic tradition has deemed to be worth codifying, which is then carried over and assumed to be valid in subsequent linguistic descriptions. The public recognition of this validity is then assured by publication in what are conveniently called standard works of reference. And so a convenient construct becomes an established convention. For one needs to note that the grammar books and dictionaries that are referred to here are not newly compiled each time from scratch from empirical data, but are adapted versions of previous grammars and dictionaries. Thus the illusion is perpetuated that these descriptions are the empirically substantiated accounts of the actual language, whereas what they represent is essentially versions of conventionalized constructs that are sanctioned by linguistic tradition. Let me stress again that to say this is not to dismiss such constructs. As I have argued, we cannot do without them if we are to impose some order on reality. Again,

Brought to you by | King's College London
Authenticated
Download Date | 7/5/18 4:23 PM

however, the question is what purpose and what interests define how convenient particular constructs are.

5. Norms of native speaker usage

The descriptions I have been considering so far are concerned with competence in the Chomskyan sense, with what ideal speaker-listeners know of the encoded properties of their language. Nowadays, of course, with the development of computerized language corpora, there are grammars and dictionaries which radically depart from linguistic tradition and set out to describe the actually occurring language of real speakers. These are descriptions not of what people are surmised to know of the language but what they actually **do** with their knowledge. They are performance descriptions that deal not with the first person data of the linguist's own introspection but with the third person data of observed usage, actual language behaviour.

There is no doubt that corpus linguistics, in reinstating the significance of performance, constitutes a fundamental change of approach to language description. The shift of focus from first person data derived from the speculative introspection about the abstract code to the observed third person data of actual usage clearly reveals aspects of linguistic reality that were previously unnoticed or disregarded. But not all aspects. Corpus linguists have sometimes suggested that their approach to description supercedes all previous approaches in that it deals with factual data and so captures 'real' language, the language that can be attested as what real people produce. But what is described is only partially real – real up to a point. It too is an abstract version of reality.

In the first place, what is 'real' is selected from what is assumed to be 'normal' English and the data are selected as representative of 'the language' by tacit reference again to this undefined category of educated native speakers. And now it is their usage, their performance, rather than their competence, that is represented as the ideal. It is their linguistic behaviour that defines **the** language. And this description of usage is also an abstract construct in that it is only a partial account of the reality of language experience. For corpus descriptions tell us what linguistic forms have been produced by this representative group of users, but not why they produced them and to what pragmatic ends and purposes. If we refer again to what Labov says should be the object of linguistics – the use of language as an instrument of communication – it is certainly not **that** language that is the object of description of corpus linguistics. What is described is linguistic text dissociated from communicative context – what linguistic forms are **manifested**, not the communicative functions that they are used to **realize**: the textual product is abstracted from the discourse process. But these linguistic forms are only real for the language user as a by-

Brought to you by | King's College London
Authenticated
Download Date | 7/5/18 4:23 PM

product of this process and so corpus descriptions do not, and cannot, capture the reality of language as experienced by its users (for further discussion see Widdowson 2003, 2004).

So the account of language that corpus linguistics provides is also an abstraction, at a remove from experience. It deals with performance, but only with the form that performance takes, and abstracting that form from its natural communicative function in use makes it into an analytic construct, another kind of fiction. This does not mean that it is without value, but the value is bound to be limited. And again the question is: what are its limits? How convenient a fiction is it?

6. Competence, performance and creative potential

As I have already argued, you can only make sense of what you actually do, or of what other people actually do, by relating it to some construct of abstract knowledge. So you can only make sense of performance as the realization of some competence or other. And here we come to the crucial question of the relationship between the concepts of competence and performance. One can accept that an exclusive focus on linguistic competence fails to account for the various ways in which it is acted upon in contexts of communication. But equally, an exclusive focus on the form that performance takes fails to account for what linguistic knowledge is being drawn upon in the process.

Dissociating competence from performance and isolating it for analysis may be a misrepresentation in that it disregards how such knowledge is actually acted upon, but it is this competence that makes the performance a reality. The ability to communicate presupposes some knowledge of linguistic means. You cannot just perform: you have to perform **something**. Performance is the actualization of abstract knowledge so it has to presuppose competence of some kind or another. Corpus linguists, in claiming to have captured the essentials of the language that has eluded other linguists, would seem to suppose that we can dispense with the distinction between competence and performance altogether: that what people produce **is** the language, the real language.

But the point is that competence provides the dynamic that drives the meaning making process and no matter how extensively you describe its performative products, its generative potential remains undiminished and is, as Chomsky said, the essential source of creativity. This is why its reality cannot be captured by corpus descriptions, no matter how extensive. For these descriptions are examples of how this potential **has been** exploited in the past for certain communicative purposes by certain groups of users, but not how it **can** be exploited for **other** purposes and by **other** users.

Brought to you by | King's College London
Authenticated
Download Date | 7/5/18 4:23 PM

To return to Sampson and his linguistic grassland, what corpus descriptions show, and can only show, is the "network of paths" already taken, and those which have hitherto been the "heavily used, wide and well beaten tracks" as distinct from the "less popular routes". But as I pointed out earlier, these paths and tracks and routes are only those which are made by authorized pathfinders – the educated native speakers who provide the corpus data. What is not recorded is what tracks others, the non-educated or the non-native, might have made to find their way through the linguistic grassland. And what cannot be recorded, of course, is what other tracks it might be possible or expedient to make in the future, whether you are an educated native speaker or not.

As far as English is concerned, there are innumerable other people apart from educated native speakers that are finding a way across this metaphorical field, and there is no reason why they should follow the well trodden paths of native speaker custom and convention which may well not suit their purposes. But there is a prevailing assumption that this is what all users of English ought to do – stay on the beaten track, do not stray, keep off the grass.

So it is that the way users like speakers of English as a lingua franca make their way through the language is said to be deviant. Their performance, as I said earlier, is generally taken as evidence that they are incompetent. And they are judged to be incompetent on two counts: not only is their knowledge of the language imperfect in that they do not conform to the abstract encoding rules that are said to constitute native speaker competence, but they do not know how to perform properly because they do not conform to conventions of actual native speaker usage either. They do not stay on track. This, however, is to accept the validity of equating competence with conformity to native speaker norms. But quite apart from the fact that the very concept of native speaker competence lacks any clear definition, there is plenty of evidence that it is irrelevant and that ELF users can get by very well without it anyway.

So how do they manage to do it? They cannot perform without competence. If they do not have native speaker competence, what kind of competence do they have? And how do they act upon it in their performance? To return to points I made at the beginning of this article: we can only ever make sense of anything by generalizing from particulars. We deal in preconceived constructs all the time: we convert samples of actual experience into examples of abstract categories, and this conversion process necessarily extends and elaborates these categories according to convenience. We cannot cope with the **data** of experience until we have converted them into conceptual **evidence**. In this sense, paradoxical though this may seem, we can only make things real by making them abstract, and we learn how to do this in the very process of learning language. And most of what we know of the world is not directly derived from perceived experience but taken over on trust from ready-made conceptualizations. Most of our knowledge is second-hand. So it is not just linguists that

Brought to you by | King's College London
Authenticated
Download Date | 7/5/18 4:23 PM

deal with abstract constructs as convenient ways of making sense of things. We all do it and we could not survive if we did not.

7. The constructs of linguistic reality

So it is by reference to what we know, to our competence, our abstract construct of linguistic reality, that we take bearings on our experience and interpret data as evidence of something familiar. The abstracting process goes on all the time. Consider how we make sense of conversation. As those who have recorded ELF interactions will know well enough, the actual data of conversation is highly complex and confusing and it is often very difficult to make out just what is going on. This, as Harold Garfinkel has said, is what conversation analysis sets out to do:

> What the parties said would be treated as a sketchy, partial, incomplete, masked, elliptical, concealed, ambiguous, or misleading version of what the parties talked about. (Garfinkel 1972: 217)

From the outsider perspective of the analyst, what is said, the actual text that the participants produce may be sketchy, partial, incomplete, ambiguous and so on, but this is a problem for the analyst, not the participants themselves. This is because they are only processing textual data as evidence of the discourse process and have no difficulty abstracting what is talked about from what is actually said. This is the only way in which the interaction can be made real for them. And the task of the analyst is to produce a similarly abstract version by inferring discourse function from textual forms, and as any ELF researcher knows, the problem is to know how far the analyst's version can correspond with that of the participants. Or indeed **should** correspond. For of course, the analysis may be informed by pretextual purposes and the analyst may be intent on placing a particular construction on the text to reveal significance that the participants may not be aware of (for further discussion see Widdowson 2004).

Deriving discourse versions from textual data will always be a tricky and controversial proceeding. There is no way, as far as I can see, of determining the validity of the different constructs that are abstracted from the data. Each is a different representation, a different take on reality. Each, therefore, to refer back to the quotation from *Four Quartets* cited earlier "imposes a pattern, and falsifies". Each is, in this sense, a kind of fiction.

In the case of conversation analysis, the constructs are derived from actual data. But there are also abstractions which are unconnected with specific instances of actually occurring language use. Here we can make a connection with representations of talk that are overtly fictional as in the dramatic dialogue of a play. The playwright Harold Pinter, for example, is often praised for the

Brought to you by | King's College London
Authenticated
Download Date | 7/5/18 4:23 PM

naturalistic way his characters carry on their conversations. Their talk somehow rings true. But these dramatic dialogues are not actually true to life. Performance on stage is entirely different from how language is performed in actual contexts of use – one has only to compare a scene from one of Pinter's plays with the transcripts of actually occurring talk to see how remote they are from what goes on in real conversation. Though they are not true to life, the dialogues somehow carry conviction – they represent a reality that the audience recognizes and responds to based on their schematic knowledge of conversation they are familiar with. They recognize that Pinter has abstracted something essential about human interaction and has represented talk by editing out the distractions of what would actually be said. So the effectiveness of the performance on stage depends on the competence of the audience. Unlike Garfinkel, Pinter is not dealing directly with the data of actual occurrence, and so his version of talk is not required to be substantiated by adducing evidence of its validity. Garfinkel is in this sense translating from an original and Pinter is not. But both Harolds – Garfinkel and Pinter – are in the business of devising fictional representations, versions of reality that edit out the particulars of actuality. But they are fictional in different ways as relevant to their different purposes. Their validity is relative: it depends on our recognition of this relevance. We would not take the script of a play as a valid example of conversation analysis, or vice versa. But each has its own validity and there are times when acknowledged fictional representations of reality in literature give enlightening insights into how people experience language beyond the scope of the supposedly factual account of linguistic analysis – an observation made many years ago in reference to experimental psychology in Hudson (1972). One might add that this suggests an area of comparative enquiry, as far as I know still under-explored: the difference between literary and linguistic representations of language in use. This would bring to the fore the uncertain relationship between fact and fiction in human affairs that I am considering in this article.

So what I am saying is simple and obvious enough. We make sense of things by abstracting from the actual. What we do, our performance, is a partial, incomplete, elliptical, masked expression of what we know, our competence – in this respect Chomsky surely got it right. We can only perform language and understand other people's performance of it by reference to some abstract construct or competence or other, and ELF as a natural use of language is no exception. Some abstract construct or other. But which? That is the question.

The main impediment to an understanding of the concept of ELF is the assumption that the only relevant and legitimate construct is native speaker competence. But competence in ELF cannot correspond with native speaker competence. Non-native ELF users cannot know English as native speakers know it. Native speaker knowledge is abstracted from the experience of pri-

Brought to you by | King's College London
Authenticated
Download Date | 7/5/18 4:23 PM

mary socialization whereby language, culture and social identity are naturally and inseparably inter-connected. Non-native speaker ELF users experience the language very differently, as an extension of a language resource they already have, acquired through secondary socialization and separated from these primary and inherent connections with culture and identity.

We need abstract constructs, I have argued, because they represent our realities and without them we cannot make sense of the world. But these constructs represent different realities, different socio-cultural schemata, values, beliefs, ways of thinking that are appropriate to certain purposes, relevant to certain circumstances. One can see, of course, why it is politically and commercially expedient to represent a language, particularly English, as a well-defined and self-enclosed entity with fully competent native speakers to provide its norms of correctness. But these norms are determined by cultural and identity factors that no longer apply outside native-speaking communities. One can see that once such a construct of English is established as convenient fiction it becomes taken for granted and there is no need to question its validity: attitudes harden and the fiction takes on the force of fact. But when purposes and circumstances change, when English gets globalized as a lingua franca and becomes common property, and thus a means of expressing other cultural values, other identities, then there is the obvious need to adapt our representations of reality. The old conditions of relevance and appropriateness no longer apply. 'The old order changeth, yielding place to new . . .' as Tennyson has it. Or if it does not, surely it should.

Non-native speaker ELF users have some kind of competence in English: they could not function in the language otherwise. Although, as I have said, their linguistic knowledge may be seen as deficient when measured against NS norms, the only measurement that is generally recognized as valid, this does not prevent them from communicating efficiently. So they have some kind of **communicative** competence. This is the cue for Dell Hymes to make his appearance.

8. Communicative function and conformity

To remind you, Hymes proposes that there are four criteria for establishing how far somebody is communicatively competent in a language: the extent to which they can judge whether and to what degree a sample of a language is possible, feasible, appropriate and actually performed. He says:

> There is an important sense in which a normal member of a community has knowledge with respect to all these aspects of the communicative systems available to him. He will interpret or assess the conduct of others and himself in ways that reflect a knowledge of each . . . (Hymes 1972: 282)

Brought to you by | King's College London
Authenticated
Download Date | 7/5/18 4:23 PM

We should note that although he does not say so explicitly, reference to "a normal member of a community" implies that it is, again, native speaker competence that Hymes has in mind. What else can a normal member of a community be but an ideal speaker-listener under a different name? And the norm that this normal member conforms to can only be that of the native speaker. You obviously cannot make judgements about whether and to what degree a language sample is possible, feasible, appropriate and actually performed without reference to established norms that define **a** particular language as the property of **a** particular community. Thus whether and to what degree a sample of language is contextually appropriate means, or has certainly been taken to mean, appropriate to native speaker contexts and whether and to what degree it is done means actually produced by native speakers. On these criteria, of course, the non-conformist ELF users remain communicatively incompetent. And their conduct is indeed interpreted and assessed as such. But as has already been noted, what native speakers actually perform as appropriate to their contexts is essentially irrelevant for ELF contexts.

So what if we dispense with the normal member of a native speaking community? What if we forget about making normative judgements and ask instead, how ELF users construct their own reality by making appropriate and feasible use of language that is not possible in these terms and not normally performed by native speakers? In the Hymes scheme, the four factors are presented as separate and unconnected components with no indication of any priority or relationship between them. The formally possible comes first in the list, but there is nothing to suggest that this implies some kind of primacy, and there is no discussion about how, for example, the appropriate factor affects the possible – how, in other words, contextual functions have a determining effect on the encoded forms of a language. But if we are to understand how communication is actually achieved, we need to consider how these factors relate to each other. Hymes (1972: 281–282) provides what he calls "a linguistic illustration" of his four factors: "a sentence may be grammatical, awkward, tactful and rare". But communication is not a matter of identifying the property of sentences, but of knowing how these factors connect and combine to make effective communicative use of the language – how, for example, one can relate the feasible with the appropriate to say something that is tactfully awkward, or when it is appropriate to produce an expression which is rare or ungrammatical to achieve a particular pragmatic effect. Communication is a function of the dynamic interplay across these different factors and it cannot be described simply by identifying them as separate components.

Use of the language in ELF, as research has amply illustrated, provides abundant evidence of how its users relate these factors. The possible is generally subordinated to the feasible and the appropriate, and what is, or more strictly has been, actually performed becomes irrelevant. It does not matter, in

Brought to you by | King's College London
Authenticated
Download Date | 7/5/18 4:23 PM

other words, whether the language conforms to established code rules or usage conventions so long as it is intelligible and pragmatically effective. Indeed, users, freed from the constraints of conformity, will typically increase feasibility by reducing the irregularities and exploiting the redundancy of the standard code, and will produce lexical re-alignments of formal features as contextually appropriate to their purposes. Thus their alternative version of the possible is motivated by functional need, and in this respect what we see in ELF is an entirely natural, and indeed inevitable, process of linguistic evolution, consistent with the Halliday dictum that the form a language takes is a reflection of the functions it has evolved to serve (Halliday and Matthiessen 2004).

The essential point to make here is that this process of functionally motivated de-formation and re-formation continues, which is why communication, in ELF or any other natural language, depends not on conformity but on non-conformity with established norms of the formally possible and the actually performed. These established norms have been derived from ways in which the language has feasibly and appropriately functioned for particular groups of users in the past, but they are no longer of necessary relevance to other users in the present. Adherence to these norms does not, as is often claimed, ensure effective communication but on the contrary will tend to make it more difficult. ELF has often been equated with fossilized learning. But if anything is fossilized it is these norms – fossils, it would seem, set in stone.

And so ELF users develop their own construct of the possible as a function of what is feasible and appropriate for their purposes, by exploiting the potential for meaning making inherent in the language, what I have called elsewhere the virtual language (Widdowson 1997, 2003). Descriptions of ELF already give some indication of the nature of this construct, and identifying its essential features is, I think, one of the major challenges of ELF research in the future. What findings already seem to show is that ELF involves a reconsideration of the concept of the possible itself. In Hymes' terms this would seem to be equated with grammatical competence as defined by Chomsky. ELF users, as we know, can communicate without conformity to the standard grammar: they take what they need from it and leave the rest. But what is it that regulates which features they take and which they leave?

This raises the very general question of what the communicative function of grammar is anyway. There are, after all, times when we can get by very well without it, when the use of words alone is both feasible and appropriate. This suggests that grammar serves only a subordinate and auxiliary role – we call on it as an expediency when it is necessary to make a more explicit connection between lexis and context. If we make use of grammar when it is not necessary, it is likely to impair communication rather than improve it. What we see in ELF interactions is just this expedient use of grammar, and ELF users will naturally focus on those grammatical features which have a high degree of

Brought to you by | King's College London
Authenticated
Download Date | 7/5/18 4:23 PM

communicative valency, or potential, and will tend to disregard those features that do not. In other words, the construct of the possible in ELF represents the ongoing development of a genuinely functional grammar, where linguistic forms are pragmatically motivated by contextual function in contrast to Halliday's functional grammar, which is essentially the static semantic record of how functions in the past have become encoded in the standard language.

9. Implications for pedagogy

I have been talking about the wider implications of ELF from a sociolinguistic perspective. What then of the pedagogic perspective? What are the wider implications here? How does all this connect up with English language classrooms?

Most ELF users are erstwhile EFL learners and their construct of English typically has its origins in the classroom. It is there that it has been abstracted from the actual language performance they have been presented with and practised in. So it is no surprise that ELF and learner English are in many respects formally alike: it would indeed be surprising if they were not. As we know, this is generally taken as evidence of failure in that this formal likeness is unlike Standard English or approved conventions of native speaker usage. But this is to focus on form without regard to the functional motivation that gives rise to it.

The question that needs to be asked about ELF users and EFL learners alike is this: why is it that they develop their own abstract construct of the language? Why are learners so perverse in their refusal to learn what teachers tell them to learn? It is not that they do not learn **something**, but that they get little credit for it if the something they learn does not measure up to what they have been taught, even if they can put it to effective use. So if it is not what is taught that determines what is learned, what does? It is an obvious fact that in English language classrooms there is always at least one other language present. Learners learn the new language by referring it to the language or languages they already know: although English is generally **taught** monolingually, it is actually **learned** bi- or multilingually (for further discussion see Widdowson 2003, Seidlhofer 2011). I would suggest that, primed by the experience of their own language, learners quite naturally focus attention on what is functionally salient, give intuitive priority to what is feasible and appropriate, and filter out linguistic features that are surplus to communicative requirement. In short, they develop their own functional grammar. This is not, and cannot be, the same as what they have been taught. But this represents success, not failure.

For this really is communicative language **learning**, as distinct from communicative language teaching, as it is generally practised, which only sanc-

Brought to you by | King's College London
Authenticated
Download Date | 7/5/18 4:23 PM

tions communicative activity that conforms to native speaker norms. Consider the version of the communicative approach that is now much in vogue: task based language teaching (expounded in detail in Ellis 2003). This sets out to teach learners what have been identified as the three basic components of competence: accuracy, fluency and complexity (see, for example, Housen and Kuiken 2009). All three of these are defined in terms of the standard language, and tasks are designed to ensure that their outcomes involve some focus on form so that learners can improve the accuracy and increase the complexity of their language as they move through stages of interlanguage towards the goal of a presupposed but undefined native speaker competence. So linguistic competence is taken to be the objective and communication the means for achieving it. Presumably, if learners are communicatively fluent without being accurate and complex in the approved way, that does not count as a successful outcome and you need to design another task.

This, I would argue, gets things the wrong way round. If learners achieve a communicative outcome without being accurate and complex, what you need to think about if you are really interested in communication, is how they manage to do that, and then design tasks that get them to keep on doing it. There is a good deal of concern that learners might not notice linguistic features, and tasks get designed to ensure that they do. But if these features are not noticed, the question is why not – and why should they be. It may well be that they are not taken to be communicatively salient and so not worth noticing.

Learner achievement is generally measured in terms of **quantity**. But I would argue that **how much** learners know of English is of little importance. It is **how** they know it that really matters. And here we might note that a good deal, perhaps most, of what is difficult for learners about the language is just those features that have an identifying function for native speakers but are communicatively redundant. What is most difficult, and most resistant to teacher correction, is probably what is most dispensable. But these are the very features that teachers tend to spend most time trying, in vain, to teach.

Learners construct their own version of the language they are being taught and this gets carried over and developed further when they escape from the classroom and become ELF users. This version is generally taken to be an interlanguage, an interim and inadequate stage of acquisition. The pedagogic task is, in this view, to move learners on towards the final goal of native speaker competence, following the directions determined by the teacher on the advice of the researcher in SLA. This is not unlike the quest for the Holy Grail: the goal is unattainable, not least because it is an illusion. And not only unattainable, but irrelevant anyway. It is surely time to think of a possible alternative.

And research on ELF gives an indication of what form such an alternative might take. This research makes clear that ELF users can make effective use of English despite their failure to conform to the kind of competence prescribed

Brought to you by | King's College London
Authenticated
Download Date | 7/5/18 4:23 PM

by their teachers – one might indeed say **because** of this failure. For in failing to conform they have developed their own construct, a kind of competence of their own. They have, in Halliday's (1975) terms learned how to mean in English, and this provides them with a **capability** for further learning as they exploit and extend this competence as and when this is functionally necessary for different communicative purposes in different contexts of use (for a discussion of capability, see Widdowson 2003). It would seem to make sense to try to understand what learners know of English, how they know and use it: to identify what aspects of the virtual language learners abstract from the data, what they notice, what they focus on as salient and essential and what they edit out as not – what, in short, they **make** of the language. And then to adjust teaching accordingly. This would be the use of learner language: not to identify what is to be corrected, but what is to be encouraged – a genuine learner-centred approach.

What form such adjustment might take is, of course, an open question. And it is bound to be constrained by factors beyond the control of practising teachers – like the reference books and teaching materials that they have to work with, the persuasive authority of teacher-trainers, especially those who are native speakers of English, and, above all, the exigencies of assessment. All of these conditioning circumstances are themselves unlikely in the near future to adjust to the changing role of English in the world and its pedagogic implications. But there will be some room for manoeuvre. The first step is to raise the awareness of teachers that there is an alternative way of thinking about the subject they teach, based on an understanding of English as a lingua franca.

10. Conclusion

And here I return to my central theme. We make sense of the world by relating the actual particulars of experience to abstract constructs of knowledge, and these constructs are always in some degree fictions of relative validity and value. Cultures and paradigms of enquiry represent their own realities according to purpose and convenience. They make different conceptual distinctions, know things in different ways. The study of ELF is, I have argued, of particular significance in that it prompts a reappraisal of established, taken for granted ways of thinking about language, especially English. I have argued that, convenient though these ways may be for some purposes and for some manifestations of the language, they are an encumbrance when it comes to understanding how English is used as a lingua franca. Many years ago, John Sinclair made the insightful point that developments in corpus linguistics produced "new material" that also prompted a reappraisal of conventional thinking:

Brought to you by | King's College London
Authenticated
Download Date | 7/5/18 4:23 PM

The categories and methods we use to describe English are not appropriate to the new material. We shall need to overhaul our descriptive systems. (Sinclair 1985: 252)

Although this is not what Sinclair had in mind, his comments are especially pertinent to ELF. Here too we have "new material", and great amounts of it, for which the categories and methods conventionally used to describe English are not appropriate. Here too we need to "overhaul our descriptive systems" and deconstruct our established concepts. And this, as I have argued, involves a quite radical rethinking about the relationship between what we know about the language and what we do with it, between competence and performance, between form and function, between learners and users of English, and between the teaching and learning of the language as a subject.

Note

This article had its origins in plenary talks I gave at the ELF2 and ELF4 conferences in Southampton and Hong Kong.

References

Chomsky, Noam. 1965. *Aspects of the theory of syntax.* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Chomsky, Noam. 1957. *Syntactic structures.* 's-Gravenhage: Mouton.

Ellis, Rod. 2003. *Task based learning and teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Garfinkel, Harold. 1972. Remarks on ethnomethodology. In John J. Gumperz & Dell Hymes (eds.), *Directions in sociolinguistics: The ethnography of communication,* 301–324. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

Halliday, Michael A. K. 2004 [1975]. Learning how to mean. In Michael A. K. Halliday & Christian M. I. M. Matthiessen. *An introduction to functional grammar*. 3rd edn. London: Hodder Arnold.

Housen, Alex & Folkert Kuiken (eds.). 2009. Complexity, accuracy and fluency (CAF) in second language acquisition research. [Special Issue]. *Applied Linguistics* 30(4).

Hudson, Liam. 1972. *The cult of the fact*. New York: Harper & Row.

Hymes, Dell H. 1972 [1986]. On communicative competence. In John B. Pride & Janet Holmes (eds.), *Sociolinguistics*: *Selected readings,* 269–293. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.

Kuhn, Thomas S. 1970. *The structure of scientific revolutions*. 2nd edn. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Labov, William. 1970. The study of language in its social context. *Studium Generale* 23. 66–84.

Sampson, Geoffrey R. 2007. Grammar without grammaticality. *Corpus Linguistics and Linguistic Theory* 3(1). 1–32.

Seidlhofer, Barbara. 2011. *Understanding English as a lingua franca.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Sinclair, John M. 1985. Selected issues. In Randolph Quirk & Henry G. Widdowson (eds.), *English in the world*: *Teaching and learning the language and literatures,* 248–254. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Brought to you by | King's College London
Authenticated
Download Date | 7/5/18 4:23 PM

Steiner, George. 1975. *After Babel: Aspects of language and translation.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Trudgill, Peter. 1999. Standard English: What it isn't. In Tony Bex & Richard J. Watts (eds.), *Standard English: The widening debate,* 117–128. London: Routledge.
Trudgill, Peter & Jean Hannah. 2008. *International English. A guide to the varieties of Standard English,* 5th edn. London: Hodder Education.
Widdowson, Henry G. 1997. EIL, ESL, EFL: Global issues and local interests. *World Englishes*, 16(1). 135–146.
Widdowson, Henry G. 2003. *Defining issues in English language teaching.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Widdowson, Henry G. 2004. *Text, pretext, context: Critical issues in discourse analysis*. Malden, MA: Blackwell.

About the author

Henry Widdowson in earlier years taught at the universities of Edinburgh, London and Essex. He was a founding editor of the journal *Applied Linguistics* and for thirty years acted as applied linguistics adviser to Oxford University Press. He has lectured and written extensively on applied linguistics, discourse analysis and language teaching and his publications include *Defining Issues in English Language Teaching* (2003), *Text, Context, Pretext* (2004) and *Discourse Analysis* (2007) – a book in the series *Oxford Introductions to Language Study*, of which he is editor. Now retired but still (relatively) active, he is Honorary Professor at the University of Vienna.

E-mail: henry.widdowson@univie.ac.at

Brought to you by | King's College London
Authenticated
Download Date | 7/5/18 4:23 PM