Euro-English

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Perspectives on an emerging variety on the mainland of
Europe, from commentators in Sweden, Austria and England

A new variety of English

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IF, THROUGH a EU decree, a distinctive European variety of English became the official language (perhaps sharing this distinction with one or two other prominent European languages), and was the standard for English language education, *second-language* status would be immediately established. Like India, Singapore, and Nigeria, the EU is a political entity where English functions as a lingua franca among linguistically diverse peoples. It is clear that in all instances around the globe where English is used locally as a language of wider communication, distinct varieties have emerged, and there are strong arguments for promoting such Englishes as educational models. Kachru's investigations of second-language varieties substantiates this claim (Kachru, 1986). Because of the current role of 'Euro-English' in the EU, it would be naive, certainly, to assume that legitimatisation, codification, and standardisation processes will not take place.

One form of 'Euro-English' can already be observed in the emergence of a "culture" among EU citizens wherein a wide range of terms, (new coinages, jargon, as well as proper nouns that symbolise grand movements, e.g., *Maastricht*, or *Schengen*)[1] make the English used in Europe distinct from other varieties. One hears of *Euro-speak*, the language of *Eurocrats*, which is the vernacular of EU politicians and civil servants. Through processes of *discoursal nativization*, wherein European expressions and conceptualisations that are foreign to native-speaker varieties become valuable communicative tools, and *fossilization*, where "nonstandard" structures become acceptable forms of language, as well as the existence of distinct European 'accents,' a new variety of English peculiar to the European experience is taking form.

The lexical register of mainland European non-native speakers of English, steeped in standard English usage, is augmented by a number of terms which are peculiar to the European experience. The new currency, €, is now referred to as the *euro* (not capitalized and no *s* for the plural). Thus, *euro notes* will soon be the valid currency in the *Euro zone* or *Euro area*, which is comprised of those *Member States* which have joined the EMU (the Economic and Monetary Union). This style of discourse, with an abundance of acronyms, as well as the word *Euro* introducing various conceptualisations, characterises 'Euro-English'. Note, furthermore, that instead of the term *state*, *country*, or *nation*, the convention in Europe is to refer to the various countries that have joined the EU as *Member States*, a distinction which has subtle but important political implications.

For European citizens, terms such as *additionality*, which means the demand for matching funds from national or local authorities when monies are provided by the European Regional Development Fund, are commonly used. 'Euro-English' *internal market* differs from *domestic market* (another subtle reference to the political organisation of the EU). On the lighter side, the term *Berlaymont* is used in Europe to refer to bureaucratisation and red tape. This is the name of the Commission building in Brussels which was renovated in 1992 because of asbestos contamination. Throughout the EU we find terms which are peculiar to

the European experience and which are not generally understood by users of English living in other parts of the world.

Expressions which are commonplace in European languages are slowly making their way into 'Euro-English' through processes of discoursal nativization. Here, modes of expression become "acceptable" forms of communication through a rather elaborate process. In the initial stage, such forms of language are only fully understood by people who have knowledge of the language from which the expression originates. In time, as it becomes accepted among users of English, nativization takes place and the form is given communicative legitimacy. This differs significantly from fossilization, where "incorrect" grammatical constructions, for instance, because of repeated use and exposure, become accepted.

In Swedish, for instance, if you want to neglect something, you say that you '*hoppa*

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över' it (in a literal translation, this is the verb phrase '*hop over*'). Here then, one can sometimes hear Swedes say that they are going to 'hop over' an activity, meaning that they refrain from doing something. An example would be, 'I am going to hop over lunch today.' Interlocutors uninitiated with Swedish may be bewildered. Nevertheless, as such usage becomes more commonplace, it could very well become accepted by users of English not familiar with the Swedish language.

With grammar, the literal translation of the Swedish structure when referring to the number of people present at an assembly is, for example, '*we were* so many people present.' In standard English the expression is '*there were*.' Thus, for speakers of Swedish, it is perfectly normal to say, '*We were* five people at the party.' Such constructions, while perceived as the usage of the non-native speaker, are nevertheless understood by many English language users. For such phrasing, there are no *comprehensibility* arguments which would compel practitioners to "root out" such usage among their pupils. The only reason why such language is deemed incorrect is that, according to the standard grammars, personal pronouns should not be used in this manner. It would perhaps be sufficient to note that such constructions are not considered standard English by a majority of native speakers. Through fossilization, it is possible that such constructions common to European languages, as they are literally translated into English by the non-native user, will become acceptable features of 'Euro-English'.

Towards making 'Euro-English' a linguistic reality

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The study of 'English' seems to have arrived at a critical juncture. There is now a widespread realization, and acknowledgement, that English, in its various forms, has become "the most universal linguistic entity that humankind has ever known" (McArthur, 1998:57). However, most discussions about 'global English' or 'Euro-English' are being carried out on a meta-level, dealing with various cultural, socio-political, economic and ecological issues, and there is a marked shortage of linguistic research into what this 'English' actually looks like when it is used in diverse constellations among 'non-native' speakers. And these are, after all, the majority of users of the language both globally as well as in Europe.

If 'Euro-English' is indeed an emerging variety as a European lingua franca, then it should be possible to describe it systematically, and eventually also to provide a codification which would allow it to be captured in dictionaries and grammars and to be taught, with appropriate teaching materials to support this teaching. While many might (still) find it difficult to countenance such thoughts, very specific

research efforts are currently under way to undertake these first steps required for an eventual description and codification.

The level of language in which work of this kind is probably most advanced is phonology (see Jenkins, below, and 2000). Important work has also been, and is being, conducted in the area of pragmatics of 'non-native – non-native' communication in English (e.g. Firth, 1996; Meierkord, 1996; House, 1999). Of course, pragmatics is a rather more open-ended area than phonology, and accordingly, the studies available to date home in on very diverse issues. But the findings which are beginning to emerge make it clear that there is a vast, complex and important area here waiting to be explored and exploited for communication in 'Euro-English'.

Another project particularly relevant to the description of 'Euro-English' is the one described in James (2000). It is entitled 'English as a *lingua franca* in the Alpine-Adriatic region' and aims to capture the English used in casual conversations among young people whose first languages are German, Italian, Slovene and Friulian. This project is currently only in its pilot phase, but James (2000 and forthcoming) offers a very helpful discussion of how his research links up with current work in various areas, such as bi/multilingualism, (native English) casual conversation, and pidgin and creole linguistics.

It seems, then, that we are at the beginning of a process heading towards the formation and acceptance of a new *concept* of English – not the one that has served as the default so far, i.e. native-speaker English, but that of English as a lingua franca in its own right, with its own description and codification (see Seidlhofer, forthcoming). That is to say, we are witnessing the emergence of an endonormative model of lingua franca English which will increasingly derive its norms of correctness and appropriacy from its own usage rather than that of the UK or the US, or any other 'native speaker' country.

But for this to happen, there needs to be a really broad empirical basis for a description of salient features of English as a lingua franca, that is to say, a large corpus of such English. Such a corpus will enable us to take stock of how speakers actually communicate through ELF (English as a lingua franca), and to attempt a characterization of how they use, or rather co-construct, 'English' to do so.

The compilation of such a corpus is now under way at the University of Vienna – to my knowledge, the first large-scale effort to capture exclusively lingua franca English. Since the intention is to record a wide range of variation, a corpus of spoken ELF is the first target, at one remove from the stabilising and standardising influence of writing. Another important reason for concentrating on the spoken medium is that spoken interaction is overtly reciprocal, which means that not only production but also reception are captured, thus allowing for observations regarding the intelligibility of what interlocutors say. For the time being, the focus is on unscripted (though partly pre-structured), largely face-to-face communication among fairly fluent speakers from a wide range of first language backgrounds whose primary and secondary education and socialization did not take place in English. At least for the first phase, it was decided to operate with a narrow definition of ELF talk. That is to say, an attempt is made to meet the following additional criteria: no native speakers should be involved in the interaction, and the interaction should not take place in an environment where the predominant language is English. Vienna therefore seems a good place for this, right in the middle of Europe, and a place where many international meetings happen. In the current phase, this project is being supported by Oxford University Press, hence its name: the *Vienna-Oxford ELF Corpus*.

As a first research focus, it seems desirable to complement the findings already available from the research on phonology and pragmatics mentioned above by concentrating on lexico-grammar and discourse. The investigation will be concerned with what (if anything), notwithstanding all the diversity, emerges as common features of ELF use, irrespective of speakers' first languages and levels of proficiency. Questions investigated will include the following: What seem to be the most relied-upon and successfully employed grammatical constructions and lexical choices? What are the factors which tend to lead to misunderstandings or communication breakdown? Is the degree of approximation to a variety of L1 English always proportional to communicative success? Or are there commonly-used constructions, lexical items and sound patterns which are ungrammatical in Standard L1 English but generally unproblematic in ELF communication? If so, can hypotheses be set up and tested concerning simplifications of L1 English which could constitute systematic features of ELF?

It will be clear from this research agenda that a lot of hard work lies ahead. Considering the momentous research effort that has gone into computer-aided descriptions of native English over the last decade or two, there is a lot to catch up with, but also a lot to learn from. And there is the whole research literature about language variation and change, about nativised, or indigenised, varieties of English (e.g., Indian or Nigerian English) to build on and develop, together with work in social psychology and research on learner corpora and on simplification in language pedagogy.

In conclusion, here is a glimpse of some initial observations and hypotheses that can be formulated about the lexicogrammar of this emerging 'Euro-English'.

The following features, though clearly different from Standard English, are usually unproblematic, i.e. they do not tend to cause misunderstandings:

- using the same form for all present tense verbs, as in 'you look very sad' and 'he look very sad' ('3rd person –s')
- not putting a definite or indefinite article in front of nouns, as in 'our countries have signed agreement about this'

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- treating 'who' and 'which' as interchangeable relative pronouns, as in 'the picture who' or 'a person which'
- using just the verb stem in constructions such as 'I look forward to see you tomorrow' ('gerund')
- using 'isn't it?' as a universal tag question (i.e. instead of e.g. 'haven't they?' and 'shouldn't he?'), as in 'You're very busy today, isn't it?'

Generally, most of these can be regarded as regularization procedures which do away with some of the grammatical particularities of native English.

What is often problematic, however, are the following features:

- Lexical gaps in the vocabulary of a speaker, combined with a lack of paraphrasing strategy
- What I like to call 'unilateral idiomaticity': the phenomenon of one interlocutor employing utterances which are particularly idiomatic in native English, but (therefore) difficult to understand if the conversational partner does not know them (e.g., 'Would you like us to give you a hand?' instead of 'Can we help you?', or 'This drink is on the house' instead of 'This drink is a present from us').

Generally, these can be regarded as particularization procedures (in direction of the speakers' L1 or native English).

What seems to be emerging with striking frequency, as far as can be seen at this early stage, are situations in which 'unilateral' approximation to native speaker norms and expectations not shared in ELF interaction leads to communication problems. Mutual accommodation and communication strategies seem to have greater importance for communicative effectiveness than 'correctness' or idiomaticity in native English terms.

'Euro-English' accents

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Given that 'Euro-English' is in its infancy, it is not yet possible to describe its accents with confidence. Nevertheless, there are certain indications as to the direction in which 'Euro-English' accents are evolving. These indications derive from the evidence provided by research into *lingua franca* use among English speakers from a wide range of L1s (see Jenkins, 2000). This research has demonstrated that when English is spoken among its L2 speakers, mutual intelligibility is the primary factor in determining pronunciation. Certain L1 pronunciation transfers were repeatedly found to cause intelligibility problems for a listener who

did not share the speaker's L1, while other transfers (and other features traditionally considered 'errors' through their presence or absence) had little or no such effect.

Speakers, it transpired, were aware of the effect of their pronunciation on their listeners' understanding and, in communicative situations where a successful outcome was crucial, made considerable efforts to replace the transferred pronunciation forms which most threatened intelligibility with forms closer to the target. Hence, there was substantially more transfer in relaxed social exchanges than in critical exchanges of information, involving features such as consonant deletion (e.g. 'different' pronounced as [dɪfə], consonant substitution (e.g. 'wife' pronounced as [waɪp] and elimination of vowel length contrasts (e.g. 'live' pronounced as 'leave' and vice versa). On the other hand, certain other transfers, most noticeably substitutions of /θ/ and /ð/ were not similarly affected. The fact that speakers attempted to accommodate in this way in the interests of mutual intelligibility offers important clues as to the direction in which their pronunciation will move more permanently: in other words, to which pronunciations will, over time, become established features of the *lingua franca* varieties of English.

To summarise, the main features found to be core for English *lingua franca* interaction are as follows:

- all consonant sounds except for voiceless and voiced 'th', respectively /θ/ and /ð/, and dark 'l' /ɫ/ – the 'l' that precedes a pause or consonant as in the words 'pill' and 'held' rather than a vowel as in 'lip'.
- vowel length contrasts such as the difference in length between the /ɪ/ in 'fit' and the /iː/ in 'feet'.
- consonant clusters, especially in word-initial and word-medial positions, e.g. the /str/ at the beginning of the word 'string' or the /fr/ in the middle of the word 'different'.
- nuclear (or tonic) stress, especially used contrastively as in the difference in meaning encoded in the following: 'Her son is at uniVERsity' vs 'Her SON is at university' (upper case indicating nuclear syllables), where the former is a neutral statement of fact while the latter implies a contrast with an unmentioned referent known to both speaker and listener, probably 'daughter'.

The above features form what Jenkins (op. cit.) calls the Lingua Franca Core. On the other hand, the following items were among those found not to cause intelligibility problems in *lingua franca* interaction when they were affected by transfer errors, other error types, or avoided altogether. They are therefore excluded from the Lingua Franca Core: the sounds /θ/, /ð/ and /ɫ/ (see above); vowel quality that differs from (standard) native speaker quality; weak forms and other features of connected speech; word stress; and pitch direction.

Extrapolating from the Lingua Franca Core, we can make certain predictions about the ways in which 'Euro-English' accents will develop over time. For example, only two mainland European languages, Greek and Spanish, include the physiologically difficult sounds /θ/ and /ð/ in their pronunciation repertoires (with Spanish not using either to represent the spelling 'th'). When they speak English, the majority of Europeans substitute these sounds with either /t/ and /d/ or /s/ and /z/. It is therefore unlikely that /θ/ and /ð/ will be features of 'Euro-English' accents. What is not clear at this early stage is whether the former – as used by many Italian and Scandinavian speakers of English, or the latter – as used by many French and German speakers of English, will ultimately become the accepted norm, or whether there will be scope for regional variation in this respect within 'Euro-English'.

Similarly, because of the difficulties of many 'Euro-English' speakers in pronouncing dark 'l', it seems unlikely that this sound will be included in 'Euro-English' pronunciation norms and more likely that it will be substituted with clear 'l'. This development, if it takes place, will then run counter to a current development in British English. Here, dark 'l' is increasingly being affected by l-vocalisation such that, for example, the word 'pill' is pronounced /pɪʊ/ (or 'piw').

The other consonant sounds of English are likely to remain as reasonably close approximations of the sounds of standard native speaker varieties of English. They include, for instance, the fortis-lenis (roughly voiceless-voiced) distinction, since the devoicing of lenis consonants was found to cause serious intelligibility problems in *lingua franca* communication. Examples from the research data of this phenomenon are the words 'mug' pronounced as [mʌk] and 'chairs' pronounced as [tʃeəs] by two different German-L1 speakers. In the first case, the word was heard as 'muck' and in the second as 'chess'.

Generally, though, approximations rather than exact imitations of native-speaker consonant sounds are likely to become the accepted forms in 'Euro-English', provided that they will not be categorised by listeners as different phonemes altogether. An example of this is the Spanish bilabial fricative [β] which in Spanish is an allophone of the phoneme /b/. In Spanish-English, [β] is often substituted for /v/, as the latter does not form part of the Spanish phonemic system. However, Spanish English speakers pronounce the sound [β] in word-initial position in a manner closer to /b/ than to /v/. Hence the [β] approximation results in words such as 'very' being interpreted as 'berry', 'vowels' as 'bowels' and the like.

Although vowel length contrasts were found to be important for intelligibility in the wider research, speakers of a number of 'Euro-English' varieties (including French, Italian, Portuguese, Scandinavian and Greek) are resistant to producing the short vowel sound /ɪ/, while Spanish has a sound [i] roughly midway between English short /ɪ/ and long /iː/. In view of the widespread problem with this short vowel sound, it is possible that it will not ultimately form part of the 'Euro-English' vowel inventory, but that there will be a single sound in the region of the midway Spanish variant. This has implications for intelligibility, given the large number of minimal pairs with short /ɪ/ and long /iː/, and it remains to be seen whether the difficulty can be resolved.

As far as vowel quality is concerned, 'Euro-English' is certain to develop its own range of regional vowel qualities comparable to those of native varieties of English. So, for example, in the same way that several northern British varieties of English have a rounded vowel sound in the word 'luck' so that it sounds more like 'look', the French-English variety of 'Euro-English' will probably have an unrounded vowel

sound in the word 'hot' so that it sounds more like 'hut'. Speakers of the different varieties of 'Euro-English' will, through extensive exposure to each other's accents, be able to interpret their regional vowel quality differences to the same extent that speakers within L1 varieties of English are able to do so. Speakers of native varieties of English, who are less likely to have prolonged exposure to 'Euro-English' accents, will need to familiarise themselves with its regional vowel qualities if they wish to interact efficiently in 'Euro-English' contexts.

Beyond this, little else can be said with any degree of certainty about the evolving accents of 'Euro-English'. There is a need first for much more research of this kind to be carried out. Only then will it be possible for 'Euro-English' accents to be more fully described and, ultimately, for its pronunciation norms to be established and codified.

Implications for native speakers of English

One further issue that needs to be addressed in relation to 'Euro-English' concerns the implications for native speakers (NSs) of English. If we take these developments and interim findings to their logical conclusion, pretty momentous implications arise. In their strong version, these would mean that if NSs are to participate on equal terms with speakers of 'Euro-English' in mainland Europe, they will have to be willing to make adjustments to their own use of English rather than continuing to expect all concessions to be made by the mainland European majority. This will mean being responsive to change in (at least) the following three ways. Firstly, NSs will need to acquire productively the pronunciation and lexicogrammatical features which are identified as core 'Euro-English' features. Secondly, they will need to acquire receptively the non-core L2 regional features, especially those involving pronunciation such as regional vowel qualities. Thirdly, they will require accommodation skills to enable them to adjust their speech spontaneously in communication with 'Euro-English' speakers, instead of persisting in using all the features of their local (e.g. British English, American English) variety and expecting their 'Euro-English' listeners to make efforts to understand them. This could involve, for instance, avoiding the use of their local idiomatic language and of certain pronunciation features such as weak forms.

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The best place for NSs to acquire these lingua franca skills is in school alongside the learning of English as a mother tongue and other modern foreign languages. Initially the process could involve the study of differences across L1 and L2 varieties of English, discussion of the difficulty of learning a second language/accent and so on. Once awareness of the crucial underlying issues has been raised, it could progress to work on productive skills. In terms of awareness-raising, Kubota (2001) provides a very useful account of an attempt to affect US high school students' perceptions and comprehension of world Englishes to enable them "to develop the knowledge and skills necessary for intercultural communication". Although her study was a small pilot project that will need refining and replicating, Kubota demonstrates effectively the kind of education that will be critical in future to enable NSs to participate fully in 'Euro-English' and other emerging branches of world Englishes. ∎

Note

1 *Schengen* is the name of the agreement which allows European citizens to travel within the EU without having to carry a passport.

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SNIPPETS 1

Can you hear me?

(From 'Can you hear me?', the Threlford Lecture 2001, delivered by Ian Campbell, published in *The Linguist*, 40:3, London, 2001)

Growth in e-commerce and e-business is rising exponentially. In 1996, $2.9 billion of trade was carried out across the Internet – mainly in North America. By 1999, this had grown to $180 billion and the forecast for 2002 is $1.23 trillion.

The number of users has shown the same order of growth. NUA Internet Surveys estimate that by the end of 2001, there will be over 407 million people worldwide with their own Internet connection. The biggest number – 167.12 million – are in North America, followed by over 113 million in Europe and 105 million in Asia Pacific.

The DTI in this country now states that over 1 million companies are wired – achieving their 2003 target two years early.