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*'They all Take the Risk and Make the Effort': Intercultural
Accommodation and Multilingualism in a BELF Community
of Practice*

ABSTRACT:

ELF research has showed that processes of accommodation are more important than linguistic correctness according to a NS model. Recently more studies have explored accommodation, pragmatic and multilingual strategies in different ELF corpora of naturally-occurring exchanges. However, what research still needs to address is how the participants themselves orient to these phenomena, how they view the idea of prioritizing effective communication instead of accuracy, as well as issues of ownership and nativeness versus the multilingual speaker. This paper addresses the views of business professionals through ethnographic interviews in a BELF community of practice. Findings show that professionals tend to prioritize intercultural accommodation and show open attitudes towards multilingual resources and non-nativeness in ELF. They also report challenges to their communication, which they overcome by relying on a shared repertoire and multilingual resources. Other reported challenges concern the company's language policy and the access to languages other than English. Finally, it is argued that more research needs to address the link between sociolinguistic investigations of naturally-occurring corpus data with ethnographic explorations of practices and ideologies at the local level, both in ELF groups generally and ELF communities of practice specifically.

Introduction

When professionals communicate in English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) their main aim is not to display their language ability, or to improve their proficiency, but to deal with their business, to carry on with their professional practice. Language is still an important aspect of their work, but their concern is not with how to sound or speak like native speakers, but with how they can make their communication effective, despite linguistic and socio-cultural differences. More recent studies on ELF

have placed considerable attention on accommodation processes— the work done by a speaker to change and adapt one's communication to the interlocutors, their socio-cultural background or the socio-cultural context of the exchange. Accommodating difference in ELF communication (Cogo, 2009) has actually been found to be more important than linguistic correctness in terms of grammatical or lexical features, especially in facilitating and negotiating understanding (Jenkins, Cogo and Dewey 2011; Mauranen 2012; Seidlhofer 2011). In business context particularly, content and clarity are considered to be more relevant than correctness according to a normative, English 'native speaker' model.

The recently developed interest in ELF processes rather than features has also contributed to an increase in research into pragmatics, especially the strategies used to make communication effective (Cogo, 2010; Kaur 2009; Mauranen, 2006; Pitzl, 2005). Among these, multilingual strategies, both avert and covert, have been explored (Cogo, 2012; Hülmbauer, 2011; Klimpfner, 2009) as part of ELF communication as a contact language in a contact zone (Pratt, 1991). However, especially in recent years, research in professional and workplace communication has increasingly become corpus-based and it has provided interesting findings in terms of sociolinguistic descriptions. What corpus-based research cannot provide, though, is the perspective of the participants, how they feel about communication or other aspects of their profession. The view of the participants, as ELF users, is the interest of this paper, which focuses on attitudes and orientations towards ELF communication, including the central aspects of accommodation and multilingual strategies. This study also focuses on a specific business community of practice that has been working with English in international contexts for a while, and may thus provide more 'developed' views of communication in their field and of the potential challenges.

In the remainder of the paper, I will briefly explore the research in BELF before introducing the business community of participants working in corporate investment that I investigated. Their views on intercultural accommodation and multilingual aspects will be the focus of the central part of the paper. I will then argue that the emphasis on the native/non-native dichotomy when describing ELF users does not seem to hold for this BELF community. Instead, the key aspects of BELF communication are expertise in the business and knowledge of the common repertoire, which also includes intercultural accommodation.

1. *A brief introduction to Business English as a Lingua Franca (BELF)*

I use the term BELF in relation to the domain of use of English as a Lingua Franca by business professionals (Kankaanranta and Louhiala-Salminen, 2010; Louhiala-Salminen *et al.*, 2005). The 'B' of Business is, in other words, an indication of the area of expertise within which professionals operate in an international English environment (see Jenkins, Cogo and Dewey, 2011 for domain of ELF use), where their use of English is closely connected to their work practices and to the global business communities they are part of and interact with.

Most BELF research so far has pointed to a general awareness that content and clarity are more important than form and 'correctness' in relation to an ENL model. In Kankaanranta and Louhiala-Salminen (2010)'s study of BELF everyday communication English is seen as part of the job – it is 'simply work'. They conducted a questionnaire and interviews concerning BELF communication and found that professionals need to be able to discuss business-related issues, which are key for communicative success in BELF interactions, rather than using English according to ENL norms. Their results confirmed previous studies (see, for instance, Ehrenreich, 2009) in relation to the fact that work in BELF is more effective when the parties share the topic and the specific practices of their genre. BELF participants report that misunderstandings are extremely rare since the shared business context helps when other aspects might be lacking.

This should not be surprising since in general we tend to understand people better when they are similar to us, either because they work in the same field or because they have the same interests. This is also justified in terms of perceived relevance: people may perceive certain aspects as more relevant to them in general, and to their professional life in particular, than others. So, knowledge of the specific professional area of expertise is considered more important than linguistic knowledge, because people tend to focus on aspects that more are relevant to their life and work. So, while in linguistic areas professionals tend to remain attached to ENL standards (Jenkins, 2007) because these remain relevant in their work perspective, in BELF studies, professionals tend to focus on getting the job done (Ehrenreich, 2009). The difference can be seen along a cline of more language-oriented individuals and more content-oriented individuals. This seems to be the case even when age difference is considered. Cogo (2011) found these diverging tendencies in her study of school pupils' perceptions of ELF and language change where the young linguist constructed her comments in terms of necessity to conform to and protect standard

English while the young non-linguist displayed positive perceptions to ELF and its communicative effectiveness. Jenkins (2007)'s monograph on attitudes of ELT practitioners' also found prevalent negative perceptions of ELF among adult linguists.

It is now an established finding of BELF research that business professionals have been shown to prioritize clarity of message over grammar accurateness as an essential aspect of their communication. Competence in English is commonly conceptualized as strictly related to business knowledge of a particular genre and communicative practices of the professionals' own business areas. Being or becoming a professional in a business context is therefore about learning and contributing to an enterprise-centred repertoire and practicing a more pragmatic approach to communication (Cogo, 2012; Ehrenreich, 2009; Kankaanranta and Louhiala-Salminen 2010) even when this conflicts with the professionals' previous education and educational requirements concerning English.

Most BELF studies agree on certain main aspects of BELF communication. For one, as highlighted above, content and clarity are more important than correctness according to ENL model. Secondly, that accommodation skills are a key component of successful intercultural BELF communication. In fact, research has shown that competence in business ELF is associated with accommodation skills and business knowledge (Cogo, 2012; Ehrenreich, 2011; Kankaanranta and Louhiala-Salminen, 2010), including the use of and reliance on multilingual resources. Cogo's (2009) work on accommodation strategies in ELF small talk conversations emphasizes the key role of a number of convergence strategies, among which repetition and code-switching, and more recently, translanguaging (Cogo, 2012). This work has shown that «adaptive accommodation skills along with appreciation and acceptance of diversity» (2009: 270) are crucial for the successful accomplishment of communication. Other strategies include pre-realization and post-trouble source strategies that can be used to prevent and solve non-understanding problems (Cogo and Dewey, 2012). All these strategies underline the importance of intercultural accommodation skills and the need to engage with, and possibly negotiate, sociocultural differences in BELF communication.

1.1 The question of nativeness versus a multilingual speaker

Another important focus of (B)ELF work so far has been on the nature of the 'English' aspect of communication and the emphasis on the English native/non-native dichotomy. Hülmbauer (2009), for instance, finds that

the speakers' shared non-nativeness is one of the main characteristics of ELF communication and possibly the main ingredient for successful exchanges.

The emphasis on nativeness is also common in BELF-related studies. Charles and Marschan-Piekkari (2002) investigated communication within a multinational corporation (henceforth MNC) that had adopted English as the company's official language. The survey and interviews revealed that there were a number of communication problems within the company, and one of their most interesting findings (for this study) is the identification of a native speaker problem. The researchers found that English non-native speakers had more difficulties understanding native speakers rather than non-native speakers of English. As a result, the authors recommended that the native speakers too be included in communication training. This was the result of a large study of a big MNC covering various aspects of communication and did not concentrate on communication among members of local or domain specific teams. However, Rogerson-Revell (2008) researched communication between professionals at the European Commission meetings and also noticed that native speakers of English had the tendency to create problems in the meetings. And although the participants in Rogerson-Revell's study are part of a community of professionals that work in a specific domain, they did not form a community of practice in the sense that they had not established regular exchanges and the 'mutual engagement' aspect of the CoP was not present. In these studies, which may deal with different parts of a business and produce large-scale surveys of the whole MNC, attitudes and practices of specific teams or smaller groups are not necessarily considered. In other cases, such as the Rogerson-Revell's study, the community is smaller and deals with a specific area of business, but the members are not necessarily in regular contact.

Similarly, Sweeney and Zhu Hua (2010) also focus on the native/non-native distinction. They research the extent to which native and non-native respondents accommodate in discourse completion tasks and find that native speakers are less efficient at accommodating in communication than non-native speakers of English. The authors also suggest that native speakers would benefit from intercultural training so as to raise awareness of their own communication style.

The papers explored so far, while informative and relevant for the present research, focus on a number of business institutions, but do not concern communities of practices. In those studies the linguistic criterion is found to be crucial for successful communication. However, as I will

suggest in the rest of this paper, when we engage with communities of practice the linguistic criterion, and especially the native / non-native distinction within it, is only one aspect of communication, and not necessarily the most important one for successful intercultural exchanges. Being part of the same business community seems a lot more relevant in domain specific communication, as shown by participants in Section 3. Before I analyse participants' views on this topic, I would like to introduce the community under study.

2. The BELF community of practice

The study is based on a BELF community of practice (CoP) working in corporate investment. The investigation focuses on a team of 17 participants, who share the same business area of expertise and have established regular contacts among team members. The emphasis on a specific CoP makes this study different from previous, larger studies in BELF, which focused on big corporations or on large communities. And though not all ELF/BELF communities need to be CoPs, studying ELF in CoPs provides rich contexts for the investigation not only of language use, but the important aspect of how attitudes, ideologies and identities influence language use and how repertoires are co-constructed and emerge in this interaction.

The team in this study works for a multinational banking corporation, with branches all over the world, and with a financial hub in Italy. They share an office and engage in a specific aspect of the MNC work, corporate investment, which constitutes their practice. There are 10 core people, who work together on a daily basis and share various projects, but each individual is also part of other CoPs inside the MNC. In this study, both core people and more marginal members were interviewed for a total of 17 participants and almost 20 hours of interviews recording.

This study is not an attempt to generalize in relation to ELF practices, and it is not meant to provide tendencies in relation to attitudes in intercultural contexts. The interviews, which form the basis of this study, are very much co-constructed events where the interviewer is as much involved in constructing a certain direction and interpretation of the interview discourse as the interviewees. In this respect, the observation data helped in providing insights into their interpretation of business intercultural practices. However, the interest here has been on how participants make sense of intercultural experiences; what especially came out of this is the emphasis on them being a special community, an international

community of practice, where intercultural experiences are their daily practices. This is a community of practice from the participants' perspective, rather than the researcher, and the emic insights into their practices are important for how they construct intercultural encounters in ELF.

Although based in Italy, the team works in international investment and English is a key aspect of communication at work. Their use of BELF, however, is not concerned with being native and, instead, it is rather multilingual in practice. In fact, English is mixed with Italian in Italian business communication. Previous studies of Italian companies' communication practices confirm the tendency of seeing English as a necessary and inevitable component of business communication, whereby English is not only used as a *lingua franca*, but is integrated in the Italian corporate genre. As Poncini and Turra explain, 'The use of English specialized lexis in Italian interaction in corporate settings has now become a linguistic routine, especially for the younger generations of managers' (2008: 177).

The community explored in this paper reflects on how being a member of the CoP makes communication smoother, by allowing the creation and co-construction of a shared repertoire of resources, such as shared ways of communicating, like jargon, procedures, policies, all tools that they use and co-construct to make communication easier and possible. It is clear that this community shares '[w]ays of doing things, ways of talking, beliefs, values, power relations' (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 1992: 8) and not only 'non-nativeness'. What they also share is beliefs, values and power relations, which are not normally given much space in the CoP concept, but they are very important to understand the specific practices and how the community orients to them. In fact, the analysis of attitudes is paramount for understanding practices and participants' membership of the community. Gee (2005) and Meyerhoff (2005) caution viewing CoPs in a positivist light and concede that the perceptions of membership need further consideration. In the remainder of the paper it will become clear that the attribution as members is not based on the native-speaker/non-native speakers of English distinction, but on the international and multilingual aspect, as much as on the knowledge of the practice.

3. Analysis of professionals' perceptions of BELF communication

This study is part of a bigger project on BELF communication divided in two phases. The first one focuses on language attitudes of professionals in this field in relation to ELF and multilingualism. The second phase

deals with ideologies and corporate practices (see Cogo and Yanasprarat forthcoming). One general aim of the first phase is exploring the perceptions of difficulties encountered in international communication, the role of nativeness and accommodation, and generally business people's perceptions of how communication works.

3.1 Shared repertoire and challenges

In this part I am going to explore the attitudes and ideologies towards English and multilingual practices, coming out of participants' interviews and the fieldwork period. The overall findings confirm previous studies in BELF, which show that business people in international communities find working in English rather 'common' and generally do not question its key role in international business. They also comment on their international use and on how they find BELF «reassuring»¹:

P8m: Now a rather important thing is that often when we have a meeting or conference call it's not that everybody speak English like Cambridge 'super fluent' and this helps you it reassures you (.) it's not that you are the one who cannot speak English or Italian, this field is a bit mixed a bit international and it reassures you

This reassuring feeling makes participants feel confident about their English because other people seem to be in the same situation as them. The sense of reassurance is then linked to the similarity of their profile and the situation. Being part of the same experience and sharing similar situations is of course another common element of a community of practice, but also a recurrent finding in ELF literature too. For instance, Hülmbauer (2009: 328) refers to it in terms of «shared non-nativeness» and Cogo (2010: 304) mentions common «foreignness» in her study of institutional talk among colleagues. Both «shared non-nativeness» and «foreignness» are about finding common ground where there are different lingua-cultural backgrounds, and this, according to the participants, is also what makes BELF more understandable:

P5m: you always find someone that more or less is in your conditions so it's easier to understand each other

Although participants usually refer to English as the «official language of business», there actually is an interplay of languages in their work practices, which involves the use of not only English, but also French

and Italian. The participants are generally involved in a constellation of activities in different languages, which are constantly interconnected. For example, they may deal in Italian or French in a conference call and then write up the decision reached in that call in an English email and then continue their discussion on the phone in French with managers located in Paris. This complementary use of various resources is an implicit negotiation of language choices available from the participants' repertoires and the company's working languages (English, Italian and French). The employees confirmed that they could not operate in English only, but also that languages in their workplace are not always kept distinct and separate. When dealing in Italian and French, business discourse is always imbued of and inter-mixed with English, so much so that sometimes the distinctions between languages may become irrelevant.

The participants also commented on how English is a key aspect of their work but being an English native-speaker is not essential. Instead, finding a common ground or a common denominator is as important for participants in this study:

P12m: surely it is easier to understand the English spoken by people who are not English because you are obliged to find a common denominator which often is really basic and then you can just say that we are not speaking in a polished English but the important thing is to understand each other

The idea of common denominator is recurring in the interviews as something that non-native speakers of English have worked at, but they also can rely upon when the common denominator is established.

In fact, participants' comments seem to suggest that in international business contexts the communication difficulties around English are less important than expected. This was also signaled by the fact that I often had to probe my participants in different ways to get them to elaborate on the linguistic challenges or difficulties. This did not mean, as they explained, that English communication was always smooth, but that in their specific (international) community communication was not the main challenge. After elaborating on the possible challenges the participants explain why communication generally proceeds smoothly. The follow quote is representative of what most participants reported:

P5m: yes yes I would say it works well you know (.) we now have expressions a kind of language and terminology that we share (.) so we actually understand each other (.) now the expressions may not

be one hundred per cent correct as I was saying but in the end there is a company culture and the language becomes that one and you share certain kinds of communication and the important aspect is that we understand each other

This emphasis on sharing expressions, language and terminology and sharing certain kinds of communication is, in my participant's terms, the «shared repertoire of resources» typical of communities of practice. This kind of «business speak», a mixture of Italian and English mainly, with possible French expressions, is the company's co-constructed, shared and emergent repertoire which is something all members of the community refer to in one way or the other. This is a shared pool of resources that is continually developed and maintained and that members contribute to. It contains not only linguistic resources, but also ways of doing things, tools, symbols, and references that the community shares.

Another aspect that has important influence on the repertoire and also on the mutual engagement of the members is the ideologies and discourses around languages in the company. In fact, for most people using English seemed just 'commonsense', while other languages could be problematic. Two of the younger members of the community expressed their concerns in relation to the use of French, which they found more challenging.

P7f: No, I cannot speak French and this this is why I cannot read the official documents sometimes

The participant refers to the official documents issued by the headquarters in France, which are kept in French unless an English translation is provided for some reason. Higher positions in the company are encouraged to speak French because the company's headquarters are in France, therefore knowledge of French is gatekeeping non-French-speaking participants away from possible higher career progression. However, language is used for gatekeeping purposes not only in higher positions but at the very beginning of the process too, for instance, in the selection of the members of the international team. All participants said that 'English is a must in job interviews for these positions' (P16f) and all confirmed that they were asked to speak English at the selection process. Certain gatekeeping practices can be enforced at different levels and with different languages, and linguistic challenges do not only concern English but other linguistic resources in the community. In fact, possibly because in Italy there has been a shift in state-funded foreign language teaching from French and English as main foreign languages to English and Spanish (with French to

a much lesser extent), and because of more higher-education institutions offering English-medium-instruction programmes, the new recruits enter businesses with more English knowledge than French.

3.2 Intercultural accommodation and understanding

Participants overall agree about the common and understandable use of BELF, which is possible partly because of the shared repertoire of resources that they mention. Another aspect they emphasise is the strategies used to make up for difficulties in communication, especially the accommodation strategies. For instance, a participant's tendency to accommodate is specifically indicated in refraining from speaking quickly when using English.

P5m: often if I hear the other has a certain difficulty then I try to speak slowly and speak in a I mean a slower manner (.) I will never do like the native speakers they always speak fast

The accommodation strategies of the BELF speakers are compared and contrasted with the ones used by native speakers, who seem to have the tendency to talk fast. Native speakers of English also seem to have advantages, such as they know more words and can more easily express themselves, as P5m explained in his interview, but here the participant thinks of possible solutions and strategies to overcome the native problematicity.

P5m: because I often happen to talk with a mother-tongue speaker and they are much more facilitated in expressing a concept you know (.) especially when you talk about technical aspects and you would have difficulty understanding that term (.) then I would say there you need to learn to ask questions and interact with the interlocutor without being ashamed [...] you are not a mother-tongue speaker so you can have difficulties

Native speakers may also - or seem to - create problems. The same participant goes on to comment extensively on the native English speakers' 'spocchia' or 'arrogance' when they speak to English L2 interlocutors as if they were speaking to the L1s, that is, without any accommodation in terms of speed or idiomatic expressions:

P5m: arrogance of the English I mean they think they are always the ones who dictate the rules of the game from a linguistic point of view [...] as a tendency the native speaker does not question or check

that the counterpart is understanding perfectly (.) they go straight (.)
make their point and then I stop them and say 'oh speak slowly!'

In the extract below, P2f recounted the instance where her accent was not understood and created problems in her trip to the United States. Problems with intelligibility related to accents were mentioned in all the interviews, and they do not relate to production only, as in the example above, but to reception too.

P2f: I remember it even now @ the first time I was in the United States when I went and asked for a glass of water and I said it in English and they what? What? Because in English you pronounce the t or not and then [...] after three times I repeated it finally [...] well they told me that here you speak american english and so I was traumatized

For others it is not a question of English native speakers but a question of any speaker who is not sensitive to intercultural issues. For instance, the participant below recalls situations where Italian colleagues were speaking Italian as if they were among L1 Italian speakers, while the French colleagues had some difficulties understanding and therefore switched to English.

P8m: but look it's the same with Italians (.) when I arrived here I had a few meetings with some of the French people who had just arrived and the Italians were talking thinking that the people could speak Italian could have the meeting in Italian but the French people would switch to English (.)

AC: and then what happened?

P8m: then the Italians started talking in English without any problems (.) but I understand the position of the person who spoke Italian but not a perfect Italian (.) in the situation of a negotiation in the end they prefer to do it in English because as a French speaker you take the risk of speaking English (.) the Italians too take the risk they all take the risk and make the effort of speaking another language

According to P8m being insensitive to intercultural issues and accommodation can happen with any speaker, from any background, not only English native speakers. In the situation he was recalling in the interview the participant showed how speaking a second language (as the French who could speak Italian) may sometimes give the impression that the whole meeting and negotiation could be conducted in that language. In fact, in that specific situation, the French participants were just trying to do some relational work by speaking the local language (Italian) and did

not expect to conduct the meeting in that language. And in those situations switching to English is the obvious choice because, according to the interviewees, speaking English is putting all interlocutors on the same level, they all take the same risks as second language speakers and they all need to 'make the effort of speaking another language'.

When asked if there were any differences between native and non-native speakers in general business communication, the participants became more specific in their comments and two of them in particular indicated a clear difference not among native and non-native, but among business people in their community and other people outside their working group.

P12m: I would say that no there are no real differences (.) you know what could be the difference is that inside the institution where I work the English often realise they have an advantage and so they make the effort of speaking a simple English or to speak slowly and so on (.) while if we compare with the English person outside the working world the English person always speaks in the same manner and with the same speed the same intonation and does not make any effort to make you understand

The participants in this research, like P12m, make the distinction among people who are part of a community of practice and are familiar with certain linguistic practices and people who are not part of that working community. The native speakers of English who work in the international environment where these participants operate are aware and seem more sensitive to intercultural accommodation, which, according to the participants, involves using simpler words and speaking in slower tempo. P12m also adds that the native speakers he works with also try to be sympathetic with the L2 English speakers as in the example he provides below:

they try to adapt it because they understand the difficulty you may encounter (.) and it often happened to me that [...] I wanted to preempt myself and I would say I am sorry but my English is not perfect as I'd like and then they say but I wish I could speak Italian as you do English (.) you know it's like they are trying to help like opening the doors to facilitate communication (P12m)

Commenting on language abilities is a way of pre-empting possible problems and almost asking interlocutors to be more flexible and understanding. This strategy is amply used and seems to be rather common in intercultural encounters. For these participants what helps is the fact they are familiar with these intercultural and international settings.

I think the difference is in the background (.) the person who works for an international organisation is already used to understanding the difficulties in communication (.) maybe they make an effort to lower the level [...] if you can lower a level and speak a common language a more understandable language (P12m)

Here he brings in the idea of working in an international environment and how this influences the way BELF is used, because in an international workplace the expectation is that of making an effort for communication to be effective. The idea of making an effort is here linked to changing or adapting the way you speak by simplifying, or 'lowering the level'. The association of BELF with lowering the level, or with a simplified version of English, is sometimes mentioned by my participants and constitutes an ideological position (usually compared with native-speaker varieties of English) that I have explored elsewhere (see Cogo and Yanaprasart, forthcoming). Unlike situations typical of an international working environment, exchanges outside the international business world may be problematic. In the following extract, P18m provides an anecdote to exemplify this:

P18m: the other time I was in London and I was asking the taxi driver to tell me what we were driving by because I realised it must have been a famous building and I asked him three times and for three times he replied with the same sentence and the same speed and the same intonation and I still do not know where we were [...] he was like a broken record repeating the same things

The lack of accommodation skills is mentioned in the interviews but only when the participants refer more generally to their experience of English in their everyday life, rather than at work. When they specifically talk about work relations, they do not seem to associate native speakerness directly with lack of accommodation.

Instead, participants show affiliation with the idea of a multilingual or intercultural expert, rather than a native speaker. When they explore their multilingual practices the distinction between those who associate with the multilinguals and those who want to emulate the English native speaker is drawn attention to:

P6m: unlike other colleagues that try in any ways to show that they know the language and so they bend over backwards and speak English eh I am the opposite (.) I speak English if I have to speak English but if I can throw some Italian expressions to make my interlocutor understand that after all I am Italian (.) I had stays in London and

Paris and my Italianity has been one of my cornerstones

For this participant the Italian aspect of his business persona is an important element of his professional life. He specifically compares himself with people who do not want to show they are Italian and try to 'bend over backwards' to speak what he means to be native-like English. He differentiates himself by the multilingual practice of 'throw[ing in] some Italian expressions', which in his international context is a way of standing out, not specifically as an Italian, but as a business professional. Various studies also confirm the reliance on local languages to stress belonging, to show strong rapport management and solidarity with the other employees (Louhiala-Salminen, Charles and Kankaanranta 2005). This does not mean to say that identity and culture are concepts that can only be related with the use of local languages (rather than English for instance), but that practices of language mixing are used effectively for professional work and construction of professional identity. It is not a matter of English in opposition to other languages, but of English and multilingualism as one thing, i.e. BELF.

4. Conclusion

The focus of this paper has seen on how international business people orient towards BELF communication, but it would be interesting to explore how their attitudes and orientations can influence or affect their communicative practices. For this we need more research that combines corpus data with qualitative data on attitudinal orientations. In fact, while corpus findings alone do not tell us about the attitudes of speakers, their construction of identity, power relations and ideological influences, they can give us a glimpse of BELF users accommodation strategies in action, so to speak. So qualitative work (especially in CoPs) on how participants orient to communication in conjunction with corpus results can shed light on how orientations can alter the way they communicate in ELF situations, in other words how orientations can affect accommodation strategies.

In this study, BELF professionals seem to be aware of the importance of being multilingual rather than native speakers of English, especially in international business communication, where intercultural accommodation and multilingual sensitivity are more valued than native speakerness. Apart from these there are other important aspects that are constantly constructed and replicated to contextualize or shape communication. These are the discourses, ideologies and power circulating in the wider

institution and in the participants' larger context. In that sense, the participants I interviewed are not only members of a specific CoP, but also part of a bigger institution where they share other practices and discourses with other communities both within and outside of their own business. These discourses are expressed and generally reproduced at different levels and in various CoPs to which employees have access. They can be, for instance, the discourses that are constructed in their relation with the headquarters, which hold the decision power of the company and work mainly in French, or the gatekeeping practices at MNC level and the specific level of the international team, among others.

ELF studies have sometimes excessively emphasised the native/non-native dichotomy in relation to discussions of the 'ELF user'. In fact, while 'non-nativeness' as a concept has been highlighted as something BELF users share (at least for some, but not necessarily for all, as ELF users can be native speakers too), there are two other aspects that are more important to their CoP: knowledge of the business practice and co-construction of their shared repertoire. And in terms of the second, more linguistic, aspect of the repertoire, what seems particularly important to BELF users is the intercultural sensitivity of the business interlocutors. Being a member of a BELF community of practice, therefore, is not a matter of nativeness, but fore and foremost a question of knowledge of the business practice and understanding of the intercultural aspects of business communication. For my participants, it is not about sounding as native-like as possible, which for some is actually considered counterproductive, but about managing differences, accommodating to difference and being aware of intercultural issues. This means being able to accommodate to different ways of using English and to multilingual aspects of BELF communication, or, in their own words, being able to 'take the risk and make the effort'.

¹ All the quotes from the interviews are translations from Italian. The underlined parts are the specific sections of text on which the main analysis is focused.

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