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*Negotiating Interpersonal Relationships in English  
as a Lingua Franca (ELF) Interactions*

ABSTRACT:

In the discourse of English as a lingua franca (ELF), interactants will tend to bring with them the linguistic and cultural conventions they associate with communication in their own communities. These conventions are likely to differ in certain respects. When different sets of usage conventions come into contact and into conflict with each other, problems arise. The question then arises of how people position themselves and negotiate interpersonal relationships in ELF interactions when they do not share common linguacultural assumptions and practices. This paper reports on the first stage of an exploration of this issue. It considers how far the various perspectives on pragmatic interaction that are offered by three different approaches [namely the Co-operative Principle (Grice, 1975 [1989]), the Politeness Theory (Brown and Levinson, 1978 [1987]) and the Accommodation Theory (Giles and Coupland, 1991)] might provide an appropriate framework for the description of positioning in ELF interactions, by relating the concepts and findings of this literature to a sample of ELF data from the Vienna-Oxford International Corpus of English (VOICE).

*Introduction*

This study considers how far the various perspectives on pragmatic interaction that are offered by three different approaches, namely the Co-operative Principle (Grice, 1975 [1989]), the Politeness Theory (Brown and Levinson, 1978 [1987]) and the Accommodation Theory (Giles and Coupland, 1991)] might provide an appropriate framework for the description of positioning in English as a lingua franca (ELF) interactions, by relating the concepts and findings of this literature to samples of ELF data from the Vienna-Oxford International Corpus of English (VOICE).

In the discourse of ELF, interactants will tend to bring with them the linguistic and cultural conventions they associate with communication in their own communities. These conventions are likely to differ in certain

respects. When different sets of usage conventions come into contact and into conflict with each other, problems arise. The question then is: how do people position themselves and negotiate interpersonal relationships in ELF interactions when they do not share common linguacultural assumptions and practices?

ELF is a naturally occurring language, and users of ELF are interacting as all people do, in general. How, then, can we look at the data, and in some sense, assign and/or relate certain goings on in these data to implicature, face saving and accommodation in order to create an effect? How far can these theoretical concepts that are common in the general literature be used to explain what is going on in ELF interactions?

### *1. Remarks on positioning in general literature*

Many ideas have been put forward on how the people who share the same lingua-culture manage their interactions, from the Co-operative Principle to the Accommodation Theory. In this Section, some of the concepts in the Co-operative Principle (Grice, 1975 [1989]), the Politeness Theory (Brown and Levinson, 1978 [1987]) and the Accommodation Theory (Giles and Coupland, 1991) will be reviewed. Then an example from the ELF data will be examined from the perspective of these approaches in Section 3.

The current Section does not aim to give a detailed account of the three approaches, rather it elaborates on only some of the concepts that could provide insights into understanding certain occurrences in the ELF data that will be looked at more closely in Section 3.

#### *1.1 Co-operative Principle*

As Widdowson (2012: 12) discusses, interpersonal positioning occurs in all discourse with each participant trying to have an effect on the other. Some positional convergence has to take place in order to maintain any communication. Communication depends on co-operation. This is what urges Grice to formulate the Co-operative Principle, «a rough general principle which participants will be expected (*ceteris paribus*) to observe» (Grice, 1975 [1989]: 26). The Co-operative Principle has four maxims, namely Quantity, Quality, Relation and Manner (Grice, 1975 [1989]: 28).

One of the ways a participant in a conversation may fail to fulfill a maxim is when a participant blatantly fails to actualize the requirements of

a maxim; in other words, he flouts a maxim. This situation characteristically leads to a conversational implicature (Grice, 1975 [1989]: 30). Irony is one of the conversational implicatures. The following is an example of irony:

«(...) X, with whom A has been on close terms until now, has betrayed a secret of A's to a business rival. A and his audience both know this. A says X is a *fine friend*. (Gloss: It is perfectly obvious to A and his audience that what A has said or has made as if to say is something he does not believe, and the audience knows that A knows that this is obvious to the audience. So, unless A's utterance is entirely pointless, A must be trying to get across some other proposition than the one he purports to be putting forward. This must be some obviously related proposition; the most obviously related proposition is the contradictory of the one he purports to be putting forward)». (Grice, 1975 [1989]: 34)

### 1.2 Politeness Theory

Whether the speaker ensures no offense by respecting the hearer's self esteem, or seeks to undermine the hearer's self-esteem, the speaker does so in order to promote the speaker's territorial intentions or make the hearer susceptible to co-operation (Widdowson, 2012: 15). «Politeness, positive or negative, is a positioning tactic, a means to an end. To put the point epigrammatically: people save face to make space» (Widdowson, 2012: 15).

«Utterances which have the effect of intruding into the addressee's life space, the psychic territory he claims as his own and in which he finds his individual security, are 'face-threatening acts', and it is generally in the interests of both interlocutors that they should be mitigated in some way». (Widdowson, 1983: 78)

One of the possible strategies which Brown and Levinson propose for doing face-threatening acts is positive politeness. Positive politeness is oriented toward the hearer's positive face and positive self- image that the hearer wants for himself. Positive politeness shows that the speaker considers the hearer to be the same as the speaker, as someone who belongs to the same group (Brown and Levinson, 1978 [1987]: 70).

A positive politeness strategy is using in-group identity markers. By using that strategy, the speaker «can implicitly claim the common ground with the hearer [sic] that is carried by that definition of the group» (Brown and Levinson, 1978 [1987]: 107). 'Use in-group identity markers' includes 'in-group usages of language or dialect'.

«Use of in-group language or dialect: The phenomenon of *code-switching* involves any switch from one language or dialect to another in communities where the linguistic repertoire includes two or more such codes. In some cases, situations of *diglossia* (Ferguson 1964), the switch is between two varieties or dialects of a language, one of which is considered 'high' and prestigious, the other 'low' and domestic». (Brown and Levinson, 1978 [1987]: 110)

Another positive politeness strategy is 'conveying X is admirable, interesting'. This strategy includes noticing the hearer's interests, wants, needs and goods (Brown and Levinson, 1978 [1987]: 102). Yet, another positive politeness strategy is claiming common ground with the hearer. This strategy includes the use of 'you know'. Its usage claims the hearer's knowledge of that kind of situation in general (Brown and Levinson, 1978 [1987]: 120).

### *1.3 Accommodation Theory*

One interesting common area of interest in the Accommodation Theory is Brown and Levinson's (1987) specification of «positive politeness» strategies, construed as diverse moves to claim common ground with an interlocutor, and portraying interactants as cooperators generally fulfilling interlocutors' wants. Although these authors discuss such strategies exclusively in terms of moves made to redress face threats, their strategic currency is presumably broader, fulfilling face promotion and maintenance goals (Penman, 1990). They would appear to fall well in the context of traditionally invoked accommodative motives to gain approval and increase communication efficiency (Giles, Coupland and Coupland, 1991: 51).

The basic concepts of the Accommodation Theory are 'convergence' and 'divergence'. Convergence is described

«as a strategy whereby individuals adapt to each other's communicative behaviours in terms of a wide range of linguistic/ prosodic/ non-vocal features including speech rate, pausal phenomena and utterance length, phonological variants, smiling, gaze and so on». (Giles and Coupland, 1991: 63)

Divergence is the term used «to refer to the way in which speakers accentuate speech and non-verbal differences between themselves and others» (Giles and Coupland, 1991: 65).

Both convergence and divergence could be either 'upward' or 'downward'. Upward refers to a shift towards a prestigious variety; e.g. accent,

while downward suggests a shift away from it. An example of upward convergence could be adopting the high-prestige dialect of an interviewer, and that of downward convergence could be shifting to street language in certain minority communities (Giles and Coupland, 1991: 67).

«Relatedly, divergence of a sort may occur not only by simple dissociation away from the interlocutor towards an opposing reference group, but by sociolinguistically expressing greater identification with that other's reference group than the other is able to display. For example, when talking to an old school friend who is using a lower-prestige code than you and perhaps disdainful of your 'superior' manner, you might adopt an even more basilectal code to show your greater identification with local values. These strategies can be termed upward and downward cross-over divergence respectively, though they are, of course, achieved by initial (and often substantial) convergence». (Giles and Coupland, 1991: 68-69)

## *2. ELF data*

A sample of spoken ELF data (ID number EDcon496) was taken from VOICE. Its written text and 32-minute audio recording is available in VOICE. A part of this ELF data is closely looked at in Section 3.4., and the written text of the part under discussion is shown in Section 3.3.

### *2.1 Description of the ELF data*

This is a conversation that takes place in a student booth at a university library in Holland. Speaker 1 (S1), S2 and S3 get together to prepare a Power Point presentation for a class the next day <<http://voice.univie.ac.at>>.

### *2.2 Speaker information*

The information related to the speaker's ID number in the conversation, age, first-language (L1), role in the conversation, occupation is illustrated in [Table 1](#).

Table 1 – Speaker information <<http://voice.univie.ac.at>>

| ID | Sex    | Age   | L1             | Role            | Occupation            |
|----|--------|-------|----------------|-----------------|-----------------------|
| S1 | male   | 25-34 | spa-VE         | participant     | business student      |
| S2 | female | 25-34 | eng-GY, dut-NL | participant     | business student      |
| S3 | male   | 25-34 | ind-ID         | participant     | business student      |
| S4 | female | 25-34 | ger-AT         | researcher      | linguistic researcher |
| S5 | female | 17-24 | ita-IT         | non-participant | business student      |

2.3 ELF data script (EDcon496, <<http://voice.univie.ac.at>>)

|     |     |                                                                                                                                             |
|-----|-----|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 585 | S1: | = <soft> paper cut </soft> (.)                                                                                                              |
| 586 | S2: | @ (.)                                                                                                                                       |
| 587 | S3: | <soft><reading> [first name2] [last name2] (.) <un> xx </un> oxford <4><un> xxx </un></4></reading></soft>{S3 continues to read to himself} |
| 588 | S2: | <4> you want </4> my cut? (1) your paper cutter is better than mine you know (3) i could bring a plate and chop your finger                 |
| 589 | S1: | oh you're so: sweet you know                                                                                                                |
| 590 | S2: | @@@                                                                                                                                         |
| 591 | S1: | <imitating> bring a plate and chop me finger you (.) you PUssy hole huh? (.) you PUssy HOLE you (rasta) <un> x </un></imitating>            |
| 592 | S2: | @ @ (.) {S2 hits table} @@                                                                                                                  |
| 593 | S1: | i used to live with a jamaican in the states.                                                                                               |
| 594 | S2: | hh bo:y yeah <5> but they </5> speak erm (.)                                                                                                |
| 595 | S1: | <5> you you </5>                                                                                                                            |
| 596 | S2: | you have like <pvc> baji </pvc> <pvc> baji </pvc> english that's ba<6>jan </6> for the CLAasy caribbean <7> bajan </7> the bahamas and (.)  |
| 597 | S1: | <6> yeah </6>                                                                                                                               |
| 598 | S1: | <7> okay </7>                                                                                                                               |
| 599 | S2: | then you have erm (.) the french accent for saint saint lucia saint <1> kits </1> and so                                                    |
| 600 | S1: | <1> yeah </1>                                                                                                                               |
| 601 | S1: | yeah                                                                                                                                        |
| 602 | S2: | cos they live (.) close to martinique <2> and </2> guadeloupe                                                                               |
| 603 | S1: | <2> yeah </2>                                                                                                                               |
| 604 | S1: | yeah? (.)                                                                                                                                   |
| 605 | S2: | and then you have like the raw english from jamaica?                                                                                        |
| 606 | S3: | @@ =                                                                                                                                        |
| 607 | S1: | = now that's what he spoke <imitating> man (you) PUssy hole man you've </imitating> (.)                                                     |
| 608 | S3: | <soft> @ </soft>                                                                                                                            |
| 609 | S2: | they can't say <spel> h </spel><3> and they can't say </3> erm (.)                                                                          |

|     |                                                                                           |
|-----|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 610 | S1: <imitating><3><fast> you call me (a) </fast></3></imitating>                          |
| 611 | S1: <imitating><fast> you call me you call me you call me (a) </fast></imitating> (1)     |
| 612 | S2: and then you have like trinidad and (.) and guyana (1) they have like indian accents? |
| 613 | S1: and you're from? (.)                                                                  |
| 614 | S2: guyana and barbados and born in suriname sweetie                                      |
| 615 | S1: oh you're born in su- so see that's why i'm so confused about you.                    |
| 616 | S3: @@ (.)                                                                                |
| 617 | S2: yes everybody is. (1)                                                                 |
| 618 | S1: so but where (.) <8> where does </8> your family live right now (.)                   |
| 619 | S3: <8><yawns></8>                                                                        |
| 620 | S2: in suriname and guyana? (.)                                                           |
| 621 | S1: where does your mom live (.)                                                          |
| 622 | S2: in suriname and guyana? (1)                                                           |
| 623 | S1: she lives what on the border of both? (.)                                             |
| 624 | S2: no: cos we <4> have a house in each <@> country?</@></4>                              |

## 2.4 Findings

It is possible to analyze the ELF data, the script of which is shown in Section 3.3. from the point of view of the concepts discussed in the Co-operative Principle, the Politeness Theory and the Accommodation Theory.

Brown and Levinson would say that S1 is being polite by saying «oh you're so: sweet» (EDcon496: 589) since S1 conveys S2 is admirable and by adding «you know» (EDcon496: 589) as this creates a common ground between the speaker and the hearer. Both of them are positive politeness strategies according to Brown and Levinson (1978 [1987]: 102 and 1978 [1987]: 120 respectively). In addition, S1 uses another positive politeness strategy which is *in-group usages of language or dialect*. In this strategy, there is a code-switching «between two varieties or dialects of a language, one of which is considered 'high' and prestigious, the other 'low' and domestic» (Brown and Levinson, 1978 [1987]: 110). Apparently, S1 switches from Standard English considered as a high and prestigious variety to a variety of English which is used in the Caribbean and considered as low and domestic, in order to indicate in-group membership with S2 who is from the Caribbean. However, he exaggerates this by saying «(...) you PUssy hole huh? (.) you PUssy HOLE you (rasta)» (EDcon496: 591) which could be interpreted as very offensive in normal circumstances. It is the element of exaggeration which distinguishes the positive-politeness redress from normal everyday intimate language behavior (Brown and Levinson, 1978 [1987]: 101). Right after S1 says these words, S1 adds that «i used to live with a jamaican in the states» (EDcon496: 593). This



and his accent makes it clear that S1 has just imitated his Jamaican roommate in the States by uttering these words which would be interpreted as offensive and would even provoke a fight in Standard English, in order to communicate to S2 that he wants S2's positive face to be satisfied. S2 acknowledges this intent of S1's, welcomes it by laughing and happily starting to comment on S1's accent, rather than expressing that she was offended or starting a fight.

At the same time S1 is not conforming to the cooperative maxim as he is being ironical by telling S2 «oh you're so: sweet you know», and «<imitating> bring a plate and chop me finger you (.) you PUssy hole huh? (.) you PUssy HOLE you (rasta)» (EDcon496: 591) , by switching to a variety of English spoken in Jamaica. The fact that Jamaica is one of the island countries in the Caribbean where S2 is from is important in understanding the real meaning of what is actually communicated.

It is perfectly obvious to S1 and his audience that what S1 has said is something he does not believe, and his audience knows that S1 knows that this is obvious to his audience. This is clear because S1 would not say «oh you're so: sweet you know» (EDcon496: 589) to S2 right after S2 tells S1 «i could bring a plate and chop your finger» (EDcon496: 588) , when the maxims of the Co-operative principle are observed. Also, in a friendly conversation between fellow students, one would not expect to hear offensive words and they are welcomed with laughter by the addressee. Based on what Grice (1975 [1989]: 34) says about irony, it is possible to say that if the S1's utterance is not entirely pointless, which does not seem to be the case, S1 must be trying to communicate some other proposition than the one he appears to be putting forward. This proposition must be a related one. What is the most related proposition is the contradictory of the one S1 appears to be putting forward. What S1 tries to communicate by telling S2 «(...) you PUssy hole huh? (.) you PUssy HOLE you (rasta)» (EDcon496: 591) must be just the reverse of what he says. In this example, S1 must be intending to communicate more than what is said, in other words, to exploit the maxim through irony, resulting in a conversational implicature, in order to create an effect. Most probably, S1 is trying to show his respect and appreciation for S2's identity and where S2 comes from.

It is also possible to parse this particular data from the perspective of accommodation. S1 says to S2 «bring a plate and chop me finger you (.) you PUssy hole huh? (.) you PUssy HOLE you (rasta)» (EDcon496: 591) by switching to a variety of English used in Jamaica. While saying this, S1 imitates his Jamaican roommate in the States, as is understood when



he says «i used to live with a jamaican in the states» (EDcon496: 593) and he also imitates this Jamaican friend when he says «now that's what he spoke man (you) PUssy hole man you've» (EDcon496: 607) and «you call me you call me you call me» (EDcon496: 611). S1 may utter these words in order to sociolinguistically express greater identification with S2's reference group than S2 is able to display. S2 comes from the Caribbean where Jamaica is located, but does not use the codes belonging to the Caribbean much. S1 moves to a variety of English used in the Caribbean considered as a lower-prestige code in order to show his identification with the code which S2 is associated with, regardless of whether S2 conforms to this code or not. It is this move to a lower-prestige code which makes it downward. Moreover, S1 adopts an even more basilectal code to show his greater identification with local values of the community which S2 belongs to, and this makes it a cross-over. Therefore, this strategy of S1 can be termed downward cross-over divergence, though it is, of course, achieved by initial (and often substantial) convergence.

### *3. Discussion*

As seen in Section 3.4, S1 is negotiating some kind of relationship with S2 in this set of ELF data (EDcon496) from VOICE. It is possible to describe the same ELF data in terms of conversational implicature through irony, or in terms of face saving through positive politeness, or in terms of accommodation through divergence. All of these can be considered to be different ways of talking about the same phenomena.

### *4. Conclusions*

In this particular ELF example (EDcon496) from VOICE with its script and audio recordings, it is seen that some of the concepts discussed in three different approaches describing positioning can be helpful in explaining how ELF speakers position themselves in ELF interactions. At this early stage of exploration of positioning in ELF interactions, the analysis of the ELF data in this study shows us that the concepts of conversational implicature through irony, face saving through positive politeness and accommodation through divergence can all be used to explain the same phenomena in the very same ELF example.

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