

English as a Lingua Franca vs. Interpreting – Perspectives of Young Conference Participants on Two Competing Means of Communication

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Abstract

The global spread of English has had far-reaching consequences for transcultural communication. The hegemony of English reflects a growing asymmetry between languages of lesser and greater diffusion and has been criticised on many occasions. English is, however, no longer exclusively owned by its native speakers, since those who use it as a lingua franca now represent the majority. The increased use of English as a lingua franca (ELF) also has implications for interpreting. 20 years ago, Seleskovitch (1996: 306) projected that the use of a single language in international settings would lead to a lower demand for conference interpreters, and a number of studies indicate that this projection is indeed becoming a reality. Another ELF-related phenomenon in the context of international conferences is the preference for English in settings where interpreting is available, and speakers can use their first language (L1). As a consequence, interpreters are confronted with a growing number of non-native speakers and their restricted power of verbal expression. This paper deals with the use of English at international events and presents a qualitative study on the preference for this language in conference settings. The study was conducted at the Model European Union (MEU) 2015 in Strasbourg, which constitutes the largest simulation of EU policy making, involving more than 100 participants and several working languages. On the one hand, the results shed light on the broad spectrum of reasons behind the preference for English when presenting a speech in front of an international audience. On the other hand, the study reveals possible advantages of using one's L1 according to young conference participants.

1. Introduction

English has become a global lingua franca and is far more frequently used as a second or third language than as a first (Seidlhofer 2011). The unique status that English enjoys today has its roots in historical developments such as the rise of

the British Empire, but also in socio-cultural trends which contributed to the language's social prestige. These factors facilitated the development of English as a global lingua franca.

The dominance of English also becomes increasingly apparent in the context of international conferences, where ELF competes directly with interpreting. The increased use of ELF in conference settings puts interpreters under pressure as they report a decrease in assignments (Chang & Wu 2014; Albl-Mikasa 2010). Also noteworthy in this context is the trend of presenting a speech in English instead of using one's L1¹, even when interpreters are available (Pöchhacker 1994; Donovan 2009).

The following study takes up these issues and focuses on the broad spectrum of reasons for preferring English to one's first language when delivering a speech at an international conference. To investigate this phenomenon, qualitative interviews were conducted at the *Model European Union 2015* in Strasbourg. The study places particular emphasis on young people's opinions on the advantages and disadvantages of using ELF or L1. The sample of MEU participants can be considered part of a population which is relevant to the phenomenon as a whole. By taking part in this event, the participants show high interest in supranational cooperation and international politics and demonstrate special awareness of multilingualism and multiculturalism.

In the first two sections, the theoretical background is introduced by first putting ELF into the context of globalisation and subsequently describing the implications of the increased use of English for conference interpreting. Following these premises, the study carried out at MEU 2015 and its results will be described in Sections 4 and 5.

2. Contextualising ELF within Globalisation

As mentioned before, English has become by far the world's most widespread lingua franca. In its basic meaning, the term "lingua franca" defines a language that is used in common by people with different native tongues (Samarin 1987: 371). In the past, *linguae francae* were mainly used in trade and among intellectuals.

ELF is, however, surpassing all of its predecessors in terms of its global range. Never before in the history of human kind has a language attained a similar number of L2 speakers (Lewis et al. 2015). What is more, it has been shown that non-native speakers of English outnumber native speakers. According to Crystal (2006), only 400 million of the 1.4 to 1.5 billion users of English are native speakers. Kachru (1985) attempted to classify speakers of English more precisely

¹ In this contribution, the term "first language" (L1) will be used instead of "mother tongue". L2 refers to "second language".

by dividing them into three circles: the 'Inner Circle', where English is used as a first language, for example the UK or USA, comprising 320-380 million speakers; the 'Outer Circle', with English as an additional language, like former British colonies such as Kenya or India, accounting for 300-500 million speakers, and the 'Expanding Circle', including all countries where English is used as a foreign language, with 500 million to 1 billion people. Despite the criticism to which this model was subjected, it still shows that native speakers of English are no longer the exclusive owners of their language, as they share it with a growing community of people who use it as a lingua franca.

The spread of English and its dominant status have been deplored on many occasions, as this development represents rising "linguistic imperialism" (Phillipson 2003: 162) endangering minority languages, which is seen as a catalyst for their extinction. Cronin (2006: 138-141) takes a similar stance by highlighting a growing asymmetry between languages of lesser and greater diffusion, representing an inequality of cultures and languages. The increasing use of ELF in international conferences can be seen as part of this development.

When attempting to define ELF, it is necessary to explore the circumstances under which English is used as a lingua franca. In this sense, a frequently cited definition of ELF is the one proposed by Seidlhofer (2011: 7), who describes ELF as "any use of English among speakers of different first languages for whom English is the communicative medium of choice, and often the only option."

It is not surprising, therefore, that ELF has become a highly important factor in international communication having a significant impact on conference interpreting, as will be discussed in the following section.

3. Implications of ELF for Conference Interpreting

ELF and conference interpreting seem to be two means to the same end, as both enable communication among individuals with different first languages. In a way, they can be seen as two competing modes of communication. As English is nowadays by far the most widely used language at international conferences (Neff 2008), it can be assumed that this must bring about substantial changes to the profession of conference interpreting. Seleskovitch made this prediction as early as 1996:

In future it can be expected that to a large degree interpreting will disappear from the international scene. With time the universal use of a single language in international conferences will make resorting to interpreters less necessary (Seleskovitch 1996: 306).

This might seem a somewhat fatalistic depiction of the interpreter's fate; however, empirical evidence shows that ELF does indeed have an impact on the demand for conference interpreters. In a study by Chang and Wu (2014), interpreters from 25 conferences in Taiwan were questioned about the effect of ELF on their profession. The results indicate that the increased use of ELF led to fewer assignments for interpreters with combinations other than English-Chinese (e.g. Japanese-Chinese, Korean-Chinese). A survey by Albl-Mikasa (2010) of 32 experienced interpreters in the German-speaking market points to the same conclusion. 81% of the interpreters claimed that ELF affected their profession, and 69% stated that the number of assignments had decreased due to monolingual communication in English. The study also points out that the number of booths - other than those for English and the local language - is being reduced.

These insights indicate that ELF competes directly with conference interpreting. This, however, is not the only ELF-related phenomenon that merits the attention of professional interpreters and researchers. It has been shown that there is a growing number of participants at international conferences who prefer English to their L1, even when interpreting from their language is provided. An early documentation of this phenomenon can be found in a case study by Pöchhacker (1994) investigating a conference comprising 104 speeches, where a considerable number of German speakers chose English for their talks. The preference for English over one's L1 also became apparent in a study by Donovan (2009), where she combined questionnaires with interviews to obtain interpreters' opinions about the effects of English on international communication settings. The results showed that conference participants with higher proficiency in English tend to prefer ELF to their L1; yet, there have only been a very limited number of investigations into speakers' motives for preferring English to their L1.

In its bi-yearly customer satisfaction survey, the *Directorate General for Interpretation of the European Commission* (DG Interpretation) collects data on the quality of interpreting in EU institutions. It also includes a question asking why delegates chose not to speak in their L1 during official sessions, providing various response options. In the 2015 questionnaire, 41% of the respondents claimed that they were "more familiar with the subject of the meeting in another language", 34% thought that the "message [is] better conveyed in a more widely spoken language", 14% were "worried that the interpretation [would] not be accurate", and 10% "did not know whether they could speak their L1"². The survey may indicate some tendencies concerning the research scope of this contribution. However, due to its quantitative design with provided response options, the study does not explore the broad spectrum of possible reasons why

² http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/scic/news/docs/css_results_css_2015_interpretation_presentation_final.pdf. (Accessed August 8th 2017).

ELF is preferred. In addition, former editions of the survey stated that a considerable number of respondents did not reply to this question³. There is no reason to believe that the response rate was significantly higher in 2015. The survey conducted by DG Interpretation therefore still leaves many questions unanswered, especially when it comes to conference participants' preference for English.

The increasing use of ELF does not only lead to a reducing demand for interpreters. The limited English proficiency of non-native speakers (NNS) is also one of the most cited sources of dissatisfaction among conference interpreters (Albl-Mikasa 2010: 134). Their struggle with NNS can be linked to the additional mental capacities that are necessary to cope with unexpected language structures. In his effort model, Gile (1995) describes how any problem during an interpreter's reception phase requires increased cognitive faculties. Challenges that interpreters face when they interpret NNS include having to "grasp foreign accents and recover unfamiliar expressions, [...] resolve unorthodox syntactic structures and compensate for the lack of pragmatic fluency" (Albl-Mikasa 2013: 192).

According to Setton (1998, 1999) interpreters usually resort to an internal "bilingual phrasebook" to deal with expressions and structures that are frequently used by speakers. These elements of speech can be described as "directly transcodable", as no elaborate process is necessary to convey them. If NNS make less use of those commonly used speech patterns, the implication is that interpreters will have to pay more attention to pragmatic cues and extratextual information in order to make sense of an utterance. The additional cognitive capacities necessary for this process can, in turn, lead to mental overload during subsequent phases, which can ultimately result in inferior quality of target speech. As a consequence, conference interpreters are more likely to feel dissatisfied when working with non-native speakers of English.

ELF as an overall phenomenon therefore poses a number of challenges for interpreters. Not only does the use of it lead to a decreasing number of assignments, but NNS English seems to be much more difficult to process because of improvised expressions that are sometimes heavily influenced by the speaker's L1 (Albl-Mikasa 2013: 206). These considerations might give the impression that ELF can be seen as a deficient medium of communication. House (2010) opposes this conception, however, and argues:

ELF is not a defective, but a fully functional means of communication, and [...] the arguments put forward against ELF come close to an appeal for an outdated prescriptive English native form.

³ 93% of the respondents did not answer this question in 2007, 92% in 2010 and 84% in 2013. (see http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/scic/docs/news_docs/2014-02-26_css_2013/scic_ccs_2013_final.pdf. Accessed August 8th 2017)

After all, ELF seems to fulfil important functions in the context of globalisation and intercultural communication. At the same time, interpreters' scepticism about the growing importance of ELF in conference settings also appears understandable, simply because of the competition between these two modes of transcultural communication. Despite this potential bias, criticism of the use of ELF by interpreters should not be ignored, as their job is to facilitate successful communication in multilingual contexts, which makes them essential stakeholders in this respect.

Describing ELF and conference interpreting as two competing modes of communication is, however, not the only way their relationship can be characterised. A study by Reithofer (2013) shows that interpreting can indeed add value to monologic NNS communication. In an experiment, she compared the level of comprehension between an audience that listened to the original speech of a heavily accented ELF speaker and an audience that listened to an interpretation of the speech into their L1. The latter scored significantly higher in a comprehension test following the talk. From these results, Reithofer (*ibid.*: 68) concludes: "For monologic communication, [...] interpreting seems to convey content more effectively."

This section has demonstrated that ELF and conference interpreting compete with one another, as they can be seen as two means to the same end. Additionally, there seems to be a growing number of NNS who prefer to address their audience in English, even if interpretation is available. The study presented in the following section aims to shed light on this issue.

4. Research Questions and Methodology

This study investigates the motives of conference participants for choosing English over their first language and whether they identify advantages in using their L1. The study thus aimed to answer the following research questions:

- 1) What are the reasons that participants at international conferences deliver their talks in English when interpreting from their L1 is available?
- 2) What are the potential benefits of using one's L1 and being interpreted as opposed to ELF, according to conference participants?

In order to address these research questions as comprehensively as possible, this study adopts a qualitative, ethnographic approach which is suggested in *Interpreting Studies* by Hale and Napier (2014: 83-116). In order to obtain empirical data to explore a specific social phenomenon, Bendazzoli (2016: 5) claims that it is essential to "establish some kind of rapport with the members of the community to be analysed".

In order to investigate the reasons why conference participants prefer

English over their first language, it was necessary to have access to an international conference where speakers could choose between using their own L1 and English. This required that a considerable proportion of participants' first languages be covered by the interpreting service. At the same time, it was crucial to have unlimited access to the conference and to be able to approach as many participants as possible whose insights could be relevant for the study.

The *Model European Union (MEU) 2015* met the above-mentioned requirements. It is an annual event that takes place at the European Parliament in Strasbourg, where students from all over Europe gather to simulate the legislation process of the European Union. Observations prior to data collection revealed that despite the MEU being a conference simulation, it can still be considered representative of a broad range of other international and multilingual events. In the 2015 edition of MEU, 150 participants met between April 11th and 18th, taking on different roles such as Members of the European Parliament, ministers, journalists, lobbyists and interpreters. The participants represented 34 nationalities, and their age ranged between 19 and 27. The interpreting team covered 9 languages: German, French, Spanish, Polish, Italian, Czech, Slovak and Hungarian. Interpreting into English was always offered via a relay from the respective booths. The interviewees were selected following observations of various debating sessions. Only speakers who had rejected the option of using their L1 were eligible to be interviewed. This required that the respective language had to be offered by the interpreting team.

In total, 20 interviews were conducted with participants from 8 different countries: Germany (7), Italy (5), Spain (2) Poland (2), Austria (1), Czech Republic (1), Slovakia and (1) Hungary (1). The interviews were planned and analysed according to the methodology proposed by Gläser and Laudel (2010). Their method allows researchers to reconstruct social processes that are relevant to the research questions. Gläser and Laudel suggest expert interviews as a method for obtaining particular knowledge from individuals who can give insights into a specific social conduct or phenomenon. They recommend development of an interview guideline based on the research questions and on a model of hypothetical factors that are likely to have an influence on the object to be investigated. The interviews were subsequently analysed according to Gläser and Laudel's approach to qualitative content analysis. In a systematic reading process, thematic codes – ideas or concepts – are generated inductively from raw data. The coding system is then used to structure the data, identify thematic patterns and, ultimately, to apply a higher level of abstraction to the material.

5. Results and Discussion

Following the data analysis, the results were grouped and summarised according to the two research questions. In addition to the two core topics, the

data also permitted investigation of the speakers' perceived ability to express themselves in English.

5.1 Reasons why English was preferred over L1

Following the data analysis, a broad spectrum of potential motives was identified for preferring English to present one's speech. One of the key motivations for choosing English over one's L1 was to directly address the audience without involving a third party. Interviewees claimed that they prefer to be in control of how their utterances reach their listeners. One of the participants expressed this motive in the following way:

I find it strange that my statement doesn't reach the audience exactly the way I expressed it. It always goes through the interpreters. I'm still convinced that they are translating everything correctly, no doubt about that, but the communication is not as direct. (Interviewee B)⁴

What also plays a role in this context is the perceived proneness to errors in interpretation, as well as the subjective feeling that parts of the information can get lost along the way. The risk and the actual occurrence of technical malfunctions also motivated many speakers to choose English and address their audience without the need for interpretation. These remarks are related to the speakers' desire to have control over their statements and be independent of the interpreters. Interviewee N, for instance, used English during her speeches to make sure "that everyone understands me, even if something goes wrong with the interpretation".

Another key reason to choose English was the familiarity with subject-specific terminology in English. This was largely because the participants had mainly dealt with the topics to be discussed at MEU 2015 in English before the conference. One of the speakers made the following comment concerning this issue:

In my experience, it's much easier to use English, because I've never read the legislative proposals in German. I wouldn't even know how to render all of these technical expressions in German. How would I even express that? I would probably have more problems using German in the Parliament than I would have using English. (Interviewee G).⁵

⁴ Me parece extraño que mi declaración nunca sea recibida por el público del mismo modo en el que yo la expreso. Siempre pasa por los intérpretes. Aún estoy convencida que ellos la traducen correctamente, de eso no hay duda, pero la comunicación no es tan directa. (Translated by the author)

⁵ Also aus meiner eigenen Erfahrung würde ich sagen, es ist für mich einfacher Englisch

A number of speakers were also under the impression that using one's L1 and relying on interpretation would make the whole communication process unnecessarily complicated. Another considerable number of participants perceived interpreting as an interfering factor that could potentially slow down the whole conference and thereby disrupt the dynamics of the discourse; as Interviewee I pointed out: "It's just easier in English", she further notes: "Everything takes longer with the interpreters involved, and you lose track of the discussion more easily"⁶.

The consistent use of a single language like English, on the other hand, was appreciated by many speakers as a contribution towards smooth functioning of the debate since "the discussion keeps flowing", as Interviewee C observed. She further reported: "Also, you can jump in much easier if you have a quick question". Another factor that seemed to play an important role in choosing English was the social prestige that is attributed to this language:

I have to admit that the language choice at these kinds of events is also a question of status. You get the impression that many speakers want to show the others how good their English is when they take the floor (Interviewee M).

Statements like this one suggest that speakers were under the impression that using English for their addresses would make them appear more confident and more competent. A side effect of using English, therefore, seems to be impressing others with one's language skills. In that context, a high level of English is associated with persuasiveness and self-esteem.

In addition to these factors, a number of other reasons were mentioned by the interviewees but were not given as much emphasis, i.e., relay interpreting was considered problematic, terminological consistency could be ensured through the use of a single language, focus should be on the speakers and not the interpreters, listeners requested that the speaker use English, MEU was seen as a training platform to practice one's rhetorical skills in English, and it is customary to talk in English at international conferences.

It should be noted that interviewees claimed that there was no single motive why they chose English for their speech, but rather a joint set of reasons. Many of them admitted that they were not entirely aware of their exact motivation to use English at the time of their speech but that they had only realised the reasons for their choice during the interview.

zu verwenden, weil ich hab' die Gesetzestexte auf Deutsch nie gelesen, ich wüsste jetzt auch nicht, wie ich diesen technischen Text jetzt auf Deutsch umwandeln würde. Wie würde ich das ausdrücken? Ich hätte wahrscheinlich mehr Probleme mich auf Deutsch im Parlament auszudrücken als auf Englisch. (Translated by the author)

⁶ Auf Englisch ist es einfach einfacher. Mit den Dolmetschern dauert alles viel länger und man verliert in der Diskussion leichter den Faden. (Translated by the author).

5.2 Potential benefits of using one's L1

As well as reflecting on their reasons to use English instead of their first language, the interviewees still identified advantages of using their L1 and being interpreted. The speakers particularly pointed out that people naturally have much better command of their first than their second or third language. These higher linguistic capacities lead to a greater power of verbal expression, which increases one's rhetorical capabilities. By using their L1, speakers can focus fully on their argument, without struggling to formulate a convincing sentence in a foreign language. This, again, makes it possible to focus one's full attention on the subject being discussed without having to worry about foreign language expressions. This seems all the more important at debates with a considerable amount of technical terminology involved:

If think it's great if you can use your own language, especially if the debate becomes rather technical. After all, my Czech is much better than my English and this way I can pay attention to the debate rather than thinking about how I'm going to string my next sentence together (Interviewee P).

Furthermore, the speakers point out that offering interpretation at an international conference makes it much more inclusive in terms of giving everyone the opportunity to address the audience regardless of their English skills. Making interpretation available at a conference can thus be seen as an act of democratisation. For Interviewee D it was a matter of levelling the linguistic playing field for all participants: "Interpreting, in a way, helps us to do our job under the same conditions"⁷.

Speakers claimed that an "English-only policy" would prevent many participants from taking the floor, which could result in many good points not even being raised. One interviewee made the following statement in this context:

If no interpreters are present at a conference, people could get very shy because in many cases they know that their English is not at a good level. Ultimately, they would probably not take the floor as frequently as they normally would, if they could use their mother tongue (Interviewee H).

Some interviewees were under the impression that speakers with a lower level of English could be taken less seriously by the audience, as their speeches tend to be less coherent and convincing. This perception reveals that the power

⁷ Para mí realmente se trata de darle a todos las mismas oportunidades. De alguna forma la interpretación nos ofrece las mismas condiciones de trabajo.

of verbal expression plays a significant role in this context. There is a risk that the point a speaker wishes to make could lose a part of its significance. As a result, the general expectation to use English for a speech had a negative connotation for many speakers. In contrast, the multilingual and multicultural character that was created through offering interpretation added value to the conference. In addition, some participants claimed that interpreters could potentially identify errors in a speech as Interviewee P pointed out: “Another advantage of working with interpreters is that they can correct you when you use wrong names or dates”. Generally, there was broad agreement among the interviewees that making interpretation available at a conference and giving everyone the opportunity to speak their L1 is something to be valued and a true asset at an international event.

5.3 Speakers’ power of verbal expression in English and their L1

In addition to the statements of interviewees concerning their preference for English and the potential advantages of using one’s L1, they also commented on the perceived power of verbal expression of themselves and their peers. This factor seems to be directly linked with the participants’ choice of one language or the other. In this context, there appears to be a contradiction between, on the one hand, speakers’ subjective assumptions of having a good command of English, and on the other hand, the feeling of not doing very well when presenting a speech in this language:

I feel perfectly fine when addressing the plenary in English. I think I don’t really care what language I use [...]. On the other hand, I always think that it’s a pity if for example me or other speakers are sometimes struggling to make a convincing point in English when taking the floor. (Interviewee I)

This comment indicates a contradiction between speakers’ general sense of feeling confident when delivering a speech in English and their dissatisfaction with their actual performance. A similar inconsistency was observed when speakers criticised their peers for not being able to express themselves properly in English, despite their impression that the average level of English at MEU is high. Some interview partners even suggested that a number of speakers would be reluctant to take the floor due to their level of English:

I’m really impressed with the level of English at this event. Everybody seems to be coping very well when giving their speeches in English. [...] of course, many speakers seem to be intimidated, as the level of English is quite unbalanced. Many participants have a

very confident use of English, while others seem to be afraid of taking the floor because of their language skills (Interviewee C).

This kind of report indicates that the perceived high level of English at an event does not necessarily mean that every speaker feels confident enough to address the audience in English.

6. Conclusions

The aim of this contribution was to shed light on the relationship between ELF and conference interpreting from the perspective of young conference participants. The study presented results from qualitative interviews with participants from the *Model European Union 2015* in Strasbourg.

This study focused on the reasons why MEU participants prefer English to their L1 when presenting a speech. The results support some of the findings of the survey conducted by DG Interpretation (see Chapter 3), as familiarity with the subject in English and the impression that the message is better conveyed in a more widely spoken language both seem to play a role in that respect. However, as the study presented in this paper pursued a qualitative approach, it was possible to identify a large number of additional motives to use English for one's speech, such as being independent from the interpreters and the prestige of English, as well as the perceived high practicality of using a single language in a conference setting.

Despite the advantages of using English, the interviewees still identified benefits of using one's L1, such as higher verbal flexibility and being able to better focus on the subject of the debate. However, the study as a whole demonstrates that the benefits of using one's first language are frequently sacrificed for the sake of addressing the audience in English, particularly for the reasons discussed above. This study can, therefore, be seen as a first step to higher awareness of the potential advantages and disadvantages of using ELF and interpreting in the context of international conferences.

The limitations of this study lie in the chosen sample of young conference participants and the fact that the field for data collection was a conference simulation. Future studies on the competitive relationship between ELF and interpreting should be expanded to include a sample of more experienced speakers and conference settings with a more professional focus. Furthermore, it would be desirable to include speakers who deliver speeches in their first language, in order to provide a more balanced picture of the benefits of using one's L1.

As the qualitative approach of this study required a high level of interpretation on the part of the researcher, which implies a certain level of subjectivity, future studies could adopt a quantitative survey design and an

analysis of (interpreted) speeches given by non-native speakers of English. The first approach could shed more light on the distribution of individual motives for preferring one language to another, while the latter could lead to more profound conclusions about the role played by the power of verbal expression in this context.

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