

Propos recueillis par
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Nous avons proposé à Karlfried Knapp, professeur à l'université d'Erfurt, spécialiste de linguistique appliquée, de nous faire partager sa vision des caractéristiques d'une lingua franca. Secrétaire général de l'Association Internationale de Linguistique Appliquée (AILA) de 2002 à 2008, il a publié de nombreux ouvrages, notamment dans les domaines de la communication interculturelle et de l'anglais comme lingua franca.

Du point de vue de la forme, cet entretien va donner une illustration d'une communication asymétrique en intercompréhension, puisque nous avons posé les questions en français à Karlfried Knapp, et qu'il a choisi d'y répondre en anglais.

1. CC/MS/EV - Depuis quelques années de nombreuses recherches portent sur la spécificité de l'anglais comme lingua franca (ELF). Pensez-vous que l'on puisse étendre les résultats obtenus dans ce domaine au français langue internationale? Où voyez-vous différences et parallélismes?

KK - Over the past years, there has been a vast body of research on English as a lingua franca. The main strands of this research focus on the reasons for the rise of English as today's dominant international language, the ways it is used in intercultural interactions and its formal features in contrast to native speaker varieties of English. Many of the findings of this research more or less also hold for French as a lingua franca, though there are in fact some relevant differences.

English has become the dominant medium of international communication in much the same way that other languages came into this role previously. The reasons behind this rise have been its political and military power, economic dominance, superiority in scholarship and technology, cultural attractiveness and ideological or religious leadership. For these same reasons, Latin, Arabic and Mandarin Chinese became *linguae francae* at different times of history and in different regions of the world. English, too, owes its status as an international language to these factors. It is now generally accepted that it was mainly the

geographical spread of the British Empire, which produced speakers with English as a native or a second language almost all over the world, and caused the spread of English and the rise of the USA as a global power in politics, military, economy, science and technology, popular culture and as both embodiment and propagator of Western values - a rise which took place at the same time as the international influence of Great Britain was declining.

Until the end of World War II, French competed with English as an international lingua franca at least in the Western world, in many domains of communication. French had come into this role by the same language external factors mentioned above. From the 14th century until the Franco-Prussian War (1870-1871) France expanded her territory at the expense of bordering countries such as Spain, Italy and various German-speaking areas. And during the time of colonisation by European powers, France set up colonies, mainly in Africa, America and Asia. In the course of this process, French became the leading language of diplomacy. In the colonies it became the language of administration and education, mainly for the local elites. In the early modern period, France was the dominant economic power - the largest state in Europe and due to the policy of mercantilism and manufacture the country became rather prosperous. France became an economic model and partner for trade for the rest of Europe, making it necessary to learn French. France was also a model in the domain of culture that was imitated by rulers of other European states and made them use French at their courts, as did, for example, the Prussian King Frederick the Great. Many developments in science and technology originate from French scientists and technicians, among them the founder of modern chemistry Antoine Lavoisier in the 18th century, the microbiologist Louis Pasteur in the 19th century, or the physicists Marie and Pierre Curie in the 20th - developments that were as much an incentive to learn French as was French political philosophy that prepared the way for modern democracy.

However, compared to the present role of English, there are major differences. English has become truly global, supported by at least two strong geographic areas (Britain and the USA), whereas French has spread much less widely geographically-speaking and has always kept its centre of gravity in Europe. Also, the spread of English today is driven to a large extent by the image of modernity and a western way of life that is associated with it, and not least by an Anglophone pop culture with which youngsters all over the world identify - features which serve as strong pull factors for learning English in all age ranges and across all social classes. This "being hip" - a factor prominent in the lower social strata of foreign societies in particular - did not play a significant role in the spread of French as a lingua franca, which was learned and used mainly by educated elites only, and factors like life style and pop culture do not seem to support the status of French today.

Research into how English is used as a lingua franca in authentic situations of intercultural contact has revealed that non-native users are rather tolerant of deviations from the norms of Standard English and also of vagueness, even of occasional un-interpretability of utterances made by the interlocutor. As to the formal features of English as a lingua Franca, it has been shown that regardless of

their respective first languages, users tend, for example, to simplify consonant clusters in phonology, to omit the third person singular *-s*, use or omit the article inconsistently and regularise irregular plurals. Furthermore, in the continental European context at least, they use a pseudo-anglicism like *handy* for *mobile phone* or *beamer* for *data projector* in their lexicon. However, the so called “let-it-pass-attitude” in conversations has been demonstrated to occur in non-native / non-native speaker interactions in general, and the structural features just mentioned can be traced back to strategies of simplification, overgeneralization and transfer which can be found in all situations of foreign or second language learning. It remains to be shown if what has been reported of the use and structure of English as a lingua franca so far is more than a set of fossilised learner languages shared by larger groups of users.

I do not know of similar empirical research into the structure and use of French as a lingua franca. But insofar as these features of learner language communication and these learning strategies apply to all cases of foreign or second language learning, they should also hold for French.

However, more important than the description of features like those just mentioned is, I think, the change in perception and evaluation that followed from this research. The deviations from a Standard English norm apparent in lingua franca English are no longer considered as deficient but rather as differences that result from its function as a means of communication in an intercultural context. In this context, non-native users of English meanwhile outnumber native speakers by far. This makes native speaker norms largely irrelevant - what counts is intelligibility and communicative effectiveness rather than correctness with respect to a native speaker standard. As a consequence, lingua franca English is increasingly regarded as a global language which is no longer under the control of native speakers. A language which is in fact, under nobody’s control, and suggestions are being made to use the features of lingua franca English as objectives for teaching it as an international language. Jennifer Jenkins, for example, found out that in many cases, pronunciation that deviates from native speaker English is more intelligible for non-native users of the language. This led her to suggest that in the teaching of English for international communication a set of phonemes should be taught that are indispensable for intelligibility - which she termed *Lingua Franca Core*. She further suggested to exclude those phonemes that whilst hard to learn are not in fact essential for being able to be understood. So the dental fricatives corresponding to the grapheme « th » could be replaced, for example, by /d/ or /s/.

This is a very pragmatic stance. But although traditionalists and language purists like the well known Anglicist and representative of the *League of English*, Sir Randolph Quirk, warn against this decay of Standard English and the loss of its significance for language teaching, the English language industry - not least to secure their share in a potentially emerging market - is jumping on the bandwagon, as it were, and supports projects that aim at a description of lingua franca English and the development of the respective teaching materials. This, I think, marks another difference between English and French as international *linguae francae*. Given the importance the purity of the French

language has for the official national identity of France and for French intellectuals, it seems hardly conceivable that initiatives to propagate a non-standard variety of this language as acceptable and as a standard for teaching will be made, let alone be successful.

2. CC/MS/EV - Le Groupe des Intellectuels pour le Dialogue Interculturel (Maalouf 2008, 16f.) dans son rapport « Un défi salutaire : Comment la multiplicité des langues pourrait consolider l'Europe » semble présenter une vision plutôt négative d'une langue de communication internationale, qui serait « confinée à un rôle d'instrument de communication globale, rôle flatteur mais réducteur, et potentiellement appauvrissant. » (...) « Il nous semble, en effet, que cette qualité (des rapports entre Européens, individus et peuples) serait sensiblement rehaussée si chacun pouvait s'exprimer dans une langue parfaitement maîtrisée, la sienne ou celle du partenaire, plutôt que par le biais d'une langue tierce maniée de façon approximative comme cela arrive si souvent de nos jours.» Partagez-vous cette conception assez pessimiste ?

KK - I do not share this view, as it makes several assumptions that are unfounded from a linguistic perspective. This view can be found frequently with people who due to their concern about the cultural capital that languages represent, neglect the functions that languages are used for. Unintentionally, statements like this one often create the impression of being ideologically biased or simply naïve.

Of course, no one will deny that it would be positive if all Europeans had native-like competence also in other languages than their respective mother tongues and that communication and relationship-building would be facilitated greatly if in a situation of intercultural contact, everyone could use a language at a level of perfect command, whether this be his or her own mother tongue or that of the respective interlocutor. This does not hold only for contacts across Europe, but is true worldwide.

However, perfect command of the language of communication is too high a demand to be realistic already for the European situation, and this is even the case if you restrict yourself to the European Union. This union is a region with 27 member states and 23 official languages, a region where communication cuts across many linguistic and geographical borders. For example, a Dutchman might find it necessary to talk on one day with a German, on another with a Frenchman, then with a Lithuanian, Spaniard or Greek. This is not at all exceptional today in business, academia or tourism. But for most Europeans it is not only improbable but simply impossible to achieve perfect command in all the mother tongues of the interlocutors they get in to contact with, even if only within the EU. There is a vast diversity of mother tongues people bring into everyday intra-European communication situations. Learning languages requires time, effort and resources, and simply for such practical reasons the idea of everyone being able to converse at native speaker-level in the home languages of their interaction partners has to remain an idealistic dream. Therefore, the use of an international language of communication, as for example English as a lingua franca, is not an obstacle, but rather a precondition for pan-European communication and cooperation.

This should, of course, not be taken to mean that people should not strive to learn as many languages as possible up to the highest level of competence. However, one should keep the functions in mind for which we learn foreign languages. With respect to the functions of English as an international language, the late German Applied Linguist Werner Hüllen coined the terms “language of communication” and “language of identification”. A “language of communication” is used for practical communicative purposes, and due to its primarily functional nature, correctness or particular stylistic and cultural features associated with the speech community from which this language originates are less important. On the other hand, “language of identification” means a language which is learned in order to be integrated into and to identify with the respective speech community. Quite obviously, the authors of this quote focus on the latter, although in most instances contacts among Europeans follow more practical goals. Learning a language for identification, of course, requires striving for native speaker competence.

However, aiming at the highest level of competence will always be restricted to one foreign language, at best to very few, and will not render the use of a lingua franca unnecessary. There can be a positive contribution from perfect command of the interlocutors’ languages to the relationships between individuals, to be sure, but this will be on the interpersonal level in the first place, and only indirectly affect the relationships between the respective peoples. In its consequence, the demand for native speaker competence implies a restriction of an individual’s ability to communicate and cooperate with speakers from just one or two other languages - a perspective that is not really compatible with the idea of a unified Europe or at least with Europe’s multifarious patterns of communication.

Also, in this quote the very notion of a mother tongue and the assumption that perfect mastery of a language is decisive for the quality of the relationships among Europeans are highly debatable. What is regarded as a mother tongue? I just mentioned that Europe is a region with 27 states and 23 national languages. But within these 27 states, there are, according to a recently updated website of European Commissioner for Multilingualism, at least 142 languages that count in these states as autochthonous or regional minority languages - languages which, trivially, also have native speakers, as have the languages of the many immigrant minorities in Europe. Take France, for example, where we have, amongst others, speakers of Basque, Breton, Catalan, Corsican and the Germanic dialects of Alsace and Moselle, alongside with speakers of African and Asian immigrant languages. I doubt that this is the kind of linguistic diversity that according to *Le Groupe des Intellectuels* should strengthen Europe and I doubt that in their report they have in mind communication between French speaking inhabitants of Paris and Breton speaking people from Plouhinec. Quite obviously, they are referring to international, pan-European communication, but not, say, between Bretons and Frisians using their respective native languages. Rather, it seems that the authors of this quote are talking about people of their own kind - that is about educated elites using the respective national standard language. But this would mirror the 19th century ideology of the monolingual nation state which no longer fits to reality in present day Europe.

This does have consequences. It is a sociolinguistic truism that apart from educated elites most speakers of a language do not have the full command of its standard variety. This does not only concern all levels of linguistic description, from pronunciation to pragmatic aspects of use, but this also the kind and amount of cultural background knowledge on which the encoding and interpretation of what is meant is based. A journalist of *Le Figaro* will, for example, have a wider range of vocabulary and a more comprehensive understanding of the cultural associations implied in a proverb than the worker stowing boxes at Rungis, although both are native speakers of French. If being a native speaker does not automatically imply “perfect mastery of a language” what then can be a suitable measure for this? “Perfect competence” is not attained by the vast majority of native speakers of any language and even less so by foreign language learners.

Luckily, contact among Europeans is not restricted to educated elites only, and obviously such contacts seem to work well even below the level of perfection, however defined. In fact, as objectives for foreign language learning, the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) takes less than perfect levels of competence into account. A speaker at level “A2” of the CEFR, for example, though sufficiently successful in many communication situations, certainly still exhibits many deficits compared to a full-fledged competence and at best approximates such a competence. But many foreign language learners do not have the time, resources and - given the variety in command of their mother tongue - the capabilities to achieve more in a second or foreign language. If less than perfect language competence is normal even in cases when someone learns the language of his or her prospective interlocutor, what then is the problem if a third language or lingua franca is mastered only on such a level?

In my view, it would rather be a cause for pessimism if mutual understanding among Europeans required perfect command of the language of the respective interlocutor.

3. CC/MS/EV - Jusqu'à quel point l'usage fonctionnel d'une langue dans un contexte multilatéral et extraterritorial limite-t-il la richesse des aspects culturels véhiculés par toute langue ? Ou, en d'autres termes, comment va s'exprimer, selon vous, la complexité des phénomènes interculturels, lorsqu'on se sert d'une lingua franca qui n'est la L1 d'aucun des interlocuteurs ?

KK - It is true: a merely functional use of a lingua franca blanks out most of the cultural aspects that are normally transported with this language, for example culture specific connotations, implicit references to socio-historical background knowledge, subtle social distinctions and evaluations, and so on. As most situations of lingua franca use are basically transactional, such as e.g. in tourism, business or science, one might be inclined to neglect this loss. For booking a hotel, agreeing on a price in a business negotiation or discussing a paper on phonology at an international linguistics conference, say, in French as a lingua franca, the cultural implications that are normally implied in this language are in fact largely irrelevant. But to dismiss for such reasons the

cultural aspects altogether would be rather premature, as even transactional communication in most cases at the same time is interpersonal: What someone says and how does not only convey content-related “propositional meaning” but at the same time also “social meaning”. This means, it is interpreted and evaluated on the level of interpersonal relations and on the level of social impressions - on the basis of their interlocutor’s words and behaviour, people judge whether this person is more or less cooperative, friendly, reliable, competent etc., or not.

Such interpretations and judgements are based on cultural knowledge participants bring into an interaction about what in the respective situation is self-evident, normal and can be taken for granted. In intra-cultural communication, participants can presuppose that this knowledge is shared by co-participants and can expect that everyone speaks and acts according to the normal expectations. If, however, a participant deviates from such expectations, this is significant, suggests an intention, and negative interpretations and evaluations arise.

In intercultural communication, participants typically do not share this kind knowledge. They have different standards of acting and interpreting which increases the risk of misunderstandings on the levels of both propositional and social meaning.

Such risks are not only due to a mismatch of the knowledge related to socio-historical givens and connotations or implied social distinctions that for native speakers are inherent in their language. They emerge already from the more profane linguistic means and the ways they are used.

For example, languages differ with respect to the range of meaning of words that are used as translation equivalents - a *civil servant* in Great Britain is not totally equivalent to a *Beamter* in the German speaking world. Speech acts vary across culture according to their occurrence and to the preferred forms by which they are realised. In the Japan, the expected reaction to a favour is that the recipient utters an apology - for the trouble he or she has caused to the other person - rather than the speech act of thanking that is normal in Western cultures. Unmarked everyday requests are conventionally expressed by imperative sentences in German, with modal particles toning down the commanding tone. In English, in this case an interrogative sentence of the *Can you ... / Could you ...* type is the normal choice - a cross-cultural difference in the directness of expressing the command which is frequently interpreted as a difference in politeness. Cultures differ in the preferred way of structuring arguments, for example deductively or inductively. Differences also exist in the macrostructure of speech events - whereas Germans during business meetings normally talk about task-oriented topics only and switch to relation-oriented communication like joking or small talk before or after the meeting, French team members tend to use both modes within the meeting. In a German-French meeting, this may lead to the perceptions by the Germans that the French are not serious at work and by the French that the Germans are humourless. Also, there are differences in the organisation of conversational interaction, for instance on the level of turn-taking. Here, for instance, the long pauses between

turns that are normal with North American Indians are perceived as signs of uncooperativeness or incompetence by Caucasian Americans, whereas their rapid change of turns is perceived by the Indians as being pushy or dominant.

Such differences in the meaning of words and features of communicative style can pose severe problems for understanding in intercultural interactions with a native-speaker and a non-native speaker. The non-native usually is a more or less advanced learner of the language used and is restricted in his communication by gaps of cultural knowledge and the usual limitations of a learner language, such as transfer from the first language and culture. He or she does not exactly know what the normal cultural standards are which determine the normal ways of acting and interpreting in the target language and culture or does not have the full linguistic means available to behave and express him- or herself accordingly. The native normally has no idea of the cultural baggage the non-native brings into the interaction and - unless he or she is tolerant for violations of expectations and knowledgeable about the limitation of learner languages - will tend to misunderstand.

In lingua franca communication, where all participants use a language which for no one is his or her mother tongue, such problems multiply. Here, participants interact who may differ significantly with respect to the competence in the language used - one person may speak a very simple learner language which is culturally stripped bare, while others may be at more advanced levels and use linguistic forms and a communicative style that is close to that of native speakers. As participants have different source languages, their uses of the lingua franca are interspersed with transfers from different origins and the transferred forms and ways of use which complicate mutual understanding. Whereas in interactions among natives and non-natives it can normally be taken for granted that it is the native speaker's language and culture that sets the frame for the norms of acting and interpreting and that is the target by which the non-native orients him- or herself, in lingua franca communication it is not clear at all which standards hold: this could be either one of the source languages of the participants or the language and culture of the lingua franca. To secure a mutual basis for understanding, this has to be negotiated among the participants, and at the end of such negotiation, a shared mode of use of this lingua franca which is specific to the respective group may develop.

However, such a negotiation process presupposes time to develop, which requires repeated and extended interaction. This may be the case for example in international institutions like the UN, CERN or the European Central Bank or among international teams in business, industry or research, but does not happen in those many short situations of intercultural contact where the use of a lingua franca is strictly functional, where it is used as simple code to manage transactions.

In the world of today, many individuals have to interact with speakers of so many different languages that it is impossible to learn them all. Therefore, *linguae francae* are a necessity. And as a language is the more attractive for a learner the more it is used, it is obvious that English, the language which

already has come into the position of a global Lingua Franca, will further expand in this function. The availability of such a global language facilitates intercultural communication - no doubt. However, it should be clear that its value is restricted to the “communication” part of this compound, and that there is an unavoidable deficit with respect to the “cultural” - not just with respect to English, but with respect to any language used as a lingua franca.