

Jennifer Jenkins. *English as a Lingua Franca: Attitude and Identity.*
Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2007. xii + 284pp.

Reviewed by Federico Gobbo

The worldwide spread of English is today the world's most studied language problem. The crucial point behind the debate among specialists can be represented by the following question: Does the English language belong to its native speakers (NSs) only, or does it also belong to non-native speakers (NNSs), given that English "is becoming the world's language," in the words of British prime minister Gordon Brown on Downing Street's YouTube channel (January 2008)? The very concept of English as a lingua franca (ELF) definitely aims to defend, if not promote, the role of NNSs in defining the standard variety to be learnt worldwide, known as the lingua franca core (LFC). The other World English varieties, Jenkins suggests in this book, would be built upon the LFC. For instance the author argues that in pronunciation "so-called 'errors' should be considered legitimate features of the speaker's regional (NNS) accent, thus putting NNS accents on an equal footing with regional NS accents" (23).

ELF is modelled on the concept of World Englishes. The term 'lingua franca' refers to the fact that English is the property neither of Anglos nor of any other ethnos. But — in my opinion — here the first problem emerges: the very term 'lingua franca' is a Latin expression, and Latin was the property of the Romans and is a major part of the heritage belonging to Europeans, particularly Romance language speakers. Hence, how can ELF supporters avoid the accusation of Eurocentrism, if not English-centrism? 'Lingua franca' is really an abused expression, and in my opinion the choice of the term is unfortunate.

Let us review the main problems that arise with ELF. First, on the matter of pronunciation: ELF involves both NS-NNS and NNS-NNS interactions, and, ideally, English learners should be able to adapt their pronunciation in order to be better understood, depending on the native language(s) of the participants. Such accommodation has always taken place; the only novelty here is that teachers of English are being asked to *legitimise* it, giving priority to the segmental and suprasegmental traits to be learnt in their syllabus. Thus, the rhotic /r/ is part of the LFC while the non-rhotic /r/ is not (see Jenkins's Table 1.2). When language attitudes are investigated through a questionnaire study (see Jenkins's Chapter 6) in order to find out how teachers perceive ELF accents relative to NS English accents, the results, hardly surprisingly, show that the greater the distance from British and

American norms, the less prestige is accorded the NNS accent. Language identity perception is discussed in Chapter 7, following the intelligibility principle of the LFC: mutual understanding in ELF communication is the priority. Again, the main topic is pronunciation, while other important aspects relating to identity, such as the sense of belonging to an ELF-speaking community (if such a community exists), remain in the background. In general, my impression is that the LFC slightly privileges the General American norm over Received Pronunciation in individuating its features, but no reason is stated for this choice.

The most relevant problem with ELF lies not in the accommodation phenomena in NNS-NNS interactions, but in the constant inequality of language rights present in NS-NNS interactions. The NS participant can accommodate, even pidginise, his own language variety, at will — perhaps with the important exception of pronunciation — while the NNS, even if conscious of the ELF perspective, would probably accommodate his or her pronunciation only to a limited degree, and he or she would enjoy a far smaller degree of freedom in adapting the English variety in every other language strata — pragmatics and semantics, morphology and syntax. This asymmetry would accentuate the inequality between NSs and NNSs — yet no direct consideration of language rights enters the discussion.

As the concept of ELF has been hotly debated and ELF has been accused of the most offensive linguistic crimes, this timely book is both an apology for ELF and a clarification, so that misunderstandings should be reduced to a minimum. In fact, it answers most arguments against ELF, which clearly are often emotional and irrational, even when presented by scholars. Interestingly, these arguments are similar to the a priori ones usually brought against Esperanto, perhaps because ELF is also often perceived as an “artificial” language. In fact, as Esperanto is an Indo-European language, at least regarding its lexicon, European Esperantists are more equal than others (who have a greater burden of acquisition). Analogously, ELF privileges inner-circle NSs, as they are bilingual in ENL (English as a Native Language) and ELF with little exertion on their part.

The main focus of Jenkins’ book is the teaching (and learning) of pronunciation, admittedly the most sensitive problem of many NNSs, while far less attention is reserved for other language strata, at least in this book. For instance, I would have liked to see a more extensive treatment of cases like ‘gatekeeping’, which addresses the problem of productivity of neologisms by NNSs. For example in Italy we find the term ‘parking’ for ‘car park’. Is this term part of ELF or not? If so, should we publish dictionaries of ELF, where ‘parking’ is marked as ‘Italian variety’? Furthermore, is ELF domain-specific, as pidgins are, or should we consider it as a non-native creole language, where the lexicon and the *Weltanschauung* are English-based, while phonology is deeply influenced by the language(s) with which it comes into contact? These key questions are still left open.

In conclusion, I impatiently await a volume which specifically addresses the non-phonological aspects behind the concept of ELF, and, in the meantime, suggest that any person involved in teaching English to NNSs read this book.

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