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Komori-Glatz, Miya

Published in:
European Journal of International Management

DOI:
[10.1504/EJIM.2018.10009389](https://doi.org/10.1504/EJIM.2018.10009389)

Published: 01/01/2018

Document Version:
Peer reviewed version

Document License:
Other

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):
Komori-Glatz, M. (2018). Conceptualising English as a business lingua franca. *European Journal of International Management*, 12(1-2), 46-61. <https://doi.org/10.1504/EJIM.2018.10009389>

MANUSCRIPT COPY:

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accepted for the GEM&L Special Issue on “Crossing Language Boundaries in Organisations”,
European Journal of International Management, Vol. 11, No. 6, November 2017.

Miya Komori-Glatz

2 June 2017

Published as:

Komori-Glatz, M. (2018). “Conceptualising English as a business lingua franca’, *European Journal of International Management*, Vol. 12, Nos. 1/2, pp.46–61.

Author: Miya Komori-Glatz

Affiliation: WU Vienna University of Economics and Business

Address: Welthandelsplatz 1, 1020 Vienna, Austria

Email: mkomori@wu.ac.at

Biographical statement:

Miya Komori-Glatz is a Research Assistant at WU Vienna. Her current project takes an interdisciplinary perspective drawing on linguistics and IB research, and examines language use in multicultural student teamwork on an English-medium marketing master programme. Her wider academic interests include teaching English for business, internationalisation in higher education, and intercultural communication.

Conceptualising English as a business lingua franca (BELF)

Abstract

Though a popular and somewhat controversial topic in discussions on language in IB, the notion of English as a (business) lingua franca/(B)ELF still lacks clear conceptualisation. This paper argues that research in IB and linguistics can be mutually complementary and supportive in conceptualising BELF, and that it is important to separate the concept of BELF from that of a common corporate language. The paper synthesises key works from both disciplines to conceptualise BELF as an emergent, multilingual use of English that adapts to the demands and resources of the specific context. It further argues that Wenger's (1998) concept of Communities of Practice offers a useful bridge between the disciplines, and that there is a need for more empirical research.

Keywords: English as a business lingua franca; BELF; language; language management; international business; communities of practice; intercultural communication; conceptual paper

1. Introduction

The notion of English as a lingua franca has become a frequent, yet controversial topic in both popular and academic discussions of language in the context of globalisation. On the one hand, studies on language in the fields of business communication, management or organisational studies have been brought together in the research stream of “Language in IB [International Business]” (e.g. Barner-Rasmussen et al., 2014; Feely and Harzing, 2003; Fredriksson et al., 2006; Harzing et al., 2011; Kankaanranta et al., 2015; Kankaanranta and Planken, 2010; Kassis-Henderson, 2005; Kassis-Henderson and Louhiala-Salminen, 2011; Louhiala-Salminen et al., 2005; Marschan-Piekkari et al., 1999; Piekkari and Tietze, 2012; Piekkari et al., 2014; Tietze, 2004; for a brief but excellent overview, see Brannen et al., 2014). On the other hand, the establishment of English as a lingua franca (“ELF”) as a field of linguistics research in its own right has been pioneered by House (2003); Jenkins (2000; 2007; 2014; 2015); Mauranen (2006; 2012; Mauranen et al., 2010); Meierkord (2002) and Seidlhofer (2001; 2005; 2007; 2011), mostly investigating the university context. In recent years it has been expanding to cover more domains (especially business; e.g. Cogo, 2012; Ehrenreich, 2010; 2011; 2016; Pullin, 2010; 2013) and a wider range of geographical contexts (with a recent focus on Asia; Kirkpatrick, 2014).

Most scholars, regardless of which discipline they are based in, agree that English has “become *the* dominant language in international business” [Ehrenreich, (2010), p.408, original emphasis; cf. Angouri and Miglbauer, 2014; Gerritsen and Nickerson, 2009] and “indispensable” [Tietze, (2004), p.176] for conducting business in the international arena. Critics of ELF research tend to assume that this means an unquestioning acceptance of the spread of (Anglo-American) English across all domains and all regions (e.g. Phillipson, 2008). On the contrary, most scholars across both disciplines do question the implications of using English as the medium of communication. Some address underlying ideological assumptions or the notions of enacted power and privilege (Baird et al., 2014; Baker and Jenkins, 2015;

Jenkins et al., 2011; Marschan-Piekkari et al., 1999; Seidlhofer, 2011; Tietze, 2004). Others question how accurate discourse about the dominance and usefulness of English really is (Ehrenreich, 2011; Fredriksson et al., 2006; Jenkins, 2009; Kassis-Henderson, 2005; Piekkari and Tietze, 2012) or whether introducing a policy of English as a corporate language really leads to its implementation at an interactional level (Angouri, 2013; Fredriksson et al., 2006).

If we take closer look at what is meant by the term “English” itself, however, some interdisciplinary differences become apparent. While linguists have questioned the hegemony and homogeneity of (British/American) “English” as a construct for decades (e.g. Crystal, 2003[1997]; Halliday, McIntosh and Stevens, 1964; Kachru, 1985; McArthur, 1985; see Bolton, 2009 for an overview), few IB scholars conceptualise what is meant by “language” and by “English”, even when it is thematised in the studies’ results – albeit with some notable exceptions (Brannen et al., 2014; Janssens and Steyaert, 2014; Louhiala-Salminen et al., 2005; Louhiala-Salminen and Kankaanranta, 2012; Piekkari and Tietze, 2012; Poncini, 2003). This paper therefore echoes Brannen et al.’s (2014) suggestion that there is a need for scholars to clarify the use and meanings of certain terms, including “English as a lingua franca”, and argues that a linguist’s perspective can help to address this gap. Specifically, it suggests that Wenger’s (1998) Communities of Practice (CofP) framework can be a useful bridge between linguistics and management research, and draws on studies that use this in the context of ELF.

The next section examines and synthesises conceptualisations of English as a lingua franca in IB and linguistics research. It then addresses some of the most common criticisms of ELF and proposes a conceptualisation of BELF which draws on this interdisciplinary theoretical base.

2. Conceptualisations of English as a lingua franca

Discussions of the term *English as a lingua franca* frequently begin with a history of the world’s lingua francas, with the more critical generally concluding that English cannot or should not be accorded that status (e.g. Phillipson, 2008). There is some controversy over records of the earliest lingua franca. Phillipson (2008) draws on Mackey (2003), who claims that the term *lingua franca* can be traced back to the Germanic Franks who moved into Gaul in the fifth century, and whose culture and language (*lisan alfiranj*) became representative of the Western Europeans for Arabic speakers at the time of the Crusades. This view is shared by House (2003). Berns et al. (2009) refer to Mufwene’s (2006) analysis of the pidgins that emerged along West African trade routes in the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries, while Björkman (2013) draws on Corré’s *Glossary of Lingua Franca*ⁱⁱ. This work presents a pidgin mainly consisting of words from Romance languages and used around the Mediterranean, which, it suggests in its forewordⁱⁱⁱ, dates from before the thirteenth century and was used even into the twentieth (cf. Jenkins et al., 2011; Piekkari et al. 2014; Seidlhofer 2011). Some scholars also refer to the use of languages such as Latin, Greek and Arabic as lingua francas, often in the context of sharing ideas (e.g. Jenkins et al., 2011; Mauranen et al., 2010). Notably, as well as disseminating

scholarship and ideas, a common factor is the use of the term to denote a language used to facilitate trade.

It is true that historical lingua francas – whether pidgins or established languages such as Latin and Greek – were, in general, relatively stable and even codified, and thus the term “English as a lingua franca” can be seen as somewhat misleading. Certainly, some of the loudest critics of ELF research (e.g. O’Regan 2014; see also Baker and Jenkins’ [2015] detailed response) seem to perceive ELF, and criticise others’ concepts of it, as a reified system. However, current ELF scholars, drawing on the substantial body of empirical research conducted over the past decade and a half, conceptualise it as a resource rather than a code, and there are numerous volumes developing an understanding of ELF as being highly context-dependent, variable and dynamic (e.g. Baker, 2015; Björkman, 2013; Ehrenreich, 2016; Jenkins, 2007, 2014; Kalocsai, 2013; Murata, 2016; Mauranen and Ranta, 2009; Mauranen, 2012; Seidlhofer, 2011; Smit, 2010). The following sections attempt to draw out the main features of some existing definitions of (English as) a lingua franca in IB and linguistics, then to synthesise them, and so propose an integrated, workable definition of language in IB research.

2.1 English as a lingua franca in Language in IB research

Existing research into language in IB has numerous references to English as a lingua franca, but conceptualisations of this term still vary greatly (Brannen et al., 2014). Definitions range from Feely and Harzing (2003), who, rather unusually, use the term “lingua franca” to represent a “one language fits all” attitude based on the imposition of the (English-speaking) headquarters’ language. This is understood to mean “rely[ing] on ones [sic] native tongues” [Feely and Harzing, (2003), p.43] and is therefore “only a realistic option for Anglophone companies” [Harzing et al., (2011), p.285]. At the other end of the range, a lingua franca is seen as being spoken only among non-native speakers of English (NNSEs) (Fredriksson et al. 2006; Gerritsen and Nickerson 2009; Poncini, 2003; Rogerson-Revell 2010).

The most common approach is somewhere in the middle, and uses “lingua franca” as a (near) synonym for a common, or corporate language, i.e. a language which is introduced to standardise language practices within a company (e.g. Piekkari et al., 2014; Piekkari and Tietze, 2012; Piekkari and Zander, 2005). Where scholars differentiate the two concepts, the distinction is usually based on whether or not native speakers of English (NSEs) are included in the conceptualisation, with “common (corporate) language” including and “lingua franca” excluding them (Fredriksson et al., 2006; Gerritsen and Nickerson, 2009; Poncini, 2003; Rogerson-Revell, 2010). The implications of this will be discussed in section 2.3. Another conceptualisation first proposed by Louhiala-Salminen et al. (2005) and called BELF (Business ELF or English as a business lingua franca), draws explicitly on ELF research but contextualises it in IB (Kankaanranta et al., 2015; Kankaanranta and Planken, 2010; Louhiala-Salminen and Kankaanranta, 2012; for an excellent, comprehensive and critical overview, see Ehrenreich, 2016). Based on international managers’ reported use of communication strategies, BELF is

perceived as being “highly context-bound and situation-specific”, while “BELF competence calls for clarity and accuracy in the presentation of business content, knowledge of business-specific vocabulary and genre conventions, and the ability to connect on the relational level” [Kankaanranta et al., (2015), p.129, based on Kankaanranta and Planken, (2010)]. This trifold understanding of language use adds to conceptualisations of ELF with a more general focus, and merits further ethnographic attention. Finally, Janssens and Steyaert (2014) propose a “multilingual franca” perspective, arguing for “a negotiated, situated approach to English as lingua franca and other languages where speakers use multiple linguistic resources in complex ways to express voice”, in contrast to what they see as a traditionally “monological” approach to studying language(s) in business (p. 629). The implications of these studies will be addressed along with those of studies conducted in linguistics after the next section.

2.2 ELF research in linguistics

Recent definitions of English as a lingua franca (ELF) found in linguistics research have largely drawn on Seidlhofer (2011):

[ELF is] *any use of English among speakers of different first languages for whom English is the communicative medium of choice, and often the only option.* [Seidlhofer (2011), p.7, original italics; cf. Baker (2015); Björkman (2013); Jenkins (2014); Kalocsai (2013)]

While the inclusion of English native speakers in ELF settings has been debated, most conceptualisations do allow space for these, in order to reflect the multilingual realities of today’s world (Jenkins, 2014). However, the focus generally remains on interactions where English native speakers are in the minority (Seidlhofer, 2011).

Still a relatively young formal field, ELF research has developed considerably since its early stages at the turn of the 21st century (for an excellent overview, see Jenkins et al., 2011 and Jenkins, 2015). Jenkins (2015) identifies two phases of empirical research into ELF from which current studies are emerging and evolving. The first, strongly influenced by the World Englishes paradigm, focused on form, pronunciation and lexico-grammar (e.g. Jenkins, 2000; Seidlhofer, 2001). The second saw a shift away from the desire to codify and towards acknowledging the “[h]ybridity, fluidity, and variability” that are “the main characteristics of ELF communication” [Cogo, (2012), p.290], as well as a re-conceptualisation of ELF with function taking precedence over form (Cogo, 2008; Seidlhofer, 2011). The second phase also included a much stronger focus on attitudes towards ELF (e.g. Jenkins, 2007), on implications for teaching English (e.g. Sifakis, 2007, 2014), and on pragmatics, especially in terms of how to communicate effectively in ELF settings (e.g. Björkman, 2013; Mauranen, 2012). It could be argued that this function-oriented approach reflects managers’ descriptions of using English as a “tool” (Ehrenreich, 2010; Kankaanranta and Planken, 2010), where “effectiveness and efficiency in communication govern[s] language use rather than linguistic correctness as such” [Louhiala-Salminen et al., (2005), p.418]. Jenkins (2015) also suggests that ELF research is now entering a third phase, where she proposes repositioning ELF within a framework of multilingualism; however, it can also be argued that multilingualism has always been an integral

part of conceptualising ELF (see section 3). Instead, this paper suggests that the third and current phase of ELF research focuses more closely on the specifics of interaction in a particular context, and on how these shape and are shaped by the demands of that context (e.g. Baker, 2015; Björkman, 2013; Kalocsai, 2013; Mauranen, 2012; Smit, 2010). In this vein, it is both timely and necessary to strengthen interdisciplinary efforts to deepen an understanding of ELF in the business context and thereby gain a more profound insight into the characteristics and demands of language use in this setting.

2.3 (B)ELF and Communities of Practice

While many BELF interactions may be brief, spontaneous and not repeated, the importance of building a relationship with your business partner implies that sustained and repeated interaction is the more likely – or perhaps more useful – scenario when examining and analysing BELF. Consequently, it can be argued that Wenger’s (1998) Communities of Practice (CofP) framework, based on the three dimensions of “mutual engagement”, “joint enterprise” and “shared repertoire” [Wenger, (1998), pp.49, 72-84], offers a valuable approach to examining and understanding the notion of BELF. The CofP approach, which was not originally conceived in the context of international settings, offers an insight into how communicational practices within organisational communities are developed and passed on to new members. Thus, as Ehrenreich (2010) points out, “adopting the CofP approach helps to go beyond the controversial *learner-user* distinction” [Ehrenreich, (2010), p.427, original emphasis; cf. Kankaanranta and Planken, 2010], as well as offering a means to bridge “the practitioner’s lived communicative realities and the scholar’s analyses thereof” [Ehrenreich, (2010), p.428]. The CofP lens can therefore offer fascinating insights into how participants in long-term or repeated BELF interactions use language not only to achieve their business goals but also to build a relationship based on their successful interaction with each other. The present paper further argues that it consequently also offers a shared point of contact for management and linguistics scholars, as this interplay of language, the achievement of business objectives and relationship-building is in the interest of both disciplines.

Recent research into the use of ELF in the academic context that draws on a CofP framework (Kalocsai, 2013; Smit, 2010) has shown how language and meaning are negotiated and jointly constructed within multilingual and multicultural discourse communities. This research can make a valuable contribution to studies in IB. For example, ELF scholars show how “mutual engagement” develops “dense relationships” by “establishing [...] who is who, who is good at what, and who knows what” [Kalocsai, (2013), p.13] – a crucial element of any effective business relationship. It can also be argued that, while interactions in any field have some “joint enterprise” or goal, the business domain is characterised by a particular goal orientation, namely, the “drive for efficient use of such resources as time and money, and an overall aspiration for win-win scenarios among business partners” [Kankaanranta and Planken, (2010), p.381]. The concrete aims of any business interaction, in other words the “joint enterprise”, therefore make this context a particularly relevant and interesting one to examine using a CofP approach (cf. Ehrenreich, 2009). Additionally, in her investigation of the development of CofP

on an international hotel management programme in Vienna, Smit (2010) found that achieving mutual understanding in this ELF setting itself constituted an implicit joint enterprise or interactional goal. Similar findings are reported in Kankaanranta and Planken's (2010) study, which concludes that "because BELF is affected by the speaker's professional expertise, English proficiency, accent, and the discourse practices of his or her mother tongue, it takes time to get used to the idiosyncratic combination of these features" (p. 392). Thus as well as the specific business goals, a community of practice should aim to develop a "shared repertoire" consisting of "linguistic routines, specialized terminology, ways of doing things, ways of talking, stories, jokes, concepts, physical artifacts, instruments, and costumes" [Kalocsai (2013), p.13]. Doing this allows a business relationship – or indeed an organisation – to coordinate its practices, activities and its members, and thus pave the way for communication that can become increasingly effective and efficient.

With the shift to examining interactants' use of their individual linguistic resources to construct a shared repertoire, the study of ELF is moving away from looking at *what* ELF speakers do to asking *how* and *why*. Just as linguists can offer an insight into the language practices reported by managers, the expertise of colleagues in IB would greatly enrich linguistic research in this aspect by providing emic perspectives of the professional field (Ehrenreich, 2010; 2016). There has already been some extremely interesting research conducted in workplace settings by linguists working within an ELF paradigm (for a detailed overview, see Ehrenreich, 2016) and beyond (Angouri, 2013; Angouri and Miglbauer, 2014). In her thorough review of work on ELF in international business contexts, Ehrenreich (2016) commends the interdisciplinary nature of existing studies while highlighting the need to appreciate disciplinary differences between the business communication and linguistics perspectives. Despite the excellent efforts to date, however, it can be argued there is still a need for further research into BELF in general, as well as for researchers to engage more with each other across the disciplines and to co-ordinate their findings. If they did so, they might find they have more in common than previously believed.

One example of unperceived common ground is the notion of language as being dynamic rather than static or monolithic. In the CofP framework, processes, practices and repertoires are constantly being negotiated and (re)constructed. Similarly, researchers in both IB and linguistics see language as being "performative" [Piekkari and Tietze, (2012), p.550]; they believe that users' language practices, the development of a context-specific repertoire and "group formational processes" [Smit (2010), p.8] are interlinked and shape each other (cf. Brannen et al., 2014; Cogo, 2012; Kalocsai 2013). Angouri and Miglbauer (2014), too, though not explicit ELF researchers, are linguists working with data from an ELF business context. They "adopt a social constructionist point of view which understands social realities as constructed instead of given and as accomplishments individuals reach through discursive work" (p.154) and which this paper shares. The suitability of the CofP framework for this analytical approach is noted by Smit (2010)^{iv}.

(B)ELF is thus conceptualised as being constituted and constitutive at two levels. The first is the discourse itself, which is flexible, variable and adapted in-situ in accordance with the

participants' individual linguistic repertoires and the demands of the specific context. The second is the level of the interaction, particularly in the context of teamwork and/or repeated interactions, in creating, shaping and confirming group/team processes.

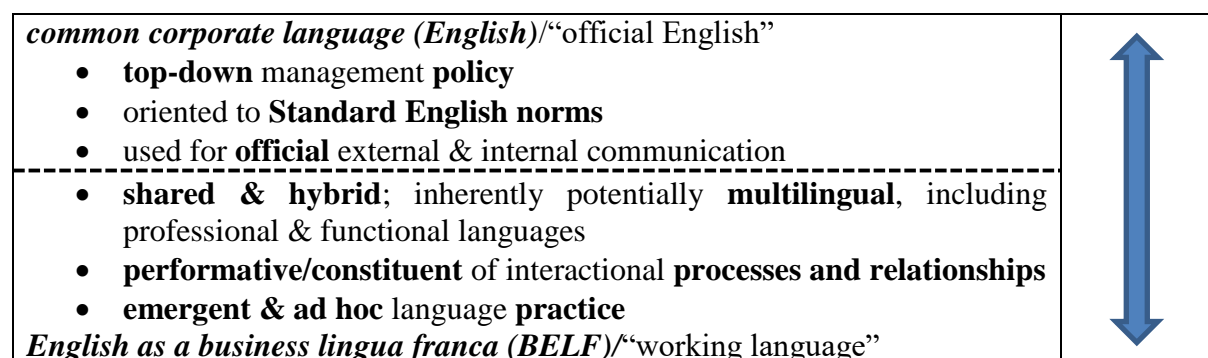
3. Conceptualising ELF for Language in IB research

In view of the foregoing discussion, this paper proposes an expanded definition of BELF based on Seidlhofer's definition of ELF (2011:7) and the other research discussed in the previous sections:

BELF is the use of English as the medium of communication among speakers of different first languages in an emergent, variable and hybrid manner that is appropriate to the demands and (multilingual) resources of the specific business context.

This definition takes into account a theoretical, linguistics-oriented perspective and highlights the constructionist approach discussed in the previous section. In essence, though, it follows Kankaanranta et al.'s (2015: 139) conceptualisation of a "continuum" of the linguistic manifestations of English in international business, with "official English" at one end and BELF as a "working language" at the other (Figure 1).

Figure 1. *Linguistic manifestations of English in international business(es)*



This continuum should not be seen as a spectrum from "good" to "bad" English, but rather as a range of approaches to English-in-use. Additionally, the reality of language use in a given context may be found anywhere along the continuum (hence the dotted, rather than solid, line). This paper thus follows Piekkari and her colleagues (i.e. Piekkari et al., 2014; Piekkari and Tietze, 2012; Piekkari and Zander, 2005) in preferring to use the term "common corporate language" to refer to active language management and top-down language strategy, and reserves "English as a (business) lingua franca" for the manifestation of English that is actually used to interact with business partners. When English is introduced as a "common corporate language", it can be an almost abstract concept since the realities of how (and if) it is implemented vary tremendously. Used as the language for official communications, it frequently follows Standard English norms, particularly when directed at external stakeholders (e.g. Ehrenreich, 2010); sometimes, however, this happens at the cost of communicating effectively and so leads to communications going unread (Kankaanranta and Planken, 2010;

Kankaanranta et al., 2015). At the other end of the continuum, how English is used as a (business) lingua franca in any given context depends greatly on many factors, including the setting and purpose of the interaction, the interlocutors' (shared) linguistic repertoire(s), their experience in technical and multicultural communication, and the length and power dynamics of the relationship (e.g. Ehrenreich, 2009, 2010, 2016; Kankaanranta and Planken 2010; Kankaanranta et al., 2015). Analysing BELF interaction through a Community of Practice lens can help to reveal how these factors influence the way language use develops over the course of a specific business relationship and how the development of a shared repertoire, the clarification of mutual goals and the (linguistic) efforts made to achieve these goals in turn strengthen that relationship and contribute to a successful outcome. Focusing on the interlocutors as “users” rather than, or as well as, “learners” of English (Ehrenreich, 2009; 2010) also strengthens the importance of function over form in conceptualisations of BELF. The CofP approach thus offers insights to both management and linguistics scholars.

The conceptualisation presented in this paper also aims to address the three main issues that frequently arise in discussions of (B)ELF, namely: the inclusion of native speakers of English and the question of how to define effective communication in BELF interaction; the issue of multilingualism; and the common assumption that a lingua franca is perceived as being a “neutral” code. Each will be addressed in turn before the section concludes by synthesising and summarising the key aspects of English as a lingua franca for the IB context.

As already noted, many IB researchers use the term “lingua franca” as a synonym for a common corporate language. While it may be argued that a “true” lingua franca cannot by definition have native speakers, it is unreasonable to exclude native speakers of English from such interactions, particularly if, from a research perspective, the goal is to investigate actual business practice (cf. Ehrenreich, 2010). There is also no reason why a native speaker of English cannot be an effective participant in an ELF interaction. Given that the interviewees in many studies reported that it was easier to talk to other non-natives than to native speakers of English (e.g. Ehrenreich, 2010; 2011; 2016; Kankaanranta and Planken, 2010; Kassis-Henderson, 2005; Kassis-Henderson and Louhiala-Salminen, 2011), however, NSEs cannot assume that they are automatically also effective users of ELF. It is important for NSEs to acknowledge that their accents, speaking rate and typically high level of idiomaticity and culture-specific metaphor often hinder intelligibility for their international interlocutors, and that they may need to adapt these accordingly.

Effective communication in this context implies understanding and applying Kankaanranta et al.'s (2015) three principles of clarity, knowledge of specialist vocabulary and genres, and rapport-building, or, as Seidlhofer (2007) puts it from a general ELF perspective, being aware of and using language “appropriate” for the specific context (cf. Ehrenreich, 2009). In many cases, this will not “fully conform to native speaker conventions” [Seidlhofer, (2007), p.315], but vary according to the repertoires and needs of individual interlocutors, the length of their relationship and the extent to which they have constructed a shared repertoire. In short, as Jenkins (2009) argues, “ELF is thus a question [...] of mutual negotiation involving efforts and adjustments from *all* parties” [Jenkins (2009): 201; my emphasis]. While this often implies

using simpler, clearer language, accommodating to your interlocutor(s), and using an increased number of pragmatic strategies such as confirming or highlighting essential information, it can also include drawing on highly technical language if this is shared by all parties (Ehrenreich, 2010; 2016; Kankaanranta and Planken, 2010).

The definition of BELF as “the medium of communication among speakers of different first languages” means BELF interactions are inherently potentially multilingual. In contrast to apparently popular belief, ELF research has always stressed the multilingual nature of such encounters (e.g. Cogo, 2012; House, 2003; Meierkord, 2002; Seidlhofer, 2011). Jenkins’ (2015) recent overview and conceptual paper even suggests that the third “phase” of ELF research should reposition ELF within a framework of multilingualism, i.e. “multilingual communicative settings in which English is known to everyone present, and is therefore *always potentially ‘in the mix’*, regardless of whether or not, and how much, it is actually used” (p.74, original emphasis). It is not entirely clear how shifting the focus away from English as the basis of the lingua franca is helpful, especially in the business context and if there is an assumption that English is “known to everyone present” (which may in fact not be the case). Nevertheless, highlighting the framework of multilingualism and its interplay with ELF is certainly an important move for the external perception of ELF.

Janssens and Steyaert’s (2014) proposal of a “multilingual franca” perspective is somewhat different from Jenkins’, as they understand it as a plurality of voices creating a hybrid language. They perceive previous studies as conceptualising language(s) as “discrete, unified, pre-existing system[s]” and call for a paradigm shift to seeing language as “social practice” (p.631). While this is a welcome development in the study of language in IB, it very closely reflects many existing conceptualisations of ELF and BELF (Kankaanranta et al., 2015) and would be greatly enhanced by including these in any further discussions of the concept.^v At the same time, Janssens and Steyaert’s (2014) “provocative” understanding of English as “a ‘glocal’ language, a hybrid language enacted in a social process” (p.636) and their inclusion of functional and professional languages as an aspect of multilingualism are valuable contributions to conceptualisations of (B)ELF. Mastery of functional and professional language(s) also represents an integral part of “appropriate” language use and enables entry into communities of practice in business contexts. The precise nature of a ‘local’ repertoire therefore depends greatly on the individuals’ multilingual repertoires, and to what extent they can develop a hybrid code based on these (i.e., a shared repertoire). It should be noted here that Kankaanranta and her colleagues’ third pillar of BELF, building rapport, plays a vital role in creating such a hybrid code, since the longer and better the interlocutors know each other, the more shared linguistic ground they can develop (Kankaanranta and Planken, 2010; cf. Angouri, 2013).

The notion of a “shared”, “hybrid” or “contact” language is arguably more useful than that of the lingua franca as a “neutral” code, an attribute accorded to (B)ELF and found across the literature (e.g. Kankaanranta and Planken 2010; Louhiala-Salminen and Kankaanranta, 2012; Nickerson, 2005; Seidlhofer, 2011). This attribution is based on cases such as the well-known example of the Finnish-Swedish bank Nordea, whose implementation of English as the company-internal language was perceived as “neutralising” a conflict that resulted from the

symbolic significance of adopting one merger partner's language over the other in a deal that was supposed to be between equals (Björkman et al., 2005). At the interactional level, too, using a third language as a lingua franca may help to break "tribal" tendencies along language divides, e.g. in a team consisting of French- and German-speaking members (Kassis-Henderson and Louhiala-Salminen, 2011). Even while topicalising BELF as being a neutral code, however, Louhiala-Salminen et al. (2005) acknowledge that "BELF speakers bring into business interaction their own culture-bound views of how encounters should be conducted", as well as "discourse practices stemming from their own mother tongues" (p.404). This reflects the social constructionist perspective which argues that "communication is always embedded in and constitutive of social situations and involves speakers with purposes and positions, none of which are neutral" [Baker, (2011), p.199]. Consequently, in (B)ELF contexts, "neutral" does not necessarily refer to an absence of power or cultural influences as frequently assumed by its critics, and one of the challenges of BELF interaction is to find synergies between these beliefs and practices through mutual engagement and the joint enterprise.

Rather, the notion of "neutrality" in lingua franca research seems to reflect the idea that nobody has exclusive ownership of or authority over the language and "everybody is allowed to contribute, construct and use" it [Cogo (2012), p.298] in whatever way achieves the interactional goals. It is true that this is somewhat idealistic given that levels of proficiency do vary widely (Ehrenreich, 2010) and the "transnational elite" educated in Anglo-Saxon management discourse may overestimate the ubiquity of English as a result of their own and their peers' (perceived) competence (Fredriksson et al., 2006; Rogerson-Revell, 2007). Clearly, the question of native speaker dominance is also highly topical here, and it is important for both native speakers and non-native speakers of English to be aware of power issues related to proficiency. Additionally, people working at different levels in the company hierarchy may have different language competences, some of them too low to read official communications or operate technical systems (Angouri, 2013; Piekkari and Tietze, 2012; Lønsmann, 2014), and others knowledge of the local language, leading to social exclusion (Lønsmann, 2014; Marschan-Piekkari et al., 1999; Piekkari and Tietze, 2012). Nevertheless, for many businesses and business people, English is seen as the only viable option for communicating with speakers having otherwise incompatible linguistic repertoires (Ehrenreich, 2010), and thus (B)ELF interactions are frequently reported to be successful due to substantial efforts towards cooperation and collaboration from the participants (Ehrenreich, 2016; Kankaanranta and Planken, 2010; Kankaanranta et al., 2015).

To summarise, research into English as the medium of communication among speakers of different first languages in an international business context has reached a point where it is important both to clarify the terminology used and to draw on and synthesise the research already conducted in IB and linguistics. This paper supports Kankaanranta et al.'s (2015) concept of a continuum ranging from English as a common corporate language implemented through a top-down language management strategy and manifested in norm-oriented official (and mostly written) communications, to English as a lingua franca (BELF) as an emergent, context-specific language function. It conceptualises BELF as inherently multilingual (including functional and professional codes) and constructed by its speakers, in accordance

with their individual repertoires as well as the specific needs and demands of the context of their interaction. BELF is not seen as neutral *per se*, but rather as flexible, hybrid and variable, with all participants in an interaction having the right to contribute to, construct and use the shared repertoire as is necessary in order to achieve their interactional goals. In effective repeated interaction, these language practices should both express and construct a community of practice based on mutual engagement, a joint enterprise and a shared repertoire. Consequently, this paper also calls for further research into building rapport in BELF interaction and how this supports and is supported by language practices.

4. Conclusion and avenues for further research

As the world becomes increasingly interconnected, businesses and the people that comprise them are seeking ways to communicate with the partners and customers they want to reach and work with across the globe. As a “shared” or “contact” language, a lingua franca facilitates that communication whenever one of the stakeholders is not able or willing to speak the language of the other(s). In many contexts, English has taken on this role.

While the study of English as a lingua franca (ELF) has grown massively both in quantity and in its conceptual underpinnings, there is still a need to clarify the concept in the specific context of international business, and especially to synthesise the research conducted from a linguistics perspective in business settings with the work done in the field of language in IB. This paper thus proposes a definition of BELF as a flexible, variable and hybrid resource that is highly context-bound and which both constitutes and is constituted by the community using it. This definition draws strongly on Louhiala-Salminen et al. (2005), Kankaanranta and Planken (2010) and Kankaanranta et al.’s (2015) conceptualisation of BELF as well as more recent work on BELF by Ehrenreich (2009; 2010; 2016), but is also informed by the notion of language as a dynamic social construct (cf. Angouri and Miglbauer, 2014; Brannen et al., 2014; Cogo, 2012; Janssens and Steyaert, 2014; Kalocsai, 2013; Piekkari and Tietze, 2012; Smit, 2010). Additionally, it proposes that Wenger’s (1998) Communities of Practice framework offers a means to bridge the gap between IB and linguistics approaches to (B)ELF, since the trifold dimensions of mutual engagement, joint enterprise and a shared repertoire reflect both the concerns of a goal-oriented business interaction and the linguistic means to develop a relationship that will facilitate achieving these goals.

It can be argued that the interpersonal aspect of business is still under-researched and will only increase in importance as the next wave of business graduates enters the workforce (Ehrenreich 2010; Kankaanranta and Planken, 2010). As a generation that has only known a “wired, connected world” [Sepannen and Gualtieri (2012): 3], research on millennials report that they are more diverse and more community- and collaboration-oriented than their predecessors (Council of Economic Advisers, 2014; Sepannen and Gualtieri, 2012). It is true that existing BELF research clearly shows that technical and subject-specific knowledge remain the top priorities when selecting employees (Cogo, 2012; Ehrenreich, 2010; Kankaanranta and Planken, 2010). Nevertheless, it seems that the relational aspect of business, and the role

language plays in this, is gaining in importance, and requires more in-depth research. Additionally, with (business) universities increasingly embracing internationalisation policies, including study abroad or joint programmes, international internships and global academic networks, as a means of gaining a competitive advantage, graduates are often starting their professional careers with a much higher level of exposure to an international environment than ever before. Yet there is still room for a more critical, reflective and practice-oriented approach to teaching business English and business in English (cf. Ehrenreich, 2009; Kankaanranta et al., 2015; Tietze, 2004).

Last but not least, the increase in globalisation not only affects future graduates, many of whom aspire to join large MNCs, but also all businesses, regardless of size.^{vi} To date there has been very little research into how the rise of English has affected small and medium enterprises (with the exception of Cogo, 2012). Yet even businesses that focus on their domestic market frequently deal with diverse suppliers, carriers, employees and customers. There is thus an opening for further research into BELF in professional practice in a wider range of types of businesses as well as in pre-professional courses and training.

In short, a solid foundation of research into the use of English as a lingua franca has been laid in both international business and linguistics. The first steps towards synthesising this work have also been made, although there is still an urgent need to find a conceptualisation of BELF that is both useful and coherent across the disciplines. This paper has attempted to meet that need, and to lay the groundwork not only for more collaboration between IB and linguistics scholars but also for further research into a wider range of contexts that demand competence in BELF.

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ⁱ From hereon the acronym *ELF* refers specifically to research into English as a lingua franca in the field of Applied Linguistics. Where *English as a lingua franca* is written out in full, it refers to other or more general contexts.

ⁱⁱ <https://pantherfile.uwm.edu/corre/www/franca/go.html>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://pantherfile.uwm.edu/corre/www/franca/edition3/foreword.html>

^{iv} With her focus on the educational environment, Smit (2010) actually refers to a social constructivist perspective focusing on affordances for individual learning. However, this paper proposes that the CoP framework is even more relevant to a social constructionist approach and its focus on processes and “the collective generation [and transmission] of meaning” [Crotty, (1998), p.57].

^v They do refer briefly to Canagarajah’s (2007) notion of Lingua Franca English, but the discussion of this in conceptual terms is negligible. There is also a rather uncomfortable use of the term “globish” to mean “a hybrid and living language where the idea of being native-English speaker is questioned” [Janssens and Steyaert (2014), p. 636; cf. Jenkins et al. (2011) and Seidlhofer’s (2011) explanations of how ELF is definitely not a variant of Globish as proposed by Nerrière and Hon (2009)]. Nonetheless, this paper represents a very important paradigm shift to focus on the dynamic and situational nature of lingua franca communication.

^{vi} The author is grateful to the anonymous reviewer for suggesting this point.