Teaching and Linguafranca Corpora: Communication and Conformity

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Recent years have seen the compilation and publication of corpora capturing (mostly spoken) interactions via English as a lingua franca (ELF). Numerous studies have been conducted on such interactions, many of them using data from VOICE, the Vienna-Oxford International Corpus of English or ELFA, the corpus of English as a Lingua Franca in Academic settings. These empirical studies range over a wide variety of research questions concerning pragmatic, lexicogrammatical and phonological aspects of ELF interactions, and the socio-psychological, sociolinguistic and pedagogical implications arising from them.

Whatever the respective focus of individual studies, what generally comes across very forcefully is that effective communication in the use of ELF does not depend on an adherence to approved native-speaker norms as such. ELF speakers make use of the language by exploiting its potential as a resource for the negotiation of mutual understanding and the expression of their own identity without deferring to authorized native-speaker norms. It becomes apparent that the use of English as a convenient means of communication does not require conformity to the way its 'monolingual' speakers use it.

Methodologically, ELF corpus work is particularly challenging in that there is no primary speech community of ELF speakers and no code and usage conventions that they are intuitively aware of and which can be adduced to define their usage as a variety of English. So there is no given, generally relevant and relatively stable norm the data can be related to. This difficulty points to the general issue of how language is captured in corpora when it is put to pragmatic use, and inevitably raises questions of selection and interpretation. Working with ELF corpora thus gives us particularly clear insights into what a corpus can and cannot do, and highlights that any corpus work has to negotiate the tricky relationship between analysis and interpretation in that decontextualized textual products are interpreted as evidence of contextualized discourse processes.

Pedagogically, ELF corpus work shows the very indirect nature of the relationship between findings derived from analysis and relevance for teaching: it demonstrates that lifting forms (however frequent they may be) from a corpus and teaching them for imitation is not a valid or viable procedure, and that again, interpretation is required in the form of pedagogic mediation in order to determine how corpus findings might inform learning and teaching. What seems to be paramount is ELF users' strategic capability for making effective communicative use of the linguistic resources at their disposal. This suggests that the objectives for language learning might be revised to focus attention not on the production of language forms that conform to the norms of native-speaker competence and conventions of usage but on the communicative process itself, dissociated from such conformity. In this communicative process, learners can develop a capability for exploiting the potential of the language and giving it formal realization as functionally appropriate to the different contexts of use they will subsequently encounter.