

Future prospects of BELF : Diversion or conversion

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Abstract

When we discuss the question of BELF (Business English as a Lingua Franca), we need to clarify the relationship of BELF to the influence of national cultures. Although people use BELF for their global business activities, they may still follow their native languages and culture-bound conventions. This idea implies that BELF cannot always be neutral or culture-less, but rather that the speaker's communication culture and language style may be quite influential and that BELF can take different forms because of this. Just as Asians have many common English usages to share with each other, European people have common features of communication patterns and peculiar ways of speaking English. A regional block-based BELF, in contrast to a one size fits all BELF, would be a suitable alternative as a practical language group in several areas, such as Southeast Asian BELF, German and North European BELF, Romance BELF, or Arabian BELF. The emergence of new Englishes has been compared to the spread and subsequent break-up of Latin throughout the Roman world. As Latin broke up into mutually unintelligible European languages, global English will similarly disintegrate into separate languages over a period of several centuries unless something is done about it. We must not repeat such a breakup of our BELF as Latin experienced its breakup centuries ago, and the development of regional BELFs will help us to avoid this problem.

Introduction

“... the electronic media that bind the world together are essentially carriers of language. To work efficiently, they need a common standard. The personal computer (PC) has one : Microsoft's operating system, Windows. The Internet has another : TCP/IP, its Esperanto or transmission protocol, which allows computers anywhere in the world to hook into it, whether they are PCs or rival Apple Macs. The English language is now the operating standard for global communication.” This passage appeared in “LANGUAGE AND ELECTRONICS ; The coming global tongue” in *The Economist*, December 21st, 1996 (p.75). The author further stated : “In fact, electronic communications have affected, and will continue to affect, language in three distinct ways. First, they change the way language is used. Secondly, they have created a need for a global language-and English will fill that slot. Third, they will influence the future of other languages which people will (perhaps perversely) continue to speak.”

The question I would like to raise here is whether or not the above predictions, nearly two decades ago, have been fulfilled, in that electronic communications have changed the way language is used, created a need for a global language, and enabled English to fill that slot in a way that would influence the future of other languages that people continue to speak. The same article also predicted as follows: “Within a decade, their [people who speak English as a subsidiary language] numbers will exceed the number of mother-tongue speakers,” citing a Cambridge don’s prediction that “English will be taught mostly by non-native speakers of the language, to non-native speakers, in order to communicate mainly with non-native speakers.” Another professor of English at the University of Cincinnati was reported to say nervously: “It will be the first time in the history of the world that the language is not ours any more. If a language is no longer the property of its native speakers, it will change, and it’s not clear what the consequences will be (p.76).”

Unfortunately, all these predictions seem to have come true. While native English speakers represent only 4.68% of the world population (*World Factbook*), equal to about 330 million, about 1.25–1.85 billion people currently use English as a communication tool (Crystal, 2003, pp.59–67). Thus, English is no longer the sole product of native English speaking countries. According to Crystal (2003, pp.46–47), in real terms these estimates (perhaps a third of the people in India are now capable of holding a conversation in English) represent a range of 30 million to over 330 million (for comprehension, with a somewhat lower figure, 200 million, for speech production). He has further estimated that if current English-language learning trends continue and with satellite television and other sources of English increasingly available, this spread of Non-native Speakers (NNS) of English will continue. Moreover, English is rapidly changing, given the input from so many NNS using global networks of communication.

The wider use of the English language has brought about some environments that must be unpleasant to native speakers. Observing the facts that NNS now outnumber NS by three to one and hundreds of millions more are learning the language, David Graddol (2006, p.29), the author of *English Next*, notes that the majority of encounters in English today take place among NNS. He further adds that many business meetings held in English appear to run more smoothly when there are no NS present. Barbara Seidlhofer, professor of English and applied linguistics at the University of Vienna, argues that relief at the absence of another NS is common when one NS is communicating with NNS. She quotes an Austrian banker as saying: “I always find it easier to do business [in English] with partners from Greece or Russia or Denmark. But when the Irish call, it gets complicated and taxing.” On another occasion, at an in-

ternational student conference in Amsterdam, conducted in English, the lone British representative was asked to be “less English” so that the others could understand her (Whose English? by Michael Skapinker, *Financial Times*, 08–Nov–2007).

So, I believe that when doing business with their foreign counterparts, NNS would find it easier to use their own English as a kind of lingua franca. This kind of lingua franca is now called BELF (Business English as a Lingua Franca). We will examine what it is and what its limitations are, if any, here and in the next chapter. The point is that different BELFs frequently emerge and that they have strengths and weaknesses.

We should note first that one could see a BELF as a pidgin in the absence of a code specifying definitions. A BELF pidgin would end up being something that has evolved and sometimes creates more problems than it solves. For example, a pidgin English speaker in Micronesia would not be intelligible to an American businessperson, although he might communicate well in the BELF with other Micronesians. When he encountered the American, however, in a business deal, they would not be able to communicate. A BELF that evolves over time into a pidgin might restrict BELF users to the BELF region. A BELF that is imposed by some authority (government, university, corporate HQ etc.), however, would work outside the region, although perhaps not within the region. What is needed is a region-based BELF that could work both within and outside of the region. Such a BELF must be created rather than based on evolution into a pidgin.

BELF, Its Definitions and Inherent Problems

The term “BELF” is reported to be a coinage by Dr. Louihala-Salminen (2005), one of the three authors of the paper from which I have cited this definition :

BELF refers to English used as a ‘neutral’ and shared communication code. BELF is neutral in the sense that none of the speakers can claim it as her/his mother tongue ; it is shared in the sense that it is used for conducting business with the global business discourse community, whose members are BELF users and communicators in their own right – not ‘non-native speakers’ or ‘learners’.

Later in 2010 Kankaanranta and Planken (2010) described the three characteristics of BELF :

While the three contextual features seem integral to BELF discourse, that is, the shared business domain, the shared professional expertise, and the length of relationship, three features of BELF proper also emerged from the interview data. They can be characterized as simplified English, specific terminology related to business in general and the professional expertise in particular, and a hybrid of discourse practices originating from the speakers' mother tongues.

Thus, as Kankaanranta and Planken (2010) observed, "the discourse of BELF can be characterized as an interesting hybrid: a simplified, shared code whose basis is English with highly specialized vocabulary and a variety of discourse practices originating from the speakers' mother tongue practices, and as such, much like a pidgin or Creole language."

It is true that the English language has been used worldwide as a lingua franca for global business, particularly for the last few decades. Business people, employers and employees, managers and subordinates, almost everybody needs and wishes to learn English for their business communications.

- 70% of the world's growth of MNCs will come from emerging markets (The UN World Investment Report, 2009)
- 70% of employees in Global 1000 companies are NNS of English (WTO)
- 92% of global employees say English is required or important for their job
- 93% say that English is required or important to get a promotion
- 70% of respondents say they need to improve their skills this year

These figures are from *The Globalization of English Report*. According to this report, 26,000 global employees (152 countries) from leading MNCs participated in this study, surveyed by *GlobalEnglish* in 2010.

For these companies and their employees BELF may be an ideal communication tool. It is convenient for intercultural business communication, and this convenience is supported by the simplicity of study to master a BELF and efficiency in its use. However, its basic function should be mutual intelligibility for mutually understandable communication between the sender and receiver of the business communication.

While I admit the usefulness and importance of a lingua franca in the business world, I cannot help but have another picture of the future trend of BELF. I think that BELF will end up being something that evolves into a form that sometimes creates more problems than it

solves.

For example, a BELF speaker in one region would not be intelligible to a speaker of a BELF in another region, although the former might communicate well with other people within his region. A BELF that evolves over time might restrict BELF users to the BELF region. A BELF that is imposed by some authority such as government, university, corporate HQ etc., however, would work outside the region.

Hypothesis about and proposition for the future of BELF

Considering the present and future problems of BELF, I would like to propose the following hypothesis :

- BELF eventually will diverge into regional groups' pidgins that become mutually unintelligible to each other unless some standardization measures are adopted.

Based on this hypothesis I wish to propose the following three measures for the better use of BELF and develop this paper accordingly : (1) forming a unified rule for BELF usage, (2) systematizing regionalized BELFs, and (3) promoting diglossic use of BELF. Before going further into these issues, however, let me first discuss unintelligibility, what it is, why it is caused, and how to prevent possible problems.

What is unintelligibility? It means impossibility or difficulty to understand what is conveyed to the receiver of communications. Intelligibility is the degree to which a message can be understood. Unintelligibility may consist of the following three factors :

- Total lack of understanding – zero communication ;
- Distortion of the message leading to errors and offense ; and
- Inappropriate formulation and cultural insensitivity.

Three conditions exist which help senders to avoid or at least lessen unintelligibility (Kameda, 2003). They are as follows :

- The level of shared experience is high, as one can see in the case of close relationships between spouses, twins, parent and child, etc. ;
- The sender of the message tries to discard his/her own value judgments and to adjust himself/herself to the judgment yardstick of his/her counterpart ; and

- The meanings of signs (words, etc.) are standardized by codes, such as rules, dictionaries, etc.

The third condition is especially important, since we can avoid unintelligibility among businesspeople involved in globalized communication if we develop official or semi-official codes that act as international rules for the interpretation of words and phrases in international business.

The next is the sources of unintelligibility. These are (1) pronunciation, (2) vocabulary, and (3) cultural schemas. The last factor of cultural schemas can be subdivided into : (1) culture, (2) social system, and (3) rhetoric and logic.

Regarding pronunciation, when people from different regions in the world speak English, they are influenced by their local tongues as far as sounds are concerned. This localization can foster different pronunciation. Moreover, some language pairs have neither the same nor even similar sounds to each other.

As for vocabulary, special meanings are apt to be given to particular English words that only local people mutually understand. Sometimes, moreover, the meanings of such words are quite different from their originals in the English of native speakers. These special meanings are not available in standard dictionaries. Even between so-called Standard English speaking countries, this problem often occurs. As Bernard Shaw put it, a common language divides the UK and the US. Today, it is said that there are thousands of differences between British and American English.

Finally, cultural conventions are different from country to country. All these differences are reflected in the respective varieties of English. And, these differences often lead to misunderstanding or a sense of dissonance, which can be called differing 'cultural schemas'. I will provide some examples in the next section.

Causes and Realities of Unintelligibility

Let us examine first the case of differences in both pronunciation and vocabulary. For example, in Papua New Guinea over two million people use Tok Pisin, an English-based pidgin, as a commercial and administrative language. However, a local pidgin English such as the following advertisement would not be intelligible to many of us living outside the region :

Colgate i save stronggim tit bilong yu. Lukaut : planti switpela kaikai na loli savi бага-

ranpim tit hariap.

When businesspeople coming from outside the region encounter this type of English and local people who use this type of English, they would not be able to communicate. This Tok Pisin can be translated as follows :

Colgate strengthens your teeth. Take care. Lots of sugary foods and sweets rot your teeth fast.

(Source : *World Englishes : A research book for students*, 2nd Ed.)

Please note that ‘bagarapim’ is the verb meaning ‘to destroy’ from English ‘bugger up’ and ‘hariap’ is the adverb to mean ‘fast’ from English ‘hurry up’. How many people in the world who may have some basic knowledge of English can understand this kind of Tok Pisin when it is spoken or written? Not many can visualize even slightly what this statement really means.

However, at the same time, in some other region such as the US, we encounter similarly unintelligible English expressions. Not only Papua New Guinean business people and those who have no knowledge of baseball, but also many of those living outside the US cannot understand the following colloquial baseball- and auto-related expressions :

Baseball :

- Hit singles, not homers – perform steadily, not erratically
- Warm the bench – not be used much (applies to persons)
- Strikeout – failure
- He fanned – he failed to do the task or did it badly
- Bush league (minor league) – not first-rate

Auto :

- Rev up – speed things up
- Put the pedal to the metal – get going faster on the job
- My tank is empty – I’m tired
- Use your headlights – use your eyes
- Shift gears – work harder (or slower)

The fact that English is a common language does not always guarantee that it will be-

come easier for people to realize mutual understanding. There are unexpected pitfalls in the use of emails, faxes, letters, phone conversations, and in face-to-face meetings across nations and cultures, even if we use BELF.

David Crystal (2003, p.187) introduces an interesting incident in this regard as follows : “There was once a nice moment when the US, UK and Australian delegates were all reduced to incoherence because they found that they had disbarred themselves from using any of their natural expressions for ‘the safe walking route at the side of a road’ – *pavement* (UK), *side-walk* (US) and *footpath* (Australian). In the absence of a regionally neutral term, all they were left with was circumlocution (such as the one just given).”

When we think of these and other examples of unintelligibility, we come up against possibly competing uses of a language. As Kirkpatrick (2007, p.10) writes, “Language has three major functions. The first is communication – people use language to communicate with one another. The second is identity – people use language to signal to other people who they are and what group(s) they belong to. The third, which is closely related to identity, is culture – people use language to express their culture.”

The reason for the existence of a standard language (to promote mutual intelligibility) is often in competition with the reason for the existence of local dialects (to promote local identity). Crystal (2003, p.127) notes, “The need for intelligibility and the need for identity often pull people – and countries – in opposing directions. The former motivates the learning of an international language, with English the first choice in most cases ; the latter motivates the promotion of ethnic language and culture.” A good example is the case of Singapore where English is one of the four official languages. While children and students learn standard British English at school, they themselves and their family members often speak localized Singaporean English or so-called Singlish such as “One person come? Your wife don’t come?” for “You must be lonesome coming to this place alone. Why didn’t your wife come along with you?”

Toward Ideal BELF

Based on the problems of the current one-size fits all BELF, we need to develop measures to improve and also promote the better use of BELF. Among these are :

- Formation of explicit rules for the use and unified interpretations of a BELF ;
- The division of global BELF into several regional BELFs ; and

- The promotion of diglossic use of BELF.

The first need, to form explicit rules defining terms for the use and also unified interpretations of a BELF, results from the following :

- Misunderstandings frequently arise with respect to the proper interpretation of business terms and phrases ; and
- Meanings reside in people, not in words, and differ from culture to culture, region to region, and country to country.

Problems are often caused when business people, such as a seller and a buyer, or a superior and a subordinate, do not share an understanding of the words they use to impart and interpret information. If both parties proceed with business even though they unknowingly assign different meanings to key business terms, it is likely that time, and possibly money, too, will be lost.

For example, the word ‘delivery’ can be easily misunderstood. It can mean ‘loading of goods on a ship’, ‘moving goods out the door of a factory’, or ‘goods actually reaching a customer’. The word ‘delivery’ used in international trade practice is interchangeable with ‘shipment’ unless otherwise specified. However, not everyone who does international business knows this standardized definition.

CAD is another business term causing confusion to international traders. CAD is often used in Europe for settlements. Its standardized meaning is ‘cash against documents’, namely, the payment should be made in exchange for the documents, including the most important title document, the Ocean Bill of Lading. However, there are business people who are apt to take CAD as ‘cash after delivery,’ which is much more lax term than the former. Clearly efforts are needed to foster learning of standardized definitions of key business terms.

However, even such ordinary English words as ‘tomorrow’, ‘immediately’, ‘return ticket’, etc. often cause trouble between two parties simply because the meanings of these words are different from culture to culture. In sum, it is desirable for global business people to set up unified rules for the use of BELF words to foster universal intelligibility. A good model is the set of rules known as the “Incoterms”. Incoterms are the official ICC (International Chamber of Commerce) rules for the interpretation of trade terms. The purpose of Incoterms is to provide standardized definitions and guidelines for the interpretations and usage of the most commonly used terms in foreign trade. “Incoterms” stands for International Commercial Terms

(Incoterms 2010).

Back in the 1920s, the International Chamber of Commerce in Paris conducted a study of the interpretation of the more important trade terms. This study demonstrated that the terms were understood differently in different countries. Therefore, the outcome of a dispute between seller and buyer often was dependent on the place where the dispute would be resolved. This involved juridical risks for the seller or the buyer that could create serious disputes and adversely affect future business between them. For this reason, it was considered important to develop rules for the interpretation of the trade terms, which the parties to the contract of sale could agree to apply. These rules were first published in 1936 under the title of “International Rules for the Interpretation of Trade Terms,” nowadays known as Incoterms, whose latest version is the Incoterms 2010.

We need some kind of Incoterms-like limitations for the use of BELF to guarantee mutual intelligibility. What I would like to propose is that we add 500 words most often used in business to GLOBISH, a subset of the English language formalized by Jean-Paul Nerriere, consisting of a simplified standard English grammar and a list of 1,500 English words, to make an overall basic list of 2,000 BELF words.

Before going further into this issue, let me explain a little bit about GLOBISH. Here are the features of Globish as described by Nerrier and Hon (2009, pp.86–88) :

- Globish has 1500 words, expandable in four ways :
 - Different use of same words,
 - Combinations of words,
 - Short additions to words, and
 - Phrasal Verbs.
- Globish uses mostly Active Voice.
- Globish suggests short sentences (15 words or fewer).
- Globish pronunciation has fewer necessary sounds than traditional English.
- Globish speakers use their body, their hands and their face when they talk.
- Globish speakers are very careful about humor, idioms and examples.
- Globish is a “Closed System of Natural Language.”

The 1,500 words that Nerrier and Hon offer would not be enough to cover cross-cultural business dialogues either in spoken or written English. How many is enough? One answer comes from a March 2011 round-table discussion sponsored by *Weekly Toyo Keizai*, a leading

economic weekly in Japan, attended by professors, government officials, consultants, company presidents, etc. all specializing in global business operations and rich in their overseas experience. At this round table, Prof. Hinata from Keio University, who is an expert in this field, suggested that the number of English words used in global business was said to be from 1,800 words to 2,000 words.

Assuming that this number is approximately correct, we can divide the list into three groups, consisting, first, of 1500 Globish-type BELF words for use in (A) primary industries, (B) secondary industries, and (C) tertiary industries. All these three BELFs must be part of an agreed on system of rules, such as the Incoterms.

The additional 500 words should be divided into two groups. The first group of 300 words would be used for each of the three types of industry's own terminology. The second group of 200 words would be shared by the three industries but used for management, trade, marketing, etc.

The selection of these 500 words would involve cooperation among linguistic researchers or research centers working with multinational corporations. Revision of the meanings of the 500 words would have to occur every ten years or so to cope with the development of the business world and its language usage.

Of crucial importance would be the development of a promotional campaign to foster the wide use of this standardized BELF, requiring the cooperation of both universities and business organizations.

Regionalized BELF and Its Diaglossic Use

A regional BELF, a common language in a given region in the world, could be built up in collaboration with each ethnic group in the region. Just as Europeans have many common English usages to share with each other, Asian people have some common features of communication patterns and similar ways of using English.

Regional block base BELF would find its way as a practical language group, such as Germanic BELF, Romance BELF, Arabic BELF, South Asian BELF, ASEAN BELF, Chinese BELF, and so on, with an authorized guideline explaining the linguistic and communication features of each. The purpose of this kind of guideline for each BELF would be to provide people who belong to another BELF group with warnings or advice on the particular use of the English language in the region. This guideline must be legitimized and managed by governmental or official organizations such as the European Commission, The ASEAN Secretar-

iat, etc. to guarantee an authoritative guiding standard for the use of each BELF.

Only after first going through this development of regional BELFs will a universal BELF eventually have a chance of emerging in global trade and business circles. This result would be due to the sincere and selfless cooperation of regional BELF authorities joining together to contribute to a worldwide standard. This universal BELF would maintain a fair and acceptable relationship not only to so-called Standard English but also to any regional BELF in the world.

As I noted in my previous paper (Kameda, 2012), about twenty years ago, a *Time* magazine correspondent interviewed Aung San Suu Kyi, a Nobel Peace Prize laureate, in Burma. During the interview she spoke about her father, General Aung San, the savior of Burma, and said, “. . . he was really a great man. I feel embarrassed saying this about my father, but the more you study his life, the more impressed you are.” Asian modesty, a common communication pattern, is well expressed in this English utterance. If the interviewee were an American, he or she would never use the word “embarrassed” and might say something like “I am very proud of my father. He was really a great person, who did wonderful things for our country!”

Though both Aung San Suu Kyi and this imaginary American use the same language, English, the ways they speak it are completely different, though both are acceptable in their cultures. Regardless of the differences among regional nations, cultures, and languages, however, almost all Asians can fully understand the way she speaks, which clearly shows Asian modesty. If we could establish a new BELF identified as a common inter-regional trade and managerial language within the Southeast Asian block, the overall business communication in the region would become smoother.

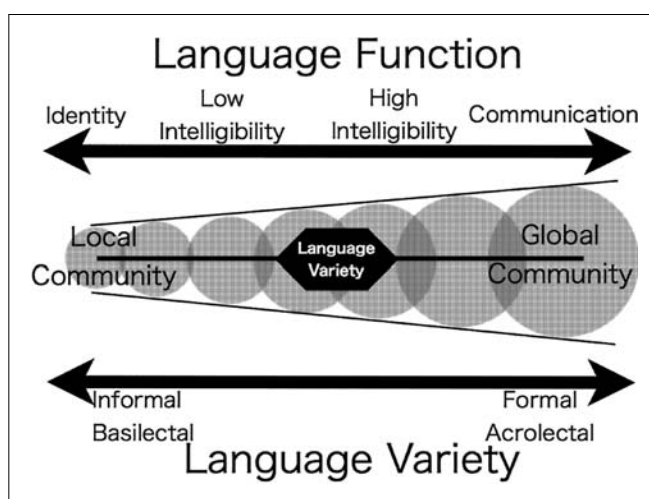
There is a pressing need to persist in this development process before realizing a Universal BELF. The emergence of the New Englishes has been often compared to the spread and subsequent break-up of Vulgar Latin throughout the Roman world. The controversial thesis by Dr. Robert Burchfield, the then Chief Editor of the OED, back in 1970s, was that just as Latin broke up into mutually unintelligible European languages such as French, Spanish, and Italian with the decline of the Roman Empire, global English will similarly disintegrate into separate languages over a period of several centuries (*The Story of English*). We must not repeat such a break-up of our BELF as Latin experienced centuries ago.

In the future, however, people will continue the trend, called diglossia, of using more than one dialect, especially when and where one is a means of expressing group identity and the other satisfies practical requirements of wider communication in the world.

English is steadily moving towards becoming a diglossic language. As noted earlier, in

such places as Singapore two or more spoken dialects of English coexist. One is for intelligibility (Standard British English) and the other for identity (Singlish). We can see a similar situation in many other places such as the Philippines, Malaysia, and many African nations that used to be British colonies. One dialect (which can be called Universal-BELF) is used for transmitting information and the other (Local-BELF) for signaling identity. These two versions of BELF collectively add up to a ‘link language’ among various English-using ethnic groups within a nation as well as the nation’s means of entry into the economic community. The relative importance of each version within a region can be located along an “identity – communication continuum.” Such a location will indicate how far the region has to go to establish a standardized BELF for use in global business.

Let me quote Crystal again. He wrote, “Most people are already ‘multidialectal’ to a greater or lesser extent. They use one spoken dialect at home, when they are with their family, or talking to other members of their local community : this tends to be an informal variety, full of casual pronunciation, colloquial grammar, and local turns of phrases. They use another spoken dialect when they are away from home, travelling to different parts of their country or interacting with others at their place of work : this tends to be a formal variety, full of careful pronunciation, conventional grammar, and standard vocabulary (2003, p.185).” Thus, people will continue to use more than one BELF especially where one (Local-BELF) is a means of expressing group solidarity and the other (Universal-BELF) satisfies practical requirements of wider communication. The accompanying chart illustrates the point.



Source : author

Conclusion

My goal here has been to analyze the dimensions of BELF (Business English as a Lingua Franca) and also discuss its future, whether or not it will diverge into pidgins or evolve into a truly universal lingua franca. I hypothesize that BELF will diverge into regional groups' pidgins that become mutually unintelligible to each other unless steps are taken to redirect the trend.

I propose three measures that should be taken. These involve (1) forming a set of unified rules which provide standardized definitions of about 2,000 terms for a BELF, (2) systematizing regionalized BELFs so that they are in accord with the rules, and (3) promoting diglossic use of BELF in a manner which accommodates the use of language for identity communication without threatening its use as a BELF for information transmission within a global business environment. A number of steps need to be taken to improve and promote the use of BELFs, taking into account the varied functions of language and dealing with the sources of unintelligibility.

In sum, BELF will fragment into mutually unintelligible pidgins unless representatives of the various communities in the world come together to begin the process of developing standardized regional BELFs that exist in a diglossic relationship within each culture with a localized BELF useful for identity-affirmation practices. The existence of Globish and the Inco-terms will serve as valuable resources in beginning the project.

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