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**Communities of practice and English as a lingua franca: A study of
Erasmus students in Szeged**

PhD dissertation summary

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1. Introduction

The aim of my dissertation is to describe the complexities of English as a lingua franca (ELF) as it is used by a group of Erasmus exchange students engaged in social practice. ELF is commonly defined as English in use among speakers of different first languages (VOICE website). From another perspective, it is seen as a “bridging language” for speakers who are bi- or multilingual in English, and whose diverse linguistic repertoires overlap in English (Smit 2010: 17). My goal is to give fresh insights into how ELF, and languages in general, can be conceived of by bringing the social into the linguistic. Thus, my focus is *not* on language use per se, but on the social practices which are instantiated through linguistic means.

My project can be defined as an ethnographic study inspired by what is sometimes referred to as grounded theory. That is, I engaged in an ethnographic study in which my interest and questions were outlined in advance, but the findings emerged iteratively over time through my participation in fieldwork. My research was begun while working with the Languages in a Network of European Excellence (LINEE) project¹, which led me to realize that for a better understanding of the Erasmus students’ linguistic situation in their temporary community in Szeged one needed ethnographic methods. Based on my careful reading of the community of practice literature in language and gender research and in language socialization research, I decided that the community of practice model had a great analytical potential for the field of ELF. Thus, I adopted the community of practice framework to design my study for data collection and analysis from the start.

On the theoretical level, a major asset of the community of practice framework is its practice component (Wenger 1998). Practices are linguistic and non-linguistic social activities, views, beliefs and attitudes which the individual members adopt (or resist) as a way of coordinating (or not coordinating) their actions and aims with those they want (or do not want) to be seen as forming one community. Shared practices are both a resource in building, and an indicator of belonging to, a group. In a dynamic process, practices emerge to achieve a shared goal (also called a joint enterprise), then they are solidified in practice, which sustains the enterprise. Thus, shared practices both reflect and create the joint enterprise. Participation in shared practices implies learning and results in the formation of new identities with respect to the group.

¹ LINEE (Languages in a Network of European Excellence) was a linguistic project funded by the European Commission’s 6th Framework Program (FP6 – contract number 028388). The project started in November 2006 with the participation of nine institutions across Europe. It was divided into three phases. The first two phases lasted for 18 months each, the third for 6 months.

On the analytical level, the community of practice relies quite specifically on ethnographic techniques for collecting data, qualitative methods for analyzing social practices, and discourse analytic techniques for analyzing linguistic practices. To this end, I collected both interactional data as well as emic data. The emic data served as a basis for providing an ethnographic account of the community, and to analyze the participants' views on their own linguistic, social and interactional processes. Furthermore, the emic data helped me identify the significant or representative social interactions, and to develop the analytical criteria for the interactional analysis of the naturally occurring spoken and written communications. Thus, in analyzing the corpus of spontaneous, everyday conversations, I focused on practices – both linguistic and non-linguistic – which the participants imbued with meaning and which seemed to have characterized the community.

Before my fieldwork, and until very recently, we knew next to nothing about how the use of ELF intersects with the speakers' activities, views, and interests within locally based communities. Since 2006 when leading ELF researchers argued convincingly for more “qualitative studies with a strong ethnographic element” to be undertaken in ELF (Seidlhofer et al. 2006: 21), ELF researchers have increasingly turned to qualitative research envisaged along exploratory lines. Qualitatively oriented studies are now becoming the “ELF mainstream” but, quite regrettably, the focus (still) remains on language use defined in terms of linguistic data only. Along with this, as Smit (2010: 80) points out, due to the cross-sectional nature of current ELF research, researchers continue to concentrate on once-off encounters, and offer ELF “snapshots” only.

To build explanatory power into the discussions of ELF, Seidlhofer (2007) encourages researchers to consider the notion of communities of practice as an alternative to that of speech communities. Following Seidlhofer's (2007) advice, many ELF researchers now opt for the community of practice theory; however, very few of them consider the analytical value of the notion. The exceptions are Ehrenreich (2009) and Smit (2009, 2010), who consider ELF a social practice, and place the ELF community, rather than the code center-stage. They work within the community of practice model, and follow a richly contextualized, long-term, ethnographic approach. This points to at least two gaps in current ELF research and theorizing.

Firstly, there is a need for more research into ELF as social practice. More specifically, there is a need for more research into ELF as a community-based social practice, and into ELF interactions whose interlocutors are engaged with one another

over a sustained period and on a long-term basis. Secondly, there is a need for more research which does not only “use” the notion of communities of practice as a theoretical background with no empirically-grounded evidence, but instead “applies” the concept as an analytical tool. My dissertation addresses these gaps. To that end, it offers an emic, richly contextualized, long-term, qualitative investigation of ELF. By examining students whose community of practice centers around activities outside of school, the present dissertation is arguably the first linguistic ethnography of a non-institutionalized ELF community of practice.

2. Aims and research questions

A general aim of my dissertation is to describe ELF in the context of the Szeged Erasmus community’s social practices. To that end, I combine current perspectives on ELF with the community of practice model (Wenger 1998) where former requires interactional data, and the latter richly contextualized, ethnographically inspired data. The ethnographic method brings into view the social meanings with which the participants invested their linguistic and other social practices. The research is guided by one major research question as set out in three sub-questions:

- *How do the Szeged Erasmus students define themselves as a group? In other words, from the community of practice perspective, what are their jointly negotiated enterprises, repertoires and resources?*
 - a) *What tools and resources do they bring to bear to engage in their jointly negotiated practices reflecting a shared goal?*
 - b) *What does a closer examination of linguistic practices in the community tell us about ELF? That is, what does it mean to be a competent ELF speaker within the community?*
 - c) *What effects do the different linguistic resources that the students bring to the community have on the overall practices of the group? That is, how do the different linguistic resources intersect with identities demonstrating membership in the group?*

These questions emerged, on the one hand, on the basis of fieldwork and examining the data. On the other hand, they were formed by the theory of community of practice combined with

insights of the current ELF perspective. The overall question aims at describing the practices – both linguistic and social – that identified the Szeged Erasmus community of practice. In other words, it aims at an inventory of the richly contextualized linguistic and non-linguistic social practices which the participants purposefully adopted as a way of obtaining and securing membership in the group of the Szeged Erasmus students.

The first sub-question through which the main question is to be answered seeks to describe the activities, interests and views which the students adopted to create a shared resource of evolving practices. In the second sub-question, the aim is to focus on the linguistic practices with an even more particular focus on ELF practices. In other words, this question sets the goal of describing, in detail, what counted as “ELF competence” within the group. In keeping with the community of practice theory, in the context of the present study gaining communicative competence is understood as gaining control of the linguistic practices which are appropriate to the jointly negotiated enterprise. Finally, the third sub-question is geared at examining what linguistic resources were brought to bear to express central versus peripheral membership in the Szeged Erasmus community.

3. Methodology

The study was conducted in Szeged with the participation of 142 Erasmus exchange students who studied temporarily at the local university, of whom 15 were closely involved in the study. The study spanned one academic year while I was working as a LINEE researcher between 2006 and 2010². As the result of the nearly one-year data collection procedure, I compiled a large corpus of interview data including audio-taped and transcribed interviews and prompted e-mails, as well as observational data including audio-taped and transcribed naturally occurring interactions, field notes, Facebook posts and e-mail messages. The 15 closely involved students participated in a variety of data collection methods each, whereas the majority of the students participated in events where the data collection method was participant observation only. The data analysis has employed both qualitative and discourse analytic methods. In the analysis, I have aligned the key practices that emerged from the data with what I knew about language and interaction, which included insights from Conversation Analysis (CA) and ELF literature.

² For ethical considerations, I have decided not to reveal the exact date of the data collection.

4. Overview of the dissertation

The dissertation is divided into five main parts and consists of eight chapters. The first part involves the introduction (Chapter 1), the second part the theoretical framework (Chapter 2), the third part the methodology (Chapter 3), the fourth part presents the empirical chapters (Chapters 4 through 7), and the fifth part is dedicated to the summary of the results and the conclusions (Chapter 8). Chapter 1 begins with the presentation of fieldwork and data. This is followed with the research questions, which are formulated on the basis of data and previous studies. Then, in the final section of Chapter 1, previous approaches to the community of practice model are reviewed. Chapter 2 further describes the context in which the present study is to be placed. It is divided into three parts: the first part clarifies the methodological and ontological positioning of ELF; the second part presents an elaborated definition of ELF; and the third part provides details of previous findings. Chapter 3 first articulates the epistemological assumptions that the present study follows. Then, it weaves together detailed descriptions of the research site and context. This is followed by detailed descriptions of the ethnographic methods for collecting data, and of the qualitative and discourse analytic methods for analyzing data. Chapter 4 provides an ethnographic account of the Szeged Erasmus community. The ethnographic sources are interviews, e-mails, participant observations and online documents; conversations are not analyzed here. Chapters 5, 6 and 7 examine the shared linguistic practices and resources tied to group membership. Each empirical chapter ends with a discussion section where the results of the dissertation are placed into a larger context of earlier research. Practical applications of the study are discussed as well. Finally, Chapter 8 first summarizes the results by linking them to the individual research questions. Then, pulling together the results of the dissertation and those of my pre-dissertation work, it discusses the impact of the Erasmus Program on students studying abroad in a central European context, with a particular emphasis on the role and status of English in the students' lives. The dissertation ends with a list of references and appendices.

5. Results

Chapter 4 elaborates on the process of getting into the community on arrival, and on the ways in which the Szeged Erasmus community sustained itself in and outside of Szeged. The single most important motivating force underlying the Szeged Erasmus community was the desire to build a local social network. The students had a range of different goals, but this was the one which they came to jointly practice. The students with the primary aim of

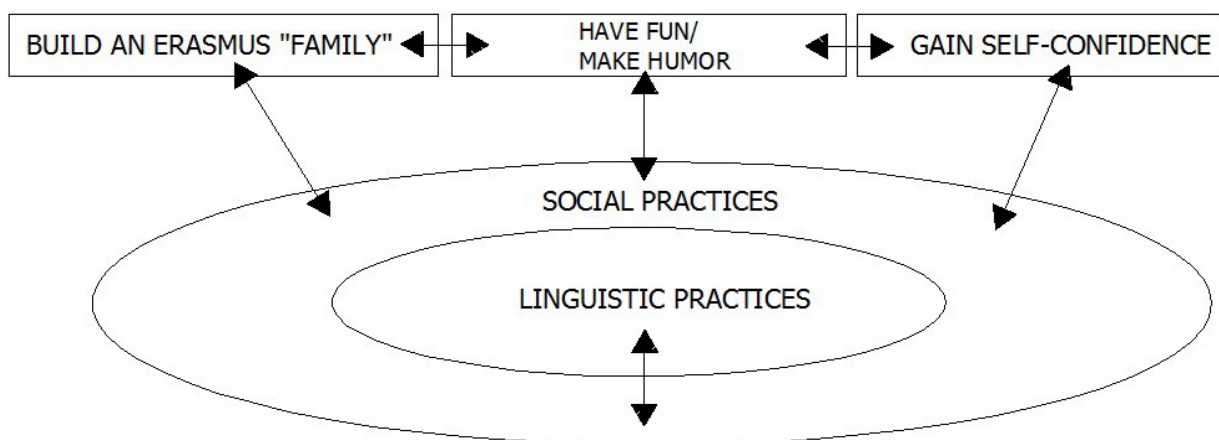
building a local Erasmus network gathered in what they called a “subgroup” within the Erasmus students’ entire group. The “subgroup” initiated the joint activities, and they defined the forms of participation for the entire group. They negotiated partying and traveling as their main forms of mutual engagement. Then, over time, through mutual engagement in partying and traveling, they developed shared negotiable resources and further refined their shared goals. In the light of Wenger (1998), this serves as evidence for them having dynamically built a community of practice, of which the “subgroup” was the core, and the remaining Erasmus students the periphery.

The Szeged Erasmus community was unique in the respect that the community of practice did not only emerge as a by-product through mutual engagement in shared practices, but the building of a community was itself a jointly negotiated enterprise. Their goal was to build, as they said, an Erasmus “family” whose members shared close ties. To that end, they built and maintained two kinds of relationships: “family” relations and friendships. Both were based on solidarity and mutual liking; in what they differed is that “family” relations connected *all* the Szeged Erasmus students, including those who did not know each other well, whereas friendships connected only those who got to know each other well. Thus, the participants typically made friends with a few Erasmus students only, but felt close to, and wanted to be seen as one community with, all the Szeged Erasmus students. As a way of building and maintaining their “family” relations (and with it, their Erasmus “family”), they organized big group events where they could mutually engage with each other, and they could develop and expand their repertoire of shared practices.

“Family” relations and friendships were built and maintained not only with the goal of building a specific community, but also with the desire to gain self-confidence in Szeged. Firstly, “family” relations made the students more self-confident members of the emerging community by preventing them from feeling lonely or home-sick. The students learnt that they could join the “family” of the local Erasmus students at whichever party or trip and they would not be imposing themselves on others. In the Erasmus “family”, they were always welcome. Secondly, the students gained self-confidence from the fact that there were people with whom they could meet up during the the day, that is, outside of the big “family” events as well. These kinds of meetings were more “personal” and “intimate”, as they claimed, and they made the students’ stay in Szeged “nicer”. Furthermore, they made them realize that there were people who relied on them, and on whom they could rely when in need.

Finally, the participants negotiated having fun as another shared goal. More specifically, they desired (and built) a “family” which provided a context for the drinking of alcoholic drinks, the playing of games (often drinking games), and for engaging themselves in what they called “crazy things”. All things considered, then, the participants sought to realize the shared goal of (1) building a friendship and family based network with a focus on (2) fun and (3) self-confidence. The joint enterprises were created and sustained through the shared negotiable resources of linguistic and non-linguistic practices, as illustrated in Figure 5.1 below:

Figure 5.1 An overview of the joint enterprises



Chapter 5 shows that “family” relations and friendships were mainly built through linguistic means. “Family” relations, in particular, were tied to the use of ELF. Once the participants had recognized that English was the only language which all of them shared, they negotiated and, from that on, required English (used as a lingua franca) in all group-wide communications. As they explained, in making this “decision”, they followed a democratic principle: they wanted to ensure that no-one in the big “family” was excluded from conversations.

Concerning friendships, the participants gave (or took) the space for using a variety of languages, be it the participants’ L1 or another additionally learnt language (Ln). Initially, many of them built friendships with the L1 speakers of the same language, but their L1-based subgroups had no rigid borders. Over time many of those who initially established friendships in their L1 made friends outside of their “little groups” as well. With L1 speakers of different languages, the students opted for the language which suited their individual purposes most. That is, they negotiated the

language on a local basis depending on who wanted to use (or practice) which language and, more often than not, they did so to the mutual appreciation of both (or all) parties. The only case when the participants did not reach a satisfying solution was when a student considering themselves a learner of English refused to use their L1 with the Ln speakers of the language, and instead insisted on their use of English (as a *lingua franca*).

Chapter 5 further shows what shared negotiable resources the students built *in* English used as a *lingua franca* to create a “family” support social system. They developed a shared resource of ritual practices accomplishing important everyday tasks, such as greeting, addressing, swearing, teasing, apologizing, thanking, congratulating, “party conversations” and “real conversations”. The ritual practices meant drawing on a set of language forms, many of which were in a language other than English. Thus, very often when the participants were to greet each other or address each other, they were expected to make a language choice and to switch codes. However, the type of code-switching they used for accomplishing ritual practices is different from the type of code-switching current ELF researchers examine. Here code-switching does not mean “spontaneous” code-switching which creates something new on the spot, but rather “repetitive” or “ritualized” code-switching which recycles “old” code-switched utterances.

Chapter 6 demonstrates that the desire for fun resulted in particular shared linguistic resources and practices developing. Thus, making fun with linguistic resources meant joking *about* the language, as well as joking *in* the language. Their propensity to joke about the language had to do with the fact that they were in the “strange/foreign land” of the Hungarian society in Szeged, in which language use, language learning, and misunderstandings were a key feature of their “strangeness” and “awkwardness”. Their language skills (or lack of them) were salient both at the level of English and at the level of the local language of the environment. Hence, they made fun of their language skills (or lack of them) in either of two languages. As regards their propensity to joke *in* the language, they used English in at least three different ways to create humorous effects. One of their strategies was to switch codes (both “spontaneously” and “ritually”), the other strategy implied a careful use of paralinguistic features, and the third strategy meant the use of word play.

Chapter 6 further shows how the participants exploited their shared negotiable resources to maximize the humorous effect (and to build a friendship and “family” support system). Their humor was a collaborative achievement in which they drew on shared ways of thinking, speaking and believing through several subsequent turns. Thus, their humor flew

from one turn to the next, in the form of accommodation for convergence. As an example, when a student switched codes, made an ironical contribution, spoke in a sing-song voice, or made an implicit reference to a “naughty” topic, the speaker of the next turn likely followed suit. Besides that, in the joint construction of humor, the participants often adopted interactional strategies such as collaborative utterance building, cooperative overlaps and repetitions as acknowledgment tokens. Thus, while the students jointly built a humorous effect, they simultaneously practiced rapport and solidarity, which resulted in the building of a friendship and “family” based social system.

Finally, Chapter 7 elaborates on the linguistic resources that helped the participants to become more self-confident speakers of their emerging “family”. The shared linguistic practices developed self-confidence in English, which though a shared code and a key practice, was not without any problems. At the beginning of their study abroad experience, the students claimed that they lacked self-confidence in their abilities to use English “well”. The chapter shows that over time the students helped each other become more self-confident speakers of English (as a lingua franca) by ensuring each other of their help at problematic moments.

Thus, when a speaker was faced with a moment of word search or was struggling with interpreting the previous turn, one or more of the co-participants joined in and offered language support. Language support at moments of word search took the form of collaborative utterance building. That is, after a direct request for, or an implicit signal of the help needed, the co-participants either provided the missing utterance, or they made a joint effort to construct a local meaning on the spot. In return to the help offered, the trouble-source turn speaker accepted and incorporated the utterance they had been provided with or, if language support was geared towards some local meaning, they continued the joint construction of the missing utterance until a satisfying “solution” was reached. Language support at moments of failed understanding, on the other hand, meant a negotiation of meaning process in which one or more of the co-participants (not necessarily the trouble-source turn speaker) repeated, paraphrased or clarified the problematic utterance. Thus, the Szeged Erasmus students became more self-confident speakers of English (used as a lingua franca) by turning the otherwise problematic moments of word search and non-understandings into mutually accepted practices resolved in a joint effort.

6. Conclusions and implications

In my dissertation I set the goal of providing an accurate picture of the Szeged Erasmus students' linguistic situation by examining how language fits in with the students' everyday social life, and what it means for them. My dissertation and my pre-dissertation work under the auspices of the LINEE project³ together paint a detailed picture of the Erasmus exchange students' linguistic situation in a Central European context, with a particular emphasis on the role and status of English in their day-to-day life. My work lends itself to the following conclusions and implications.

Firstly, the Szeged Erasmus exchange students had both the willingness and the resources to build a temporary community of practice in their country of residence. That is, “over time and in response to others’ forms of participation, they learn[t] together about how to participate most meaningfully and also how to project their desired identities” (Duff 2006: 16). What this also implies is that during their study abroad the students were not actively involved in any of their home country or host country social networks, but rather created a new space for themselves. While the emerging community of practice was a happy and a safe place for the students, and the members talked about it in positive terms, it raises some important questions concerning identity, language, and even the purpose of study abroad programs.⁴

Further results of the present dissertation show that for the Szeged Erasmus exchange students English was a facilitator. In case of lacking other shared languages, it was the most important means of connecting with the other Erasmus students. The need for the use of English emerged as the majority of the participants demonstrated no competence in the local language. The recognition (or even the assumption) that the local students did not speak English had great consequences: it made the students redirect their energies from the local students' social networks to the Erasmus students' group, with whom their linguistic repertoires overlapped in English. Therefore, in countries of lesser used languages such as Hungary, English may be the most important means of connecting both with the other Erasmus students and the local peers. Thus, the English language pedagogy does need the ELF perspective, which frees up resources, and allows a great amount of teaching time currently devoted to the teaching of native-like forms to move to the teaching and learning of other languages.

³ See Kalocsai (2009).

⁴ Firstly, “Does the European Commission *want* the exchange students to occupy a ‘third space’ between their home countries and the host country?” Secondly, “What can the European Commission *do* in order to facilitate the exchange students’ access to the local students’ social networks?”

A third result of the present study is that in the process of re-inventing themselves as members of the emerging local Erasmus community, the Erasmus students also re-invented their language. That is, they showed readiness and willingness to “make it [their] own, bend it to [their] will [and] assert [themselves] through it” (Widdowson 1993: 43). Since the participants of the present study built their community of practice in and through English, the language which they skillfully re-invented was English. Through developing their shared resources, they created through practice their own “version” of ELF, which was of short duration only, but has major implications. ELF speakers engaged in social practice may make the fleeting, changeable nature of ELF “fixed” to the extent that it helps them define themselves as a group.

Another major issue the present study has brought to light concerns the Erasmus students’ identity as users versus learners of English. The participants of the present study were users of English, in the first place, and learners of English in the second place. That is, they used English for the needs of their everyday lives, but in the mean time they also developed shared practices for positioning themselves as L2 learners. Their shared practices did not imply an L2 learner who is on the way to becoming more native-like but is doomed never to get there (Cook 2005: 3), but rather an L2 learner who takes on a learner identity by choice, as and when appropriate, as a way of exploiting a shared resource.

Finally, both my pre-dissertation work and the present study have shed light on the Erasmus students’ “natural interest in languages” (Stark 2009: 175). For the Szeged Erasmus students, in particular, code-switching was a key shared practice, which involved “spontaneous” code-switching for humorous effect as well as “ritualized” code-switching for the creation of a friendship and “family” based social system. Thus, contrary to current ELF research findings, in the Szeged Erasmus community code-switching was for the creation of humor, rapport, and a “family” more so than for the accomplishing of intelligibility, or for the signaling of linguacultural identities. All things considered, then, the dissertation points to the conclusion that there is a need for a careful understanding of the social context in which ELF is used or is developing.

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