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Mapping ELF for applied linguistics

The increasing pace of globalization over recent decades has altered the way we understand and map out the world, and it therefore seems reasonable to expect the way we think of human communication in this (not very brave) new world to have changed accordingly. But it seems that conceptual adjustments in this respect have not kept pace. The conventional mapping of 'English' has been called into question as obviously outdated, but what has not been so obvious is that its spatial spread as a lingua franca calls into question not only what constitutes 'English', but the validity of our academic maps of such basic concepts as competence, community, and culture. And here ELF research has wider implications for the study of communication, both in theory and practice.

The need to extend the conceptual scope of cartography has been recognized for some time. In addition to traditional topographic maps of particular areas of the globe, other kinds of map have gained sophistication and significance. For instance, there are thematic maps tracing the location of whales, political voting patterns, and maps attempting to tell the complex story of the human footprint on the planet, including the transportation and communication systems that both result from and drive globalization. It seems not too fanciful to suggest that just as these dynamic maps help us get better at geospatial thinking, so mapping out the essential processes of ELF communication can guide us in our engagement with problems which fall within the scope of applied linguistics.

A case in point is the theme of transient groups and fairly fleeting encounters in which a large proportion of daily lingua franca communication takes place. These can be relatively unproblematic, everyday exchanges such as service encounters and casual conversations among tourists. But others are unequal encounters characterized by a power differential between the communicating parties, such as asylum procedures, law enforcement, and conflict resolution efforts. Here, there is an immediate urgency in negotiating satisfactory relationships and outcomes, and failure to do so can have far-reaching consequences.

Just like some exciting innovations in cartography, the currently evolving methodology for investigating lingua franca interactions in such transient groups maps out how communication is enacted and so has particular significance for applied linguistics in that it directly relates to the problems that human beings have to cope with in the real world.

Bionote

Barbara Seidlhofer is Professor of English and Applied Linguistics at the University of Vienna. Her research and teaching focus on the communicative use of English as a lingua franca: how it can be conceptualized and described within the context of sociolinguistic and pragmatic theory and its study made relevant to the practical concerns of applied linguistics. Barbara Seidlhofer is the founding director of the Vienna-Oxford International Corpus of English (VOICE) – recently released as VOICE 3.0 – and author of *Understanding English as a Lingua Franca* (Oxford University Press). She is past editor of the *International Journal of Applied Linguistics* and founding editor of the *Journal of English as a Lingua Franca*.