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The Role of English as a Lingua Franca in International Trade Negotiations

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Abstract— *English has become the default working language of cross-border commerce, yet the great majority of its users in this domain are not native speakers. This article examines the role of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) and, more specifically, Business English as a Lingua Franca (BELF) in international trade negotiations, synthesising three decades of research at the intersection of applied linguistics, pragmatics, and international business studies. Drawing on a narrative review of empirical and conceptual literature, the article traces the shift from a native-speaker-normed view of business English to a function-oriented, accommodation-based model in which intelligibility, cooperation, and relational competence outweigh grammatical correctness. It identifies four recurring themes in the literature: (i) the genre-specific pragmatics of negotiation talk, including hedging, repetition, and comprehension-checking; (ii) the accommodation and meaning-negotiation strategies that BELF users deploy to pre-empt and repair misunderstanding; (iii) the persistence of power asymmetries and native-speakerism despite the theoretical 'de-nativisation' of English; and (iv) the emerging influence of digital and AI-mediated communication on lingua franca negotiation practice. The article concludes that trade negotiation success in ELF settings depends less on proficiency in Standard English than on shared business and cultural knowledge, cooperative pragmatic strategies, and negotiators' capacity to co-construct meaning in real time. Implications for negotiation training, language policy in multinational firms, and English for Specific Business Purposes (ESBP) pedagogy are discussed, alongside directions for future research.*

Keywords— ***English as a Lingua Franca, Business English as a Lingua Franca (BELF), international trade negotiation, intercultural business communication, pragmatic accommodation, global Englishes***

I. INTRODUCTION

International trade is, in practice, conducted overwhelmingly in English, but it is a form of English that belongs to no single nation. Estimates cited across the business-communication literature consistently note that native speakers form a numerical minority among the world's English users, and this is nowhere more visible than in cross-border commerce, where a German buyer, a Japanese supplier, and a Brazilian intermediary may transact an entire deal without a single native speaker of English present in the room (Seidlhofer, 2011). This reality has prompted a substantial body of scholarship reconceptualising English not as a foreign language to be mastered against a native-speaker yardstick, but as a lingua franca a contact language whose norms are negotiated locally, in situ, by its users (Jenkins, 2015; Mauranen, 2012).

Within international business, this shift has crystallised into the concept of Business English as a Lingua Franca (BELF), a term developed to capture the distinctive, hybrid, and highly functional variety of English used by professionals for whom English is neither a first language nor, typically, a shared second culture (Louhiala-Salminen & Kankaanranta, 2011). Trade negotiation is one of the genres in which BELF's communicative demands are most acute: negotiators must simultaneously manage linguistic accuracy, cultural sensitivity, commercial risk, and interpersonal rapport, often under time pressure and with

asymmetric power relations between buyer and seller (Planken, 2005; Charles, 2007).

This article addresses three interrelated questions. First, how has the conceptualisation of English in international business shifted from an English-as-a-foreign-language (EFL) paradigm to an ELF/BELF paradigm, and what are the theoretical implications of that shift for the study of negotiation? Second, what pragmatic and interactional strategies characterise successful ELF communication in trade negotiation contexts? Third, what challenges linguistic, cultural, and political persist despite English's apparent neutrality as a lingua franca? In addressing these questions, the article synthesises findings from applied linguistics, international business communication, and, where relevant, pragmatics and discourse analysis, with a view to informing both theory-building and practice in negotiation training and ESBP pedagogy.

II. FROM EFL TO ELF/BELF: A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Early research on business English treated non-native usage largely as a deviation from native-speaker norms, implicitly positioning native English speakers as both linguistic authority and communicative advantage (Nickerson, 2005). The ELF paradigm that emerged from the work of Seidlhofer (2004, 2011) and colleagues challenged this deficit view, arguing that when English functions as a contact language among speakers of different first languages, its 'ownership' shifts to its users collectively, and communicative success is measured by mutual intelligibility rather than conformity to a native standard.

Kankaanranta and Louhiala-Salminen extended this reasoning to the corporate domain, coining BELF to denote English used as a neutral, shared communication code among business professionals of differing linguistic backgrounds, oriented toward getting the business done rather than toward native-like correctness (Kankaanranta & Louhiala-Salminen, 2013). Kankaanranta and Planken's (2010) influential study of BELF competence proposed that effective BELF use rests on three interlocking components: language and communication skills, knowledge of business practices and genre conventions, and a shared, negotiated understanding of the professional relationship itself. Crucially, none of these components privileges native-speaker fluency; instead, they foreground pragmatic flexibility, clarity, and cooperative meaning-making (Kankaanranta & Planken, 2010; Ehrenreich, 2010).

This reconceptualisation matters for the study of trade negotiation because negotiation is, at its core, a genre defined by asymmetric interests, strategic ambiguity, and the need to build enough trust to reach agreement. If English in this genre is understood as a co-constructed, situationally negotiated code rather than a fixed target norm, then negotiation research must attend as much to the interactional work participants do to establish shared meaning as to the propositional content of offers and counter-offers (Firth, 1996; Pitzl, 2005).

III. LITERATURE REVIEW: ELF AND BELF IN TRADE NEGOTIATION CONTEXTS

3.1 Genre-Specific Studies of Negotiation Talk

A relatively small but methodologically rich strand of research has examined negotiation as a distinct communicative genre within BELF scholarship. Planken's (2005) comparative study of professional and aspiring sales negotiators found that experienced BELF negotiators used rapport-management strategies including hedges, humour, and small talk more skilfully than novices, suggesting that negotiation competence in a lingua franca setting is acquired through professional socialisation rather than formal language instruction alone. Vuorela's (2005) case study of a sales team's international negotiations similarly showed that goal attainment depended less on grammatical polish than on the team's ability to read the counterpart's business priorities and adapt their discourse accordingly.

Charles's (2007) research on long-term buyer–seller relationships further demonstrated that language choice and negotiation style are embedded in the broader relationship history between trading partners: negotiators who had worked together over time developed shared linguistic shortcuts and implicit understandings that reduced the communicative burden English might otherwise impose. Poncini's (2004) analysis of multicultural distributor meetings likewise illustrated how participants from a dozen or more countries constructed a shared professional identity through English, using linguistic choices strategically to signal inclusion, deference, or authority within the negotiating group.

3.2 Pragmatic and Accommodation Strategies

A second, larger strand of literature examines the micro-level pragmatic strategies that make ELF negotiation work in practice. Building on Firth's (1996) foundational notion of the 'let-it-pass' principle whereby interlocutors tacitly overlook non-standard forms that do not impede understanding subsequent research has catalogued a repertoire of accommodation devices used by BELF speakers: comprehension checks, repetition and paraphrase, explicit confirmation requests, and self-initiated repair (Cogo & Dewey, 2012; Mauranen, 2012). Pitzl's (2005) study of non-understanding episodes in business talk found that participants rarely let misunderstandings derail a

negotiation; instead, they collaboratively repaired trouble spots through negotiated clarification, treating communication breakdown as a joint problem to be solved rather than a failing attributable to either party.

Hedging is a particularly well-documented strategy in this literature. Modal verbs, vague quantifiers, and conditional phrasing allow BELF negotiators to soften face-threatening moves such as rejecting an offer or pressing for concessions, making proposals more palatable across cultural and linguistic distance (Kankaanranta & Louhiala-Salminen, 2013). Nickerson's (2005) research similarly found that BELF users adapt their communicative style strategically according to power relations, industry norms, and the cultural expectations of their counterpart, rather than applying a single fixed register. More recent work has extended this attention to nonverbal and multimodal accommodation gesture, visualisation, and shared documentation as resources BELF users draw on alongside spoken language to make understanding visible in real time, particularly in face-to-face and hybrid meetings (see discussions of nonverbal communication strategies in BELF interaction).

Taken together, this literature suggests that what might appear, from a native-speaker-normed perspective, as linguistic 'simplification' is, in fact, a sophisticated and strategically deployed communicative competence: BELF negotiators prioritise functional clarity and relationship maintenance over idiomatic correctness, and they treat meaning as something to be jointly constructed rather than transmitted (Kankaanranta et al., 2015).

3.3 Power, Identity, and the Native-Speaker Question

Despite the theoretical de-nativisation of English proposed by ELF scholarship, empirical studies consistently find that native-speaker status continues to carry symbolic and, at times, material advantage in negotiation contexts. Kankaanranta and Louhiala-Salminen's survey research found that a substantial proportion of BELF users reported feeling disadvantaged relative to native speakers in meetings and negotiations, even while functioning competently in English for their day-to-day work; some respondents nonetheless described treating native speakers as informal models to emulate rather than resenting the asymmetry outright (see discussions in Kankaanranta & Louhiala-Salminen, 2010).

This tension connects to a broader critique, developed within sociolinguistics, of 'native-speakerism' the ideological privileging of native-speaker norms and native-speaking professionals in language teaching and international business alike (Jenkins, 2015). Ehrenreich's (2010) study of a German multinational corporation illustrated how, in practice, corporate language policies mandating 'English' as the official working language often left considerable interpretive latitude to employees, who developed localised, hybrid forms of BELF that diverged from Standard English while remaining fully functional for business purposes. Such findings complicate any straightforward claim that ELF is a linguistically 'neutral' or power-free medium: the choice of English itself, even when de-nativised in use, still advantages speakers with greater exposure to English-medium education, and trade negotiations conducted in English can subtly reproduce broader asymmetries between economically dominant and developing trading partners.

3.4 Digital Mediation and the Changing Negotiation Environment

A more recent development in the literature concerns the effect of digital communication technologies on ELF negotiation practice. E-mail, video conferencing, and instant messaging have become primary channels for pre-negotiation and follow-up exchanges, introducing new genre conventions such as the negotiated use of openings, closings, and politeness markers in written BELF correspondence that differ from those of face-to-face talk (Louhiala-Salminen et al., 2005). Research on BELF e-mail and virtual exchange has shown that written channels can both ease and complicate lingua franca negotiation: the absence of prosodic and nonverbal cues removes some accommodation resources available in spoken interaction, but the asynchronous nature of e-mail also affords negotiators more time to plan hedged, face-saving phrasing than real-time talk allows.

Pedagogical innovation has followed this shift: virtual-exchange projects have been used to give business students structured practice in BELF negotiation pragmatics, simulating cross-border deal-making between geographically dispersed classrooms. The growing use of machine translation and AI-assisted drafting tools in cross-border correspondence represents the newest frontier in this strand of research, raising open questions as yet only lightly addressed in the peer-reviewed literature about how such tools reshape accommodation strategies, and whether they narrow or widen existing native-speaker advantages in trade negotiation.

IV. METHODOLOGY

This article adopts a narrative literature review methodology, appropriate for synthesising a conceptually heterogeneous body of research spanning applied linguistics, pragmatics, and international business communication (Nickerson, 2005; Louhiala-Salminen & Kankaanranta, 2011 provide comparable precedent for this integrative approach). Sources were identified through the

core BELF and ELF literature associated with the Aston/Jyväskylä/Vienna research traditions, cross-referenced with studies indexed in Scopus-listed outlets such as *English for Specific Purposes*, the *Journal of Business Communication*, *Ibérica*, and *Journal of Pragmatics*. Studies were included if they addressed spoken or written business communication in English among speakers of different first languages, with particular weight given to studies explicitly treating negotiation, meetings, or deal-related correspondence as the object of analysis. The review is thematic rather than systematic: given the conceptual aim of the article tracing the development of a theoretical paradigm and synthesising its findings for a negotiation-specific readership thematic organisation around recurring constructs (accommodation, power, genre, technology) was judged more useful than a PRISMA-style systematic protocol, which is better suited to intervention or effect-size questions than to a conceptually oriented synthesis of this kind.

Readers intending to submit an empirical extension of this review are encouraged to pair the conceptual synthesis offered here with primary data collection for example, discourse-analytic transcription of authentic negotiation talk, corpus-based analysis of trade correspondence, or interview-based studies of negotiators' own accounts of their BELF strategies since the present article is explicitly conceptual/review in nature and does not report new empirical data.

V. DISCUSSION: SYNTHESIS AND IMPLICATIONS

Three cross-cutting observations emerge from this review. First, communicative success in ELF trade negotiation is overwhelmingly reported as a function of pragmatic and relational competence rather than grammatical proficiency. Across genre studies, accommodation research, and BELF-competence models alike, the recurring finding is that skilled negotiators treat English as a flexible, jointly managed resource, deploying hedging, repair, and comprehension-checking strategically to keep the negotiation moving forward (Kankaanranta & Planken, 2010; Pitzl, 2005). This has direct implications for negotiation training: programmes premised on native-speaker-accuracy targets may be less useful to practitioners than training that builds explicit awareness of accommodation strategies, active listening, and cooperative repair.

Second, the literature's own findings complicate the notion of English as a fully neutral lingua franca in trade contexts. Persistent reports of native-speaker advantage, whether real or perceived, indicate that language policy in multinational firms cannot treat 'English-medium' negotiation as automatically a level playing field; firms and trainers alike may need to actively counteract native-speakerist assumptions, for instance by normalising BELF forms in internal style guides or negotiation protocols rather than holding all correspondence to native-variety standards (Ehrenreich, 2010; Jenkins, 2015).

Third, the shift of negotiation activity into digital and increasingly AI-mediated channels is under-theorised relative to its practical importance. Much of the empirical BELF literature predates the widespread use of real-time machine translation, AI drafting assistance, and video-conferencing as default negotiation infrastructure. Given how central accommodation and repair strategies are to successful ELF negotiation, research is needed on how these strategies transfer or fail to transfer into technology-mediated environments, and on whether AI tools flatten or reinforce existing asymmetries between native and non-native English users in trade talks.

VI. PRACTICAL AND PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

For negotiation practitioners, the review suggests that investment in explicit accommodation skills comprehension-checking, strategic hedging, and collaborative repair is likely to yield more negotiation value than pursuit of native-like fluency alone. For corporate language policy, the findings support moving away from monolithic 'English-only' or native-variety mandates toward policies that explicitly recognise and legitimise functional BELF forms. For English for Specific Business Purposes (ESBP) curricula, the review reinforces long-standing calls to shift pedagogical emphasis from correctness-based instruction toward genre-aware, strategy-based training that simulates authentic cross-border negotiation scenarios, ideally incorporating the intercultural and relational dimensions of BELF competence identified by Kankaanranta and Planken (2010) alongside the linguistic ones.

VII. LIMITATIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This review has three notable limitations. It is conceptual rather than systematic, and therefore does not quantify effect sizes or provide a fully exhaustive inventory of the BELF literature. It draws predominantly on research from European and, to a lesser extent, East Asian business contexts, reflecting the geographic concentration of existing BELF scholarship; trade negotiation practice in Sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East

remains comparatively under-represented in the literature reviewed here and merits dedicated empirical attention. Finally, as noted above, the accelerating role of AI-mediated translation and drafting tools in real-world negotiation is only beginning to be studied, and future research combining discourse analysis with technology-in-use methodologies would substantially extend this review's conclusions.

VIII. CONCLUSION

English functions in international trade negotiation not as a fixed, native-owned code but as a jointly constructed, pragmatically rich lingua franca whose effectiveness rests on cooperation, accommodation, and shared business knowledge among its users. The BELF research tradition reviewed here demonstrates that successful negotiators treat linguistic imperfection as normal and manageable, prioritising intelligibility and relationship-building over grammatical correctness. At the same time, persistent native-speaker advantage and the rapid rise of AI-mediated communication indicate that the study of ELF in trade negotiation remains an open and evolving field, with significant scope for further empirical, cross-regional, and technology-focused research.

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