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*ELF Encounters in Migrants' Forums: Communication Management
Across Cultures*

ABSTRACT:

The present study investigates the strategies that migrants can adopt to ask for help and express their views in English as a Lingua Franca. On the basis of the exchanges between migrants of various nationalities and in different locations, a framework is proposed with the twofold aim of outlining the structure and discursive moves of migrants' postings and analyzing the interactional dynamics which may turn a mixed group of nationals into a goal-oriented community of practice (House, 2003). The migrants participating in discussion forums rely on the experience of other users to obtain additional information and solve their problems. This prominent goal is manifest in the survey of the discussion threads, from nationalization documents to job hunt, including lawful residence, citizenship tests, application forms and many others. The transactional metafunction is, however, entwined with the interactional one (Brown and Yule, 1983) as feelings of anger, frustration, relief, joy, gratitude are in turn expressed by the forum users. In light of the 'entailment' paradigm advanced by Firth (2009), that is «the inherent interactional and linguistic variability that lingua franca interactions entail», the analysis focuses on the affective connotations of lexical choices and interactional markers, as well as the dialectics between potentially disruptive language behaviour and consensus-seeking pragmatic strategies. The migrants' forum Trackitt <www.trackitt.com> (last access 31.05.2013) is contrasted with a British expatriates' forum <www.britsabroad.com> (last access 31.05.2013) in order to ascertain to what extent the pragmatic features of the former can be realistically associated with an ELF use rather than with the genre (i.e. forum discussion) and the subject (i.e. migrants' queries) under examination.

1. Introduction and general framework

ELF literature has so far mostly focused on the phonological, lexicogrammatical and pragmatic features of English as a Lingua Franca, or rather of the many different kinds of English used for international communication (Burns, Coffin, 2001; Canagarajah, 2007; Facchinetti, Crystal and Seidlhofer, 2010; Firth, 2009; Jenkins, 2007; Kachru, 1983;

Mauranen, 2005; McArthur, 2001; Mollin, 2006; Seidlhofer, 2001, 2011), also with a view to putting forward an adaptive educational framework and agenda for teaching English in a global context (Gagliardi and Maley, 2010; Jenkins, 2000, 2006; Kuo, 2006; Lee McKay, 2002; Seidlhofer, 2004, 2005). Few studies have attempted to combine linguistic analysis and cultural insights, putting forward a more holistic approach to the English used in multinational contexts (Canagarajah, 2006; Guido, 2008). Starting from recent developments in cross-cultural pragmatics (Leech, 2005; Wierzbicka, 2003), this paper aims to examine the cultural implications of immigrants' dialogic exchanges with particular regard to the expression of emotions.

Many studies grounded in different disciplines have examined the concept of culture, either underlining its inherent elusiveness or highlighting its considerable potential for explaining and resolving conflict (Hofstede and Hofstede, 2005; Kiesling and Bratt Paulston, 2005; Wierzbicka, 1999, 2003, 2006). In his thorough analysis of the semantics of culture, Goddard (2005) illustrates the evolution of this word and outlines its past and present meanings, including its classical anthropological meaning of «ways of living, thinking and behaving», which is the one used in this study. Far from complying with universally shared norms and conventions, people's patterns of behaviour are shaped by different cultural models and frames of reference, which need to be explained by allegedly impartial analytical tools such as cultural scripts and cognitive scenarios (Wierzbicka, 2003 and 2006). Both tools account for human emotions and behavioural patterns through a simplified language reduced to its conceptual primitives (e.g., causality, possession) and lexical universals (e.g., good, bad, think)¹.

The present study investigates the discursive moves of migrants when eliciting help and expressing their feelings in an English-medium forum dealing with immigration and citizenship issues. A migrants' forum Trackitt <www.trackitt.com> (last access 31.05.2013) was automatically downloaded by the aid of a web crawler application, Teleport, <www.tenmax.com/pro.html> (last access 31.05.2013) and the threads from January 2012 until May 2013 were selected, totalling 70 threads approximately. In parallel, a British expatriates' forum <www.britsabroad.com> (last access 31.05.2013) was also downloaded with the same software and a roughly equivalent number of threads was analysed.

Although both forums address migrants' issues related to narratives of displacement and relocation, they differ with regard to a significant feature, the migrants' origins and life stories. The Trackitt migrants come from all over the world and tend to concentrate in the UK and the USA, while Britsabroad – as indicated by the name itself – is a forum almost exclusively represented

by British people settling down or wanting to settle down anywhere but their homeland. Furthermore, most of the Britsabroad participants are moving or have moved to Anglophone countries such as the USA and Australia, where the differences in the (English) language and culture would not feel as threatening and destabilizing (see Wierzbicka, 2006: 6-7) as they may be perceived by the Trackitt participants and where bureaucratic requirements (including visa fees) can be much less demanding for British citizens. Thus, the cultural and linguistic closeness between the British expatriates and the host countries may also account for the perceived lower stress level of the Britsabroad participants and for their higher-order self-actualization concerns (Maslow, 1987).

The differences in the migrants' origins and life stories across these two forums also entail a difference in focus, made apparent by the very titles of the threads (Table 1): while the Trackitt threads tell painful stories of outrageously long visa waiting lines, the Britsabroad threads are more concerned with quality of life including topics such as climate, geography, house hunting and job opportunities. The British migrants are typically looking for a sunny climate and, possibly, breath-taking landscapes, whereas the Trackitt migrants are more concerned with application forms, visas and work permits. In line with the different communicative contexts embedded in the two forums, also the length and tone of the forum posts may dramatically differ: while the Trackitt posts are concise and to the point with a clearly utilitarian purpose, the Britsabroad ones are often more elaborate and diffuse to the point of sounding like autobiographical reflections:

«I have stumbled accidentally across this forum and am reading the posts about leaving NZ to move back to the UK with interest. I thought I would share our story... I apologise in advance as it's very long... [follows a one-page-long summary of the participant's life story]» (Britsabroad).

Given the differences between these two migrants' forums, the contrastive approach is meant to verify to what extent the pragmatic features of the migrants' postings could be realistically associated with their linguistic and cultural backgrounds rather than with the genre (i.e. forum discussion) and the subject (i.e. migrants' queries) under examination. The linguistic analysis has focused on 'moves' or units of pragmatic meaning (Swales, 1990; Flowerdew, 2005), lexical choices, and cultural scripts. Given the kind of cooperative behaviour mutually elicited by the forum participants, attention was also paid to face threatening acts and the strategies of positive and negative politeness used for counteracting the potential face damage (Brown and Levinson, 1987: 69-70).

Table 1 – Some typical discussion threads in the two forums

TRACKITT THREADS	BRITSABROAD THREADS
Waiting for interview	Thinking of a big move?
February 2013 Filers	Australian passport
Spouse sponsorship	It's warm again!
Tier 1 Extension	Brit moving to Auckland
I-140 denied	Hi newbie here
UK student Visa	Moving to USA
IELTS mandatory for applicants	Hello from Canada

More than thirty different nationalities are represented in the Trackitt corpus, each contributing to a lesser or greater extent in the discussions: beside the largest national group represented by Indians, also Pakistanis and Latin Americans are well represented, while Europeans in general are sparse², apart from a fairly large group of Russians (Table 2). The dominance of the Indians may, to some extent, turn a migrants' forum into an Indian migrants' forum; however, in point of fact, the close interaction among people from different nations has resulted in a variegated production of English, as shown by the analysis below where the contributions of the single nationalities have been acknowledged³.

Table 2 – Trackitt participants according to their nationality

COUNTRIES	PARTICIPANTS	COUNTRIES	PARTICIPANTS
Bahamas	3	Jamaica	6
Bangladesh	10	Japan	2
Bulgaria	2	Jordan	2
Brazil	2	Kenya	2
Canada	3	Malaysia	4
Cameroon	2	Mexico	2
Colombia	2	Morocco	1
China	3	Nigeria	2
Cuba	3	Pakistan	22
Germany	4	Peru	3
Ghana	2	Philippines	4
Greece	2	Russia	17
Haiti	1	Turkey	2
India	74	UK	2
Israel	3	USA	6
Italy	2	Vietnam	4

2. *The analysis of moves*

The forum postings have been analysed in terms of their 'moves' or 'macrosegments', i.e. functional text constituents, according to the electronic message schema partially adapted from Herring (1996). In particular, the comparative analysis across the two forums is aimed at exploring the migrants' English usage when performing the following functions:

- greeting;
- requesting information;
- requesting help;
- encouraging;
- complaining.

All these functions are central in both migrants' forums, pointing to the close intertwining of the transactional and the interactional macrofunctions (Brown and Yule, 1983). The member users in both forums interact for friendship and mutual support and not just for eliciting information or advice; however, depending on the urgency of their queries or their perceived lack of control in the relocation process, their online interaction may either sound like a pleasant, worthwhile pastime or some anxiety-ridden borderline experience.

2.1 *Greeting*

One general feature of forums is that very often they dispense with opening and closing salutations, and allow their members to go to the point without any preamble (Crystal, 2001: 141). In the two forums under examination, however, greetings were found to be a very common way to engage with the big group of all potential forum members, as shown by the general forms of address used: *Hello, Hi, Hi all, Hi there, Hello everybody, Hi folks, Hi guys, Hey Guys*. All these forms were found in both forums beside more personal forms of address directed at one member in particular, called either by their first name or username. In some cases, however, the greeting sounded more hearty and affectionate as in *Hello Buddy* (Nigeria); *Hi brother! Hi bro* (Pakistan); *Hello Friends, Dear Friends, Hi dude* (India). Interestingly, the use of the heavily connoted word *dude*, indexing solidarity and casualness among young male speakers in North America (Kiesling, 2005: 96-97), is evidence of the echoing taking place in the migrants' forum by which ELF speakers appropriate English words and adapt them to suit their particular communicative purposes and speakers' identity (House, 2003).

2.2 Requesting information

Queries are most frequent throughout the Trackitt corpus and largely revolve around citizenship issues, employment opportunities, job requirements, and daily routines. The same topics are also tackled in the Britsabroad forum but they appear to be more conversational and devoid of the sense of urgency associated with the Trackitt messages. The overall impression, on reading the Britsabroad postings, is that the member users are exploring alternative ways of life and socializing in the meantime, while in the Trackitt messages the member users let out anguish and frustration at their loss of control over their own life. The following two long quotations from Trackitt and Britsabroad respectively may give an idea of the different pathos associated with the migrant experience in each forum:

«First, do we have any one who had finished filing by August, 2012 at VSC? anyone with news? romours? Secondly, what are the odds that one can be called for an interview? are there many cases? if so what are the qns? (examples). I guess I am asking the odds for an interview as i know many who just got approvals??» (Nigeria, Trackitt)

«Hello, I just landed a job through CanadaVisaJobs.com which qualifies me for Arranged Employment for the Skilled Visa program. My wife and I are planning to move to Toronto in a few months so I can start my job, and now need to file my visa application ASAP. Now that we've come this far I don't want to take any chances with the visa filing process and wondered if anyone knew a good and reliable immigration lawyer in Canada that could handle everything for us. Any recommendations would be greatly appreciated, thanks for your help.» (Britsabroad)

In the first quotation, the sequence of interrogatives culminates in a disconsolate remark, «I guess I am asking the odds for an interview as I know many who just got approvals??», illustrative of the frustration and confusion experienced by many migrants. The syntactic hybridity of the sentence – which is made to sound like a statement, an exclamation and a question all at the same time – can be interpreted as evidence of the migrant's turmoil, but also of his deeply emotional response to problems. In the second quotation, by contrast, going through the visa procedure is just one of the many steps ahead, a feasible endeavour which can be greatly facilitated by a legal expert. In line with a typically English «reason-based approach to human life» (Wierzbicka, 2006: 72), problems are confronted and emotions are kept under control⁴.

2.3 Requesting help

The language used in the requests for help seems even more indicative of the reason-emotion divide that appears to emerge across the two forums, with the Trackitt participants systematically personalizing their requests for help through repetition, capitalization and a skilful use of punctuation devices:

- Can you help?
- Please help?
- pls help!!
- Plzzz help
- Please please help
- please somone help me
- PLEASE HELP

Direct requests for help in the Trackitt forum are a standard move shared by all the participants regardless of their nationalities; they are generally placed in the closing salutations where they can be seen to perform an appeal function:

«Hi friend plz help me,i already pay\$88 and \$230 aos and ds3032 bill, please tell me what will be mine next step.when I will get next mail from nvc.thanks in advance,plz help me.» (India, Trackitt)

«My question is how long does the processing with the NVC takes, since we worried about airfare will sky rocket soon. We want to buy my ticket now for 1 June 2013, but we are worried to know how long it takes for the NVC to finalize our case to have my visa number and interview, please help us, urgent needing help. Thank you.» (Ghana, Trackitt)

Some messages convey the utter impotence and frustration of the migrants, who seem to rely on helpful others for the solution of their problems:

«Anyone else have had this kind of experience? Any advice to what we should be doing?» (Colombia, Trackitt)

«Thanx ikhan for responding i have checked visa bulletin 2012 it indicates F2A numbers r available for all countries with priority dates earlier than 01 AUG. 2010, while my PD is 24 Feb. 2010 what does it means & what shall i do» (Pakistan, Trackitt)

Orienting oneself through the bureaucratic complications of the visa procedure is obviously not an easy task, as shown by the cryptic acronym-ridden

postings above, hardly comprehensible to anybody unfamiliar with the US National Visa Center (NVC), the visa bulletin and the various forms and fees requested from immigrants. The whole procedure may appear so overwhelming to require some form of guidance and enlightenment on the part of more expert member users:

«I am very worried about the age Issue during my Interview with the Consular. Please Enlighten me Osweiti.» (Nigeria, Trackitt)

«Please guide me as I am thinking to send a reminder as I have been waiting response for the last 2 months.» (Pakistan, Trackitt)

«Hi, Any AMIE graduates got the Eb2 I-140 approval. kindly respond & guide.» (India, Trackitt)

This kind of pleading downplays the requesters' ability to cope with the migration experience and maximizes the unknown recipients' skills and expertise, almost casting them in a saviour role. Interestingly, the pleading script largely enacted in the Trackitt forum appears at odds with the way in which the Britsabroad member users try to sort out their own problems, by requesting information rather than by appealing explicitly for solidarity:

«Wanting to work in America for a few months. Help!
I leave my job here in England on the 7th August with ambitions to go to America to work for a few months. Just wondering if anyone could help me by telling me whether this is possible and if so, where do I start? What visa will I need etc? Many thanks!» (Britsabroad)

«English Lad living in Perth moving to Toronto <--- Can anyone HELP me Pleaseee :))))
I'm an English lad who moved to Perth 10 years ago. So far I love it, but It's a little boring and very isolated. I've always loved the Idea of Canada seeing as I like snow boarding, Ice Hockey and Canadian Club Lol. I'm about to finish my degree in Finance (Graduate October), which is number one on the short listed skills needed for Canada right know. I'm just wondering what are my chances of getting a job in either a bank or financial institue?» (Britsabroad)

Although the Britsabroad participants also resort to standard formulas such as «help please!!!», made more pressing by the graphological devices used in the thread titles, the actual requests in the body of the message are indirectly phrased through some mitigating devices such as the use of the 'be wondering' structure and the past tense (cf. Wigglesworth and Yates, 2007).

From the messages quoted above, it is apparent that the Trackitt participants and the Britsabroad participants resort to different strategies of negative politeness (Brown and Levinson, 1987: 70): the former by using a deferential mode which maximizes their recipients' self-image and decisive intervention (Brown and Levinson, 1987: 178-179), and the latter by relying on self-effacement and restraint, which are meant to minimize their addressees' coerced response (Brown and Levinson, 1987: 176). Fully in accordance with the pivotal value of personal autonomy in Anglo culture (Wierzbicka, 2006: 50), pressurizing people, by exerting undue influence or resorting to the «Oriental habit of imploring», appears to be unacceptable (or at least culturally inappropriate) for the British (Wierzbicka, 2006: 52-53).

2.4 Encouraging and complaining

The participants in both forums express feelings of gratitude for the advice and support received from the other member users; however, while the Trackitt participants extend their gratitude to the forum itself acting as a catalyst for their sense of common belonging, the Britsabroad member users mostly address their words of thanks to single participants and, even when they express their appreciation of the forum community, they sound much less emotional and empathetic:

«I'm so thankful for this forum everyone is so helpful and supportive. I'm glad I'm not alone going thru all this» (Mexico, Trackitt)

«I like talking to people going through the same thing as me. We can all lean on each other for strength and guidance» (Jamaica, Trackitt)

«Hello Everyone, I've been reading all these great posts, so good job to everyone who posts and replies :)» (Britsabroad)

The differences in attitude across the two forums can be ascribed to the different pathos associated with the same communicative goal, i.e. obtaining the information necessary for settling down successfully in a foreign country: as the Trackitt member users seem extremely worried and sceptical of a satisfactory outcome, their common feelings of disorientation and dejection helps them develop a bonding relationship based on in-group solidarity which cuts across the differences in culture, language and ethnicity. By contrast, the British participants, coming from a society where bureaucratic matters are considered much less stringent and worrisome, show a

more relaxed happy-go-lucky attitude. For example, the same unpleasant experience of waiting for the greencard is perceived and commented on very differently by a British member user and by some other nationals:

«Not in any rush to get GC but the wait is rather unpleasant» (UK, Trackitt)

«I will go crazy if I have to wait for 2 months.» (Mexico, Trackitt)

«How long should I wait, had also made erequest [sic] and was told waiting for decision...but for how long... very frustrated.» (Italy, Trackitt)

«How long should I wait? This is simply agonizing!! [...] Oh well what can we do? We are completely at their mercy» (Malaysia, Trackitt)

The former minimizes the feeling of annoyance caused by the long wait in accordance with the Anglo practice of understatement (Wierzbicka, 2006: 25 ff.), while the latter emphasize it and give full vent to the participants' anger and frustration.

The very expressions of encouragement across the two forums seem to point to two opposite semantic scripts, the 'good luck' script in Britsabroad clashing with the 'I Need Divine Intervention' script in Trackitt:

«Leave it to Allah...things will move smooth inshaallah» (Jordan, Trackitt)

«Pray for the best. Leave it in God's hands. I'll be praying for you.» (Jamaica, Trackitt)

«We are trying to be positive, since no answer is better than a negative answer. So we are just praying.» (Colombia, Trackitt)

«I'm just praying to God that everything come out good» (Mexico, Trackitt)

«Be strong Faith Works» (Nigeria, Trackitt)

Religious feeling is not, by any means, removed from the Anglo cultural scripts and cognitive scenarios, but, due to the blend of the Puritan and Enlightenment philosophies, it is inextricably bound for the English with reason and a modern scientific outlook (Wierzbicka, 2006: 96-97). Thus,

the troubles of everyday life are seen to require a rational approach and the problem-solving skills so deeply ingrained in the English mindset⁵. By contrast, other nationalities as represented in the Trackitt corpus appear to rely on religion and divine intervention, especially as the whole immigrant pathway seems out of their own control.

3. Conclusions

The Trackitt forum messages appear to be rather imprecise with frequent misspellings and some convoluted syntactic patterns, which may be accounted for either by the hurry and inaccuracy associated with computer-mediated communication or by the varying degree of proficiency of the ELF users. By contrast, the Britsabroad messages are characterized by a much more accurate use of English, giving the impression that they are perceived to be more akin to personal accounts dignified by some autobiographical aspiration than to the urgent requests for help sent out by the Trackitt participants.

Despite frequent lapses, the Trackitt postings seem to display an idiomatic use of the English language with many typical collocations and phraseological patterns related to feelings and daily routines: 'to be in the same boat'; 'fingers crossed'; 'a hell of a life change'; 'rat race'; 'hard feelings'; 'counting the days'. The wide vocabulary range and even linguistic creativity shown in the Trackitt postings are evidence of how the English language resources are adapted to suit the communicative needs of a multinational online community and their negotiated identities. In particular the Trackitt migrants' tendency to emphasize their feelings and strengthen bonds of mutual solidarity was contrasted with the Anglo dispassionate script and their inclination to adopt a reason-driven approach to problems, as shown by the frequent hedging devices (Brown and Levinson, 1987: 145 ff.; cf. Wierzbicka, 2006: 29). As observed by Kirkpatrick (2007: 36) «far from English being a purveyor of Anglo-cultural norm, the development of new varieties of English shows how English can be adapted by its speakers to reflect their cultural norm.»

While the findings of this study appear to match Wierzbicka's insightful observations on cross-cultural interaction and, particularly, Anglo attitudes and values, it seems fair to outline the limitations of the present research and, in doing so, also indicate further developments. The corpus would need to be extended to other English-medium migrants' forums and investigated also from a quantitative point of view, bearing in mind that, rather than being absolutes, «most cross-cultural differences turn out

to be differences in context and/or frequency of occurrence» (Schieffelin and Ochs, 1986: 9-10). In fact, as people's responses are inevitably correlated to communicative context and social identity dynamics (Hogg and Reid, 2006), it may be worthwhile exploring to what extent the need for group membership may shape the varying emotional response of forum participants: for example, whether, placed in a multicultural and multiethnic forum, the Anglos would show greater emotionality and, on the other side, whether non-Anglo participants, under the influence of a predominantly British forum, may adapt and give evidence of the dispassionate and non-imposing script characteristic of mainstream Anglo culture (Wierzbicka, 2006), as proved by many cross-border life stories where «immigrants choose to 'go native'» (Fox, 2004: 18).

¹ See Wierzbicka (2003 and 2006) for a full account of the Natural Semantic Metalanguage.

² Although the Forum does not exactly specify whether the participants come from the European or Asian part of the Russian Federation, the Russians have been considered part of the western territory, as it is by far the more populous one.

³ The language items evidenced in the analysis have been associated with the countries rather than with the forum usernames for ease of reference.

⁴ This unemotional style typically associated with Englishness has been labelled in many different ways: 'British stiff upper lip' (Aitch, 2008: 185), 'default mode of moderation' (Fox, 2004: 403), and 'belief in privacy' (Paxman, 1999: 123).

⁵ In her impressive study *English. Meaning and Culture*, Wierzbicka (2006) identifies the shared cultural core of the inner circle of English-speaking countries in light of her own immigrant experience. Although wary of the ideological simplifications underlying 'Anglo English', she argues that «the concept of Anglo culture is potentially particularly useful to millions of immigrants to Anglophone countries like Britain, the United States, and Australia. To deny the validity of this concept means to deny the immigrants culture training, which is essential to their social advancement». (Wierzbicka, 2006: 7).

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