

# Make your voice heard and tune your ears for a global orchestra

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## Abstract

Many people still think that sounding like a native speaker together with correct grammar and perfect vocabulary are the main elements of successful international communication. There have been countless situations when people did not speak up because they feared that their noticeable accent features could be considered as a low level of expertise and that this could result into social, educational, and professional disadvantages or even discrimination. How is English mostly used by international communication partners and what information about them is available? Who is responsible for misunderstandings or communication breakdown?

Based on secondary analysis of researchers in the areas of (business) English as a lingua franca and sociolinguistics, the relationship between accent and authenticity as well as identity and intelligibility will be clarified. Moreover, the Common European framework of reference for languages: Learning, teaching, assessment (CEFR, 2001) and the CEFR Companion Volume (2020) can be regarded as an ideal framework for educators and employers to increase employability by developing a (B)ELF mindset. This will not only raise awareness of a person's plurilingual and pluricultural repertoire, but also challenge certain attitudes, beliefs, and intercultural appropriateness. Despite the close relationship between language and culture and its huge impact on constructing ourself and the other, accent prejudice and linguistic racism have often been neglected and should be added to the map of diversity and inclusion, as they are crucial for our sense of belonging and wellbeing.

*Keywords:* accent, identity, intercultural competence, mindset, prejudice

## 1. Introduction

The motto of the European Union “united in diversity”, which is used in the preamble to the Treaty, highlights the challenges of finding a balance in a fast-changing world (CVCE.EU by UNI.LU, 2016). While unity cannot be regarded as an end in itself because there is always the risk that too much standardisation could have a negative impact on the variety of identities, too much diversity could easily prevent achieving a common goal. The idea of giving equal importance to seemingly contrasting ideas will be a recurring topic in this article, which is also meant to highlight that language and culture as well as speaking and listening are inextricably linked, and why using (Business) English as a Lingua Franca will be useful for successful and reflective communication across cultures. Although the enormous increase in globalization and migration has intensified awareness of our linguistic and cultural diversity, finding an appropriate level of adaptability and authenticity, especially with English as the number one global language is highly affected by a person's attitude towards their own and other people's accents.

## 2. Linguistic diversity

A total number of about 7,000 living languages (Ethnologue, 2021) gives us an idea of the worldwide linguistic diversity. Nonetheless, more than 40% of the languages are at risk of disappearing. This development has been more accelerated by two facts: Firstly, only 23 languages represent half of the world's population. Secondly, no other language has ever been as important and dominant for global communication as English is now. While English finds itself in third position (370 million people) after Spanish and Mandarin Chinese when looking at so-called “native speakers”, it achieves an outstanding first position with about 1.5 billion speakers, when the focus is on the usage of English and “non-native speakers” are included. (As there has been a lot of criticism concerning these two terms they will be used with inverted commas in this article). The colonial influence of the British Empire, the US-American economic and cultural power and the use of the internet are given as main reasons for this development and are still deeply rooted in many people's attitudes and beliefs concerning the users and use of English.

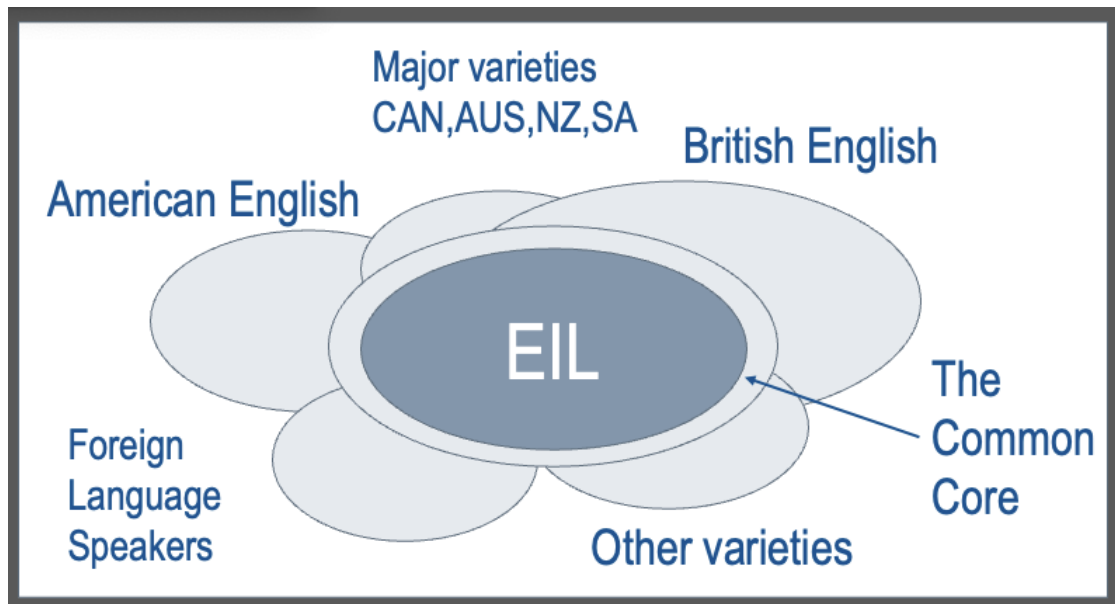
The British linguist David Crystal (2003) describes Kachru's (1988) “The Three Circles of English” as the most influential model of World Englishes. The “Inner Circle” stands for countries like the United Kingdom, the United States or Australia, where English is the primary language, but it accounts for only 10% of English users. These countries have a long tradition of being “norm-providing varieties” with regard to the English language. Many Commonwealth countries like for example India or Singapore belong to the “Outer Circle”. English is used as official first or second language and has often achieved a key role in a country's main institutions. While these are considered as “norm-developing varieties”, all the countries in the “Expanding Circle” (China, Russia, Germany) are “norm-dependent varieties”, because English is taught as a foreign language relying on standards developed by “native speakers”.

Guerra (2012) is of the opinion that all the stakeholders involved in learning, teaching, and assessing English will have to thoroughly question their attitudes and beliefs so that misconceptions about the use of English can be avoided referring to Kachru's (1992) “six fallacies about the users and uses of English”:

1. That in the Outer and Expanding Circles, English is essentially learned to interact with native speakers of the language.
2. That English is necessarily learned as a tool to understand and teach American or British cultural values, or what is generally termed the Judeo-Christian traditions.
3. That the goal of learning and teaching English is to adopt the native models of English (the Received Pronunciation or General American).
4. That the international non-native varieties of English are essentially “interlanguages” striving to achieve “native-like” character.
5. That the native speakers of English as teachers, academic administrators, and material developers provide a serious input in the global teaching of English, in policy formation and in determining the channels for the spread of the language.
6. That the diversity and variation in English is necessarily an indicator of linguistic decay; that restricting the decay is the responsibility of the native scholars of English and ESL programs (Kachru, 1992 in Guerra, 2012).

Crystal (1999) is far ahead of his times, as he predicts that “learners will have to adapt their British Standard English to an international norm – or perhaps vice versa, learning an international norm first, and modifying it to British (or US, etc.) English”. This is very similar to Modiano’s (1999) model of English as an international language (EIL) putting EIL as the “common core” at the centre, which could then be complemented by the necessary varieties in a specific context.

FIGURE 1. ENGLISH AS AN INTERNATIONAL LANGUAGE (EIL)



Source: Modiano (1999)

According to Crystal (2013), the question of ownership of a language or whose English is to be spoken depends on the number of people using it and can, thus, clearly be answered when only looking at the ratio of four “non-native speakers” to one “native-speaker”. The people speaking a language have the power to change it so that it reflects their linguistic and cultural identities in their specific contexts. Moreover, Graddol (2006), who stresses the importance of English as a Lingua Franca, estimates that about 80% of international communication happens without any native speaker being present. What does that mean for the still dominating and mostly British and North American role models and their Anglo-American cultural norms? Would not most international users of English benefit more from moving away from a focus on “error” as a deviation from a “native-speaker” norm to functional appropriateness in a specific sociolinguistic context. Graddol (2006) is highly interested in the future of English. The subtitle of his book *Why global English may mean the end of ‘English as a Foreign Language’* already forecasts the paradigm shift officially confirmed by the publication of the CEFR Companion Volume (2020), which is supposed to be a complement to the first publication of the CEFR in 2001. The “native speaker” disappeared as idealized role model, intelligibility is the primary construct of phonological control and listening and speaking are equally important or as Hansen (2018) describes it: *2 Billion Voices: How to speak bad English perfectly*.

A further societal development has to be taken into consideration. Based on the New York Times/Qatar Foundation publication named after Joe Mortell (2020) globalization has also been responsible for a huge increase in multilingualism. It is estimated that 60% of the global population can speak two or more languages. Singapore and Sweden can even offer top

percentage figures of 100% and 97%, whereas the United Kingdom and the United States, so-called “native-speaker” countries, achieve only 35% and 25% (Mortell, 2020). Thus, it is very likely that when there are conversations with “native speakers” that they may have never been confronted with possible limitations of communicating in a language other than their mother tongue. Melo-Pfeiffer (2018) illustrates how this development at a societal level has had an impact on language education as the so-called multilingual turn. As the use of terminology does not always seem to be clear, she makes a difference between social and individual multilingualism and defines the latter as plurilingualism. Additionally, the CEFR Companion Volume (2020) further supports this paradigm shift away from the monolingual fallacy, which suggests that English can only be taught by strictly using English. The CEFR Companion Volume highlights that the learners/users have to become more aware of the richness of their linguistic and cultural heritage so that they can make use of it as a plurilingual and pluricultural repertoire:

“In an intercultural approach, it is a central objective of language education, to promote the favourable development of the learner’s whole personality and sense of identity in response to the enriching experience of otherness in language and culture.”  
(CEFR, 2001, p. 1.)

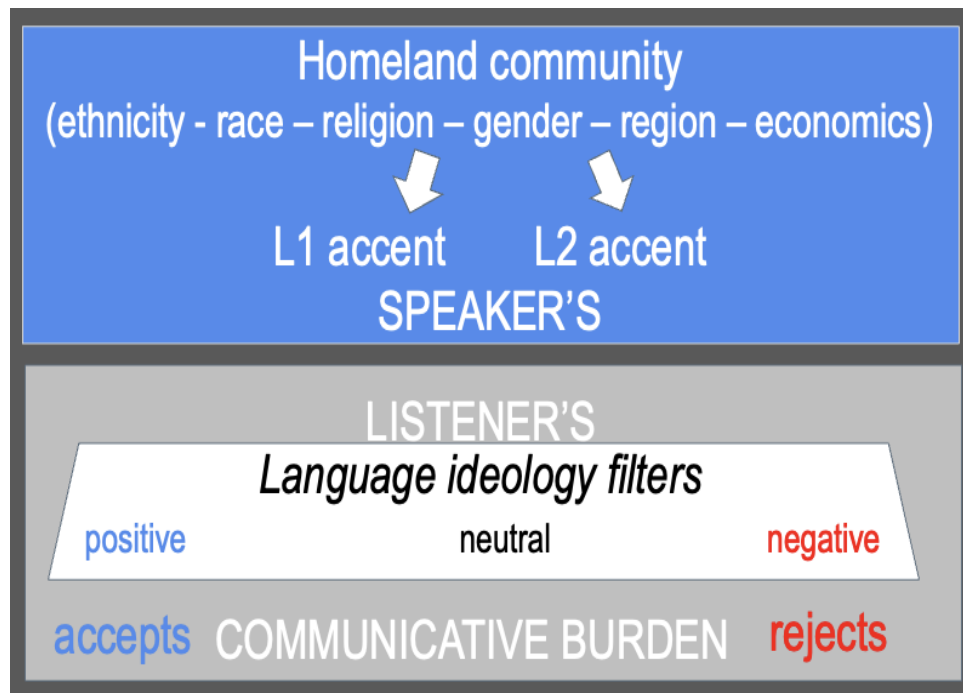
In spite of the close relationship between language and culture and its huge impact on constructing our self and the other, the so far mentioned and often deeply rooted attitudes and beliefs concerning users and the use of English can have a huge influence on a person’s ability to be proud of their English voice, to speak up in spite of having an accent, or to make other people heard in communication across cultures.

### 3. Accents and attitudes

Crystal (2019) clarifies that everyone has an accent and that an accent should be “fostered” and “respected” as a crucial element of a person’s identity. Moreover, there has always been a tension between two opposing forces. A person’s authenticity may get in conflict with the intelligibility of their accent, which is mostly based on standard English as a norm. Crystal (2019) criticizes the “myth of the native speaker”, and Rosina Lippi-Green (2012), a US-American sociolinguist, adds the myth of standard English and of non-accent to this list. Myths are stories with general cultural significance, which are supposed to keep social order. Standard English is spoken and written by people with superior education, who are supposed to have “no regional accent”. Myths are at the core of an ideology and empower individuals and institutions.

Lippi-Green (2012) created a model that describes the mechanisms of “accepting or rejecting the communicative burden”. As a consequence of a speaker’s homeland community, which is highly influenced by factors like ethnicity, race, religion, gender, region or economics, a person develops an L1 or L2 accent. The listener carries out a subjective evaluation based on language ideology filters, which moves on a continuum from positive via neutral to negative. As a consequence, the listener weighs the pros and cons that may result from this conversation. May it be worth accepting the communicative burden like making use of active listening strategies? May it be better to reject it and to make the speaker take over all the responsibility for the success of this conversation by speaking with an intelligible accent?

FIGURE 2. ACCEPTING OR REJECTING THE COMMUNICATIVE BURDEN



Source: Lippi-Green (2012)

According to neuroscience, these language ideology filters are also called unconscious or implicit biases, or stereotypes. Knappitsch (2019) gives an overview of these nearly 200 filters, which are normally useful tools for our brain to deal with a constantly growing overload of information by organizing it according to certain categories. Unfortunately, these processes may also involve mostly unintentional (linguistic) prejudices. Lichterfeld (2020) illustrates that there have been numerous examples of discrimination based on both “non-standard” and “non-native” accents and that several researchers came to the conclusion that having a ‘prestige’ accent (e.g., ‘BBC English’ or ‘General American’) will provide people with a 20% higher income. Furthermore, Lippi-Green (2012) stresses frequent forms of accent discrimination in the judicial system, employment, and health care and that accentism is often used as a proxy for racism. In addition to this, she mentions that strengthening a person’s self-perception plays a crucial role when dealing with internalized racism by quoting Eleanor Roosevelt: “Nobody can make you inferior without your consent”. Lippi-Green also draws attention to the close relationship between accent, culture, and mindset:

“The whole concept of units of conversation in which two partners work toward mutual comprehension assumes a certain state of mind on the part of the participants, and to an extent the question of skill. Intercultural competence is as crucial to successful communication as underlying motivation, solidarity or hostility.”  
(Lippi-Green, 2012, p. 72.)

Although many institutions and companies have initiated unconscious bias training, especially after the Black Lives Matter movement, the topic of language and accents seems to have been overlooked and should be added to the map of diversity and inclusion (Lichterfeld, 2020). After a lot of criticism concerning the usefulness of unconscious bias training, some organization including the UK’s civil service cancelled their schemes. David Robson (2021) clarifies, however, that some of the researcher may not have been interpreted correctly. Diversity training

does not work as a one-hour “quick fix” but has to be implemented as the “foundation for broader organisational change” and as an on-going project. Moreover, it should be stressed that other intersecting forms of oppression (gender, class, nationality, skin colour, age, or sexuality) are equally important to prevent any form of discrimination or racism and all of them are necessary to achieve real systemic change. The French government (Willsher, 2020) demonstrated how this could look like by passing a law, which bans any form of regional accent prejudice or glottophobia. As a consequence, discrimination based on language use or characteristics of speech will be treated in the same way as racism or sexism.

The recent anti-racism movement has also started a long overdue discussion about the privileges of being white. The Canadian linguist Vijay Ramjattan (2019/2020) studies the intersection of language and race at work and highlights that “hearing accent means hearing race”. Standardized language is associated with a “native speaker”, which means that nativeness works as a proxy for whiteness. He highlights that raising awareness of accentism at a personal level is not enough and suggest striving for structural change. This could include engaging students in action research like interviewing employers about their hiring practices in their local communities, and thus achieving change at a micro level. Moreover, any form of workplace training (for example safety drills or computer courses) should include talking about different forms of oppression similar to the above-mentioned long-term diversity and inclusion projects. The linguist Kelly Wright (2019) focuses in her study on raciolinguistic profiling and suggests taking the following measures:

- a) Audit your organizational history, policies, and practices
- b) Co-create decolonialized teaching materials and texts
- c) Co-create products for the public good
- d) Advocate for linguistic justice in migrant and immigrant communities, in the legal and criminal justice systems, in healthcare.

Gerald, Ramjattan and Stillar (2021) are of the opinion that the topics of racism and whiteness should be added to language teacher training and that all the white language teachers should be encouraged to “examine their own Whiteness and how it affects their teaching”. This includes “re-envisioning classrooms” with regard to dismissing linguistic prescriptivism, which they compare to a “remnant of what some have called linguistic imperialism (Phillipson, 1992)”. Merely focusing on descriptivism has been discussed for decades, thus, they are now in favour of “counterprescriptivism”. As negotiating meaning is comparable to negotiating power, “unstandardizing English” would mean covering the features of its standardization and the decision-making processes, why these features are valued higher than others. The students could also be empowered to move away from monolingual principles and be encouraged to “use the entirety of their translingual and cultural resources to aid the learning process”. A further step “rethinking intelligibility” could help students to move their attention to “critical listening”:

“By focusing their attention on developing listening, students would appreciate that certain racialized accents are not inherently unintelligible, but rather made unintelligible by ears conditioned by ideologies of White supremacy.”

(Gerald, Ramjattan & Stillar, 2021)



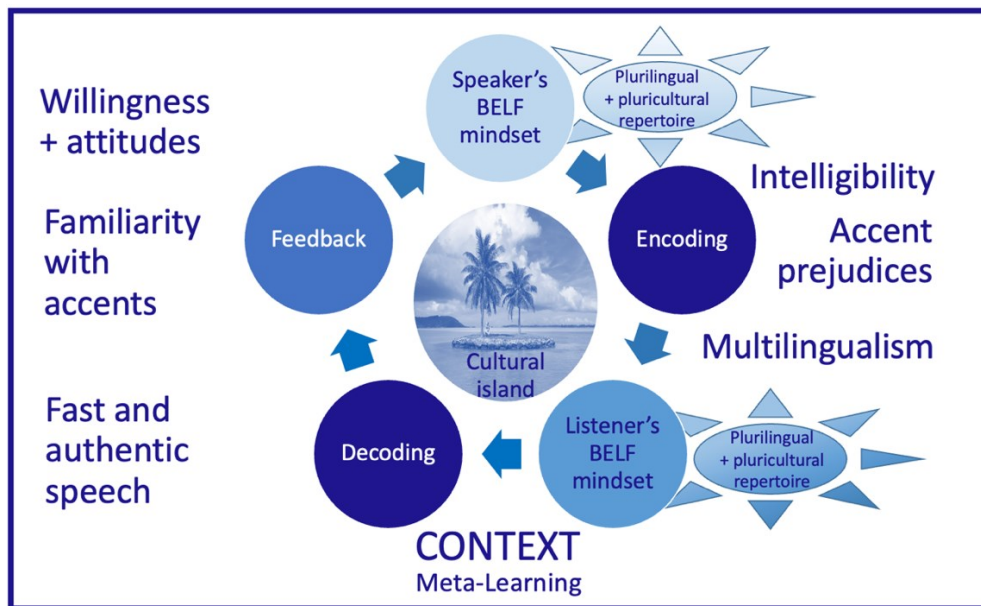
#### 4. Reflective communication with a (B)ELF mindset

After looking at the topics of linguistic diversity, multilingualism, accent prejudice and linguistic racism from different sociolinguistic perspectives, many valuable contributions can be added from the research areas of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) and Business English as a Lingua Franca. In 2000, the linguist Jennifer Jenkins discovered that communication breakdown was mostly caused by phonological transfer from the L1. Many consider her development of the Lingua Franca Core as the beginning of the research area ELF. According to Barbara Seidlhofer (2011), ELF is any use of English as means of communication chosen by speakers of different L1(s). Cogo (2018) describes ELF as an “open-source phenomenon”, which is constantly adapted by means of intelligibility and accommodation (Jenkins, 2000) and gives multilingualism as third characteristic feature. Researchers from a Finnish School of Business, Kankaanranta and Louhiala-Salminen (2018), stress the close relation between ELF and BELF. Professionals involved in international business focus on getting the job done and creating rapport. Moreover, Ehrenreich (2018) emphasises the key role of “communities of practice”, a concept originally developed by Wenger (1998). Their members are described as competent and confident users of BELF. Cogo (2018) clarifies that BELF is not a variety. You cannot teach it, but only adopt a BELF-oriented approach, which is characterized by three principles: The multilingual principle (English and learner’s L1(s)), the negotiation principle (effective communication combined with accommodation and intelligibility) and the intercultural principle (intercultural awareness and competence). A BELF-oriented approach will be a big change in mindset for all the stakeholders and needs flexible, aware, creative, and open-minded users of English. (Lichterfeld, 2019).

The CEFR Companion Volume (2020) takes the mentioned societal changes into consideration and supports the paradigm shifts in many research areas by putting the 21<sup>st</sup> century learners and their needs at the centre. They focus on developing character, skills, and knowledge with a growth mindset within the framework of the 4Cs (collaboration, communication, critical thinking, and creativity) and meta-learning. The CEFR (2020) puts emphasis on the learner/user as social agents, who negotiate and co-construct meaning in a specific context to set up trustful relationships.

Furthermore, it completely moved away from the native speaker to intelligibility and inclusive ELF-oriented practices mobilizing general, plurilingual and pluricultural competences by means of interaction and the now even richer model of mediation based on Vygotsky’s social constructivist theory. Mediation creates bridges, has a positive impact on relationships, and creates a safe pluricultural space or a “cultural island” as Schein (2009) calls it. Derwing and Munro (2015) define intelligibility as “the extent to which a speaker’s message is actually understood by a listener”. Nevertheless, “just because an L2 accent feature is noticeable, doesn’t mean that it detracts from intelligibility”. It takes two to tango, as speaking and listening are inseparably connected. Thus, successful communication highly depends on listener factors like the ability of decoding authentic, fast, and spontaneous speech, familiarity with different accents and the listener’s attitudes or willingness to communicate (Piccardo, 2016).

FIGURE 3. ELEMENTS OF COMMUNICATION



Source: Udey (2016), CEFR (2020) & Schein (2009)

## 5. Conclusion

To sum up, the CEFR (2001) and the CEFR Companion Volume (2020) can be regarded as an ideal framework for educators and employers to help future and current employees to raise awareness concerning uses and users of English as a Lingua Franca. Multilingual speakers have become the new norm and should be empowered to be proud of their English voice and the richness of their plurilingual and pluricultural heritage. A flexible and open-minded BELF-mindset will help to get the job done and to invest in trustful relationships without getting lost in linguistic perfection. Taking over responsibility as a speaker and listener will be necessary for successful communication across cultures. In spite of a willingness to share the communicative burden unconscious filters may still cause misunderstandings, unintentional accent prejudices or linguistic racism. Nonetheless, critical awareness of the close relationship between language and culture and the tension between identity and intelligibility will help to add these topics to the map of diversity and inclusion and to achieve a sense of belonging and wellbeing at an individual and above all at a societal level.

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