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Global English and English as a Lingua Franca (ELF): Implications for the Interpreting Profession

Abstract

The unprecedented global spread of English as a lingua franca is a recent phenomenon that poses a challenge to the age-old craft of interpreting. What little research has so far been undertaken has concentrated on the effects of non-native source text production, especially non-native accents, on the interpreter's comprehension process. Based on a cognitive-constructivist and functional view of language, this paper analyses the results of a questionnaire-based survey of 32 experienced conference interpreters. Examining the changes inevitably brought about by ELF, the survey looks at the impact on interpreters and their profession. The findings identified capacity-related problems not only in the comprehension process, but also, in the form of accommodation, in the (target text) production process. On a more general level, working conditions are reported to be adversely affected, with consequences for performance quality and job satisfaction.

1 Introduction

The global spread of English as a lingua franca is one of the most significant developments of this century and has marked the 21st century as much as conference interpreting did the 20th century. The 20th century saw the rise of the nation state, the League of Nations and later the United Nations, international conferences and multinational companies, as well as the technological evolution of simultaneous interpreting and English take over from French as the language of the diplomats (cf. Hinsley 1963/1985). It was the century that saw the heyday of (simultaneous) conference interpreting (cf. Pöchhacker 2000/2007: 18, 23). That century of international conference interpreting has now been superseded by the century of English as a lingua franca, the century of ELF communication. (Native and non-native) English has become the most widely used language in conferences (cf. Pöchhacker 1994: 154; Basel 2002: 16-19; Neff 2007).¹ The reasons for and far-reaching implications of the spread of the English language and its unprecedented "genuine global presence" (Crystal 2003: 190) are described in detail by Crystal (2003) and Graddol (1997). However, the consequences of this development for those responsible of international

¹ In Pöchhacker's study it becomes clear that English as the predominant conference language is used by many non-native speakers (despite "an – often rather poor command of the – foreign language" 1994: 234, my translation), even when there is no need to do so, i.e. when interpreting services are provided and the option to use one's mother tongue is given (1994: 154-155).

communication before, i.e. for the international conference interpreters, have not been studied in depth.

To some extent, the recent evolution of ELF and the age-old art of interpreting (which Jürgen Stähle 2009 in the title of his recent book somewhat eye-catchingly calls the second-oldest trade in the world) seem to be mutually exclusive. Towards the turn of the last century, Seleskovitch, one of the best-known names in interpreting studies and a renowned conference interpreter herself, paints a rather gloomy picture of the interpreter's fate:

In future it can be expected that to a large degree interpreting will disappear from the international scene. With time the universal use of a single language in international conferences will make resorting to interpreters less necessary. (Seleskovitch 1996: 306)

This raises a number of questions: have interpreters fallen from their position as indispensable, often courted, at times even diva-like facilitators of communication – much admired for the incredible feat of tackling two languages at split-seconds and of listening to and speaking two languages at the same time – to become mere providers of a service that may fast become redundant and superfluous? Have things changed, and if so, to what extent and in what way are they changing and what effect does this have on interpreters and their craft? In what way do interpreters experience and perceive such changing circumstances?

This paper is not a sociological or sociolinguistic study into possible currents that might or might not render interpreters redundant one day. Based on a cognitive-constructivist and functional view of language as an instrument and force of intercultural and plurilingual communication, it seeks to explore these questions by analysing the results of a (questionnaire) survey of 32 highly professional conference interpreters with a focus on the changes inevitably brought about by ELF and its impact on interpreting processes and interpreters' performance quality.

It is a small-scale initiating study in a research area that is only just gaining ground. So far research has concentrated on the effect of the non-native speaker speech delivery on interpreters' source text comprehension, and the consequences for their performance (e.g. Basel 2002; Kurz 2008); a recent study by Reithofer (forthc.) looks at the level of comprehension achieved by German addressees who listened to a presentation in the original non-native version as opposed to those listening to the interpretation. My study does not only look at the way in which the growing number of non-native English source text producers affects the comprehension process (section 4), but also – irrespective of any comprehension-related aspects – at what effects it has on the (interpreters') production process (section 5). In addition, it deals with the intricate questions of quality and job satisfaction (section 6). To start off, I shall first present the methodological approach (section 2) and give a short overview of the quantitative survey results (section 3).

2 The Methodological Approach

I sent out a non-standardised questionnaire² to 50 highly professional conference interpreters, with a response rate of 64% or 32 interpreters. All respondents, 88% of whom (28) are members of AIIC (Association Internationale des Interprètes de Conférence), have worked as interpreters for between 10 and 40 years, or 21.5 years on average. Most of the interpreters (84% or 27 in absolute figures) have German as their mother tongue (all the others are non-native speakers of English, too, being Dutch, French or Italian). All of them have English as one of their working languages: 72% (23) have English as their B (active) language; 28% (9) as their C (passive) language.³ 72% (23) have their professional addresses in Germany; 28% (9) are Swiss-based. 72% (23) mainly work in the private market; 9% (3) primarily with international organisations, namely the EU; 19% (i.e. 6, 2 of whom are, additionally, partly employed as in-house interpreters) work for both. With 66% (21) female and 34% (11) male respondents, my sample reflects AIIC gender distribution (according to its website,⁴ AIIC has two thirds [2191] female and one third [740] male members).

The questionnaire was formulated in a non-standardised way, so as to encourage respondents to write down comments and to give information beyond the stereotypical yes/no, or Lickert scale, replies. 32 respondents would not typically be considered a large test pool; however, the objective was not to obtain quantitative results from a large population (as in AIIC statistical study reports, for instance), but to gain qualitative data yielding insights into the professionals' individual experiences and perceptions. This means that one has to be cautious with generalisations. The survey focuses on long-standing professional conference interpreters (rather than the new generation of community interpreters, or other interpreters in highly intercultural settings, see Kalina 2009). Moreover, as has been said in the previous paragraph, the survey centres around the German-speaking interpreting context and freelance private market interpreters (with few EU and hardly any institutional staff interpreters).

3 Quantitative Overview

Before analysing the qualitative findings in greater detail (in sections 4-6), I should like to provide an overview of the quantitative results and the questions asked. In the following quantitative breakdown, figures are given both in percentage points and in absolute terms (bracketed). In all of the tables, 'no reply' refers to those respondents

² The questions were taken and adapted from those designed by the TELF (Tuebingen English as a Lingua Franca corpus) research group (of Kurt Kohn's Applied English Linguistics chair), which uses a triangulated methodological approach (i.e. video-recorded discussions, interviews and retrospective comments), cf. Albl-Mikasa (2009: 110-111), Kohn (2011), <http://www.ael.uni-tuebingen.de>.

³ An A language, according to the Statutes of AIIC, is "the interpreter's native language [...], into which the interpreter works from all her or his other languages". The B language refers to "a language other than the interpreter's native language, of which she or he has a perfect command and into which she or he works from one or more of her or his other languages". C languages, finally, are languages "of which the interpreter has a complete understanding and from which she or he works" (AIIC 2010: 19).

⁴ URL: <http://www.aiic.net/stats/figures/default.cfm?G=5>

who either chose not to answer a given question at all, replied that they could not answer the given question(s), or who felt that the question did not concern them (because they did not have English as a B language, for instance).

The *first block of questions* refers to the direct effects of the spread of English as a lingua franca on the interpreters' work. A substantial majority of respondents (81%) say that the spread of ELF does indeed affect their work. A majority (72%) also agrees that for languages other than English, interpreting booths are provided on fewer occasions and that the overall number of interpreting assignments is decreasing (69%).

<i>Question block 1 (N = 32)</i>	'yes'	'no'	no reply
(a) Does globalisation and the spread of English as a lingua franca have a noticeable effect on your work as an interpreter?	81% (26)	13% (4)	6% (2)
(b) Are booths for languages other than English passed over?	72% (23)	9% (3)	19% (6)
(c) Has the number of interpreting assignments decreased due to an increase in monolingual English communication?	69% (22)	13% (4)	19% ⁵ (6)

Interestingly, a more detailed analysis shows that all the 'no'-replies in questions (a) to (c) are given by Swiss-based interpreters, which suggests that the situation seems to be less serious in their part of the market.

As regards to question (b), the following detailed observations are made with respect to working languages and language booths:

- the overall impression (72% of respondents) is that the number of interpreting booths per event is reduced; often only one booth is provided (usually English in connection with the local language, while "less popular languages such as Italian" are no longer provided)
- according to 4 respondents, German is increasingly dispensed with as a conference language; language pairs increasingly cover English combined with various languages other than German
- according to several respondents, the following difference between private market and EU institutions can be observed: in the private market there is an increasing reliance on one, i.e. an English booth (English plus local language, including 'retour'), while in the EU, the English booth (which in this case means interpreting from various languages into English) is increasingly done away with as most speeches are given in English anyway (thus requiring interpretation *into* other European languages only).

The *second block of questions* concerns a possible increase in non-native speakers producing the source text and, consequently, a growing number of foreign accents. A clear majority (88 and 81%) perceives this to be the case.

⁵ Total percentage 101 due to rounding.

<i>Question block 2 (N = 32)</i>	'yes'	'no'	no reply
(a) Are you increasingly faced with non-native speakers of English producing the source text?	88% (24+4)	6% (2)	6% (2)
(b) Are you increasingly faced with accents (e.g. Spanish, Indian, Chinese speakers) that are difficult to understand	81% (19+7)	16% (5)	3% (1)

It needs to be noted, however, that some respondents do not see this as an increase or change, but as a constant problem interpreters have faced for a long time: 4 of the 28 'yes'-respondents in question (a) point out that non-native speakers have outnumbered native source text producers for a long time, and 7 of the 26 'yes'-respondents in question (b) similarly declare that problematic accents have been around for a long time. One of those 26 respondents points out that there is not so much an increase in the number of non-native speakers, but rather in the variety of cultural backgrounds those speakers come from.

Question (3) regards the consequences the increasing confrontation with foreign accents has on the interpreters' work. The great majority of respondents (78%) agree that these accents have an effect on their work. While 22% did not answer the question, there is not a single explicit reply to the effect that foreign accents did not have any influence at all. Of the 78% who feel that their work is affected in some way or another, 72% are of the opinion that the impact is negative, rather than positive.⁶ 22% of those 72% explicitly underline comprehension problems arising from foreign accents as the major trouble source, while 50% outline that the process of interpreting was rendered more strenuous and that cognitive processing capacity was additionally taxed.

<i>Question 3 (N = 32)</i> Consequences	more strenuous, capacity consuming	comprehension problems	others	no reply
What are the consequences of increasingly difficult accents?	50% (16)	22% (7)	6% (2)	22% (7)

As might have been expected from the difficulties the interpreters feel to be associated with non-native speakers and their accents, the majority of them (69%) prefer native speaker source text producers (*question 4*) while only 6% prefer non-native ones.

<i>Question 4 (N = 32)</i>	native	non-native	no preference	no reply
Do you prefer native or non-native speakers of English to produce the source text for your interpretation?	69% (22)	6% (2)	22% (7)	3% (1)

It comes as no surprise that interpreters set very high standards for their own levels of proficiency and language competence (*question 5*). At the same time, they are very

⁶ Of the remaining 6%, i.e. 2 respondents, one points out that not only speakers but listeners, too, are non-native to an ever larger extent; no specification is given, however, as to what that implied; the second respondent says that the various backgrounds of speakers needed to be taken into account more fully in the preparation phase.

much aware that it is unrealistic to believe the native speaker standard is an attainable goal. As a result, 53% of respondents strive to be as native-like as possible and 25% aim at a solid B language level. Only 6% explicitly state that they have no native speaker ideal whatsoever. (The 'no-reply' answers are given by people who do not have English as a B language.)

<i>Question 5 (N = 32)</i>	as native-like as possible	solid B language level	no such requirement	no reply
What is your target regarding your English language competence? Do you expect yourself to offer native-like English?	53% (17)	25% (8)	6% (2)	16% (5)

The high expectations interpreters have of their own English language competence⁷ (*question 6*) are also reflected in the finding that the vast majority adhere to their own standards, even in the face of an increasing number of non-native source text producers with sometimes relatively poor English.

<i>Question block 6 (N = 32)</i>	'yes'	'no'	no reply
Have your own requirements regarding your English changed due to the growing number of non-native speakers?	3% (1)	78% (25)	19% (6)
Has the pressure to be native-like decreased?	3% (1)	78% (25)	19% (6)
Do you feel less inclined to be grammatically correct?	0% (0)	84% (27)	16% (5)
Do you care less about your accent?	3% (1)	75% (24)	22% (7)

Leaving aside the 'no-reply' answers, there is an almost unanimous vote in favour of keeping standards up (only 3% take a more relaxed attitude). This is maintained despite the view (made explicit by 22% of the respondents) that such high standards may not be appreciated or may not even be appropriate in all cases.

As regards customer expectations (*question 7*), the respondents (75%) do not observe any laxer attitudes on the part of their customers as might have been expected as a result of the increasing number of non-native speaker communication. Some respondents even feel that demands have actually risen, i.e. that the language professional is expected to offer exceptional linguistic skills since "everybody 'knows' English". At the same time, question (b) regarding expectations of native-like English yields a divided vote: 41% feel that customers hold very high expectations, while 31% do not see it that way. As is pointed out by the respondents, however, customers often appear unable to judge an interpreter's competence (and performance) or simply do

⁷ According to Kohn's performance model (1990a) it is in fulfilment of one's own communication and community-oriented requirements of performance that language is used and language competence built up. This has a number of interesting implications for ELF communication (cf. Kohn 2007; 2011).

not give importance to this but take it for granted; moreover, a number of customers do not seem to be in a position to assess the language-related needs of a given communicative situation (which is why many interpreters see themselves as providers of a service that goes way beyond the actual interpreting process and into communication consultancy). In many cases, it is the co-interpreting colleague (i.e. the booth mate) that is seen as the expert positioned to make a judgement. In fact, 3 respondents explicitly expressed their amazement at the fact that insufficient interpreting quality on the part of some colleagues was not infrequently accepted or left unadmonished by the customer.

<i>Question block 7 (N = 32)</i>	'yes'	'no'	no reply
(a) Have your customers' expectations regarding your English changed/decreased?	3% (1)	75% (24)	22% (7)
(b) Do customers (or colleagues) consciously or unconsciously expect a high, native-like standard of English of you?	41% (13)	31% (10)	28% (9)

In reply to question 6, above, (regarding their own requirements and the standards of linguistic competence they set for themselves), the respondents firmly rejected the idea of lowering their own standards. At the same time they voiced the necessity of adjusting their output to the perceived competence of their non-native speaker addressees. When directly asked about possible adjustment processes and needs (*question 8*), a majority of 72% confirmed that they usually did adapt to the language level of their addressees, especially when they had evidence that no native speakers were in the audience.

<i>Question 8 (N = 32)</i>	'yes'	'no'	no reply
Do you adjust your English (consciously or unconsciously) to your listener/addressee?	72% (23)	19% (6)	9% (3)

The *final block of questions (9)* regarding the implications of ELF for conference interpreters comprises of the following questions: do you feel threatened by the global spread of English in any way? Do you have any *fears*? What *future* do you see for your profession in the face of this development? 59% of respondents expressed certain fears and saw a negative impact, 16% felt that the interpreting profession was not under threat in general, but that certain shifts were noticeable (e.g. from conference interpreting to other modes of interpreting such as community interpreting). 22% did not perceive any threat to the profession at all.

<i>Question 9 (N = 32)</i>	'yes'	'no'	changing conditions	no reply
Negative effects	59% (19)	22% (7)	16% (5)	3% (1)

It needs to be specified that 6 of those 7 respondents who do not feel threatened in any way are Swiss-based and/or work for international institutions such as the EU. Moreover, all 6 are firmly established in their professional careers with a working life of

19 to 28 years. The seventh respondent is neither Swiss-based nor working for an institution, but with 35 years of working experience is perhaps less concerned about future developments. Similarly, there is a negative correlation to be noted according to age: the two youngest respondents in terms of working years (10) paint the gloomiest picture of the future that lies ahead for their profession.

As regards to major concerns or negative effects, the respondents report to have observed or foresee the following changes:⁸

Decline in the demand for interpreters	40% (13)
Change in the kind of interpreting assignments (fewer conferences/congresses; more tele-/video-conferences, more legal proceedings and depositions, more product presentations, more interpreting for television/radio, more community interpreting, etc.)	9% (3)
Increasing provision of interpreting services for highly complex and difficult events or subject matters only	13% (4)
Shift in language pairs (see question block 1)	13% (4)
"Flattening" of communication/lowering of the level of linguistic competence	9% (3)

Interesting as it may be, this set of quantitative data cannot yield the same insights as qualitative analyses can. The qualitative statements and findings are therefore discussed below in terms of their implications for source text comprehension (section 4), target text production (section 5), and quality of interpreters' performance (section 6).

4 ELF-related Implications for Source Text Comprehension

A major finding of my survey regards the additional processing cost that may be incurred when increasingly having to interpret non-native speakers. Interpreters have to strike a careful balance in distributing the total available capacity between the various tasks of source text comprehension and analysis, short term memory management as well as target text production. Such processing capacity management is seriously affected when resources are too heavily taxed during one of the tasks, which will inevitably result in a lack of resources for the remaining ones. These interrelations are most distinctly outlined in Gile's Effort Models (1988; 1995: chap. 7). They are also a basic assumption and fundamental ingredient of a cognitive model of consecutive interpreting, which places interpreting in the broader framework of cognitive-constructivist language and text theory as well as the narrower framework of relevance theory (cf. Albl-Mikasa 2007: chap. 2.3.3, 2.3.4, 2008). Interestingly, the respondents in this survey did not only report overload in the comprehension task (brought about by foreign accents) with related consequences for the production task (see below in

⁸ As several points are mentioned by individual respondents, the percentage figures in this table relate to how many of the respondents explicitly express a particular effect or concern.

this section), but they also pointed to capacity-related problems specific to the production process itself (see section 5 below).

In the little research that has so far been undertaken on ELF-related interpreting issues, the focus of investigation is on the *comprehension side*. Based on Gile's Effort Models, Kurz (2008) provides empirical evidence for the hypothesis that higher processing capacity is required for comprehension when a speaker has a strong foreign accent (see also Gile 1995: 173, 176).⁹ A pilot study (carried out by an MA student under Kurz' supervision) finds that

there was a markedly higher loss of information in the interpretations of the non-native speaker. Students obviously had great difficulties in managing and allocating their cognitive resources. Too much mental capacity was needed for comprehension [...], so that the capacities required for speech processing and speech production were insufficient. (Kurz 2008: 190)

Similar findings put forward by Mazzetti (1999), who investigated trainee interpreters, too, and by Basel (2002), whose case study comprised of students as well as professional interpreters,¹⁰ "seem to indicate that a non-native speaker of English is less difficult to interpret for an interpreter who is familiar with the speaker's mother tongue" (Kurz 2008: 184; see also Kurz/Basel 2009).¹¹

In this context, it is important to note that the difficulties mentioned above do not only arise from pronunciation-related aspects of non-native source speech, but also – and perhaps to an even larger degree – from lexical, syntactic, prosodic and fluency-related factors (see also Pöchhacker 2004: 129; furthermore, see House 2002a on the lack of "pragmatic fluency" on the part of non-native speakers). When asked about the consequences the increasing confrontation with foreign accents has on the interpreters' work (question 3 above), the respondents in my survey mentioned the following main causes to explain the difficulties arising from *non-native speaker* source text production:

- unorthodox grammatico-syntactic structures
- elliptical structures
- unusual ways of putting things
- imprecision, unclear wording and phrases
- wrong intonation (overshadowing the overall line of argumentation)
- generally reduced language

When asked whether they prefer non-native over native speakers when it comes to source text production (question 4 above), the 22% of respondents who did not have any preferences point out that native speakers (e.g. a football player from the North of

⁹ This is confirmed by an AIIC Workload study on interpreter stress and burnout where foreign accents rank fourth in a list of eleven stress factors reported by the respondents (cf. Mackintosh 2002).

¹⁰ In Basel's (2002) study 12 student and 6 professional interpreters are asked to interpret into German an English source text which is delivered by a Spanish or French native speaker.

¹¹ In Pöchhacker's case study there is also ample evidence of the "difficulties for simultaneous interpreting arising from English being the predominant conference language" (1994: 154, my translation).

England) can potentially be much more difficult to interpret than a non-native speaker (e.g. a Scandinavian scientist). Respondents also seem to agree that non-native speakers, who often speak slower, can be easier to interpret under certain conditions (i.e. when they are experienced or even gifted speakers, when their speech is clear and well-structured, when they use simple syntactical structures and a less elaborated vocabulary, when their accent is intelligible).¹² Similarly, native speakers can be extremely hard on the interpreter if they mumble, speak in a rather confused or highly sophisticated way, or when they pull out all the stops and talk nineteen to the dozen. On the whole, however, there was a general agreement that non-native speakers pose a much greater challenge (69% prefer source text production by native speakers and 72% feel that the increasing number of non-native speakers has adverse effects), with the general feeling being that native speaker output is more conducive to the interpreting process. The reasons why respondents favour native speakers are given as follows:

- reliable structures, correct expressions
- deliberate and purposeful use of concepts and terms
- conscious choice of words
- more pleasant idiomaticity
- fewer mistakes/false friends
- smoother word flow, fluency, eloquence
- clearer, more logical, more differentiated argumentation
- more accurate expressions
- can get their message across
- easier to follow what they are getting at
- more natural way of putting things
- higher register
- allowing for anticipation and inference

From the replies to questions 3 and 4, it becomes clear that comprehension problems are associated with non-native speakers to a much greater degree, while aspects supporting comprehension are mostly linked to native speakers. Respondents explicitly put this down to the cognitive load factor. In reply to question 3, they specify the capacity-related operational consequences from non-native source text producers as follows:

- a higher level of concentration is required

¹² As Stähle points out, however, even such non-native speakers may be challenging since they tend to speed up and become sloppy in articulation once they turn to highly familiar items (such as native language terms or proper names): "Nehmen Sie als Beispiel einen auf Englisch vortragenden Franzosen, dem ein deutscher Dolmetscher normalerweise leichter folgen kann als einem 'Ur-Engländer'. Sobald er aber französische Begriffe wie Ortsnamen, Eigennamen etc. vorträgt, spricht er plötzlich schneller, undeutlicher – eben wie ein Franzose und nicht wie ein 'Beuteengländer' – und wird dadurch schwerer verständlich" (2009: 278).

- additional listening efforts are required
- the extra work involved in crossing over from non-standard English to intended first language expressions and in having to "reformulate" accordingly (this is especially mentioned in connection with German interpreters having to make inferences on the basis of "wrong English" as to the "intended German") ("vom falschen Englisch auf das gedachte Deutsch schließen")
- additional effort for "the correction of the source text prior to interpreting"
- additional processes aimed at disambiguation, at abstraction from unintelligible "scraps of conversation" ("Wortfetzen"), at unravelling unusual word combinations and interferences from speakers' mother tongue
- extra operation in "recovering what the speaker would have said, had he said it correctly"
- insertion of corrective steps and measures
- ironing out of mistakes, compensation for incomplete structures
- desire for visual support/visual presentations to reduce processing load

In summary, native speaker output is reported not only to spare the interpreter additional compensatory measures, but also to support processing. Therefore, "all things being equal", i.e. native and non-native speakers being similarly articulate and communicative, native speakers are felt to be not necessarily easier but better or more pleasant to interpret, as their speech flow, speech structure and precision in expression are conducive to the interpreters' task. In contrast, non-native speaker-induced pronunciation, structure, and expression-based comprehension problems impede the underlying processes of anticipation and inference.

This can be explained against the background of the very nature and intrinsic particularities of the translation task, where comprehension and the recovery of intended source text meaning "have to be unusually careful and exhaustive for an optimal choice of target language means of expression to be successful" (Kohn 2004: 223, my translation). This necessity is put forward by Kohn as one of the three major sources of conflict in translation (see also Kohn 1990b). Empirical evidence for this trouble source comes from a study (cf. Sabatini 2000/2001) that compares listening comprehension, shadowing, and simultaneous interpreting on the basis of two "non-standard" English speeches (one delivered by an Indian speaker and one by an American with a strong accent). It finds that

listening comprehension is considerably less demanding than shadowing and simultaneous interpretation. Given the high scores for listening comprehension, the explanation for the difficulties in shadowing and simultaneous interpreting is logically not a general failure to understand the source speech. However, poor understanding is probably a factor in some of the difficulties experienced, as shown by analysis of problem areas. (Sabatini 2000/2001:46)

This clearly indicates that successful general comprehension is not sufficient, but that exceptionally precise, in-depth understanding of each and every source text item is necessary for the translator's decision-making process. Acting as "a potential problem

trigger", "non-standard English source speeches" may impede such understanding and, thus, "add to the difficulty of simultaneous interpreting" (Sabatini 2000/2001: 27, 47).

While in "monolingual ELF-communication", comprehension problems or ambiguous and deficient utterances are often glossed over by resorting to the 'let-it-pass' principle (cf. Firth 1996; Seidlhofer 2001; House 1999, 2003: 558), this strategic option seems almost incompatible with the interpreter's task (although 'let-it-pass' does, of course, happen in interpreting, strategically as well as involuntarily). One of the three major trouble sources typical of translation is thus aggravated by the increasing presence of non-native speakers due to the obstruction of in-depth comprehension, on the one hand, and the non-availability of the compensatory mechanism of 'let-it-pass', on the other. It is against this background that interpreting is rendered more difficult or more strenuous under ELF conditions.

5 ELF-related Implications for Target Text Production

Just as 'let-it-pass' is a phenomenon investigated in ELF research with respect to non-native speaker comprehension processes, *accommodation* is a phenomenon extensively discussed with respect to non-native speaker *production processes* (e.g. Jenkins 2000: chap. 7; Mauranen 2006; Cogo 2009; Seidlhofer 2009; House 2002b, 2010). On the one hand, non-native speakers adjust their speech to other non-native interlocutors; on the other hand, however, when they find themselves in an ELF situation, native speakers, too, tend to feel a certain responsibility to adapt their linguistic level to the perceived needs of non-native participants in the interaction (cf. Albl-Mikasa 2009: 116-117). This phenomenon has, to my knowledge, not yet been investigated from an interpreting studies perspective. It is, however, reported quite extensively in my survey. As mentioned before, the respondents make it very clear that a lack of resources in the production process is only in part caused by difficulties in understanding the non-native speaker output, i.e. by having to devote too much processing capacity to the comprehension process. There is an additional factor affecting processing capacity management in production: interpreters see a need – induced by the non-native speaker's level of communicative competence – to adjust their output production to their non-native speaker addressees.

According to the answers to question 8, above, 72% of respondents, conceiving of themselves as language professionals and communication experts, see accommodation to the non-native speaker addressee as part of their job. Unfortunately, this reorientation brings an additional load, taxing the interpreters' processing capacity. The respondents declare that it renders interpreting more strenuous. Accordingly, 4 respondents explicitly point out that adjustment can only be done when there is enough time and capacity left. One of them explains this in the following revealing terms: "Yes I do it, when I have sufficient capacity left, for it means having to give up long-established automatisms learned over the years."

In what way do interpreters accommodate? Accommodation is mostly directed towards linguistic simplification and, according to the respondents, is implemented in the following way:

- see to clearer articulation
- use shorter sentences and less complex syntactical structures
- say things in a simpler yet appropriate way
- pay greater attention to the careful selection of expressions
- avoid supposedly unknown or incomprehensible expressions
- renouncing of sophisticated idioms and phrases
- add easier paraphrases after the use of an idiom
- cut down on style and register
- reduce nuances and shades of meaning
- clarify input information by providing additional explanations
- try to keep in mind the national background of the addressees
- take into consideration cultural differences and different codes of conduct

Interestingly, respondents care to stress that such simplification is *not* tantamount to a reduction in interpreting standards. They point out that they "still use correct, fluent and appropriate English just as one can say things in one's mother tongue in a simpler yet fully appropriate way" or that they have "only started to simplify when asked to do so by an Eastern European audience". Moreover, 4 respondents explicitly stress that, yes, they did adjust to their non-native addressees, but that that did not mean coming down to a lower level of English. One interpreter made it clear that such practice would be unprofessional ("nicht seriös") and a betrayal of customer interests. The interpreters thus find themselves in a situation, where, on the one hand, the idea of adjusting one's linguistic output to suit non-native speaker addressees automatically conjures up associations with downgrading one's language, while on the other hand, slackening standards are seen as incompatible with professional ethics. In fact, according to the replies to question 6 with regard to the high expectations interpreters have of their own language competence, this is almost inconceivable for the professional interpreter.

As a result, the production of the source text by non-native speakers leads to *internal pressures* arising from the conflict between the interpreter's role as a mediator and his or her self-identification as a language professional. The interpreter's *role as a mediator* puts the accent on facilitating effective communication and ensuring mutual understanding. In the presence of non-native speakers, this calls for adaptation and accommodation to addressees who depend on this mediating function (as respondents put it: "after all, interpreters are here to promote communication"; "communication is more important than beautiful English"; "non-native speakers have to be helped in their communicative efforts and endeavours, for they are disadvantaged in comparison to native speakers"). On the other hand, mediation and facilitation – when involving too great a degree of accommodation – may appear as down-grading one's language level and may go down as a self-denigrating practice in the language professional's *self-identification as an expert*; it generates a feeling of exposing oneself as not up to certain standards. This is especially true in the presence of native speakers (as one respondent put it: "as soon as a native speaker is listening, no interpreter would ever

expose and humiliate herself by producing on a lower level than she is able to").¹³ In fact, 5 respondents explicitly stress the fact that they stop accommodating whenever a native speaker (or the customer for that matter) is known to be present. There is a clear conflict here, in that interpreters have to align the perceived need to produce a sub-standard target text (from their professional point of view) with the perceived need of having to keep up high standards in order to live up to their own professional expectations and requirements (which are also specified and firmly upheld by AIIC in its "code of professional ethics", see the AIIC website¹⁴).

The increasing presence of non-native speakers, therefore, puts additional strain on the production process, and, at the same time, leads to a conflict between serving the listener/addressee and upholding cherished professional ideals. Quite obviously, this conflict must have an impact on questions relating to the quality of interpreters' performance.

6 ELF-related Impact on Quality and Job Satisfaction

It is undisputed amongst researchers and practitioners in the field that the spread and global use of English as a lingua franca generates *additional pressure to uphold or even uplift quality standards*:

Karla Déjean le Féal summed this up by pointing out that at a time when English is steadily gaining ground as the *lingua franca* – making interpreting more and more of a luxury item – high quality standards have become a *sine qua non*. (Shlesinger et al 1997: 131)

Unfortunately many people nowadays think that 'global English' is good enough for 'global business'. As a result, professional conference interpreters have to convey even outside the booth just who they are and what they are able to do. Unlike Zara, Diesel or other fashion brands, we will certainly not succeed in generating demand where there is none. But were it might be, there we should not hesitate to demonstrate what qualified, committed and [...] passionate interpreters and translators are capable of (achieving). (Geese 2009: 53, my translation)

This "ELF-induced" demand for high or even higher quality is confirmed by the respondents in the survey under discussion. They give the following reasons for why they feel a strong need to maintain or even raise quality standards:

- fiercer competition for fewer jobs (in answer to question 1 as to the effects of ELF on the interpreter's work, 69% of respondents report a decrease in the number of assignments due to an increase in English-only events, and in response to question 9 relating to how they see the future of their profession, 40% express fears of declining demand)
- the necessity to give customers good reasons for offering interpreting services rather than have their events managed in 'bad simple English' (this argument is advanced in answer to question 6 on the expectations of their own language

¹³ The original quotation is: "kein Dolmetscher würde sich diese 'Blöße' geben und ein niedrigeres Niveau produzieren, als er produzieren kann, sobald ein Muttersprachler mitzuhört".

¹⁴ URL: <http://www.aiic.net/ViewPage.cfm/article24.htm>

competence; only 3% of respondents take a somewhat more relaxed attitude towards upholding high language standards)

- the subjectively felt requirement on the interpreters' part to defend their reputation as language professionals and to dissociate themselves from unprofessional users of English (in response to various questions respondents express the feeling that many non-native speakers grossly overestimate their English).

In answer to question 9 relating to the future prospects of the interpreting profession, a number of detailed arguments are actually put forward as to why maintaining or increasing high quality is paramount:

- to an ever larger extent, interpreters are only contracted for highly technical and complex events (since "everybody knows English")
- there will always be demand for top interpreters, but mediocrity will not suffice
- increasingly, only highly qualified interpreters will subsist; quality and professionalism will become the decisive factors
- interpreting is increasingly becoming a luxury service, so that when people contract interpreters despite scarce financial means they expect perfection
- enhanced quality can strengthen the interpreting profession's *raison d'être*
- one has to demonstrate that added value lies in the provision of professional interpreting
- the topics under discussion are often too technical for organisers to forgo professional interpreters; one has to bring home to potential customers that the English language competence of many speakers is insufficient for them to express themselves precisely and to participate fully in the communicative event
- one has to set a counterpoint to the increasing use and acceptance of bad English
- as a language professional one has to dissociate oneself from the poor use of English many speakers content themselves with and from the unwarranted feeling of many non-native speakers that their English is very good
- one has to make a difference

It becomes very clear from these statements that (conference) interpreters observe rising requirements of quality and professionalism and do not see a very bright future for the so-called "common or garden interpreters". The "segment" of the interpreting market or of multilingual communication which used to be covered by less professional interpreters or which fell under the label of the "easy and pleasant assignments" seems to have been taken over by ELF. It is when matters become complex, technical or very specific that professional interpreters are needed and contracted.¹⁵

This situation generates additional *external pressures*. Interpreters are faced with the conflict that on the one hand, for the reasons given above, *demand for higher quality* is growing while on the other hand, they find it *increasingly difficult to produce*

¹⁵ These findings as reported by respondents are apparently in opposition to those of a study by Vuorikoski (mentioned in Kalina 2005: 782), which is, however, based on the situation in the European Parliament.

high quality interpretation. As pointed out in reply to questions 3 and 8, this difficulty is caused by:

- the increasing level of complexity of the average interpreting assignment (see above in this section)
- the unusual ("non-standard") structures and foreign accents used by non-native *speakers* that tax the interpreters' resources in *source text comprehension* (see section 4)
- the additional effort to accommodate to non-native *listeners*, which requires extra cognitive load in *target text production* (see section 5)

The additional burden imposed by the above-mentioned conflicts and pressures may pass unnoticed, as interpreters' highly professional attitude, according to an AIIC workload study on interpreter stress and burnout, tends to compensate for, or cover up, stress-related factors:

the literature does not show consistent evidence of stress having an adverse effect upon performance. This may be due to the presence of two moderating variables: competence and motivation. Research indicates that highly competent workers are likely to maintain a high level of performance in the presence of stressors such as role overload, role ambiguity, role conflict and resource inadequacy. Simultaneous interpreters are highly skilled and motivated to perform well given that their work is continuously monitored by their listeners. Research shows that this comes at a cost: physiological exhaustion and post-work stress. (Mackintosh 2002)

While the pressure arising from ELF-related developments may not show in the interpreters' performance, it does reveal itself in the image they have of their profession. Respondents, in reply to questions 3, 4, 6, and 9, above, report a decline in job satisfaction which is reflected in the following qualitative statements:

- increased strain and annoyance at having to submit oneself to more and more subpar levels of English¹⁶
- higher levels of frustration
- "crooked English" making for frustrating work
- pessimism as to market saturation
- dreadful prospects of colleagues backing down on working conditions and remuneration levels
- reduction of language to a mere means to an end
- some colleagues contenting themselves with increasingly modest English
- loss of motivation
- finding no more joy in the work, especially when having to interpret the poor English of German native speakers into German; this is highly dissatisfactory language-wise and the work actually stops making sense at this point¹⁷

¹⁶ According to Reithofer (forthc.), substandard English is one of the interpreters' major sources of complaint: "[...] non-native speakers (NNS) of English are currently the preferred objects of criticism by practising interpreters. Speakers using so-called *BSE* – bad simple English – have made it to the top of the list of complaints in our profession".

In summary it can be said that, on the whole, the increasing use of English as a lingua franca is seen by interpreters as having adverse effects on their working conditions: easy source texts and pleasant "simple assignments" are a thing of the past; instead an extra comprehension effort is induced by non-native speakers and additional cognitive load is required for accommodating to non-native listeners. As has been said before, every second interpreter (50%, see question 3 in section 3 above) found that interpreting has become more strenuous and tiring, and another 22% complained about comprehension problems. Moreover, 72% felt that accommodation puts an additional burden on processing capacity management. While the surveyed interpreters sternly fend off all allegations as to a possible decline in the quality of the service they provide, or a relaxing in the standards they set themselves, they do find that overall job satisfaction levels are going down.

This adds a new dimension to the research debate on interpreting quality. So far it has focussed on how complex the interpreting task is due to the great number of factors, variables and different (user) perspectives that influence and determine the interpreter's performance (see e.g. Kurz 1993; Pöchhacker 1994; Gile 1995: chap. 2.5; Shlesinger et al 1997; Mack 2002; Kalina 2005, 2006). As interpreters are trying to hold their own against ELF, the increasing pressure for specialisation, professionalization and sophistication have to be taken into account as well, including the potential conflicts¹⁸ that follow from it.

7 Conclusion

The present survey amongst professional conference interpreters who, based on their many years' experience in the business, were able to provide insights into the changing situation they are faced with, leaves hardly any doubt that their working conditions have undergone far-reaching changes. In the traditional 20th century view, simultaneous interpreters are often admired for their fascinating art; they are in high demand and therefore greatly appreciated by high-ranking personalities in the top floors of international politics, business and finance. They are assumed to visit exotic and luxurious places, to get a glimpse of spectacular events and an opportunity to overhear top-secret information and talks. In the 21st century, interpreters have had to come down a bit from such lofty ideals and positions. There is a decline in the prestige of the profession, the glamour and glitter have vanished, the "diplomat's aura" is no longer part of the interpreter's image. With increasing demand in community interpreting and efforts to upgrade and professionalise it, one can even speak of a creeping alignment between the formerly distinct modes of conference and community

¹⁷ In this context, Stähle (2009: 170) refers to a trend among German native speakers who insist on speaking English even in front of a predominantly German audience; this can lead to a situation where the English presentation is just about understandable for German mother tongue interpreters, but often unintelligible for an English native speaker.

¹⁸ Intragroup contradictions and ambivalences of (non-professional) non-native speakers of English in lingua franca situations have been sketched out in Albl-Mikasa (2009). For differences between professional and non-professional participants in ELF communication, see Albl-Mikasa (in preparation).

interpreting (cf. Pöchhacker 2000/2007; Hofer 2007; Gross-Dinter 2009). More importantly, however, conference interpreters find and experience that their job is becoming tougher and more strenuous and that job satisfaction is on the decline.

A major reason for this development is the evolution of English as a global lingua franca. Financial constraints increasingly lead to a situation where – at least in the private market – only one language booth is provided (English plus local language) or where no provision is made for interpreting services at all. Instead, attendees are expected to communicate in English. As a result, there is increasing pressure for interpreters to produce higher quality (see section 6), which, in turn, is in conflict with ELF-induced *difficulties* to produce high quality (due, amongst other things, to problems in the comprehension phase caused by non-native speakers and accommodation efforts in the production phase needed to cater for non-native listeners; in an activity crucially determined by cognitive load factors, resources are additionally taxed). It is clearly the *conference* interpreter who is most affected by ELF-related developments, for it is in her that the demand for high linguistic standards, professional language competence and native-like targets is most deeply ingrained. This is why conference interpreters are probably the most interesting and perhaps the most relevant population for the study of the implications of ELF on interpreting, although, quite obviously, further research is needed not only on this part of the interpreting population, but on others as well.

But is ELF taking over from the (conference) interpreter altogether? ELF has made inroads and left its mark, however, the interpreters questioned do not see themselves as an “endangered species”, but are more concerned with the adverse effects on working conditions and job satisfaction levels. They also point out that non-native speakers of English, who are often admired and heaped with kind words of appreciation by the more monolingual native speaker (just as interpreters are often admired by their audience), frequently overestimate their linguistic skills, which can obstruct communication and render the interpreter’s task more difficult. A more realistic assessment of their own (foreign) language skills by conference participants, of what one can expect from speakers coming from all over the world by organisers and of the communicative needs in multilingual events by financial decision-makers, could make communication much more effective. As is pointed out by several respondents, heightened efficiency in communication could even compensate for the additional cost incurred by interpreting services, including the appropriate infrastructure (i.e. interpreters, booths for all necessary languages, technical equipment, etc.). The above-mentioned study by Reithofer (forthc.) confirms respondents’ impression that (at least in non-dialogic communication) interpreting is more effective and that relying on interpretation yields better comprehension results on the part of an audience than listening to unmediated non-native English source text production.

The recent evolution of ELF and the age-old profession of interpreting compete with one another. ELF, although an intriguing added value for personal international

communication,¹⁹ is (as yet?) not a solution to the world's professional transnational communicative needs. This stands unquestioned in international organisations. However, opinions are divided in other domains, such as the business sector. Companies such as Porsche, for instance, have come around to insisting on German as the company's working language, as English was found to undermine engineers' creativity and productive motivation, as well as to hamper discussions about technical details (see Stefanie Gentner, *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 11 March 2008²⁰). In another large German-based company, by contrast, ELF, just like mobiles and laptops, is seen as an ordinary working tool for everyday multinational and even in-house communication (cf. Ehrenreich 2009). As has also been found in studies unrelated to interpreting, ELF is quite an ambivalent matter and gives rise to rather contradictory phenomena (see, for instance, Jenkins 2007; Albl-Mikasa 2009). As pointed out above, the competitive forces, and the pressures and conflicts arising from ELF-related developments need to be taken into consideration in the research debate on interpreting quality.

It may be useful to make (beginner) interpreters aware of the implications of ELF, saving them from unrealistic expectations and preparing them for the difficulties that go along with the impact the spread of ELF has on their working conditions. At the same time, they should be helped to show great confidence in their unique and rightly admired skill and to be well informed so as to be able to reason with potential customers. They need to come up with strong arguments for the provision of interpreting services and adequate technical support, the combination of which is not so much a costly liability, but rather a valuable instrument in ensuring successful interlingual communication.

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¹⁹ A study looking at 34 non-professional users finds that all of them (100%) regard ELF as an asset (Albl-Mikasa 2009: 112).

²⁰ URL: <http://www.sueddeutsche.de/wirtschaft/beispiel-porsche-sprache-in-firmen-schlechtes-deutsch-besser-als-gutes-englisch-1.292633>

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