Book Review


Two areas in English as a lingua franca (ELF) research where more study has been called for are communication among ELF-using couples (Jenkins, 2022) and in computer mediated gaming interactions (Schneider, 2019). *Interpersonal Positioning in English as a Lingua Franca Interactions* constructs a comparative analysis of both domains in the one monograph. More specifically, it explores the pragmatic processes of meaning negotiation among ELF users in these two interactional contexts. It probes how interactants’ individual contexts and pre-texts might inform how they interpret others’ utterances. It investigates how they achieve shared understanding and negotiate affective territory.

The data from online gaming comprises 1776 hours of in-game written communications, as well as responses to an online questionnaire and introspection protocol collected both inside and outside of gaming events. The couples data consist of 25 hours of self-recorded spoken interactions between five couples with different language and cultural backgrounds who communicated through ELF. Their data were supplemented with questionnaire and interview data, including participants’ retrospective accounts of earlier recordings. Intercultural couples’ interaction was selected to illuminate – as the authors state – how far the use of a ‘neutral’ lingua franca influences couples’ relational development, or whether, conversely, it is the nature of their relationship that determines how language is used.

The authors’ eclectic approach to data collection is informed by Bakhtin’s view of human interaction as polyphonic, i.e. a multi-voiced, jointly-constructed, subjective reality comprising a range of perspectives for viewing interpersonal interactional sequences. Bakhtin also provides the authors’ methodological model: in each domain they collect first-person data (from researcher diaries and field notes) for self-reflection and introspection; second-person
data are gained through external elicitation (interviews and questionnaires); while third-person data is garnered through observation (corpora of interactions in each domain).

The analysis is focused through the theoretical lens of interpersonal positioning, which the authors frame as not just negotiating meaning but negotiating interpersonal relationships. Positioning theory (Harré and van Langenhove, 1999) treats human behaviour – including communicative behaviour – as being goal-directed, and bound by cultural norms and conventions, as well as by the rights and obligations that accrue to certain encounters (e.g. in teacher-student discourse). Human behaviour is also coloured by each interactant’s previous interactional history. It is inevitably complex, multifarious, subjective, and even contradictory. The authors relate interpersonal positioning to pragmatics-oriented frameworks such as Goffman’s model of participant footing and Jaffé’s (2009) model of interactional stance. They also outline politeness theory, particularly how face-work is performed by participants in interaction.

Although the two domains of multi-player online gaming and couples talk appear essentially dissimilar, the authors argue that they are comparable because they “have to do with the same basic issues of how people relate to each other” (10) and “illustrate the same general pragmatic process of positioning” (12). Their logic is that the different domains and types of data represent a conceptually unified range of ELF ‘voices’ in Bakhtin’s parlance. Their claim is not entirely convincing, however. The spoken (couples) data set is small and localised with clearly-defined social and interactional characteristics and knowledge of participants’ linguistic and cultural backgrounds; by contrast, the written (gaming) one is a much larger corpus of computer-mediated interactions spanning a range of text types, including narrations, news, and advertisements. The participants’ interactional relationships to one another are often unclear. And the most widely spoken native language in the corpus is listed as English, raising questions about how many of the sample are actually ELF users.

The bulk of the data and resultant findings are presented in chapters 5 and 6. Chapter 5 details the ‘disembodied’ communication that characterises online gaming interactions, i.e. where participants cannot see or hear each other and the discourse may occur asynchronously. The chapter asserts that online gamers consciously strive to balance their own interactional needs and face-wants with those of their interlocutors, often in stressful or conflict-oriented situations. Actors have to cooperate to achieve not only game-oriented goals but also real-life interactional and affective goals: they form guilds and make friends in-game.
Chapter 6 explores how couples use ELF to help establish and sustain intimacy. It posits that the key factor is their desire to accomplish their “coupleness” (128): to collaboratively establish and maintain rapport and achieve their joint relational goals, using whatever linguistic means are available. The authors highlight a tension between maintaining one’s own private affective territory and accommodating to the interactional and relational requirements of their partner, which they rightly point out features not just in ELF but in all couples talk – indeed, in all interpersonal interaction generally.

In chapter 7 the authors then meld the two sets of findings into a joint conclusion, asserting that each reflects “the same conceptual issues of how people use linguistic resources to create shared cultural – conceptual and affective – territory” (160). They claim a “fundamental theoretical link between the two domains since the whole interaction depends on how people relate to each other” (160).

As well as the methodological issues touched on above, some gaps in the analysis impact the reliability of these findings. One is the rather sporadic and rudimentary application of pragmatics theories and frameworks: a more comprehensive and rigorous analysis of participant stance, for instance, or a more systematic discussion of how interlocutors’ face-wants were negotiated moment-to-moment, would have revealed the rich vein of interactional data that the authors clearly intended to explore. There are also expansive claims which are not sufficiently unpacked, such as that ELF users deploy linguistic resources to assist them in accomplishing both meaning and interactional comity. They do of course, but we need a more systematic and in-depth treatment of what these resources are (based on the now considerable scholarship in this area) and how interactants employ them in either gaming talk or ELF couples talk. This is perhaps a shortcoming of positioning theory, which was not conceived to facilitate analysis of linguistic items as strategies for managing interactional rapport.

All in all though, this book is to be praised for its concerted attempt to increase our understanding of human interactional behaviour in two prevalent ELF domains in use today, and for pointing out characteristics of ELF interactions in these domains that might be extrapolated to other spheres as well. There is clearly a great deal of material here for ELF researchers wishing to mine the rich seam that these authors have begun to unearth.

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References


