



WHAT ENGLISH DO WE SPEAK IN INTERNATIONAL CONTEXTS?: A CONCRETE LANGUAGE WITH ITS PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS



QUE TIPO DE INGLÊS FALAMOS EM CONTEXTOS INTERNACIONAIS?: UMA LÍNGUA CONCRETA COM CONSEQUÊNCIAS PEDAGÓGICAS

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Abstract

The concept of 'concrete utterance' maintained by Bakhtin and its Circle questions the use of standard language, that is an established model language which does not respond any more to the needs of its users. A good example of this phenomenon is the remarkable spread of English all over the world used by speakers of other languages for specific purposes. It poses a debate about what English language we speak in a global context, and consequently what language is acceptable according to the 'norm'. If we consider that in international contexts only few English native-speakers, if any, are involved in the use of English as a vehicular, or a common foreign language, it is immediately evident that a new medium is in use, distant from British culture connotations, and more often locally connoted in terms of different accents, even new lexis adequately chosen by the concrete users in a given, specific, unique context.

O conceito de “enunciado concreto” utilizado por Bakhtin e o seu Círculo põe em questão a abordagem linguística com um modelo único, a língua padrão, para todos os falantes. Um exemplo emblemático deste fenômeno é a surpreendente difusão do Inglês em contextos internacionais que implica a utilização de um novo meio linguístico, uma língua veicular globalizada para tratar de assuntos específicos. Trata-se de um fenômeno que abre um debate sobre a língua padrão e o tipo de língua que se fala em contextos globais. É evidente que o Inglês atual já não transmite mais, de modo direto, a cultura britânica, mas aquela dos falantes locais, com acentos e vocabulário diferentes, de acordo com o contexto específico e as exigências deles.

Entradas para indexação

KEYWORDS: Concrete utterance. Standard language. Global context.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Enunciado concreto. Língua padrão. Contextos internacionais.

Texto integral

Introduction

The wondrous spread of English in international contexts has led to a linguistic globalization, where the speakers of other languages have successfully found a medium for their needs of expressing specific contents, in domains such as law, business, politics, education and academics, science and technology, among the many others (PENNYCOOK, 2003). This phenomenon has also opened a debate about Standard English and the nature of the English we speak in a global context (BURNS; COFFIN, 2001).

It is already evident that a new medium is in use, characterized by locally connoted accents and new lexis, often distant from British culture and the established standard English. This new world English, or English as a Lingua Franca, is the result of a concrete use by speakers in a given, specific context (LLURDA, 2009; PHILLIPSON, 2001).

The concept of ‘concrete utterance’ maintained by Bakhtin and its Circle leads us to rethink the linguistic model, or the standard language, which does not respond any more to the needs of all its users. In fact, it suggests a more realistic vision where a concrete, international language is the common medium.

It is well known that also good English speakers all over the world bring traces of their own accent and, as far as this does not lead to misunderstandings, they may contribute to affirm their cultural backgrounds and enrich the exchange with discourse conventions, words, phrases or expressions transferred from their original languages into English as a Lingua Franca (JENKINS, 2006). It is their will to cooperate in building a communication that prevails, rather than competing by producing the best correct utterances. In a discussion using ELF, it is paramount to reach some sort of consensus and solidarity to manage, to cooperate and to co-construct utterances.

While ELF users may certainly need to improve their pragmatic fluency, their strategic competence is arguably intact, and it is this strategic competence which enables ELF speakers to engage in meaningful negotiation. (HOUSE, 2003).

In our global and multicultural society, the use of English as a common medium is probably going to replace the national norm, which, nowadays, seems politically unsustainable and culturally distant from the speakers' identity. The primary input should instead come from a community of speakers who share a multilingual competence, which enables them to interact in a variety of contexts and purposes. A community of practice (WENGER, 1998), an activity-based community, characterized by different backgrounds and sociolinguistic features, but engaged in joining together for a cooperative negotiation of meanings.

All this implies to rethink the linguistic norm for ELF discourse and behavior. The monolingual English native speaker norm is out of question, since by definition ELF users are multilingual speakers and do not want to become part of any English native speaker community. The model they may eventually aspire is an ELF performance, with a different but not lacking competence (KACHRU; NELSON, 2001). It is helpful to refer to the concept of "hybrid" language elaborated by M. Bakhtin (1981), those border-crossing items, or traces of other languages in ELF, creating an effect of "otherness" with a number of texts made up of multiple voices, each one showing its own inner "dialogicity", despite being realized in one common language.

According to Voloshinov (1986), language is a source of communication among people, since a sign cannot exist outside a society and we live our experiences in a society, within temporal and spatial structures. Once a word is placed in a cultural context, it is also charged with social life and performed with the different accents of the people using it. In the Bakhtinian concept of language stratification, specific words and accents convey specific content, concrete values and judgments, different points of view on the world. We live in a polyglot world, where a language can only exist in relation to other languages and dialects, semiotically and socially interacting between them (BAKHTIN, 1981).

The pedagogical issue is whether a 'norm' is possible and acceptable for this multifaceted reality. In other words, whether deviant uses from the norm are all to be considered 'errors', mistakes due to an incorrect performance, or if they are evidence of an international use of the language (CATTANA; NESCI, 2004).

Error analysis reveals cultural backgrounds

The English language, as a matter of fact, is a medium for expanding intercultural competences and - in a context of social and political awareness - for expressing local values, cultural identities and issues. Some uses, though different from what it is customarily recognized as standard, are accepted as long as they do not break down intelligible exchanges. It has been demonstrated that pronunciation 'errors' made by foreign speakers do not impede intelligibility in communicative interactions (CORDER, 1967).

B. Seidlhofer (2003) claims that virtually all English speakers, especially those who use English as a Lingua Franca (ELF), speak with some trace of their L1 accent. Some good examples are those sounds regarded and taught as "particularly English" ones – and also as particularly difficult for foreign users, like the "th" sounds and the dark "l" allophone. Whereas mastery of these sounds was proved not to be crucial for mutual intelligibility, and so various substitutions, such as /f/, /v/ or /s/, /z/ or /t/, /d/ for "th" are permissible, and indeed are also found in a variety of native-speakers too!

In a case of conversation with speakers of other languages, interaction is generally cooperative, mutually supportive and consensus-oriented. In fact, when misunderstandings occur, they tend to resolve them strategically with topic change, or by rephrasing the statement in other words, or by repeating the key words. A sort of negotiation of meaning takes place naturally and communication may be carried out successfully. VOICE lists by B. Seidlhofer (2004) contain a wide range of lexicogrammar features that give an idea of English varieties taken from different first language backgrounds and in various settings and domains. Some recurrent misuses, such as dropping the third person present tense 's', the interchangeable use of "which" and "who", the inappropriate omission or insertion of articles, the all-purpose use of one tag question "isn't", pluralization of uncountable nouns such as "businesses", "informations", "furnitures", are not a problem for a pragmatic communication.

Who determines the ownership of English and what standards are implied?

Apparently, the answer is easy: the language and the people are legitimately connected by history. But English is found anywhere, spreading and growing despite the tenacious effort of Oxford English promoters to protect it from 'abuse' (WIDDOWSON, 1994). This presupposes an idea of authority and of ownership of a language. The so-called native speakers, who are themselves instructed in the

standard at school, are presumably speakers of some regional or social dialect. Then there must be a cohort of well educated native speakers entitled to preserve the language integrity. What is standard English? To define it we have to refer to a kind of grammar and lexis which are conventionally fixed for institutional use – administration, business, education and so on – and suited to written communication, since its spoken form can manifest any accent. The written form, as a durable medium of communication, is used to express institutional values, for that reason any deviation from conventions can undermine the social stability. Standard English is, then, not a simple means of communication, but the symbolic possession of a particular community, through which it expresses its identity and conventions, that is, its culture (TRUDGILL, 1999).

But English as a Lingua Franca is nowadays an international language serving a range of different communities, as such, it transcends traditional boundaries, namely the ones preserved by a restricted group of users. The varieties of English used for international communication in the field of commerce, finance, science, academic research are in a continuous evolution, adapting to suit changing circumstances. This happens when mastering a language means being able to bend it to your advantage; that is, sometimes rejecting the norm when it is not any longer useful. This happens in literature and in creative writing. All creative uses of language draw on linguistic resources to generate new ones and so to express new and different perceptions of reality. How English develops in the world has little to do with whatever native speakers think or do with it. It is a fact that English is an international language over which no nation can have custody. All the people using it actually own it (CRYSTAL, 2001).

Educational issues

In educational contexts, English is a tool and a goal at the same time. It is taught as a language for global communication, but also as an instrument for cultural development, through which students can acquire knowledge in several domains: literature, arts, science, films, music¹.

Teaching and learning a language involves the conscious use of communication and compensation strategies, which are helpful for transferring previously acquired competence to new contexts. Adjusting meaning and words, according to the given setting and the role of interlocutors, self-correcting and paraphrasing, all of them are helpful techniques to integrate and compensate communicative abilities, that permit to cope with many complex situations. Motivation and learners' attitudes are fundamental in language acquisition and essential for successful learning.

Teaching ELF means abandoning unrealistic notions of achieving perfect communication through native-like' proficiency in English, drawing on extralinguistic cues, identifying and building on shared knowledge, adjusting to interlocutors' linguistic

repertoires, supportive listening, using compensation strategies: asking for repetition, paraphrasing, and the like. Exposure to a wide range of varieties of English and a multilingual, comparative approach [...]. (SEIDLHOFER, 2004).

Some conclusions

If English as a Lingua Franca, an International Language is the alternative to a monolithic English for the entire world, it advocates a heteroglotic language and so it questions the role of a Standard English.

What really happens in everyday life is a genuine exchange of meanings, attitudes and intentions that aims to fill in the cultural gap between users. This actual language use is a dynamic language adjusted to the needs of users in an international community, deprived of the fetishist attitude towards linguist authorities, and stressed toward a constant attempt to mediate – and communicate – real life, its values and meanings.

Notas

¹ The so-called Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL).

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