Language of social media

Examination of English as a Lingua Franca in social media

B.A. Essay in English

Jóhann Daníel Jimma
Kt.: 040686-2749

Supervisor: Erlandína Kristjásson
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Abstract

International communications have always relied on a Lingua Franca an intermediary language, to serve as a bridge to mediate understanding between individuals with diverse cultural and language background. With the arrival of social media in 1995 with the appearance of Ebay, has resulted in an amplified need for a Lingua Franca. Since then, social media has grown into a global phenomenon that has billions of individuals partake in various media services available to them. Due to how wide spread social media has become, it allows members of numerous cultures and languages to interact with each other on a daily basis. This leads to the need for a Lingua Franca to be used to overcome various language barriers that would form in communications of such scope. The language used as a Lingua Franca will vary. But more often than not, the language chosen for that role will be the one of the country with the strongest economic presences. In modern time, the United States of America has that possession. As a result, their mother tongue English had been a dominant Lingua Franca even before emergence of social media. Therefore, as social media spread around the globe so did the influence of English as a Lingua Franca and the need to use English. Allowing the presence of English to grow even stronger.
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Introduction

The difficulties created by the differences in cultures, languages and locations, have made global communications problematic. When interacting with members of different cultures for the purpose of business, pleasure, tourism or education would present challenging situations for communications. These interactions would often be problematic due to language barriers, even more so for people in the remotest places, who had even less contact with speakers of a different language. They would have the hardest of times just ensuring basic communications. During these instances, an intermediary language or Lingua Franca as it is known, would often be used for this purpose. The language that would be elected for this purpose would be the one of the country with the strongest and largest economic presence in the modern world. In the present historical context, the country would be the United States of America (Berns, 2009; Seidlhofer, 2011). English, the mother tongue of the U.S.A, has the leading status of languages that serve as a Lingua Franca. What is more, the English language has occupied this role since the end World War 2. Due to the expanded economy and political influence of the U.S.A from that time, maintaining that role even to modern day (Phillipson, 2012). This role is even further enforced due to the advances in modern communication technologies that have led to the possibility of interaction between people from distant countries with different linguistic and cultural background. These advances in communications have given way to what is referred to as social media. Which included web serves such as: Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and online gaming. Where distances are reduced to a click, and people from anywhere in the world can interact with one and another. In addition to this, English as the Lingua Franca that is used for communications in social media, business and in education around the world, in order to secure its command among the highest possible number of people. This ensures that no one is left out of the collective dialogue happening in the global village that the world is becoming (Berns, 2012; Jenkins et al, 2011). This essay will discuss English as a Lingua Franca, giving particular attention to its predominant use on social media and the reasons behind it. At the same time, there will be an attempt to establish
the effects that the use of English as Lingua Franca by speakers of other languages has on the English language itself.

**Definition of Lingua Franca**

The world is a home of a vast number of countries and even greater amount of languages. This diversity of languages would often result in what is referred to as a language barrier, a type of blockage due to the incapacity to understand a speaker of another language. That barrier is one of the major hurdles to overcome when it comes to international relations in the fields of politics and economy. In current times, mainly thanks to technological advancements, the encounters between people of different linguistic backgrounds has become more frequent. This has created an even greater necessity to overcome the language barriers associated with such types of exchanges. As the demand to resolve the problems associated with the language barrier grew more evident, there was a need to create an alternative language to favour mutual understanding, such as a pidgin dialect, or the adoption of an already existing language. The resource to the latter solution originated what is known as Lingua Franca: an intermediary language used by speakers of different language backgrounds (Seidlhofer, 2005; Berns, 2012).

The term Lingua Franca was first used during the middle ages, as a way to describe the pidgin that developed from interactions between French and Italian crusaders of that time (Mufwene, 2008). Since then, the definition of Lingua Franca has changed to the umbrella term that it has in modern times. It is important to note however, that a Lingua Franca is not just a pidgin or a third language that is used for the sake of communication, it can also be the language of one of the persons that are having the discourse at the time. For example, if people of Norwegian, German and Chinese origins are having a conversation where they are all speaking German. Even though there in the conversation there is someone who has German as his native language, the Lingua Franca is still German. Even though there is someone in the group whose native language is German, the Lingua Franca is still German. That is because the other two parties in the conversation have different native tongues and are using German as an intermediary language to secure communication (Berns, 2012). The essential aspect to take into consideration is that, when people with different mother tongues interact, they
speak with one and another using an intermediary language. That intermediary language that is used as a tool for communication is Lingua Franca. It is through the use of Lingua Franca that the relations between different countries and peoples are maintained. In the modern world, where communications occur in such an instant manner, the understanding of the phenomenon behind Lingua Franca has assumed an even more relevant position. When it comes to the selection of the language used as Lingua Franca, people tend to choose a language that is more widely used, recognized and known. In practice, the country with the strongest economy, tends to have its language used as Lingua Franca (Seidlhofer, 2011). It is somehow natural that other countries will adopt the language of the dominating country to establish communication, create and reinforce relations. In addition to this, there will be the need to teach this language as a part of an official educational program, in order to insure its diffusion and command. In short, that is how the rise and diffusion of Lingua Franca occurs. Currently, the language most widely used as Lingua Franca in matters of business, education and leisure, is English (Berns, 2012; Jenkins, 2009; Seidlhofer, 2005).

**English as a Lingua Franca**

Nowadays, English is the most widely used Lingua Franca in international communication. The strongest reason behind this prevalence is related to the economic pre-eminence of the United States of America (U.S.A.). There are, however, other factors behind the pervasiveness of English as a Lingua Franca. Among these, is the predominance in terms of dimensions and power that the British Empire occupied from the 16th century until the end of the Second World War. During almost 400 years, English was the mother tongue of a powerful country and a great Empire, being used for the daily communication both inside and outside of their borders (Berns, 2009). Thanks to that, it had ample time and opportunity to establish its foot hold as the dominating Lingua Franca (Jenkins, 2009; Seidlhofer, 2011). The criteria that is used to determine whether conversations carried out in English represent instances of Lingua Franca is the circular model defined by Braj B. Kachru (Seidlhofer, 2011). Kachru defines English speakers is into three categories or circles of English users: Inner circle, outer circle and expanding circle. These circles are applied to the country of origin of speakers to determine their place as users of English. Speakers of the inner circle are the ones that
are referred to as 'native' speakers, they come from countries that are known to have English as their mother tongue like U.S.A, United Kingdom (U.K) or Canada, among others. The members of the outer circle are from countries that were former British Colonies during the time of the British empire, such as India, Nigeria and the Philippines. The inhabitants of these countries are users of English as a Second Language. Countries outside of these circles fall under the expanding circle. They are countries such as Russia, Japan and Iceland, where English is taught as foreign language (Kachru, 2007).

Table 1: Kachru’s Circles

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Inner Circle (Native)</th>
<th>Outer Circle (Second language)</th>
<th>Expanding Circle (Foreign language)</th>
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<tr>
<td>Australia, Canada, New Zealand, U.K, U.S.A</td>
<td>Former British colonies e.g. (India, Kenya, Tanzania)</td>
<td>Russia, Japan, Iceland, Egypt, Peru and more</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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According to Kachru’s definition of native and non-native speakers, it is clear that native speakers are vastly out-numbered by non-native ones. In modern times, where the use of English is on a rise, due to the increasing contact between people of different origins, the language has almost naturally assumed the role of Lingua Franca. However, Kachru’s circles don't take into consideration the complex language environments. For instance, when a child that is born to a Canadian family, where both parents are Canadian and speak English, but they are living in Denmark when the child is born. According to the Kachru’s circles, the child is a member of the expanding circle even though it should be considered a native speaker of the language because of its family being Canadian. Therefore, the determination of nativity of the child with the concept of L1 and L2 speakers would be better suited for this situation (Jenkins, 2006). Speakers of L1 and L2 are identified by the manner in which they learn to speak a language rather than considering where they are from. Speakers of L1 are referred to as ‘native speakers’, and they learn speak a language before they learn to read and write it. Speakers of L2 are the ones that learn it at the same time or after they learnt to read and write, they are referred to as ‘non-native speakers’ (Norton, 2000). With this definition in mind, the number of native English speakers should increase. The reason behind
using this newer model, is that the exposure to English is far greater than in previous times. A fair number of children are starting to pick up spoken English much quicker than they did before. Consequently, when they finally start to learn the language in a formal environment, they already have a firm grasp of vocabulary and grammar before they learn to read and write (Jenkins, 2006; Norton, 2000).

Table 2: L1, L2 Model

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<th>L1 Learners (Native)</th>
<th>L2 Learners (Non-native)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Learn to speak the language before they learn to read it</td>
<td>Learn to speak the language at the same time or after learning to read it</td>
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Currently, Kachru's model is more used when determining English speakers’ nativity to the language. As people from the inner circle countries have English as their mother tongue, it would seem correct to assume that they have a much better understanding of both the evolution and changes that are occurring in the language. That would justify the assumption that, in a way, speakers that are included in the inner circle, might feel as custodians of the language and that they should be the judges of what constitutes its correct usage, taking on a sort of prescriptive role. However, those notions are nothing but that. In fact, the changes that are occurring in the English Language are happening at such a pace, that sometimes, it is difficult to know whether there we should be speaking of English as a unit or of ‘Englishes’ as the set of different strands or dialects that share the communicative space around the world (Berns, 2009). Due to a growing globalization and a need to shorten the distances through a common tool for communication, the use of English as ELF is far greater than before (Berns, 2012). This facilitates a greater interaction between speakers that would be originally divided into different instances of Kachru’s language circles, and whose native languages would undoubtedly affect their use of the English language and influence its evolution (Jenkins et al, 2011; Berns, 2009; Dewey, 2007).

Technological advances in communication are additionally contributing to the increasing influx of speakers to the language. These advances have led to the emergence of what is known as social media, leading to a greater exposition of people from
different countries to the English Language. This phenomenon leads to an increase in the use of English as Lingua Franca in order to surpass the communicational barriers between people of different linguistic backgrounds. This also originates a larger proficiency in the use of English among people who were not born in English speaking countries, calling the notion of ‘native’ users of English into question (Dewey, 2007; Page et al, 2014). The L1, L2 model, which will be mentioned in this dissertation when referring to individuals as native speakers of English, is more up to date and therefore could be considered more relevant in that regard. Kachru’s model will be used when referring to a nations’ native tongue. Even though bilingualism, rather than the apprenticeship of a single mother tongue, is becoming a more common phenomenon in current times. However, these bilingual speakers are not considered native English speakers, because they are born in countries where the mother tongue is not English. This difference will be important later on in this discussion. When it comes to ELF discussions, it is important to note how speakers view themselves. There are speakers that view themselves as native speakers even though they have never set foot in an inner circle country. The amount of exposure to English media through television, music and material on the internet, has resulted in the increase of speakers from the outer and expanding circle countries. Many of them achieve native-like speaking fluency before they even learn the alphabet. This, in turn, promotes more consumption of media, which results in even more English exposure. It is this exposure to English in media and the ease of access to it that has resulted in Kachru's model not being sufficient when discussing ELF, as it does not address matters such as bi or multilingualism (Iaia, 2016; Phillipson, 2008).

Multilingualism is important when it comes to ELF interactions, especially in the case of social media, which has a great congregative capacity as it facilitates communication between a great number of people from different linguistic origins. This increased interaction has users of all ages talking to one another. While the users from older generations are more likely to be mono-lingual, the younger ones that are born after 2000 are more likely to be bilingual due to their greater exposure to English and the need they have to use it in their daily lives (Kelly-Holmes & Pietikäinen, 2012). Until 2005, when the online service known as Facebook was launched, people’s interaction with each other via social media escalated greatly. This, of course, has made
it much easier for ELF instances to occur. Furthermore, the use of ELF has been on the rise thanks to other forms of social media such as blogging, news and online video games. Nevertheless, none of these forms had the same explosive effect that Facebook had when it came to bringing people into contact with one another. That is why it is important to properly explain what social media is, and reflect on its different forms (Dewey, 2007; Iaia, 2016; Kelly-Holmes and Pietikäinen, 2012).

**What is social media**

The term *social media*, functions as an umbrella term that includes internet based sites and services that function for or promote social interactions between individuals that use them as an important part of their interpersonal communication (Page et al, 2014). Social media in its current form began its development in the 1980s, under the forms of bulletin board system (BBS), UseNet and Internet relay chat. These services, while not referred to as social media, are considered as their modern form precursors. What is more specifically referred to as social media is the range of tools that started to appear in the 1990s. One of the first sites that came out in 1995 was eBay. In 1997, the term *web log*, which was coined by Jorn Barger and was later shortened to *blog* by Peter Merholz, came to light. However, services that would use these names first appeared in 1999 with the arrival of Live Journal and blogger.com. The next seven years saw the rise of multiple services that are commonly used in the present, such as Wikipedia and Trip advisor, in 2001. Then, in 2003, Skype and Word Press made their debut. After that, in 2004, Facebook, which is arguably the most widespread and used service in social media, was launched. In 2005, YouTube came to existence, and the following year a service named Twitter began to operate. The arrival of two data file formats: one for audio files, named mp3 and a flash software plug-in for web browsers, which allowed videos to be played much more easily in web browsers is what made these sites and services possible. With these two data file formats, users are allowed to create and share digital animation and audio resources more easily. This is, in short, what lead the internet from being a mostly a text based medium to the assumption of its modern and interactive format (Boyd & Ellison, 2007; Page et al, 2014).

Since the arrival of eBay, social media gained many different forms and functions that aim to fulfil the types of services that the users seek, such as forums,
blogs, wikis, content sharing and virtual worlds. However, these are merely a few examples of all the different types of services that are available to users, as many social media services often merge forms or group them together. It is this inherent versatility that social media possesses that makes it so appealing to users. It is also the reason behind the daily increase of its clients. Currently, social media is divided into three categories:

Table 3: Three Categories of social media

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<th>Communications</th>
<th>Collaboration</th>
<th>Multimedia</th>
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<td>Blogs, Social Nets</td>
<td>Wikis, Social News</td>
<td>Streaming, Videos, Virtual Worlds</td>
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These categories were defined by Cann, Dimitriou and Hooley in their booklet: social media: A Guide for Researchers (Cann et al, 2011). When people use social media, they use the service that they require. For example, services that fall under the Communications category, which includes services such as Facebook, LinkedIn and Twitter that are used by people to maintain connections and relations. If, on the other hand, people would feel the need to express themselves, they would use online journals, which have come to be known as Blogs, such as LiveJournal, WordPress and Blogger. Collaboration services are diverse, as they can serve multiple purposes, for example, Wikipedia or Wikis, which is a site for any user to collect, add or edit content using a web browser. As a part of this category, there are also social news sites such as Newsvine and Reddit, that allow anyone that signs up for their services to spread news that they feel are noteworthy. Finally, there are Multimedia services, which are often connected to entertainment services such as video sharing sites like YouTube and Vimeo. Streaming sites like Twitch, which has users broadcast live content from their computers, are also included in this category. The content originated in streaming can include anything from playing a game to what is known as a podcast, which is somewhat similar to a radio show, with the difference that it can also be used to showcase videos as well. The final category of the Multimedia branch of social media is virtual worlds. This category includes online video game playing, and it can be referred
to what is known as massive multiplayer online role playing games (MMORPGs), such as, World of Warcraft, Everquest or Final Fantasy 14. Additionally, there are games which are competitive in their nature, such as Counter Strike: Global offensive and Overwatch, which all belong to the first person shooting genre. There are also those referred to as Massive Online Battle Arenas (MOBAs), including games such as League of Legends (LoL), and Defence of the Ancients 2 (DOTA2) (Cann et al, 2011; Iaia, 2016).

**Language usage in social media**

It is important to keep in mind that these different types of media vary from service to service. This discrepancy affects the way in which people speak and depends on the purpose of their interactions, as there is a difference in the way people communicate within games or how they do it on Facebook, for example. Facebook users can post their messages allowing a broader audience to access them or use private messengers (PM) when they wish to establish a more personal type of communication. In the case of games, however, communication tends to be a lot faster as it takes place in real time. Another example of modern day online interaction is Twitter, which follows a similar system for communication to Facebook. Nevertheless, Twitter is mostly used for a quicker reading and writing of messages, allowing the use of a limited character space. Facebook messages, on the other hand, can be much longer, reaching a different degree of depth. These limitations have a direct influence on the manner in which people address each other. Services often mix methods of communication to suit the needs of people that are using them, and securing their customers. While YouTube is primarily a video media site, it also has a message board-style comment system which has no limitations in terms of length. In this section, different users carry out a discussion about the content of the video, reply to questions asked by the creator of the video or about other topics related to the video. There are also users who engage in discussion about different subjects or personal interests. In addition to this, sites such as Facebook and Twitter allow content from other services as, for example, YouTube and Reddit, to be ether linked or shared in the users’ posts or messages. It is this ability to mix services and share them that brings so many users to social media. What is more, users of social media come from all over the world, each bringing their own
backgrounds and cultures into the mix (Boyd & Ellison, 2007; Kelly-Holmes & Pietikäinen, 2012).

With such a global user basis, social media becomes a melting pot of languages used in different manners and for different purposes. This has resulted in the creation of an alternate dialect that, with its immediacy, favours real-time communication as, for instance, the acronyms that are used in instant messages. Examples of these acronyms would be expressions such as LOL, which means to laugh out loud. One of the oldest acronyms used on the internet, LOL, it is often used to convey the message that the user found the subject of the conversation funny. Its first use was simply due to the feeling that writing the full sentence took too long. At around the same time, peer-to-peer chat services were gaining more use in mainstream communications, which increased the popularity of its use. Likewise, many other language groups developed their own acronyms to express the same meaning as LOL. In Japan, for instance, people use two or more w to signify laughter. In Russia, people use XAXA and JAJAJA in Spanish speaking countries. In some linguistic contexts, people abandon the use of the alphabet altogether, such as in Thailand where 555 is used for expressing amusement (Carter et al. 2013; Kelly-Holmes & Pietikäinen, 2012). Online language usage is full of these types of acronyms, along other methods to address a subject or call attention to something. An example of this phenomenon is Hashtagging. Hashtagging uses the hashtag symbol # to draw attention to an action or subject that people feel that should be paid attention to on social media. By Hashtagging an image or a reference to an event, people actually succeed in creating trends on social media. Because it uses a symbol rather than a shortening of a sentence, hashtagging tends to be used in the same manner in various languages. These types of phenomena are occurring in various languages that are used in social media, creating a sort of dialectic comprehension among users along the lines of a Lingua Franca. However, these are mostly bound to written languages as it lacks the auditory features of spoken dialog. At the same time, there are services that offer online voice chat and also allow for the use video cameras for face-to-face dialogue, such as Skype and Discord. Nevertheless, the majority of online interactions take place in written format. Due to either time, word or character limitations, acronyms and other various referencing methods are increasing in their numbers and usage in online communication (Iaia, 2016).
According to what has been previously mentioned, acronyms are often used in online communications. This is the reason why, when it comes to ELF interactions in social media, people will more likely associate the acronyms that are used in their own language to those used in English, and make an ample use of them during the conversations that they will establish. This will also affect their capacity to get the message across to their interlocutors, depending on the misunderstandings that can emerge due to the wrong use of acronyms. This is often a problem when using social media in real-time conversations or in the case of immediate exchanges of words during the use of online games. In both these cases, communications take place at a high speed, resulting in the need for the users to rapidly summarise their thoughts. The positive outcome of their interactions will greatly depend on their command of the English language. More often than not, the necessity of recurring to acronyms during a fast-paced discussion leads users from different linguistic backgrounds to default to their native languages’ acronyms. That, in turn, can lead to communication problems, converting the use of acronyms into a liability when it comes to the use of English as Lingua Franca (Iaia, 2016; Kelly-Holmes & Pietikäinen, 2012).

**ELF and social media**

As discussed earlier, social media is a global phenomenon on a scale thus far unknow in history. The amount of countries and people that are in contact with one another at any given moment is ever increasing thanks to modern technology. Examination of the user statistics of Facebook and Instagram helps understanding how global this is. According Kaplan and Haenlein: since its launch in 2004, Facebook has grown to 175 million active users by the year 2009 (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Furthermore, according to Facebooks company info, the number of daily users that engaged in the sites’ services during December 2016 reached 1.23 billion on average. With 85.2% of activities taking place outside North America (“https://newsroom.fb.com/company-info/”). Further reinforcement of this notion is the user statistics of Instagram services. Which reached 700 million active users in April 2017 since starting its’ services in 2010, with 80% of those users being outside the U.S.A (“https://instagram-press.com/blog/2017/04/26/700-million/”; Parker, 2016). As social media brings people from different countries together, it is safe to assume that
these people will also bring their linguistic and cultural backgrounds with them into the communicational situations. Therefore, if and when these languages clash, obstructing the dialogue that is taking place, the most common solution is to search for an alternative means to secure communication. This is where Lingua Franca comes in. In the present time, this function is occupied by English, the most commonly used language for global relations of personal and political exchange. According to what has already been mentioned, English already occupied a strong position as Lingua Franca due to the privileged economic position of the U.S.A, which was reinforced by the widespread of American culture promoted by the export of the national entertainment industry. These factors have contributed to an emerging necessity of the command of a minimal degree of proficiency in the use of the English language in order to reach at least a basic understanding of the surrounding realities. Additionally, the increase of international travel for business, education and leisure, along with the diffusion of the use of the internet, has had a determining influence in the popularization of the use of English in international situations of communication. It is due to this increase in the reduction of real and virtual distances between inhabitants of a growingly globalized world that the odds of using English as a Lingua Franca have exponentially increased along with the risks of miscommunication associated with this phenomenon (Berns, 2012; Boyd & Ellison, 2007; Cann et al, 2011).

When considering the use of English on a global scale, it is preferable to recur to the term ‘native speaker’ according to the connotation that it is given in Kachru's English circles. The need for non-inner circles members to use English is greater, as they need to process the knowledge that is available to them online at the same time that it will allow them to understand and enjoy the sources of entertainment that they are being offered. They can also establish a meaningful contact with other people, thus promoting their inclusion into society. In this sense, social media has made it even easier for people to conduct their communicative interactions according to their needs and desires. Moreover, social media’s adaptability and reach makes it an ideal ground for ELF interaction to happen. A progressively satisfying experience has, in its turn, originated the users’ demand for better and more effective resources, thus contributing to the development and modernization of the available services. In order to reach greater audiences, the creators of these services must also consider the most effective means of
communication for their purpose, which has been shown to be the use of English as a Lingua Franca. It is this need to communicate and be understood that keeps on elevating English as the world’s most used Lingua Franca. The rate in which social media is used makes for a proportional increase of the users of the English Language. Against all odds, there are still users who do their best to use as little English as they can. However, they are outnumbered by those who do use English, which make a growing effort to increase their proficiency in the use of the language (Berns, 2012; Kelly-Holmes & Pietikäinen, 2012). This phenomenon also has a direct relation to the younger generations. The children who were born after the year 2000, the so-called millennials, have almost been brought up using social media. This has resulted in the younger generations of speakers belonging to the outer and expanding circles having greater English skills than those of their precedents (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011).

As mentioned earlier, while the circles model is good when considering the speakers’ nativity in term of the use of the English Language on a global scale, the L1, L2 classification is more effective when it comes to individual classification. However, there is another factor that has a strong influence on ELF, and that is how people view themselves. Quite frequently, members of the outer and expanding circles do not view themselves as native speakers. Additionally, they are often unaware of the L1 and L2 model, as it is a more recent and not well known method to determine if a speaker is a native user of the language. Another issue is that the circles model is only used for English, while the L1, L2 model can be used for any language. Nevertheless, with number of young speakers of English on the rise, and due to their different and complex circumstances, it is becoming clear that the circles model is becoming outdated, mainly because it is too general. Thanks to social media, the younger members of the English-speaking communities from the inner circle are outnumbered by the outer and expanding circle members. They often achieve a level of fluency quite close to that of a native speaker. However, due to the fact that their native country is not an English speaking one, and their mother tongue is not English, these speakers will often regard themselves as non-native, disregarding matters such as bi or multilingualism. The reason why social media leads to children achieving a native like proficiency as speakers is due to ELF occurrences in social medias. Children often use social media for entertainment, watching videos on YouTube, using Facebook and Twitter, and playing
online video games. All these serve as a source of entertainment for them and often require them to have some form of ELF communication, for example, when playing video games, they use the games’ in-built voice chat which leads them to exercise their English-speaking skills. Likewise, YouTube videos serve as a method for them to listen to English speakers and build up their vocabulary. In the case of Facebook and Twitter, users practice their reading and writing skills. When confronted to such situations, it is necessary to rethink what is the definition of a native speaker of English. When considering the qualities of a native speaker, linguists must also consider the tools and resources that have been added to a speaker’s ability to communicate and acquire English thanks to social media. Even more so when considering the ELF interactions and discussions that take place thanks to the use of these services (Boyd & Ellison, 2007; Iaia, 2016; Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011).

**ELF in social media – a study**

The discussion will now move to the subject of the use ELF in social media. According to what has already been established, the transition of ELF to social media is a natural result of its status as the dominant Lingua Franca (Iaia, 2016). Nevertheless, finding data on people’s language usage in social media proved itself a difficult task. Therefore, an online survey was conducted from 21-26th March 2017 in order gather data on the use of ELF in social media.

**Method**

The survey was created by using Google forms and contained 16 questions which were divided in to 3 main sections. First was general information, age, gender, country of birth and residence were asked along with language speaking ability. The second section covered social media usage. In this section, it was asked which social media services were used, how often per week they were used and information about online gaming was gathered. The last section was used to gather correlation data on respondents’ language usage in social media with the prime focus on English usage. The questions were in regard to which language they mainly used in social media, and whether they used English when interacting with a person who has a different native language than they did. Attitudes towards English as a Lingua Franca in social media
and views of English’s position as the main Lingua Franca in social media were also covered. It is important to note that none of the questions were mandatory to answer so the subjects would not feel uncomfortable, in case they encounter a question that they felt was inappropriate. The survey was distributed through Facebook and Discord text chat. Participants were asked to share the survey on Facebook or spread it through Discord. It was allowed to be answered and shared for one weeks’ time, after which it was closed to new responses.

Participants

The survey was anonymous and was conducted in English. This was done due to the nature of the subject at hand, and in hopes of gathering responses from a diverse group of individuals from different national backgrounds. The most crucial factors would be to have an understanding of written English and that participants used social media. This resulted in a total of 86 participants from 15 different countries. 59 (68.6%) were female while 27 (31.4%) were male. The participants were of various age groups with 41+ years old being the most numerous with 27 (31.8%) followed by 25 to 30 old with 20 (23.5%) of participants. The third group was 19 to 24 years old that had 16 (18.8%) followed by 31 to 35 age group that had 8 (9.4%). The two smallest age groups were 36 to 40 and 10 to 18 years old both groups had 7 (8.2%) respondents each. It is important to note that not all of the participants answered every question, therefore there will be some fluctuation in the numbers presented.

Results

All of the respondents answered about their country of birth: 41(47.7%) of them were from native English speaking countries, while 45 (52.3%) of them were born in outer and expanding circle countries. The second most numerous country represented was Iceland, with 29 (33.7%) respondents. Germany occupied the third position as the country of origin of the respondents with 4 (4.7%) people of German nationality. However, only 37 (44.6%) of the respondents were residing in an English-speaking country. Three of the respondents preferred not to answer.
The participants were also asked about their language skills, that is what was their native languages and which languages they could communicate in, only one of them did not answer the question on native language. The list of native languages in the question slot were Chinese, Danish, English, France, Icelandic, Japanese, Norwegian, Spanish, Polish, Portuguese and Other. Among the participants, 41 (48.2%) stated that their native language was English, with Icelandic coming up as the second highest among the answers, at 30 (35.3%). The results for ‘other’, with 10 (11%) participants, stood at third place, with languages such as German, Dutch and Russian. The rest of the languages had 1 or 2 respondents each, sharing a 1(1.2%) and 2 (2.4%) among the participants. Only Danish and Chinese were left without results. The survey also inquired about what languages the respondents could speak, with 76 (91.6%) answering English. Icelandic came second, with 32 (38.6) and Other was third with 24 (28.9%) participants. However, this was a multiple-choice survey. Therefore, many participants answered with more than one option. The languages that were presented as options were the same as those contained in the question that identified the respondents’ native languages.
After the collection of general information and data concerning language knowledge, information regarding social media usage was gathered. The first question inquired about the media services that the participants used. This was also a multiple-choice, and the sites asked about were: DeviantArt, Facebook, Google+, Instagram, Myspace, Tumblr, Twitter, YouTube and Other. The most used media site by the respondents was Facebook with 79 (91.9%) participants, after which appeared YouTube with 56 (65.1%) and Instagram 47 (54.7%). Myspace had the least amount of votes, with only 1 (1.2%) participant. Data on the frequency with which they used these services was also collected, with most of the participants: 20 (23.3%), answering 6 to 10 hours a week. After that, came 1 to 5 and 21+ hours per week, with both options sharing 18 (20.9%) respondents each. Finally, 16 (18.6%) participants answered 11 to 15 hours and, in last place appeared 14 (16.3%) respondents with a 16 to 20 hour of weekly time of use. It is important to note that all participants answered this question. It was also asked if they played any online video games and 47 (55.3%) participants answered that they did not. Among the remaining participants, 17 (20%) responded affirmatively, as 13 (15.3%) answered that they played video games sometimes. Finally, Yes, rarely yielded the lesser results with only 8 (9.4%) respondents. This made up for a total of 38

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<th>Spoken</th>
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<tr>
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<td>France</td>
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<td>Japanese</td>
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<td>Other</td>
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(43.5%) participants who play video games online with a varying degree of regularity. One of the respondents did not answer this question.

Chart 3: Social media usage

The participants who answered affirmatively when asked whether they played video games were additionally asked to identify the games that they played. This was a multiple-choice answer taken by 36 of the respondents. That means that only 2 among the 38 that had previously declared to play video games did not answer this question. The options presented were the following: Counter Strike, DOTA 2, Final Fantasy 14, League of Legends, Star Craft 2, Team Fortress 2, Overwatch, World of Warcraft and Other. This time, Other had the most votes, with 19 (52.8%) respondents, with Final Fantasy coming in second place, with 14 (66.6%) votes, and the third place being occupied by Overwatch, with 7 (19.4%). The relevance of inquiring about what type of game is played, as well as the specific game that is used has to do with how communication takes place during these games. Additionally, some of these games also have in-built voice chat, while others have a text based chat, which also influences the manner in which players interact with one another.

The following question was about the language used in social media. Participants were able to choose from the following languages: Chinese, Danish,
English, France, Icelandic, Japanese, Norwegian, Spanish, Polish, Portuguese and Other. English came in first place, with 82 (96.5%) respondents claiming to use the language when communicating through social media. It was followed by Icelandic, with 27 (37.6%) respondents and, in last place, the option of Other with 7 (8.2%) participants choosing this answer. This was also a multiple-choice question, which was left unanswered by only one of the participants. The next question inquired about the importance of the command of the English language when interacting with people from different linguistic backgrounds. This question was presented through the use of a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 meant ‘not important’, and 5 meant ‘very important’. Among the respondents, 39 (45.3%) chose very important, while 21 (24.4%) chose the ‘somewhat important’. ‘Neutral’ came in third position, with 18 (20.9%) respondents choosing this option. The choice indicating ‘not important’ only received 2 (2.3%) votes. It is important to note that all respondents answered to this question.

Chart 4: Necessity for English in international communication

Participants were also asked whether they used English when interacting with people whose native languages were different from their own. The participants that responded divided their answers in the following manner: 81 (95.3%) said that they use English when they interact with speakers of other languages, while only 4 (4.7%) respondents answered negatively, with only one choosing not to answer. It was also
asked if any other language was used as a Lingua Franca, and only 10 participants responded to that question. Among them, 4 (40%) said that they used Japanese as a Lingua Franca, with 2 (20%) saying that they would prefer to use their interlocutor’s native language, in case they knew it. In the next question, participants were asked whether they felt that English was the main Lingua Franca used in social media around the world. 77 (89.5%) participants answered English was the main Lingua Franca used on social media, with only 9 (10.5%) negative answers.

Finally, the last question referred to the position of English as the main Lingua Franca used on social media. The format of the answers was offered through the use of a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 meant ‘not at all’, and 5 meant ‘very strong’. Among the respondents, 47 (54.7%) answered 5 (very strong), followed by 4 (somewhat strong), with 22 (25.6%) votes. 14 (16.3%) respondents chose 3 (neutral), while 1 (not at all) only collected 2 (2.3%) votes. It is important to note that everyone responded to these two questions.

Chart 5: Is English the Lingua Franca of social media?
Discussion

According to the data gathered from the survey, it becomes quite clear that an overwhelming majority of the participants considers English as the Lingua Franca of social media, with 77 out of 86 respondents offering a positive answer to this question. What is more, the majority of the participants identified themselves as being either bilingual or multilingual. Few respondents claimed to be monolingual, and those that did identified themselves as native speakers of English. The participants that did not agree with the claim that English is the most popular Lingua Franca in use, were often from an English-speaking country themselves or resided in a country that does not welcome the influence of the English language, such as Japan (Kelly-Holmes & Pietikäinen, 2012). While it is understandable that countries such as Japan deny this reality, it is curious to perceive that native English speakers also assume a similar position. It is also interesting to note that the participants that did not agree with the fact that English is the most popular Lingua Franca in use on social media are also the ones that make the least use of the services related to it. These respondents were among those that claimed to use social media during 1-5 hours on a weekly basis. Therefore, it could be concluded that they simply did not spend enough time on media sites or services in order to offer a satisfactory response. However, those who identified themselves as native speakers and effectively spend more time on social media, as well as multilingual speakers assumed a neutral position in reference to the predominance of the use of English as Lingua Franca. The majority of the respondents also considered the knowledge of English as an important factor when interacting with people with different native languages, as is demonstrated in the data that was offered previously. The interactions that occur in social media have, additionally been identified as taking place for leisure or entertainment purposes. This is a typical aim of the majority of the interactions that occur through social media (Iaia, 2016; Berns, 2012).

Frequently, the language that is used during these conversations is informal, as it makes it easier for people with different levels of proficiency to find a common understanding (Reed, 2015). This, in turn, would encourage people to use English more often when interacting through social media, as they would feel less concern about making mistakes. They would additionally, feel more at ease to express their thoughts and emotions without the fear of breaking grammatical rules (Iaia, 2016; Boyd &
Ellison, 2007). It is, therefore, the urgent need to communicate, and to do so in an effective manner, that prompts the users of social media to use a language that they feel as more likely to be understood, this is where English comes in (Dewey, 2007). In addition to this, the media service that is being used will also determine the form in which these interactions take place. In the most popular services, such as Facebook and YouTube, communication occurs mainly in the form of written messages or through the use of audio-visual means, mainly videos that the users create and post online. In the case of YouTube there is also the possibility of writing comments on the correspondent sections offered for that purpose. These sites are well-known global phenomena, that originate extensive networks which allow users from all over the world to connect with each other and communicate in a very simple and practical manner. Additionally, the great popularity of Facebook and YouTube, as well as their global diffusion, allow these services to offer their websites in different languages. Therefore, this may lead certain users to claim that the notion of English as Lingua Franca is not that accurate. This is the case of the respondents who denied the claim that English is the predominantly used Lingua Franca on social media. Two of these participants were from an English-speaking country. However, the remaining participants that sustain this claim are from countries such as Japan, Russia and Germany, where YouTube offers its services in their native language, allowing them to upload their videos in their language of choice. Therefore, the exposure to videos in English is significantly reduced and the users are more likely to be exposed to material in their own language (Page et al, 2014).

As stated earlier, people often use social media for entertainment purposes. Consequently, this influences the manner in which ELF communications take place. While in media outlets such as Facebook, YouTube and Twitter, communication is more informal and relaxed (Page et al, 2014; Berns, 2012), when it comes to virtual world or streaming, it has the tendency to assume a faster and, therefore, more strenuous pace. This happens as a consequence of the users’ need for a quicker reaction when it comes to interacting with other users in a real-time context. This interaction takes place under the form of text-based chats, and may work well within MMORPGs, such as Final Fantasy 14 or World of Warcraft, where the activity is often much slower than in most games, as it can take hours for a game to reach its conclusion. Sometimes, however, players tend to resort to voice chat through the use of an external program,
such as Skype. The reason behind this is the necessity of a greater coordination among the players in order to conclude the game at hand, which can only be achieved through real-time voice conversations. On the other hand, in the case of games such as Counter strike, Overwatch, and League of Legends, which often have their matches in smaller time intervals that rarely surpass an hour, the communicational needs are quite different. Often those games have in built voice chat that allows the players to directly speak to one and another (Iaia, 2016). This is important keep in mind, when considering that online games are played all over the world and often by players from different countries. When users choose to play a video game online, after identifying the original region where their connection is originated, the host server additionally asks them to choose the language they want to use during their match. However, some servers do not inquire about the preferred language and simply use English as their default language. According to what has been stated earlier, most players are likely to use English when addressing users of different languages. This confirms the data originated by the survey that has been conducted, where 95.3% of the respondents claimed that they use English when addressing speakers of different countries. As a consequence of the wide popularity of English, it is also possible to affirm that people are more likely to understand some of the language specific quirks, such as idiomatic expressions and acronyms. The knowledge of these particularities of the language becomes even more important when it comes to the use ELF in social media (Iaia, 2016). Non-native English speakers are more likely to understand some English acronyms due to their wide use in the social media services that they use. Consequently, these players are likely to make a more frequent use of these acronyms in online games to be able to insure a smooth pacing of the activities that they are engaging in (Carter et al, 2013; Iaia, 2016).

The most meaningful conclusion to extract from the survey that was conducted is that the majority of the respondents consider English to be the most widely used Lingua Franca on social media. This is patent in the affirmative response given by 89.5% of participants, which confirms this notion.
Concerns about ELF and conclusion of the study

The widespread use of ELF across the globe, greatly thanks to the growing use of social media, rises a series of concerns regarding the its possible effects on the English language and its evolution (Berns, 2012; Carter, 2013; Jenkins, 2006; Phillipson, 2008). To begin with, there are people who do not identify with the choice of English as the ideal language of use for interactions on social media. This has been, additionally, confirmed by the results of the survey. There is also the well-founded concern of the influence of English loan words on the purity of a given native language, and the changes that this phenomenon entails (Reed, 2015). Nevertheless, this has been frequent occurrence in the history of the English Language. Very well know and widely used words, such as Pizza, Pyjamas, Yoga and Jungle are loan words (Durkin, 2015). In the case of social media, however, this phenomenon deserves greater attention due to the wide and rapid scale in which it takes place. Because of social media, ELF interactions happen more frequently than ever before. This occasion a greater incidence of language contact, which in turn, leads to an increase in the use of loan words. The advent of social media has facilitated this pervasion of loan words into the corpus of different languages, leading to the aforementioned concerns of the possible consequences that it may occasion in the future. This also raises interrogations regarding the extension of the language changes in terms of the vocabulary, but also of the possible marginalization of the people who do not have access to the internet (Durkin, 2015; Reed, 2015, Philipson, 2008).

Another issue to take into consideration is the effect that social media is having on the evolution of the English language. The abundant use of abbreviations acronyms and neologisms, for instance, with their ability to convey more meaning while using less words and grammatical instances is a preoccupying factor (Carter et al, 2014; Reed, 2015). Acronyms and neologisms are used in social media for two reasons. First of all, the small amount characters allowed in social media services such as Twitter and Instagram, propitiates the use of acronyms and abbreviations. Secondly, grammar can be an obstacle for non-native speakers whose command of the English Language is not very effective. The use of acronyms allows the interlocutors to communicate through the use of ELF and thus ensure a proper understanding of the message that they are trying to convey (Berns, 2012; Carter et al, 2014). This further contributes to the
Popularity of ELF as a privileged medium of communication on social media. As a matter of fact, the whole concept behind ELF is the possibility of its use by people of different linguistic backgrounds in order to reach a common ground of understanding. The effects this has for the native speakers of other languages that use English as a Lingua Franca is yet undetermined. However, the prominence of English as a Lingua Franca is, at the present time, undeniable. Additionally, this prevalence is somehow boosted by social media which, in turn, benefits from the widespread of ELF, in an interesting dynamic of cooperation and interdependence (Dewey, 2007; Iaia, 2016).

Conclusion

English has been the main Lingua Franca in use the world for almost 400 years. English owes its popularity to being the native tongue of two nations that had the biggest economies. It is used in business, entertainment and leisure, as a preferred means to maintain communicational exchanges. With the arrival of social media, the possibilities of interaction between people of different backgrounds has increased to an unforeseen extent. Despite being the most widespread language in the world, with the advent of social media, English has reached its peak of dissemination thanks to the use of ELF propitiated by these types of services. The users’ desire for a simple and efficient means to convey their thoughts has converted English into the mainstream language for textual and verbal communication on the world-wide web. Additionally, the constant growth and dissemination of the use of social media is likely to contribute exponentially to a growth in the number of speakers of English that originate from different countries and, therefore, have different native languages. The results of the survey that was conducted support this affirmation, as a great majority of them claimed that English is the Lingua Franca of social media. Even the respondents that claimed not to speak the language, could at least read it, demonstrating how effective social media is as an alternative resource to acquire a basic command of English. Many of the participants were also multilingual speakers, that demonstrated an understanding of the need to be able to communicate effectively with people from different linguistic backgrounds. This is the reason why these users recur to the use of English when engaging in conversations with people from different countries with diverse native languages.
The survey also demonstrated the great amount participants use multilabel social media sites, with Facebook at the top of their preferences, followed by YouTube, Instagram and Twitter. Despite the small number of participants that took part, it is safe to say that the survey mirrors the wider reality of the users of social media around the world. These data only serve to confirm the great power assumed by social media in today’s world. A power that can also determine the linguistic trends among its users. Moreover, apparently, these trends, at least in terms of language, seem to favour a growing use and dissemination of English as a Lingua Franca: the language that serves as a connection between people of different origins when they attempt to establish meaningful interactions among each other in the digital world. The ease of interactions that social media allows is one of the many features that make it so appealing to individual, that with the ability to find entertain, gather information and even seek education are what allows social media to be so prominent in modern times. It is thanks to this adaptability of social media is that supports its’ staying power. Allowing the users to customize their experiences in accordance with their desires leads to it appeal, that in turn leads to more people that will start using these types of services.

However, the consequences of this widespread use of English are unpredictable in terms of the evolution of the language itself and of the effect that its pervasive influence may exert on other languages. The more global usage of English leads to influx of loan words, slang and acronym usage. These are just examples of concerns that scholars have when it comes to this increase of non-native users. It must be said that these worries are not without foundation, but the concern is more about the rate that slang, loan words and acronyms are introducing to the language. This introduction rate has risen greatly because of the ease that information is able spread through social media. And as a result, trends and language quirks tend to be acquire stronger footholds in language faster. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that the use of ELF in the context of social media in our globalized world will constitute another fascinating chapter in the long history of the English language.
Works cited


