

## ENGLISH WITH THE “MARRIED” NAME: THE CASE OF LINGUISTIC HYBRIDITY IN ELF COUPLE TALK

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### **Abstract**

This paper aims at extending the analysis of ELF discourse to the domain of intimate interactions and to explore how partners with different linguacultural backgrounds accomplish their “coupleness” through English as a lingua franca with a focus on the hybrid features of couples’ ELF. For this purpose five European couples with different first languages were asked to audio-record their ELF home interactions and comment on selected excerpts of their recordings so as to gain some insights about how these interactions were perceived from a participant viewpoint. The investigation of the data suggests that ELF partners use hybrid forms to activate and ratify particular *contexts* (schematic constructs), and to achieve a particular *pretext* (an interactive purpose) of domestic intimacy and togetherness.

### **Key words**

discourse analysis, context, pretext, English as a lingua franca (ELF), couple discourse

### **1 Introduction**

This paper attempts to add to our understanding of intimate discourse where partners do not share the same language and use English as a lingua franca (henceforth ELF) – a mother tongue for neither of them – as “the medium of communicative choice” (Seidlhofer 2011: 7). The paper focuses on hybrid forms in ELF couple talk. It suggests that the private communication between couples, like any other communication, is a pragmatic process whereby meanings and relationships are negotiated by using available linguistic resources to key into particular *contexts* and to further a particular *pretext* (Widdowson 2004). *Contexts* are understood here as schematic socio-cultural constructs, and *pretexts* as the purposes that the interactants set out to achieve (ibid.). My argument will be that ELF couples relate their ELF and hybrid forms within it to their own intimate reality by creating their own schematic conventions for the pretextual purpose of accomplishing their coupleness. However, it is important to note that partners’ ELF has the semantic potential to mean many things, and what pragmatic significance couples make of the available language/s varies and is elusive. In this respect, the hybrid nature of the private interactions of ELF couples I am concerned with in this paper is a particular case of how language

functions generally to pragmatic effect in any interaction.

The paper thus aims at adding to our understanding of the discourse analysis of interaction in general and to the specific understanding of intimate ELF couple discourse. Of course, such an undertaking immediately poses the question: what is discourse analysis and ELF couple discourse? In the next sections, I first briefly outline the field of study to which this paper belongs, namely discourse analysis, the framework for it developed by Widdowson (2004) and provide preliminary definitions for the notions most relevant to this paper, specifically discourse, ELF intimate discourse and linguistic hybridity in ELF (Section 2). Section 3 considers what bearings my understanding of discourse can have on the analysis of hybrid forms in ELF couple talk. Finally, Section 4 raises the theoretical issues that arise in the analysis of examples of naturally occurring ELF couple talk and of the participants' retrospective comments on these examples. This analysis leads to the conclusion that ELF couples adapt and accommodate their ELF by drawing upon any available resources, and re-load it with their own *contextual* values for the *pretextual* purpose of creating their shared intimate territory.

## 2 Discourse analysis: ELF couple discourse

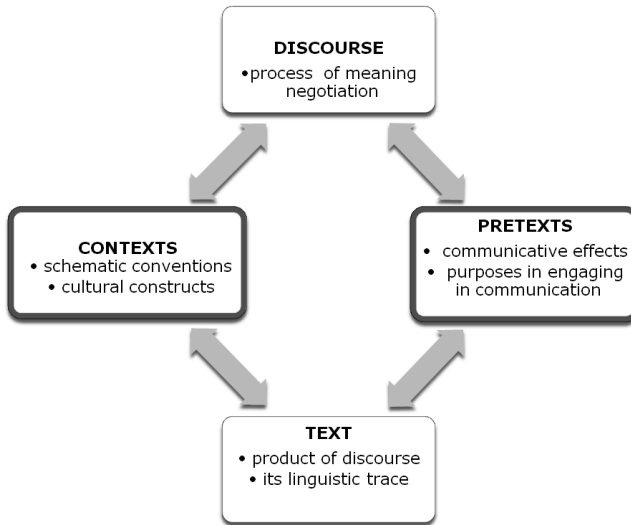
Because of the diversity of the disciplines from which discourse analysis has developed, it is a rather confused field of study and naturally implies different theoretical premises that, in turn, influence assumptions, concepts and methods. In linguistics, discourse analysis is also one of the most all-embracing and least defined areas. Despite the extreme vagueness of discourse definitions in linguistics, a broad distinction between two paradigms can be made, namely formalist and functionalist frameworks. The first paradigm describes discourse as structure, or "a particular unit of language (above the sentence)" (Schiffrin 1994: 20). The latter conceives of discourse as function, or in Schiffrin's words, "a particular focus on language use" (ibid.). In other words, structural definitions focus upon text and functional definitions upon context. However, most definitions, both structural and functional, provide no conceptual distinction between *discourse* and *text*. This general tendency among linguists to use *discourse* and *text* in free variation is delineated, for example, in Wallace Chafe's entry in *International Encyclopedia of Linguistics*:

[t]he term *discourse* is used in somewhat different ways by different scholars, but underlying the differences is a common concern for language beyond the boundaries of isolated sentences. The term *text* is used in similar ways. Both terms may refer to a unit of language larger than the sentence [...] (Chafe 2003: 439-440)

Such definitions, nonetheless, raise a number of questions. To list a few of them: What is language *above/beyond* the sentence? Is there language *below/within* the sentence? If discourse is almost synonymous to *text* and *language* itself, why do we then need a separate name for the field *discourse analysis*?

These issues have been taken up by many linguists. My own intellectual path has led me to the applied linguistics model for discourse analysis developed by Widdowson. In his account *Text, Context, Pretext: Critical Issues in Discourse Analysis* (2004), he formulates at least two points that can be taken as a starting point for this paper. First, the author provides a conceptual distinction between text and discourse, which rejects “as unsatisfactory, and misleading, the definition of either of them in terms of language ‘above the sentence’” (Widdowson 2004: 14). The relation between discourse and text is described as that of process and product. Thus, text is a linguistic trace of discourse. Discourse is the pragmatic process of meaning negotiation.

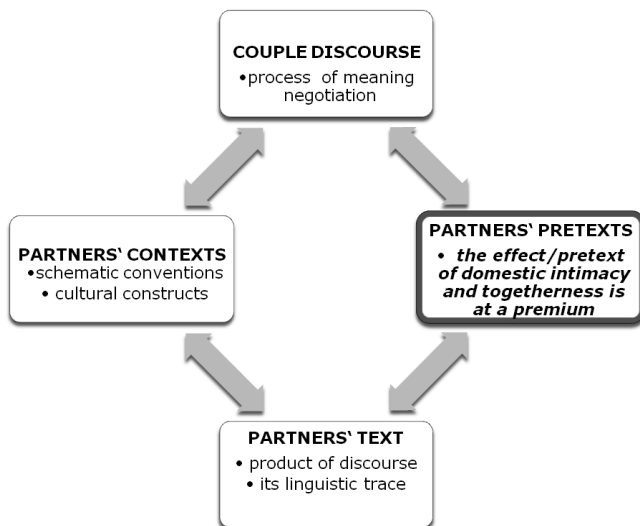
Second, texts need to be connected to discourse and discourse community. According to Widdowson, this connection is indirectly mediated by schematic conventions and pretextual purposes. “Unless it is activated by this contextual connection, the text is inert. It is this activation, this acting of context on code, this indexical conversion of the symbol that I refer to discourse” (Widdowson 2004: 8). What is central for my discussion of ELF couple talk is not only Widdowson’s concept of *context* but also the *concept of pretext* as one more factor in the general interpretative process. The notion refers to “an ulterior motive” (Widdowson 2004: 79) in engaging in communication. Thus, following Widdowson, I take discourse as “the communicative functioning of language in use” (Widdowson 2009: 162). Consequently, I argue that there are at least two kinds of conditions, under which a text is realized as discourse, which relate to *pretextual* as well as *contextual* factors. This distinction between contexts as schematic constructs, or “socio-cultural conventions from which the online pragmatic processing of language takes its bearings” (Widdowson 2004: 54), and *pretexts* as perlocutionary purposes in engaging in communication are taken as likely to be more useful for the analysis of my data. The relationship between text and discourse can be shown diagrammatically as follows:



**Figure 1: The relationship between text and discourse**

What Figure 1 shows us is that in discourse we do not only exchange information *contextually* by involving the ideational knowledge of how the situation and communication can be referentially framed, but also by managing the interpersonal relationships *pretextually* and creating desirable communicative effects.

If we turn now to the pretextual level of a close relationship, it is Tannen's (1986, 1991, 2007) work on the monolingual intimate discourse that can be useful for conceptualizing ELF couple interaction. According to Tannen (1986: 118), in couple communication all that is said revolves on the axis of the perlocutionary effect or *metamessage* (Tannen 1991: 32-33) (in our terms, pretext) which can be formulated as the question "Do you love me enough?" Her understanding of intimate discourse gets close to that of Widdowson who suggests that "the desired effect of mediating comity" (Widdowson 2004: 79), the pretext of domestic intimacy and togetherness, which also inevitably brings contextual factors into play, is the defining feature of such discourse. Adopting the view represented in Figure 1 above one can visualize the process of meaning negotiating in intimate relationship as follows:



**Figure 2: Discourse in intimate relationship**

What Figure 2 is meant to show is that ELF partners bring their own contextual assumptions to their interactions as default values that are adjusted in the process of discursive co-construction whereby they achieve the desired pretext of domestic togetherness and closeness. My argument will be that such a pretext is at a premium in ELF couple discourse. One way of achieving this very pretext is to draw upon the language/s that have proved to be functional in the past. These, of course, are predominantly (although not only) partners’ mother tongues. This being so, ELF and hybrid forms within it can be treated as the use of linguistic resources to activate and ratify particular contexts, or socio-cultural assumptions, beliefs and values; and at the same time to achieve particular pretexts or interactive purposes that manage the relationship between the two parties. My argument, then, is that linguistic hybridity (as well as other resources) in ELF couple talk is used as a device not only for what Gumperz (1982) refers to as contextualization, or activating particular contextual factors in interaction, but for pretextualization, or achieving particular interactive purposes and effects, as well. Now, let us explore this relationship between text and discourse a little bit further and consider what bearings it can have on the analysis of hybrid forms in ELF couple talk.

### 3 Discourse analysis: Analysis vs. interpretation

Making the distinction between text and discourse, Widdowson argues that text must be associated with analysis, and discourse and its factors (context and pretext) with interpretation. The examining of the text involves “a consideration of the textual product as such without regard to the discourse that gave rise to it” (Widdowson 2004: 58). As Widdowson puts it:

Interpretation is the process of deriving a discourse from a text and will always be a function of relationship between text, context, and pretext. Any text has the semantic potential to mean many things, and which meaning gets pragmatically realized depends on how these other factors come into play. No matter how detailed the analysis of a particular text might be, the textual features that are activated in interpretation are only those which are perceived, consciously or not, to be contextually and pretextually relevant (Widdowson 2004: 166).

Thus, the identification and consideration of linguistic features and patterns is associated with text while contextual/pretextual relation is associated with discourse. This distinction is fundamental for the present paper. As I have mentioned above, the recognition of the purpose of a text or utterance depends not only on contextual but also on pretextual factors. These pretextual factors regulate not only the parties’ but also the analyst’s focus of attention on the textual features to be analyzed and the contextual factors to be considered.

That is to say, to adopt Widdowson’s model for discourse analysis also means to realize that any sociolinguistic and discourse analytic research is a contextually and pretextually embedded activity. Each step in the research framework and method is profoundly affected by the values, opinions, biases, beliefs and even political interests of the researcher. As Widdowson surmises:

[...] It seems to me that models of human behaviour in the social sciences are comparable in status and function to the representations of human behaviour in novels and plays or any other art form. Both depend upon idealization procedures which in effect yield archetypes of a kind which we can set into correspondence with actual and non-idealised reality. There is not, and cannot be, any direct empirical link between either of them and the external world. Descriptive models and fictional representations create archetypal norms of human behaviour which we can accept as a plausible pattern against which actuality can be compared. Their function is not to be correct but convincing, to serve as a means towards a more perspective awareness of what we do and who we are (Widdowson 2009: 7).

That is to say, any analysis is a function of interpretation and so in some degree partial, incomplete and culture-bound. Therefore, with the paper at hand I will inevitably present my own view of the world, my model of reality, which of course is open to investigation by other models. Likewise, I would not make any claim to be providing anything like an exhaustive or definitive analysis. So the analysis that follows has a selective focus on the data and represents my own perception of what is going on. For my purposes I focus on the textual feature of linguistic hybridity as a mixture of two different encoded (‘national’) languages within the limits of a single ELF utterance and interpret this as evidence of how the partners in the interaction activate and ratify particular contextual and pre-textual functions of their discourse. I will firstly consider the hybrid forms in terms of their formal textual features and then look at their possible pragmatic values in ELF private discourse.

#### **4 “You better did it less pesante”: hybrid forms and the discursive construction of intimacy in ELF couple talk**

In this section, I will present a discourse analytical qualitative analysis of one data excerpt from a corpus of ELF private talk. To obtain data for this investigation, five European couples with different first languages were asked to audio-record their ELF home interactions at their own convenience, and a total of 18 hours was recorded during 2009-2010 in this way. The couples were asked to fill in a questionnaire and were interviewed on their language background and linguistic practices. They were also asked to comment on selected excerpts of their recordings so as to gain some insights about how these interactions were perceived from a participant viewpoint. For the transcription of the data I generally follow the VOICE (*Vienna-Oxford International Corpus of English*) transcription conventions ([www.univie.ac.at/voice](http://www.univie.ac.at/voice)).

The example comes from Sandy and Peter’s data. At the time of data collection Sandy (25) and Peter (31) had been a couple for three and a half years. Sandy is an architect and Peter is a civil engineer. Peter grew up monolingual in German in Austria. Sandy, who grew up monolingual in Italy, had lived in Austria for two years for both professional and personal reasons. Let us now look at how and for what purpose they use their first languages in their ELF. In the interchange Sandy and Peter are discussing their plans to take a trip to the Dominican Republic over the New Year holidays. It is about half past eleven pm, late December 2009. They are looking for a hotel to stay at. Sandy is working on the computer and comments on the search results for the hotels and rooms available. It is a “hard day’s night”, and they both are very tired. In this context Sandy produces Italian *inaugurato* and *pesante* in line 4 and 26.

## Excerpt (1)

1. Peter: *yes. so that that two ye- yeah. YOU said that it was it's two or three years ago.*
2. Sandy: *no. that's no i said that was the other one. it reads that it was inaugurated in two thousand and seven. but i didn't say this.*
3. Peter: *what's inaugurated? (2)*
4. Sandy: *yeah. to open something <L1it> inaugurato. {inaugurated.} </L1it>*
5. Peter: *reopened it.*
6. Sandy: *no.*
7. Peter: *reopened it?*
8. Sandy: *we? no*
9. Peter: *reopened it.*
10. Sandy: *you know inaugurate it's when you open for the first time.*
11. Peter: *yes and that was two years ago? or is it not?*
12. Sandy: *i didn't see it. as i said i didn't see it i don't know if it was made two years ago so i no would told you >*
13. Peter: *@ yes we: yesterday.*
14. Sandy: *no. because it was not that hotel peter. and we didn't ever look at this <1> page yesterday. </1>*
15. Peter: *<1> maybe. </1>*
16. Sandy: *<2> because we've got it today. </2>*
17. Peter: *<2> i know that page </2> <3> maybe it's not that hotel it looks exactly the same like one there xxxx </3>*
18. Sandy: *<3> it's not other hotel because it's that one. not one we saw yesterday </3>*
19. Peter: *good. so it's a two year picture of course in google and that's will be fair.*
20. Sandy: *okay.*
21. Peter: *so you will book.*
22. Sandy: *<soft> what you did? </soft>*
23. Peter: *book. credit card. and what is showed on the screen.*
24. Sandy: *ah. pete:::r.*
25. Peter: *<imitating> pete:::r. </imitating> you better xxxx. it's no time any more.*
26. Sandy: *you better did it less <L1it> PESANTE: {difficult} </L1it>*
27. Peter: *i am not <LNit> pesante. {difficult} </LNit>*
28. Sandy: *yes. you do:::.*
29. Peter: *yes because i have all the right to be <LNit> pesante. {difficult} </LNit>*



30. *Sandy: no:::*

31. *Peter: yes i do. (7)*

If we look at the formal linguistic features only, the Italian Participio perfetto *inaugurato* (line 4) seems to be more understandable and, therefore, acceptable than *pesante* because of its formal resemblance to the English past participle *inaugurated* (line 2). Both *inaugurato* and *inaugurated* signify the act of opening with the slight difference in their semantic meaning. Sandy provides the Italian equivalent of it and decodes it as: “when you open for the first time”. Online Oxford Dictionaries lists the meaning “mark the beginning or first public use of (an organization or project) *with a special event or ceremony*” (*Oxford Dictionaries*, my emphasis). In the second example (line 26), Italian *meno* + ADJ (*meno pesante*) (Da Forno & Manzini-Himmrich 2002: 77) corresponds to English *less* + ADJ (*less difficult*). Nevertheless, comparably to *inaugurato*, the hybrid *less pesante* with the English comparative *less* and Italian adjective *pesante* is a rather unusual configuration, which might lead to a mis/non-understanding. Interestingly enough, it seems that in this interchange the relatively comprehensible *inaugurato* provokes a conflict (line 19-26) while intricate *pesante* repairs it (line 26-31).

Let us firstly take a look at *inaugurato*. As I have argued in Section 2, the purpose of private conversation often has less to do with the exchange of information than with the pretext of intimacy. If we turn now to this pretextual level, it is Grice (1975) who can be useful for commenting on Sandy’s *yeah. to open something? inaugurato* in line 4 and Peter’s *reopened* in lines 5, 7, 9. These utterances are clearly tautologous. In the framework of Grice’s (1975) Co-operative Principle, this counts as flouting of the Quantity maxim: do not say more than necessary. However, Grice does not mean that such violation of the Quantity maxim has no function in discourse. It is informative in the sense that a hearer must be able to understand the point of the speaker’s choice of a particular tautology. It can be claimed that Peter perceives Sandy’s insistence on the exact meaning of the term “open for the first time” (line 10) as being unnecessarily precise in the situation where the date of the hotel opening does not really matter. Tensions are growing (line 19-26) not because the partners do not understand what is being said, but because their different assumptions put them at cross purposes. While Sandy tries to be semantically and indexically accurate, for Peter the conversation is the pretext for exchanging the necessary information in order to get the booking done. From his point of view, Sandy presses for precision with the pretext of picking a quarrel and denies the conditions of contextual relevance that Peter takes as self-evident. “Book whatever you would like to... That’s no

time any more...” – in other words, you know that “it’s late and I’m tired and I worked and I have all right to be like that” (Peter’s retrospective comment). It is clear from Peter’s reaction that in mentioning his tiredness he is appealing for sympathy. In turn, Sandy’s *inaugurato* calls for Peter’s extra time and efforts to process the foreign Italian term. That is to say, Sandy is not affected as intended and focuses on the precise meaning of the term.

So much for my researcher’s attempt to explain partners’ linguistic behaviour in this example. Precise and convincing as a researcher’s analysis and interpretation might seem to be, they might not correspond with how the participants themselves experience their interaction. Therefore, it is worth looking at what Sandy has to say about the use of *inaugurato*: “[...] I know there are lots of words in Italian, German and English that have the same Latin root [...] *I’m just trying to say the word in Italian or to make an English/German version of it*”. As it can be seen from Sandy’s comment, she is far from picking a quarrel. What she attempts to do here is to get her message through, to make it intelligible by using her first language (L1): she simply draws upon the resources (L1 Italian) that have proved to be functional in the past. Ironically, Sandy’s concern for comprehensibility leads to Peter’s confusion and, therefore, provokes a conflict.

Interestingly enough, *pesante*, which occurs some minutes later in the same exchange, has quite a different nature. Although it can be assumed that *pesante* has the same motivation as *inaugurato*, namely Sandy’s attempt to “try the words” from other available languages, it appears to serve another pretext for both partners. If one can claim that the partners attempt and fail to achieve the alignment of different states of knowledge and to create the shared frame of reference for the first concept *inaugurato*, then in the second instance Peter not only understands *pesante* but reproduces it twice in lines 27 and 29. It seems that here there is no need to negotiate the pragmatic conditions of the use of the concept: the shared frame of reference has already been created. Contrary to *inaugurato*, *pesante* also appears to be rather acceptable. That is what both partners have to say about it:

Excerpt (2)

1. Peter: *because it also one of the words that we once added to our talking style. yeah. yeah. [...]*
2. Sandy: *yeah it’s a word of our english now.=*

As it can be seen from Excerpt 2, *pesante* is not only the matter of indexical reference to the situation or state of affairs. Both partners use *pesante* as an affective gesture of domestic intimacy, as a little bid for attention and

togetherness. Thus, the term has already been symbolically established so as to conceptualize reality in a way most convenient for the partners’ private context. According to the partners’ claim, this adaptation of the Italian concept to their private ELF discourse is driven by the least-effort-principle for it serves as an umbrella term for all kinds of difficulty: both physical and social. Insofar as it can be seen, *pesante* conventionalizes the couple’s cultural values and creates the desired effect of mediating what Aston (1988) refers to as ‘comity’.

## 5 Conclusion: English with the “married” name?

In this paper, I have examined one extended interchange that took place between one of the couples who participated in my study of ELF couple interaction. I have suggested that the process of establishing and maintaining intimacy through ELF involves at least two kinds of conditions, namely *contexts* or socio-cultural constructs, and *pretexts* or perlocutionary purposes in engaging in communication. Moreover, I have argued that the defining feature of intimate ELF discourse is *the pretext of domestic intimacy and togetherness*, although such a pretext inevitably brings contextual factors into play. This being so, the couple develop their own significance for the hybrid forms and their ELF in general, which is often elusive for an outsider who is not party for the partners’ symbolic conventions. Consequently, English use in ELF private talk undergoes the creative pragmatic process of hybridization and ‘*acculturation*’ of English into the partners’ private space, whereby ELF couples adapt and accommodate the language by drawing upon any available resources, and re-load it with their own pragmatic values for the pretextual purpose of creating and maintaining their coupleness. What I am proposing, then, is that we might think of ELF in private interaction as the English with the “*married*” name or the use of the language potential which is exploited in different ways for the *specific pretext to accomplish partners’ coupleness*.

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