

L'ANALISI

LINGUISTICA E LETTERARIA

FACOLTÀ DI SCIENZE LINGUISTICHE E LETTERATURE STRANIERE

UNIVERSITÀ CATTOLICA DEL SACRO CUORE

1

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Indice

La costruzione delle preferenze dei consumatori/pazienti: il concetto di 'alimentazione sana' nei messaggi pubblicitari di prodotti alimentari <i>Sarab Bigi e Chiara Pollaroli</i>	7
How Far Is Stanford from Prague (and vice versa)? Comparing Two Dependency-based Annotation Schemes by Network Analysis <i>Marco Passarotti</i>	21
Saussure chiama, Pascoli risponde. Nuove prospettive sulla ricerca anagrammatica <i>Giovanni Palmieri</i>	47
Some Typological Features of 'Minority' Literature: the Case of the Slovenian and Italian Minorities <i>Jadranka Cergol</i>	61
Manzoni e la rivoluzione degli Stati Uniti <i>Alice Crosta</i>	77
The Old English Genesis and Milton's Paradise Lost: the Characterisation of Satan <i>Elisa Ramazzina</i>	89
Contributo per un'edizione critica della versione armena dell' <i>Eutifrone</i> di Platone: il manoscritto 1123 della Biblioteca dei Padri Mechitaristi di Venezia e l'edizione a stampa <i>Sara Scarpellini</i>	119
Analisi d'opera Intorno al volume: <i>La lingua del imperio. La retorica del imperialismo in Roma y la globalizacion</i> <i>Federica Venier</i>	125
Recensioni e Rassegne	
Recensioni	137
Rassegna di Linguistica generale e di Glottodidattica a cura di Giovanni Gobber	151

Rassegna di Linguistica francese a cura di Enrica Galazzi e Chiara Molinari	161
Rassegna di Linguistica inglese a cura di Amanda Murphy e Margherita Ulrych	179
Rassegna di linguistica russa a cura di Anna Bonola	189
Rassegna di linguistica tedesca a cura di Federica Missaglia	193
Indice degli Autori	201

Recensioni

W. Baker – J. Jenkins, *Criticising ELF*, “Journal of English as a Lingua Franca”, 4, 2015, 1, pp. 191-198

English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) has been much debated in recent years, and this has significantly determined a constant (re-)consideration and (re-)definition in terms of research and analysis from different perspectives. In this regard, negative critiques have also been raised, at times causing confusion. This review reports on two divergent views of ELF studies – i.e., Baker & Jenkins and O’Regan – in an effort to clarify the question and avoid any misunderstanding of current trends into the field. In their intensive 6-page article “Criticising ELF”, Baker & Jenkins criticize O’Regan’s immanent critique of ELF research(ers), recently published in the *Journal of Applied Linguistics*¹, and refute his attempt to demonstrate that ELF has been “reified” as a “stable form of language” (p. 191). Baker & Jenkins reveal their concerns about O’Regan’s approach to ELF, and drawing from significant previous studies, they stress how inadequate such an approach proves to be. Similarly, Widdowson maintains that “the kind of critique that O’Regan employs in his paper is an ‘immanent’ one – one that, he tells us, has the intellectual endorsement of Hegel and the members of the Frankfurt School and is further informed by the thinking of such notables as Marx, Volosinov, and Foucault –”², and expresses his worries about O’Regan’s hypothesis.

O’Regan’s criticises ‘ELF research’ for reifying and hypostatizing language, and thereby treating it as a fixed entity or “thing-in-itself”. Therefore, he advocates that five key “conceptions” should be considered in ELF studies: ideology, discourse, power, truth and the nature of the real, specifically “in relation to the power structures associated with neo-liberalism, class, and globalisation”³. In particular, he affirms that ELF research has failed to engage with these specific areas of investigation over the past years, and accuses ELF researchers of reification. However, in Baker & Jenkins’s view his stance turns out to be unreliable because it suggests a prescriptive application of theory to practice, and demonstrates O’Regan’s pre-determined conceptual framework based on the claim that ELF is a ‘hypostatized universal code’.

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the terms ‘hypostatize’ and ‘reify’ mean ‘to treat or represent something abstract as a concrete reality’. In O’Regan’s perspective, these are used to describe the character of English as an unnecessary update of Marx’s concept of ‘reification’, which he mentions. As a matter of fact, both expressions ‘reification’ and ‘hypostatization’ stand for the materialization and fetishization of products and ideas in capitalist societies⁴. In O’Regan’s view, English has become a product, packaged and marketized for immediate consumption. By accusing ELF researchers of reification, O’Regan argues that “‘using English as a Lingua Franca’ implies congeals and ‘ELF’ becomes a thing in itself”⁵. In Baker & Jenkins’s opinion, this reification is nothing but the result of O’Regan’s (mis)interpretation. In fact, he erroneously labels ELF researchers as a

¹ J. O’Regan, *English as a Lingua Franca: An Immanent Critique*, “Applied Linguistics”, 35, 2014, 5, pp. 533-52.

² H. Widdowson, *Contradiction and conviction. A reaction to O’Regan*, “Applied Linguistics”, 36, 2015, 1, pp. 124-27.

³ W. Baker – J. Jenkins - R. Baird, *ELF researchers take issue with ‘English as a lingua franca: an immanent critique’*, “Applied Linguistics”, 2014, 4, pp. 1-3.

⁴ S. Torres-Martínez, *English as a lingua (NOT) so franca. What’s the meaning of the term ‘hypostatized?’*, https://www.researchgate.net/post/English_as_a_lingua_NOT_so_franca-Whats_the_meaning_of_the_term_hypostatized/1, 2015 (last accessed September 27, 2015).

⁵ J. O’Regan, *Op. cit.*, p. 536.

“movement”⁶, and in doing so, he himself reifies the field of ELF research “as it were homogeneous with a fixed set of interests and philosophies” (p. 194). No clear proposal or theory on how to approach interconnectedly the aforementioned “conceptions” are advanced by the author. Consequently, Baker & Jenkins stress O’Regan’s lack of deep understanding of ELF research, ELF being neither a “stable form of language” nor a “variety of English”, but a field of investigation “driven by real-world problems” (p. 193).

Any language is an ongoing process of transformation and adaptation, and ELF specifically, due to its own nature, requires a multidisciplinary approach and understanding, and cannot be considered an unchangeable entity. O’Regan’s assumption sounds very thought-provoking, but actually an academic debate is no doubt intended to make advances in one domain through discussion. Any contributor’s considerations are generally welcome. Nonetheless, his position appears, on the one hand, pretentious and inflexible, while, on the other, quite inaccurate. This twofold aspect renders it alarming as it suggests an improper interpretation of the ELF question, albeit he personally makes clear that what is seemingly distinctive about immanent criticism is that it “invade[s] the inner logic of an opponent’s theory showing how, according to its own standards, it is partial, one sided, and self-contradictory”⁷.

In conclusion, within the long-lasting debate in the field of ELF, Baker & Jenkins offer an evident critique of uninformed criticism which ELF research is still subordinated to, and provide insightful clarification of the way detailed ELF studies – and research more in general – can be approached constructively and productively. This may open to deeper investigation into diverse areas of inquiry, such as those related to ideology, class and power referred to language and globalization, though not new to researchers’ engagement over the last decades. In this respect, anyway, an in-depth analysis is yet to be carried out. Baker *et al.* suggest the adoption of a different perspective to O’Regan’s, i.e., “a more holistic approach which mediates between theory and practice in keeping with the foundations of applied linguistics in general”⁸, while Mauranen⁹ asserts that nowadays ELF research should not be focused on the study of the English language but, more generally, on how this language and its role in human communication are perceived. In any case, whatever the approach, the role of ELF as a commodity for two billion speakers across the world cannot be denied. Speakers who do not share a common languaculture tend to use and ‘shape’ English according to their own culturally and linguistically different backgrounds, and this feature itself renders it dynamic and unhypostatizable.

The article by Baker & Jenkins points out clearly that ELF is characterized by situationality in that it is ever-evolving, context-dependent and meaning-driven. Baker & Jenkins punctually deconstruct O’Regan’s immanent critique and stress the illogicality of his view, exemplifying “the kind of unhelpful, uninformed, and tendentious criticism that ELF research is still subjected to” (p. 196).

Antonio Tagliatalata

⁶W. Baker – J. Jenkins – R. Baird, *Op. cit.*

⁷H. Widdowson, *Contradiction and conviction. A reaction to O’Regan*, “Applied Linguistics”, 2014, 1-5.

⁸W. Baker – J. Jenkins – R. Baird, *Op. cit.*, p. 2.

⁹A. Mauranen, *Exploring ELF. Academic English shaped by non-native users*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2012.



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