

What is a lingua franca?

 <https://doi.org/10.1075/wlp.10.c02>

 Available under a CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 license.

Pages 9–14 of

Esperanto – Lingua Franca and Language Community

Sabine Fiedler and Cyril Robert Brosch

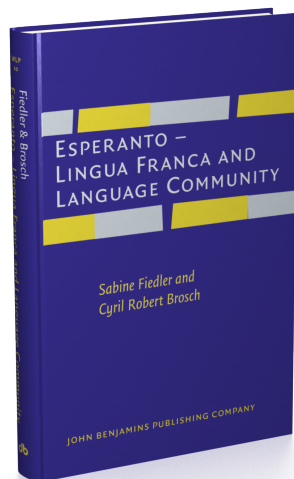
[*Studies in World Language Problems*, 10]

2022. xx, 429 pp.

© John Benjamins Publishing Company

This electronic file may not be altered in any way. For any reuse of this material, beyond the permissions granted by the Open Access license, written permission should be obtained from the publishers or through the Copyright Clearance Center (for USA: www.copyright.com).

For further information, please contact rights@benjamins.nl or consult our website at benjamins.com/rights



What is a lingua franca?

A book bearing the expression *lingua franca*⁷ in its title should include a definition of what exactly is meant by that term. This seems to be even more important for this specific term, which has become very popular recently but frequently has different definitions (see Brosch, 2015b, with further literature). Besides the notional variation, we have to consider the fact that *lingua franca* is based on a proper name, which leads to some uncertainty with regard to its ontological status: can a language be a lingua franca or just **function** as one?

Throughout human history, there have been several languages that served people with different mother tongues as common or vehicular languages, such as Latin, Koiné Greek, Akkadian and then Aramaic. The term *lingua franca*, as mentioned above, is based on a proper name. It was derived from the Mediterranean Lingua Franca, which was a pidgin adopted as an auxiliary language among European, African and Arab traders, sailors and pirates from the Middle Ages to the nineteenth century. It developed spontaneously in order to bridge language barriers, with a simple grammar and a lexicon confined to the expression of only the notions needed for the communication goals of the interlocutors and was based mainly on Italian, with a considerable adstratum of the languages spoken around the Mediterranean (Barotchi, 1994, p. 2211; Brosch, 2015b; Ostler, 2010). Much of its glottogenesis, of linguistic details, and the origin of its very name are unclear. Despite its common use for hundreds of years, it never became a mother tongue (a creole). Finally, Lingua Franca died out, leaving no certain traces – ousted by national languages, especially French. There are only a few written attestations of the language, many of them of poor quality. The 1671 play *Le bourgeois gentilhomme* by Molière (or rather the operatic version by Lully; act 4, scene 5) seems to contain authentic specimens of Lingua Franca.⁸

7. Of the competing plural forms *linguae francae* (Latin), *lingue franche* (Italian), and *lingua francas* (English), we always use the last one.

8. E.g.: *Mahamettha per Giourdina* “Mahomet, for Jourdain
Mi pregar sera é mattina I pray (in the) evening and (in the) morning,
Voler far un Paladina (I) Want to make a paladin
De Giourdina, de Giourdina. Of Jourdain, of Jourdain.
Dar turbanta, é dar scarcina Give a turban, and give a scimitar
Con galera é brigantina With a galley and a brigantine
Per deffender Palestina. To defend Palestine.”

Based on this use of the original Lingua Franca in the past, the term *lingua franca* (as a common noun to be written in lower case), in a metaphorical sense, has now gained currency to describe a common language that people of different mother tongues use for communication. When we compare the following definitions of lingua franca in this sense, two opinions can be distinguished. For a first group of authors (see, for example, Firth, 1990 and Clyne, 2000 below), it is important not to include native speakers, whereas this criterion is not mentioned as relevant for others (see UNESCO's 1953 definition and Gnutzmann, 2004 below) (Haberland, 2011).

The term 'lingua franca' is adopted to describe the language and the setting where English is used exclusively by non-native speakers. (Firth, 1990, p. 269)

A Lingua Franca is used in inter-cultural communication between two or more people who have different L1s other than the lingua franca. (Clyne, 2000, p. 83)

[A lingua franca is] a language which is used habitually by people whose mother tongues are different in order to facilitate communication between them.

(UNESCO 1953 as quoted in Barotchi, 1994, p. 2211)

A language that is used as a medium of communication between people or groups of people each speaking a different native language is known as a lingua franca.

(Gnutzmann, 2004, p. 356)

As Clyne (2000, p. 84) illustrates by an anecdote, all languages can function as lingua francas (and it is on the basis of function that a language is considered to be one):

I was sitting in a train between Cologne and Bonn some years ago when a young Turkish man entered the compartment nervously waving a piece of paper with an address on it. A number of people tried to explain to him in ever louder German where to get off, but he did not quite understand. Several people tried in English but to no avail, and the man sitting opposite me attempted to communicate with the Turk in French, but that did not succeed either. Almost as a joke, I tried Dutch and it worked wonders, for he had been employed in the Netherlands for over a decade. At that point, a triangular conversation developed between us and the person opposite, who had spoken French, a French-Canadian who had taken his doctorate in Utrecht. So the only means of communication between an Australian, a Turk and a French-Canadian turned out to be Dutch!

Barotchi (1994, p. 2211) distinguishes three types of lingua francas: 'natural', 'pidginized', and 'planned' languages, while Vikør's (2004) classification includes four types: 'languages of religion and culture', 'imperial language', 'pidgin language', and 'artificial languages'.

Lingua franca is today generally used to describe the worldwide spread of English as a vehicular language. What makes the use of the term in connection with

English problematic is the fact that a substantial subset of its speakers (no less than 360 million people) using it are native speakers of this language. This means a clear disadvantage for its non-native speakers, who have to invest a great deal of time, energy and money in language learning and may still communicate with difficulty (Ammon & Carli, 2007; Fiedler, 2010a), a fact described as “unfair competition” by Ammon (1994). From a philosophical perspective, De Schutter (2018, p. 170) argues that with the spread of English, “global linguistic injustice comes in four types: communicative injustice, resource injustice, life-world injustice, and dignity injustice”. “Communicative injustice” refers to the fact that second-language learning generally does not lead to a command of a language that is equivalent to that possessed by native speakers: the latter usually have higher degrees of fluency, expressiveness, articulateness and eloquence in almost all communicative situations when it is used. This is closely connected to “resource injustice”, i.e. the unilateral burden of learning the shared language in terms of time, energy and money (Grin, 2005, 2011). Not to be forgotten here are related indirect advantages (e.g. financial benefits) for native speakers, who enjoy better job opportunities as the stereotypical providers of English teaching and of text-correction and translation services, but also the privileged position of English-speaking universities. De Schutter’s third type of inequality, “life-world injustice”, results from the close relationship between language and culture. Given that its spread is connected with Anglo-American cultural influence and a simultaneous marginalisation of other cultures, English is not a neutral language. “Dignity injustice”, finally, describes the inferiority and loss of self-respect that is often felt by non-native speakers in relation to their communicative partners, who can simply continue to speak their own language.

The fact that English is in active use in many different contexts today by a large number of people for whom the language is not a mother tongue, has led to the development of the concept or school (some speak of a movement – see O’Regan, 2014) of English as a lingua franca (ELF). Its advocates argue that the English used by non-native speakers should be seen as detached from native-speaker English, as a “legitimate use of English in its own right” (Seidlhofer, 2011, p. 24) shaped by its users or, as more recent publications argue, due to the non-native speakers’ various linguistic backgrounds as a “multilingual mode” (Hülmbauer & Seidlhofer, 2013).⁹ The approach has been met with little acceptance and, in our view, for reasons we described elsewhere (Brosch, 2015b; Fiedler, 2010a, 2011; see also Gazzola & Grin, 2013), cannot fundamentally redress the inequality described above. We agree with Grin (2011, p. 59), who points out that

9. See also the latest studies describing a third phase in the development of ELF, that is “English as Multilingual Franca” (Jenkins 2015, 2017).

[t]he differences between what is labelled as “English as a lingua franca” and simply “English”, in terms of their consequences for language status, are superficial, and mostly of little importance. [...] As soon as you have a natural language which is the language of an existing community and finds itself in this internationally dominant position, you have all of these adverse effects, and ELF makes no difference at all to these problems.

Against this backdrop, if the degree of linguistic justice that a lingua franca provides is considered a relevant criterion, it appears questionable whether the term lingua franca might be suitable at all for describing communication by means of English. “[...] [C]ommunicative inequality is obscured when English is referred to as a ‘lingua franca’, a concept that appears to assume communicative equality for all,” as Phillipson (2003, p. 40) states. In fact, the positive connotation of fair communication implied in the term is abused here – we recall that the original Lingua Franca was not a native language. In reaction to these aspects, Brosch (2015b, p. 79) proposes a more precise concept in which the (non-)existence of a native speaker is taken into account (see Figure 1 below). In his model, contact languages are all second languages that can serve as means of interlingual communication, including those that are habitually not used in this function but are held in common with interlocutors by chance alone (see Clyne’s example above), and lingua francas are subdivided into lingua francas in the broader sense and lingua francas in the narrow sense. The former, which should preferably be called vehicular languages (see also Janssens et al., 2011), are languages that are habitually used to bridge language gaps, irrespective of whether their speakers are native or non-native. Examples include English or Arabic today and Aramaic or Latin in the past in certain contexts. In contrast to these, lingua francas in the narrow sense are characterised by their being

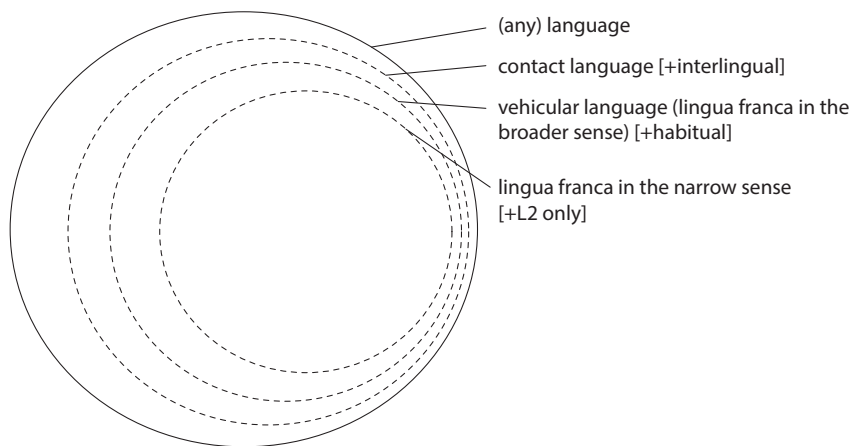


Figure 1. Notional system of language use (Brosch 2015b, p. 79)

used as non-native languages only. Ammon (2012, p. 336) expresses the difference using the terms “asymmetric” and “symmetric” lingua francas.

This constellation leads us to two aspects which, although of secondary importance, will be included in the research questions that our study intends to address (see Chapter 4). First, as the exploration of lingua francas has mainly focused on English so far, we will explore the differences between our data on Esperanto as a genuine lingua franca (lingua franca in the narrow sense) and those on English as a vehicular language (lingua franca in the broader sense). We will discuss this issue in Part IV, when we analyse the features of Esperanto communication. Second, as there are people who learn and speak Esperanto as a mother tongue, the *denaskuloj* (see Fiedler, 2012), it will be necessary to study whether their existence leads to a restriction of Esperanto’s character as a genuine lingua franca, a topic that we focus on in Chapter 10.

