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English as a lingua franca in spoken genres in the international university: introduction

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English has long been the lingua franca of academic settings. As many readers of this journal will know, since World War II, English has established for itself a solid place as the dominant lingua franca of science through which most academic and scientific activity takes place (Crystal 2013). In Europe, its position got even more stabilized after the Bologna Declaration in 1999 when an agreement was made to establish a common European higher education arena (EHEA) by 2010. Now in 2018, we can see that this aim has been reached to a large extent with a very large number of English-medium instruction (EMI) programs (Wächter and Maiworm 2014), allowing students to study in other countries than their home ones through exchange or degree programs, and staff to practice academic mobility in different ways. All these students and staff, often if not always, use English as their lingua franca in their everyday practices, often in high-stakes situations.

The literature on EMI has focused heavily on non-English speaking countries with scholars reporting from different parts of Europe (e.g. Hultgren et al. 2015; Hynninen 2016; Smit 2010; Wilkinson 2013). English is of course used as a lingua franca also in universities in English-speaking countries. In English-speaking countries, it of course has a different history of being a lingua franca with the local language being the same as the most dominant lingua franca, and there are certainly different dynamics involved for speakers of other first languages who use English as their lingua franca at e.g. a US university.[1] Speakers are also exposed to English in daily settings associated with ordinary people, accounting for a considerable portion of their interactions. I have argued elsewhere that, with regard to studies of English as a lingua franca (ELF), the sociolinguistic realities of each country and region must be considered, making the geographical divide an organizational criterion key (Björkman 2016). Other

1 See e.g. Matsumoto (2014) and Kimura (2017) on ELF examples of usage in the United States.

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parameters that need to be taken into consideration are (other) local contextual factors and the variable nature of ELF communication. Especially with respect to studies focusing on interactional practices, "ELF speakers must be examined in relation to the social context in which the interaction is embedded" (see Kaur's commentary in this special issue).

This special issue (SI) focuses on spoken academic genres in the international university from both English-speaking and non-English-speaking EMI settings, taking into account such domain-related and local, context-related factors. Its point of departure was the tenth international conference on English as a lingua franca, held in Helsinki in June 2017, based on a panel entitled "English as a lingua franca in spoken genres in the international university," consisting of four papers originally. The aim of the panel was to bring together cutting edge research on spoken academic genres from academic settings, including a combination of audio and video data, using different methodological approaches. This aim very much holds true also for this SI. The seven papers included have in common the nature of the data used, namely that they all employ audio/video data gleaned from naturally occurring interactions collected with ethnographic observations, focusing on communicative phenomena by using conversation, sequential and discourse analytic procedures as well as corpus analytic methods. While the nature of the data used and similar methodologies provide a useful common ground which may be representative for similar settings, the papers differ nicely with respect to the genres they investigate, allowing this special issue to include a variety of spoken monologic, dyadic and polyadic genres, comprising classroom interaction (Matsumoto), group-work (Toomaneejinda and Harding, and Komori-Glatz), PhD supervision meetings (Björkman), PhD vivas/defenses (Mežek), lectures (Wang), and dormitory interactions (Siegel). Despite the fact that academic settings have been among the first domains to be researched and contribute to ELF research, some of these genres to date still remain under-researched and call for further investigations (especially PhD supervision meetings, PhD vivas, classroom interactions and interactions evolving over long periods of time.

An obvious strength of this special issue that deserves highlighting is the quality of the data in all the papers included. All the seven papers have employed authentic, naturally occurring data that would exist with or without the presence of the researcher. Another contribution this special issue makes to the field of ELF is regarding some common observations and findings in these papers. As Kaur maintains in her commentary here, and as I have touched upon above, the role of contextual factors is clearly visible in the papers. This can be observed, for example, in the papers focusing on disagreement practices

(Toomaneejinda and Harding, and Komori-Glatz). The practices of disagreement, and how disagreement is perceived, are largely domain- and context-bound (see Toomaneejinda and Harding). Toomaneejinda and Harding report that the speakers in their study choose to express disagreement in indirect and subtle ways, whereas Komori-Glatz shows how the speakers in her investigation practice little mitigation if any when expressing disagreement (Komori-Glatz) (see also Kaur's discussion of this). This is only one of the examples of the papers considering contextual factors carefully, showing the variable nature of ELF usage and ELF interactional practices. Among such factors are institutional and academic roles and relationships (see Björkman, Mežek, Siegel), goals of the task (Komori-Glatz), status and group dynamics (Matsumoto), domain- and discipline-related factors (Wang), and all factored in by employing different methodological approaches. Finally, it is also worth noting that this special issue shows how conversation analysis (CA) can be applied to ELF data when investigating institutional talk, taking into careful consideration various factors such as membership categories, institutional rules, instructions, and the like. As some of the papers here exhibit (e.g. Wang), a great deal may have been overlooked with some of the earlier frequency-based approaches when it comes to e.g. domain-related investigations, and important insights can be gained from manual, micro analyses.

The findings of the papers in this special issue have important implications for the use of English as an academic vehicular language in general but also for English-medium instruction (EMI) practices more specifically. While it is certainly necessary that we explore the myriad of domains where English has become an important lingua franca, we are far from having explored academic usage of English as a lingua franca fully. I believe also that the present special issue goes beyond that: it has relevance for the field of ELF in general, especially with respect to the importance of contextual factors, methodological approaches and data.

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Bionote

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Beyza Björkman is Associate Professor at Stockholm University, Department of English. Her research interests are the use of English as a lingua franca in English-medium instruction settings and spoken academic discourse in general. Her most recent research has focused on the genre of PhD supervision interactions, where she has investigated a variety of issues including power asymmetries, linguistic competence and content knowledge, as well as the architecture of supervision meetings.