Building International Business Relationships: English language use in Airbnb conversations

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Building International Business Relationships: English language use in

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Abstract

English as a business lingua franca is changing and shaping the English language. Previous research has shown that there are variances in BELF between nationalities. We investigated potential differences between L1 and L2 users of English in an Airbnb environment. We analyzed 65 conversations from Airbnb & booking.com looking at the inclusive and exclusive moves made by guests. There is a difference of inclusive moves being made from different nationalities. Accommodation owners can better understand the messages of guests who are booking private accommodations.

KEYWORDS: *BELF; L1; L2; English; Online Bookings; Airbnb; Corpus analysis; Business relationships; Business English*

Introduction

English as a Global Language

There are more than 6000 different languages worldwide ("How Many Spoken Languages," 2017), but even with different native languages, people are still communicating with each other in a common language, and that language is likely to be English. English is the most popular lingua franca globally. English as a lingua franca is the use of English between two people who are non-native speakers as a means of a mutual language for communicating to one another, whether for learning, teaching, or business use. (Seidlhofer, 2005) According to Barbara Seidlhofer, English is the global lingua franca and the use and shaping of the English language are influenced not only by native speakers but as well as non-native speakers. (Seidlhofer, 2005) Non-native speakers inadvertently help to shape and evolve the English language simply by using it in their conversation. Since English is used in so many aspects of everyday life around the world, the English language can't help but continue to grow and evolve.

Non-native speakers of English far outnumber native speakers. The global number of native speakers was estimated to be around 335 million people while the global number of English spoken by non-native speakers was estimated to be around 1.5 billion people. (Christiansen, 2015). The language has become so influential on how internationals are communicating Riddle. S (2019) suggests that native languages will become a thing of a past and English will be the language of the world. It is safe to say that English as a spoken and written lingua franca plays a huge role in how the world is communicating.

Many people are learning English as a second language and the majority of them are being taught through formal education. Countries, such as Korea and China, have invested the teachings of English as a second language ("EF EPI", pp.26, 2017). The majority of Europe mandates at least one foreign language in their school curriculum. 73% of students in the EU are learning English as a second language during primary school ("Language teaching", 2012) and 94% of students enrolled in higher education. ("Foreign Language", 2018) Countries such as Jordan, Qatar, and Syria are also mandating the teachings of English as a second language as early as primary school. (Manzo & Zehr, 2019)

Companies around the world implement a variety of strategies to stay competitive. One of these strategies includes a language strategy where employees across different locations communicate in a common language. 23% of employees interact internationally and of that 23%, 67% of them are doing so in the English language. ("English is the Common Link", 2012) English used in the business world is growing and is even being used as a strategy in order to gain competitiveness and improve communicative efficiencies. (Neeley, 2012) A CEO at an internet company in Japan with around 7,100 employees decided to mandate English as a primary language in order to keep a competitive advantage in international business by eliminating translation time. (Mikitani, 2013) The implementation of business English as a lingua franca is at large and is impacting the English language and how people are communicating.

BELF

English as a business lingua franca or BELF has become the language that many

companies have chosen as a way to communicate as a lingua franca. When writing in English,

there are many tactics that are used in order to portray or position themselves and convey their

message effectively. Gestures, tone of voice, and mannerisms are something that comes naturally

when speaking, however, it is a challenge when writing.

A researcher by the name of Philippe Millot (2017) conducted an analysis of business

emails written by French professionals using English as a lingua franca and observed the

different tactics and strategies used in writing. The study observed what kind of expressions were

used in business emails and whether users were trying to simply exchange information or create

interpersonal relationships. It is important to understand the positioning acts which involve how

the user addresses themselves to whomever they are emailing and what tactics they use such as

"boosters, hedgers, attitude markets and self-mentions". Whether the users made jokes,

criticized, or made gestures in efforts of trying to build rapport. (Millot, 2017) Millot's research

divided the actions into inclusive and exclusive language. Inclusive language included

addressing a person, using smileys, hedgers or other rapport building tactics. Exclusive language

involves the user trying to exchange information and excludes any of the previously mentioned

tactics. In the study conducted by Millot, it was found that L2 (English as a second language) to

L2 involved more inclusive language than with L1 (English as a first language) to L1.

It isn't so important for grammar or spelling to be perfect when communicating, but the

importance comes down to communicative competence. It is important for the speaker or writer

to be able to convey what they are saying and that the receiver understands what is being said.

(Jonsson, 2013, pp. 4-5) The goal for non-native speakers is not to imitate native speakers or

achieve native-speaker level perfection. In addition to understanding content, successful ELF

communication means being able to follow and convey appropriate personal and social elements through language. Such as; building rapport, establishing identity, authority, trustworthiness, "saving face" and other social linguistic functions of language through specific strategies like; making promises/commitments, requests, use of humor, use of L1, emojis, personal greeting, thanking, apologizing. This is particularly important in business contexts (establishing trust) in writing (when there is no voice or facial expression or gestures).

As mentioned before, there are many forms of the English language. Another form or strategy that has grown to a large extent is texting. Texting itself shapes the English language. Instead of using full words, abbreviations are used, or smiles, emojis, GIFs, and stickers. A lot of these aren't even actual words, but expresses a message for the user to interpret. Grammar and English writing rules don't mean anything in a text, what matters is how the message being delivered. (Crystal, 2008, pp. 6-7)

Online Accommodation Booking

Anytime someone goes on vacation, or on a business trip, they have to find accommodation. For a long time, hotels were the primary source of short term accommodation. However, in recent years with companies like Airbnb, HomeAway, and Couchsurfing; private accommodations have grown into the marketplace exponentially. This is the rise of the sharing economy, though not recent, the idea has changed from offering a home or bedroom to a friend or family to sharing with a complete stranger. Airbnb started in 2008 and by 2009 they had around 20,000 bookings running through their site. In 2017, they had nearly 100 million bookings in around 191 countries valued at around $38 billion. ("The Explosive Growth", 2018) ("2019 Airbnb Statistics", 2019) In an online private accommodation, the communication is

peer-to-peer, rather than communicating with a trained professional. On sites like Airbnb, a lot of the communication is dealt through the site and is more closely related to text than it is to a professional email.

A host of a private accommodation has a goal to provide a level of trustworthiness and hospitality. The host isn't necessarily a trained professional, but the host will represent themselves through their online profile and messages separating themselves from other accommodations (professional or private). By utilizing the online platform provided by online accommodation sites like Airbnb, hosts can establish a degree of trust. Airbnb allows the users to write a profile of themselves, write reviews, and respond to reviews. These are all available publicly for the host and guests to view. The way a host describes themselves and how they respond to reviews shapes the way a potential guest views the host and whether they decide to make a booking or not. It is also important for the host to act accordingly to how they describe themselves in their profile online and face to face. Variances between online communication and face-to-face contact could affect trust between the host and guest. Trust is established through three criteria; "Reputation, performance, and appearance". (Tussyadiah, & Park, 2018, pp. 263) Not much research has been done analyzing online-booking conversations and its effects on bookings and ratings, though one study based in San Francisco found that responsiveness was one of the criteria in achieving a super host status. (Gunter, 2017, pp.35)

Other studies have been made analyzing the online community in the sharing economy. In an online based communication, friendship can be established, however online communication lacks the ability to show facial cues. Although, trust can become stronger than face to face interactions due to open information on personal profiles, giving each person a better

idea of whom they are speaking with. (Chung, J. Y, 2017) Online communication could be utilized by hosts to achieve a personal level of trust and friendship.

Method

The use of English as a business lingua franca has been analyzed through emails and face to face conversations, however, there doesn't seem to be much research done regarding conversations through text messaging or applications that are now commonly used for online booking sites. The purpose of our data collection was to understand the kind of conversational tactics people are using, how people are communicating, and to observe if there are any kind of patterns or differences between L1's and L2's. The data was collected from Airbnb and Booking.com's conversation applications. Messaging through the Airbnb application, or booking.com application resembles more closely to sending a text message more than it resembles an email.

We conducted a corpus analysis of authentic Airbnb conversations. We asked an abundance of people to provide us with conversations they had had from Airbnb or booking.com. We took up to five conversations provided by a host and one conversation if the user was only a guest. We collected 65 conversations with a large portion being guests who were visiting Dubrovnik, Croatia. Our research was taken place in Dubrovnik, Croatia which is a large touristic town with many people using Airbnb and Booking.com to advertise and market their accommodation.

In an excel sheet, we gathered specific information from the conversations we had collected. Guests and hosts on Airbnb and booking.com have profiles with generic info like

gender and country. These columns included: guest name, guest language, guest country, guest gender, host language, host country, host gender, word count, greeting, greeting name, use L1, inclusive moves, total inclusive moves, L2 markers, emoji, spellcheck, closing, closing name, ask for reply, and notes. In a separate sheet, we categorized the information into 4 types of conversations; L1 to L1; L1 to L2; L2 to L1; and L2 to L2. We then isolated information that seemed most relevant which included whether a guest started their message with a greeting (hello, hi, good day, etc.); whether the guest acknowledged the host by name; the average word count of the conversations; the average number of inclusive moves made by the guest; whether the guest closed the message (thank you, all the best, sincerely, etc.); whether the guest signed their name at the end of their message; and the guest's total inclusive score. We collected 15 L1 to L1 conversations; 15 L1 to L2 conversations; 15 L2 to L1 conversations; and 20 L2 to L2 conversations. Out of the 65 conversations collected, 27 were male guests and 39 were female guests. In the corpus analysis, we created a point system to keep track of inclusive moves made in the body of the conversation. One point would be awarded for each inclusive word as well as symbols such as exclamation marks emphasizing the importance or illustrating excitement. Each conversation we added points for each formal inclusive move which are at the beginning and ending of the conversation (greeting, name, signing, and closing) as well emojis and added it to the inclusive score.

Results

Our results have shown that on average, people are writing 33.72 words and have an average inclusive score of 5.03. A large majority of people are using formal inclusive moves with 78.88% of them starting with a greeting. Addressing the host didn't seem to be as common,

47.77% of people used the host's name in their conversations. 39.39% of people closed their messages and only 29.79% signed their name at the bottom. The use of emojis wasn't so common either, only 18.18% of people did so in their conversations. Some conversations were purely exclusive; "Scott family vacation"; "We will arrive at 3 pm". While some were very inclusive; "Hi Jelena! How are you?"; "If it isn't an inconvenience could we check in a little earlier…"

Our analysis of each subgroup showed that L1's are just as likely to be inclusive or exclusive as L2's are. The average word count of L1 to L1 conversations were 32.4 words; L1 to L2 average word count being 35.33; the lowest of the 4 groups, L2 to L1, had an average word count of 25.53; and the highest of the 4 groups, L2 to L2, had an average word count of 39.55. The highest percentage of people closing their messages fell into the L2 to L2 group with 65% of them doing so. The group with the lowest percentage of people closing messages were L1 to L1's, with only 26.67% of them closing their messages. 40% of L2 to L2's also ranked highest when it came to signing their names at the end of their message compared to L1 to L1's who were the lowest; only 13.33% signed their names. L2's, including those with obvious L2 markers, are writing just as much (see Appendix A) and are being as inclusive overall (see Appendix C), although L2's seem to be relying on the genre conventions (greeting, closing) rather than the freestyle body of the message. L2's had an average inclusive score of 1.8 (see Appendix B) but had an average total inclusive scored of 4.9 (see Appendix C).

Men and women have a few variances in their discursive moves. Word count in both groups are just about the same with women having a slightly higher average word; women had an average word count of 35 while men had an average word count of 32. It seems that women

tend to be more inclusive than males. Women were slightly more inclusive in their messages than men were with women scoring on average 2.3 in inclusivity while men averaged at 1.8 for inclusivity. The average total inclusive score for women came to be 5.3 and 4.6 for men. Only 5 males fell into a high inclusive score of 7 or more while 10 females fell into a high inclusive score of 7 or more. Women were twice as likely to use emojis as men, 23.08% for women compared to 11.11% for men.

There wasn't much difference in variances in inclusivity and exclusivity between nationalities. There was a difference that could be seen of those from Asian countries, with 8 out of 10 people from Asian countries with a total inclusive score of 3 or lower.

Discussion

A large portion of L1 hosts lived in Croatia, and it would be safe to say to that guests writing to these hosts would assume that they are speaking to an L2 speaker, which contributed to the limitations of our research. Our sample size is also a limiting factor; having a larger pool of data could end up showing a clearer differentiation. Also, our knowledge of whether someone was truly an L1 or L2 speaker was limited to the names and country presented on their profiles. We could never know for sure if the guest or host held an L1 or L2 status. Also, there isn't an exact science to differentiating between inclusive and exclusive moves. Deciding what was an inclusive move or not was based more on judgment than on an exact formula.

There are many possible reasons why a large portion of guests always greet and why fewer people tend to close and sign their names in their messages. One reason could be the format Airbnb and booking.com uses, which resembles more closely to texting. Greeting

typically is normal in any situation, whether you're talking to a friend or stranger. In a texting format, it isn't so normal for people to close their message or sign their names at the bottom. People following this texting format could be subconsciously thinking that it would be "weird" or unusual to make these kinds of moves. The usage of emojis might be used more in a friend to friend situation versus with a complete stranger or in a business setting which could explain a very low percentage of use in Airbnb conversations.

Even with our limitations, there is still something that we learned and can take away from our data and results. As the data showed, there isn't a consistent difference between L1 and L2 speakers. Some L1's wrote purely exclusive messages while some L2's wrote very inclusive messages and vice versa. Regardless of the level of technical writing competence an L2 writer has, they are still freely using a variety of inclusive moves to communicating in a business situation. It doesn't seem to matter whether the user holds an L1 or L2 status. The distinguishing factor when using inclusive or exclusive language may have to do more with gender, culture, and individual personality. This could be more of the trend that follows in the future and the distinguishing factors between who is L1 and L2 may fade away while the connections and relationship building in a business situation will rely on those three traits rather than on technical competence.

Conclusion

Many people around the world are learning to speak English in order to be more flexible when traveling or dealing with business. Those who are teaching these people should understand that speaking and writing like a native speaker isn't necessary. Creating well-built connections

and relationships are the key and helping their students understand this should be the key message to their students.

The future of building business relationships seems to be going in a direction where we rely less and less on proper grammar and spelling. As the English language grows and changes, building business relationships will most likely rely more on inclusivity. People who hold an L2 status shouldn't be worried so much about their grammar and spelling, but should focus on using inclusive words, whether it's in a formal way or in a creative way. Those who hold an L1 status and are working with a variety of people of different nationalities and culture, such as Airbnb hosts, shouldn't be so focused on whether people are using proper grammar or spelling, but should rather understand the kind of efforts that person may be putting into establishing a relationship.

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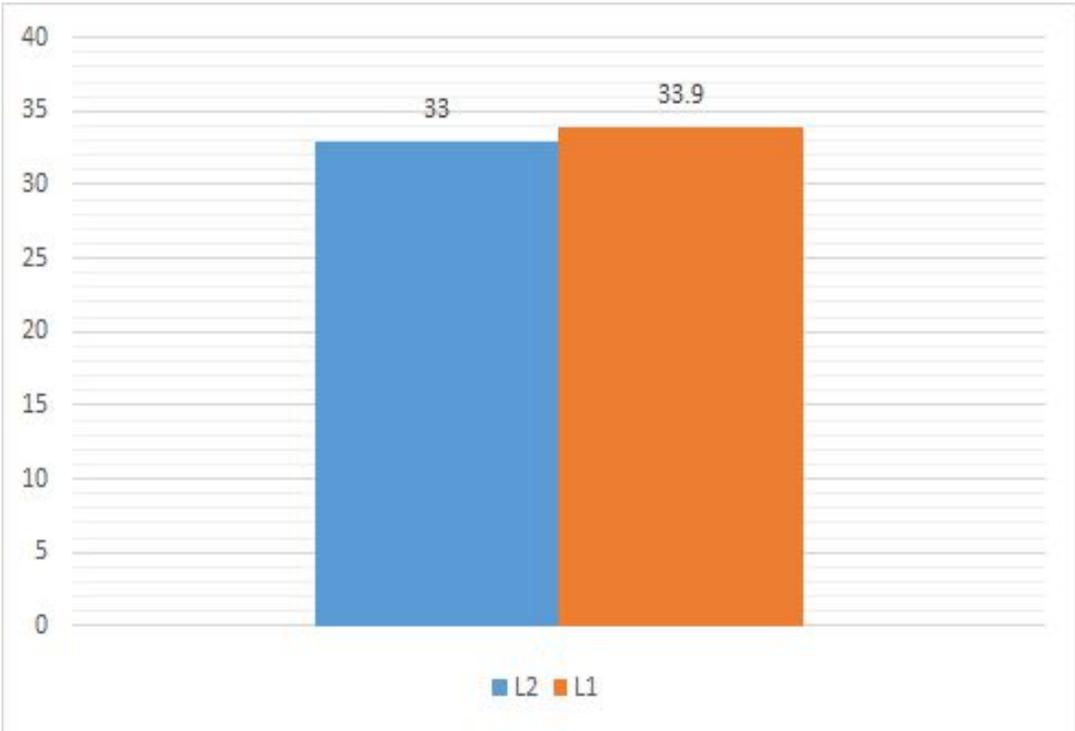
Appendix A

Figure 1. Difference in median word count between L1 and L2

Appendix B

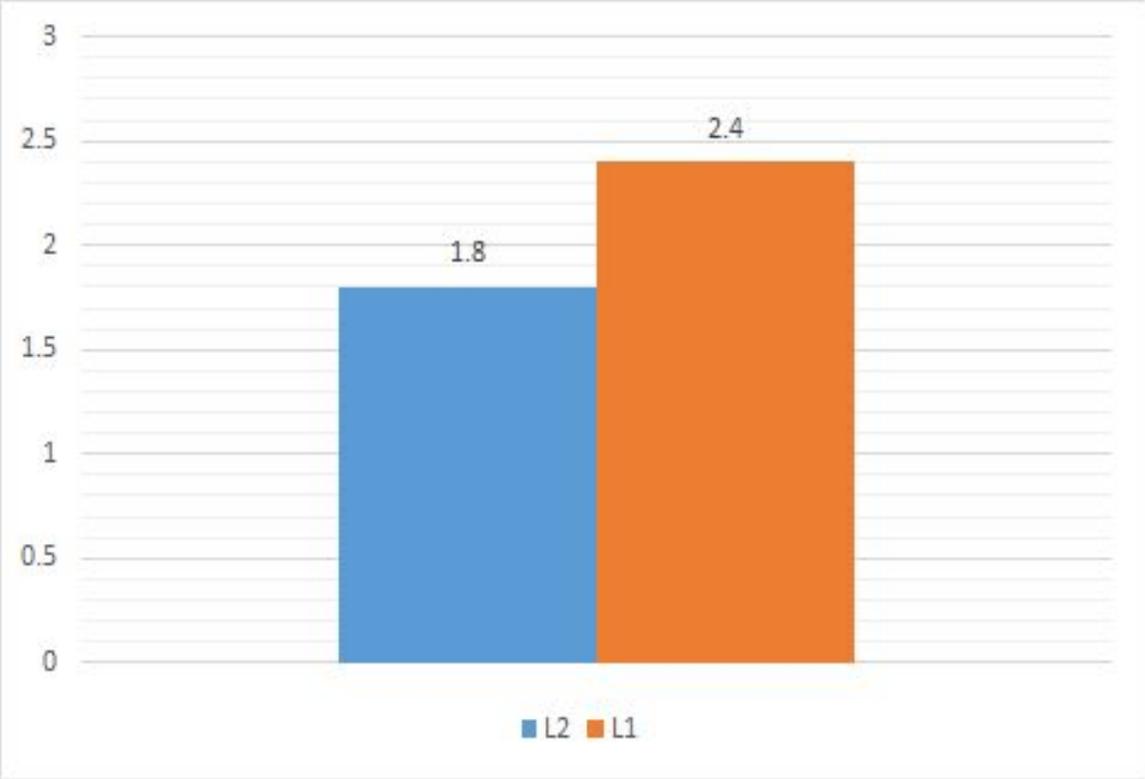*Figure 2*. Difference in median inclusive score between L1 and L2
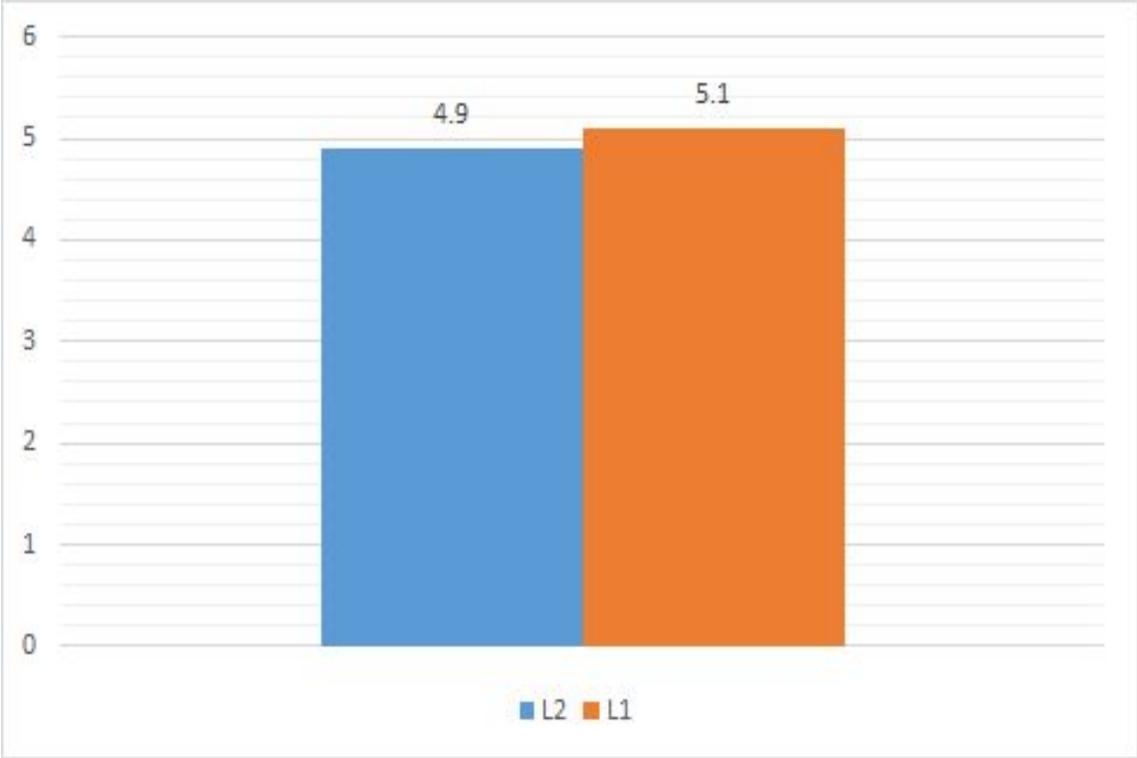
Appendix C

Figure 3. Difference in median total inclusive score between L1 and L2