Will Baker* and Jennifer Jenkins

Criticising ELF

Readers of *JELF* will be well aware that over its relatively short history, research into ELF has been subjected to a steady stream of criticism. Some of this criticism has been constructive and objective and, in turn, has informed thinking about ELF and helped researchers to develop their empirical work and move the field on. Other criticism has been of a very different order: subjective, unconstructive, often ad hominem, and demonstrating a very limited (if any) understanding of ELF on the part of the author.

The most recent example of the "uninformed criticising ELF" genre, to our knowledge, is O'Regan (2014a), an article that appeared earlier this year in the normally reputable journal, *Applied Linguistics,* and purports to be providing an "immanent" critique of ELF. However, it turns out to do nothing of the kind. And as it is such a "clear" example of the genre of unconstructive, uninformed attacks on ELF research(ers), we will take a close look at this latest one and provide our own critique of it from an ELF perspective.[1]

O'Regan claims to be making use of an *immanent critique* in his attempt to demonstrate that ELF researchers have reified ELF as a stable form of language; that they have employed a rationalist ideology which is blind to the class stratification and political economy of English; and that ELF theory

> combines a rationalist, positivist and objectivist epistemology with a transformationalist, postmodern and poststructuralist sensibility which is both incommensurable and under-theorized. (O'Regan 2014a: 533)

We will argue that the first two of these criticisms reveal O'Regan's lack of understanding of current ELF research and that the final criticism of ELF theory

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1 For an equally critical response to O'Regan's article, but from the perspective of applied linguistics, see Widdowson (2014), and for a briefer response of our own, see Baker et al. (2014).

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*Corresponding author: Will Baker: University of Southampton. E-mail: w.baker@soton.ac.uk
Jennifer Jenkins: University of Southampton. E-mail: J.Jenkins@soton.ac.uk

would in fact apply to (and render null and void) much research and discourse in applied linguistics including, somewhat ironically, O'Regan's own argument.

We start with the claim that the argument is an immanent critique. According to O'Regan (2014a: 534–535), such a critique should use the terms, theory, and position of whoever one is critiquing, not " 'by attacking him somewhere else and defeating him where he is not' (p. 581)" (Hegel 1969 [1812] cited in O'Regan 2014a: 534). However, it is this latter approach which O'Regan adopts, "attacking" ELF in terminology and from a theoretical perspective that few ELF scholars would recognise or engage with (as O'Regan subsequently admits in his follow-up response [2014b: 5] to our critique of his article). In particular, O'Regan works with a pre-established conceptual framework that is then applied to his characterisation of ELF. This becomes most apparent when he states that:

> There are five key conceptions about which it is *necessary* to have formed an opinion prior to being able to claim that one is working from within (or against) a transformationalist, plurilithic, poststructuralist or postmodern position. These are ideology, discourse, power, truth and the nature of the real – and, particularly, the relations between them. (O'Regan 2014a: 544, emphasis added)

These five key conceptions may be crucial to O'Regan's philosophy, as he terms it, but we would question whether they, or any other particular approach, are *necessary* for *all* research in applied linguistics. It is also hard to see how the imposition of an external framework constitutes an immanent critique of a field that does not, as he makes clear, engage with or prioritise them in the same ways that he suggests necessary. There is apparent confusion here, too, in that ELF as a field of inquiry is being critiqued for not focusing its research efforts on these areas and then for the consequences of applying these categories to ELF. This would seem a clear case of trying to defeat "him [sic] where he is not." O'Regan's a priori delineation of this "necessary" philosophical and theoretical framework is itself suspect, for it would also seem to go against a number of the philosophical positions he adopts. In particular, Foucault (1997), who forms part of O'Regan's framework, is clear about the problems of prescription:

> My position is that it is not up to us [intellectuals] to propose. As soon as one "proposes" – one proposes a vocabulary, an ideology, which can only have effects of domination. What we have to present are instruments and tools that people might find useful. By forming groups specifically to make these analyses, to wage these struggles, by using these instruments or others: this is how, in the end, possibilities open up. (Foucault 1997: 197)

But we would argue that O'Regan's approach here is problematic, not just for the inconsistency of the rhetoric, but more importantly for its understanding

of the nature of research in applied linguistics more generally and specifically of ELF research. Unlike the prescriptive application of theory to practice that O'Regan is suggesting, ELF has emerged as a field driven by "real-world problems" in which theory is drawn on, adapted, and developed as necessary, rather than decided a priori. This is in keeping with perhaps the most well-known characterisation of applied linguistics as "[t]he theoretical and empirical investigation of real-world problems in which language is a central issue" (Brumfit 1995: 27). The argument also highlights the central concern of Widdowson's (2000) distinction between "linguistics applied" and "applied linguistics," i.e., the difference between the direct application of linguistic theories and the relevant mediation between these and the practical domain of "real world" problems. While O'Regan's theories are not linguistic, he is clearly advocating a direct application of theory. This constitutes not only a critique of ELF inquiry but also of most of applied linguistics.

Connected to the relationship between theory and practice, O'Regan makes much of the term "real" but offers little in the way of what it might mean in relation to the interests of ELF researchers. For example, O'Regan writes that:

> "ELF", like the commodity, is that mysterious thing, on this occasion here and yet not here, fluid and yet congealed, normative and yet hybrid – appearing to exist in some reified and yet simultaneously liminal space in the circulation of Englishes in the world. Rather than in its *real* form as Englishes of various kinds in contact, "ELF" *appears* instead as an *irreal* and especial hypostatized form so that – to play on Marx's words – in the fetishism of English as a lingua franca the linguistic pragmatic interactions of speakers of different first languages assume the nature of a fantastic relation between speakers of an hypostatized universal code. (O'Regan 2014a: 539, emphasis in the original)

Most obviously, in portraying ELF in this manner, this would seem to reveal O'Regan's own reification of "the real" and English language use (e.g., "its real form as English of various kinds in contact"), a point that will be returned to later. He then goes on to pursue "the real" in relation to issues of concern to his own theoretical framework, including "false consciousness," "fetishism," "social, cultural, linguistic and economic" capital (O'Regan 2014a: 539) but makes little attempt to connect these points of analysis to current ELF research. Additionally, as the above quotation highlights, he also applies this critique of ELF to a misrepresentation of the field. No mainstream ELF researchers that we are aware of are currently claiming that ELF is a "universal code." Attempts to delineate ELF as a variety of language are not part of contemporary ELF discourses. Indeed, there seems to be a high degree of consensus that ELF is *not* a variety of language and hence there can be no "universal code" hypostatized.

Continuing the discussion of the "real" and taking the example of language teaching as one of the "real-world problems" that concerns ELF inquiry, as well as applied linguistics more generally, imposing externally derived a priori theory and practice on teachers and other interested parties would, quite rightly, result in resistance and hostility. As noted by Cook (2012), ELF has emerged as a field of inquiry that started with real-world problems as experienced by language teachers (e.g., Jenkins 2012) and corpus linguists (Seidlhofer 2011; Mauranen 2012). Of course, how we identify these problems is related to our theoretical orientations but the relationship is not a linear deterministic one (i.e., it is not linguistics applied). This has resulted in the kind of mediation between the problems identified locally and the relevant linguistic or other theories that characterizes applied linguistics. Crucially, both the problems investigated and the theories drawn on have adapted and changed over time, with inevitable tensions, as the field of ELF inquiry has developed.

This brings us to another concern with O'Regan's argument, his simplistic and essentialised characterisation of ELF. As noted above, he accuses ELF researchers of reification.

> It is common for example that references to using English as a lingua franca metamorphose into a more linguistically and conceptually reified formulation, so that the relativized conception of English which "using English as a lingua franca" implies congeals and "ELF" becomes a thing-in-itself. That is to say, users of English – of whatever stripe – in multicultural settings become speakers or users of an hypostatized "ELF"; that is, one which projects "ELF" into material existence, often by means of a noun phrase. Hypostatization is thus a form of reification in which abstract concepts are artificially concretized and made real. (O'Regan 2014a: 536)

However, we would argue, the reification is a product of O'Regan's interpretation. He chooses to refer to ELF researchers as part of "The 'English as a lingua franca (henceforth ELF) movement' (cf. Elder and Davies 2006; Holliday 2008; Berns 2009, for this term)," (2014a: 533). Yet, this is an externally imposed term; none of the citations given here to support the use of the term come from ELF researchers. Most significantly, the characterisation of ELF as a "movement" serves to reify the field of ELF research as if it were homogeneous with a fixed set of interests and philosophies. This may suit O'Regan's rhetoric but it is not an accurate reflection of the current status of ELF research.

Simultaneously, this hypothesised "ELF movement discourse" (O'Regan 2014a: 536) is accused of "slippage" (O'Regan 2014a: 536) when differences and tensions in how ELF is theorised and investigated are revealed. In particular, O'Regan argues that ELF discourse frequently "slips" between discussions of *using* English as a lingua franca and hypothesising ELF as a thing-in-itself.

O'Regan is right that as thinking about ELF has progressed there has indeed been a tension between earlier hypotheses concerning the possible status of ELF as a variety of English and ELF as a use of English. Yet, it is these tensions or "slips" that reveal ELF as a field with a variety of often competing discourses which are a key part of the constant changes and developments in researchers' characterisations and understandings of ELF. As already noted above, this particular debate has resolved itself around a consensus that ELF is not a variety of English. Crucially, without such debate and discussion it is unlikely that ELF research (or any other kind of research) would progress. Somewhat ironically, O'Regan makes this same point when he recognises the inconsistencies and contradictions in the different theoretical perspectives adopted in his own position, but he concludes that "I consider this tension an immanently productive one" (O'Regan 2014a: 536). We, by contrast, see it as astonishing hypocrisy on O'Regan's part to permit himself such licence while not permitting it to others.

Reification is a problem throughout O'Regan's article, not just in relation to ELF research but more importantly to English and language more generally. There is surprisingly little about language and English in the article, but the few sections where it is addressed, as revealed in earlier quotations, would suggest an understanding of language which is closer to the structuralist positions O'Regan critiques rather than the postmodernist ones he advocates. English is variously described as having "penetrated societies" (2014a: 534), as "Englishes of various kinds in contact [...] the circulation of Englishes in the world [...] L1 inflected English [...] the acquisition of any second language" (2014a: 539). All of this indicates a view of English and language in which it is a thing that can "penetrate," "contact," "circulate," be "acquired," and be "inflected" with other distinct and bounded languages. However, this "language as bounded object" approach has been critiqued within ELF by a number of scholars (e.g., Mauranen 2012; Widdowson 2012; Mortenson 2013; Baird et al. 2014) and also in Global Englishes more generally (cf. Pennycook [2010] for a critique of the metaphor of the centrifugal spread of English). These scholars, and many others who are asking similar questions about the "object" of linguistic study, are raising important issues that need further investigation and it is a pity more thought was not given to such questions and a greater engagement with the debate not provided.

Returning to issues of interest to O'Regan, ELF research may also benefit from greater understanding of ideology, discourse, power, truth, and the real, particularly in relation to the power structures associated with neo-liberalism, class, and globalisation, however we might choose to characterise these terms. O'Regan argues that these are issues on which those involved in ELF inquiry have failed to engage with.

> If the ELF movement is unable to give anything more than a cursory account of ideology, discourse, reality and truth, this also applies to the category of power. In ELF movement philosophy power too appears in its popular guise – as something possessed by some (NSs) in their unjust domination of others (NNSs). (O'Regan 2014a: 546)

But this assertion is quite simply wrong. Many ELF scholars have been directly involved in investigating issues of ideology, discourse, and power (see Jenkins 2007, Jenkins 2014; Seidlhofer 2011; Guido 2012; Baird et al. 2014, among many others). This has encompassed questions of standard language ideology, native speaker ideology, and the ideology of ELF scholars themselves as well as issues of status and power within this. It may be that O'Regan disagrees with the approaches taken so far or that some of them do not accord with his understanding of the issues. However, without a proper engagement with what has been written it is hard to know. Furthermore, it is not realistic to expect one research field, ELF, to be accountable in terms related to another perspective, Marxism.

Nonetheless, issues of ideology and power are of interest to many researchers who engage with ELF, and further conceptualisation and inquiry will almost certainly be valuable. However, we would argue that such inquiry would not benefit from a priori assumptions or a single explanation of ideology, discourse, power, truth, and the real or what their influence will be. O'Regan (2014a: 547) rightly critiques simplistic concepts of power as being something some groups have and exercise over others who do not, and we would argue the same critical stance needs to be taken over any single approach to theorisation and research. Given the complexity of the intercultural encounters which are the typical subject of ELF inquiry, we need open investigation in which power relationships, and other relationships, are only established after careful investigation.

In sum, critiques of the field of ELF research have been a significant feature since its beginning and a phenomenon that anyone engaging in ELF inquiry quickly becomes accustomed to. ELF researchers benefit from critiques that offer insights into potential new lines of inquiry or blind spots in current thinking. Knowledgeable critiques may also serve to inform those less familiar with ELF of the current "state of the art" and of areas in need of further investigation. However, for such critiques to be constructive and productive and thus serve a genuine scholarly purpose, there are certain minimal conditions they have to meet. They have to be well informed so that they portray the area under critique accurately and with reference to contemporary research and current thinking. And they need to meet certain intellectual standards of rational argument. O'Regan's critique fails to meet either of these conditions. It serves only to exemplify the kind of unhelpful, uninformed, and tendentious criticism that, as we pointed out at the beginning of this paper, ELF research is still subjected to.

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Bionotes

Will Baker is Lecturer in Modern Languages at the University of Southampton, UK, where he teaches Global Englishes, Intercultural Communication, and Applied Linguistics. He is a founding member and Deputy Director of the university's Centre for Global Englishes. He is co-editor of the book series "Developments in English as a Lingua Franca." His current research interests include ELF, intercultural communication, culture and language, e-learning, English medium instruction and ELT, and he has published and presented internationally in all these areas.

Jennifer Jenkins is Professor of Global Englishes at the University of Southampton. She is founding director of the university's Centre for Global Englishes, co-editor of Mouton de Gruyter's book series "Developments in ELF," and author of three monographs and numerous other publications on ELF, as well as a university coursebook, *Global* (formerly *World*) *Englishes* (Routledge, 3rd edn.). She is currently leading an international research project into EMI policies and practices in higher education around the world.