ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE AND MACHINE TRANSLATIONS AS NEW FORMS OF LINGUISTIC IMPERIALISM
Is there any future for variations of English as a Lingua Franca in intercultural communication?

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Abstract - The rise of English as a global Lingua Franca (ELF) has enabled cross-cultural communication on an unprecedented scale, acting as a "bridge language" for people from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds using their own diverse ELF variations. This paper shall explore, by means of a number of case studies, whether Artificial Intelligence and Machine-Translation programs, by promoting a 'standardized' English (SE), are creating a new form of 'linguistic imperialism' that could impact the diversity of English as a Lingua Franca in intercultural communication.

Keywords: English as a Lingua Franca (ELF); Artificial Intelligence (AI); Machine Translation (MT); Linguistic Imperialism; intercultural communication.

1. Rationale and research questions: setting the scene[1]

The rise of English as a global Lingua Franca (ELF) has enabled cross-cultural communication on an unprecedented scale, acting as a "bridge language" for people from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds using their own diverse ELF variations (Guido 2008, 2019; Guido, Seidlhofer 2014; Seidlhofer 2011). This paper will explore whether Artificial Intelligence and Machine-Translation programs, by promoting 'standardized' forms of English consistent with native-speaker 'Standard-English' (SE) varieties and specialized-discourse conventions, are actually creating a new form of 'linguistic imperialism' (Phillipson 1992) that could impact the diversity of English as a Lingua Franca in intercultural communication. Indeed, the advent of Artificial Intelligence (AI) (Dunham *et al.* 2020; Jiao *et al.* 2023; Moneus, Sahari 2024) and Machine Translation (MT) (Krüger 2020; Vanmassenhove *et al.* 2019) – especially in their latest Neural Machine Translation (NMT) (Klubička *et al.* 2017; Moorkens 2018) and Generative Artificial Intelligence Translation platforms (GenAIT) (Fu, Liu 2024) supplied by ChatGPT – raises the following crucial questions about whether these technologies are creating a new form of linguistic imperialism:

a) by prioritizing SE forms, are AI systems erasing the diversity of ELF variations developed from the contact between native English typological, syntactic and semantic structures and the structures of other native languages used in contexts of intercultural communication?

b) is this AI process of ELF-diversity erasure unintentional?

c) or, rather, is it more likely that a precise and intentional political and hegemonic plan aimed at the achievement of a sort of frightening "Orwellian Newspeak" as predicted by George Orwell (1949) is currently underlying AI and MT developments in Intercultural-communication and Translation studies?

d) could such possible covert plan be ultimately aimed at inducing cultural and racial hate for diversity and opposition by means of the elimination of intercultural dialectics and mutual understanding in order to achieve the total control of human minds and their perception and interpretation of reality?

2. Research hypothesis, objectives, and case-study data

In this paper, the impact of AI-driven MT programs on the variations of English spoken worldwide will be explored, questioning whether the dominance of native-speaker SE in digital-translation tools is leading to a homogenized language that could (or that intentionally does) marginalize local variations – as previously attempted by Corpus Linguistics models grounded on digitalized corpora of native English texts (Sinclair 1991; Tehseen *et al.* 2018). This phenomenon will be analyzed through the lens of 'linguistic imperialism' (Phillipson 1992), considering its implications for ELF variations in intercultural contexts. The research objectives are:

•   to examine the influence of AI and MT systems on the diversity of English variations used globally in intercultural communication in various specialized and non-specialized contexts;

•   to evaluate whether this trend represents a new form of linguistic imperialism in which SE overshadows local variations;

•   to consider the broader implications of AI-driven standardization for ELF variations in intercultural communication.

In this view, case-study analysis will focus on what will be lost with AI/MT-driven English standardization and it will be carried out on instances drawn from my research data in institutional migration contexts, illustrating possible difficulties in turning ELF-mediated discourses into AI/MT-driven intra-/inter-lingual translations.

3. Case study A: Intercultural mediators' interrogations of migrants

Case study A is drawn from a corpus of interrogations of migrants and asylum seekers carried out by intercultural mediators assisting the Border Police – representing the subjects in the cases in point (Guido 2004, 2008, 2018, 2019). The assumption in such cases is that if AI/MT-driven intra-/inter-lingual translations were applied, there would almost certainly be a loss of the typological and experiential structures (Langacker 1991) that are automatically 'transferred' (Faerch, Kasper 1987) from the migrants' native languages into their ELF variations (Guido 2008).

The following case study represents an instance of such L1→ELF processes, precisely regarding West-African migrants' typical transfer of their non-Western (Nigerian, in the case in point) OVS "effect-cause" Ergative typological structures into the ELF variations that they use in interacting with Italian intercultural mediators. Often the ELF variation most frequently used by Nigerian migrants is the Nigerian Pidigin English

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(NPE) (Elugbe, Omamor 1991; Faraclas 1996), a nativized official variety in their home country that is, however, commonly perceived as a 'defective' variant of English by Italian mediators. Nigerian Pidgin English, indeed, reflects the Ergative typological structures (Manning 1995) typical of many indigenous languages of West-Africa deriving from Proto-Afroasiatic languages (Bomhard 1984; Gildea 1999). The characteristic feature of such OVS Ergative clausal structures is that they personify inanimate Objects, as well as natural elements, as force-dynamic animate Subjects (Dixon 1994; Kibrik 1991; Manning 1995; Talmy 1988). In the protocol analysis (Ericcson, Simon 1984) of the case study under scrutiny, such Ergative structures in the Nigerian migrant's (NM) report were systematically misinterpreted by the Italian mediators as a "reticent use" of the 'Agentless Passive' typical, instead, of their Western (e.g., native Italian/English) SVO "cause-effect" Transitive (or Accusative) clausal structures. The aim of the two Italian mediators (IM1/2) was to elicit from the Nigerian migrant (NM) the identification of the Agent, in Subject position, responsible for their illegal journey across the sea. Yet, the Nigerian migrant's dispreferred replies in the Ergative NPE, that he used as ELF in intercultural interactions, were systematically misinterpreted by the Italian mediators as attempts to diminish the culpability of the agents (i.e., the smugglers) in carrying out their illegal deeds (Pomerantz 1978; Talmy 1978). The following case-study transcript (in NPE) is an extract from this interview (Guido 2008):

Extract 1 [Italian ntercultural Mediators 1 & 2 (IM1 / IM2); NPE-speaking Nigerian Asylum Seeker (AS)[2]]:
IM1: w<u>ho</u>::: (.) assisted you:: (.) in the journey to Italy? *(SVO Transitive typological structure)*
　　[Who assisted you in the journey to Italy?]
NM: won old <u>ship</u> bin bo::ard os <u>many</u> many >di <u>deck</u> so::: so:: bin <u>pack</u> di hold so so <u>cra::m</u>< .hhh di ship <u>wood</u> bin <u>sweat</u> hh di <u>hull</u> bin (.) <u>drip</u> water .hh °after won day journey° di <u>ship</u> >bin <u>struggle</u> struggle< (.) against di <u>se:::a</u> (.) .hh-<u>heavy</u> won night(..) hhh di <u>wave</u> dem bin de <u>ri::se</u> (.) like <u>tower</u> (.) na cold cold o o. =
(OV(S) agentless Ergative typological structure)
　　[An old ship boarded us, too many, that was trouble everywhere, the deck was so packed and the
　　hold so crammed. The ship wood sweated (was soaked), the hull leaked water. After one day
　　journey, the ship struggled desperately against the heavy sea in the night. The waves were rising
　　like towers and they were so cold!]
IM2: =the boat <u>pi::lot</u> didn't drive the ship very well? he sent you in <u>pa:nic</u>, eh? w<u>ho</u>:: is he? *(SVO Transitive typological structure)*
　　[The boat pilot didn't drive the ship very well? He sent you in panic, eh? Who is he?]

In this brief exchange, both Italian intercultural mediators activate Elicitation Moves (Moerman 1988) organized according to a 'cause-effect' Transitive structure which foregrounds the animate Agent ("who") in active clauses. Yet, the Nigerian migrant's replies are perceived by the mediators as "dispreferred" (Moerman 1988) since they did not supply the expected information. In fact, NM answers by organizing his clauses according to his Ergative constructions that characterize his native Igbo language (Ahukanna 1990; Greenberg 1963; Nwachukwu 1976) that typically emerge when speakers experience a high emotional involvement in their reports of past events (Dixon 1994; Manning 1995). Hence the "old ship" NM refers to in his report the of the extremely dangerous journey across the sea that he underwent is not represented as a Medium (cf. Halliday 1994) – i.e., as the means through which the pilot (namely, the smuggler) performed the action – but it is rather described as an animate Subject deliberately carrying out the action. NM replies by providing an Information Move reporting how the

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[2] Transcription symbols adapted from Edwards 1997, pp. 323-324): <u>underlining</u> *emphasis*, ° ° *quieter speech*; (.) *micro-pause*; (..) *pause*; :: *elongation of prior sound*; .hhh *inspiration*; hhh *expiration*; > < *speed-up talk*; = *latching*.

force-dynamic 'Ship', in Subject position, accepted on board too many excited migrants overcrowding all its parts, whose emotional state is stressed by the "word-reduplication" feature (Anagbogu 1995) that NM unconsciously transfers into his NPE variation of ELF from his own Nigerian indigenous L1 – i.e., Igbo (Okeke 1984) – as an 'emotional intensifier' ("many many", "so so", "struggle struggle"), as well as by the Igbo emphatic suffix "o". Eventually, even the parts of the ship become animated and personified as Agents in Subject position, suffering from the migrants' disregard for each part's physical and psychological fatigue in containing them. In this perspective, it is possible to interpret the transitive verbs that NM uses intransitively after the ship parts that he lists as if they were symptoms of the physical sickness and the psychological suffering of each of them, whereas the migrants themselves crowding them are represented as if they were severe skin reactions bursting on the infected parts of the ship ('the ship-deck' that 'packed'; the 'hold' "so so" 'crammed', although the "ship wood" 'sweated' and the 'hull' 'dripped water').

Obviously, this kind of typological and culture-bound understanding of West-African migrants' ergative reports cannot be accounted-for in today's AI-grounded machine translations. Hence the need for developing annotated data-bases of ELF variations in domain-specific contexts to be processed by AI systems so as to disambiguate different typological structures in intra-/inter-lingual translations.

4. Case study B: ELF-mediated trauma reports in Transcultural Psychiatry

Case study B represents another instance of AI/MT failure in rendering pragmatically equivalent translations of non-Western migrants' and refugees' different cognitive-experiential metaphors and native figurative language employed to express trauma (Guido 2019, 2020a, 2023). More specifically, the reports under scrutiny regard the 'idioms of distress' (Devereux 1980; Gibbs, O'Brien 1990; Kirmayer 1989; Kleinman 1981, 1988, 1995; Peltzer 1998) – as those used by African migrants in their trauma narratives, which are typically metaphorical, encompassing not simply individual experiences of physical and psychological distress, but also collective feelings of socio-political and even religious-metaphysical outrage that call for immediate action – and often revenge (emphasized by a frequent use of deontic modals – Guido 2001, 2019). As such, African 'idioms of distress' drastically diverge from the Western specialized biomedical terminology of post-traumatic stress disorders (PTSD) codified in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* issued by the American Psychiatric Association (APA 2022). Such APA PTSD definitions refer to trauma impact on Westerners (i.e., US war veterans – Summerfield 1999) but fail to classify the manifold trauma causes and effects on non-Western populations (Peltzer 1998) and to understand the meaning implications of non-Western idiomatic expressions of distress. Indeed, such expressions are typically described in a tentative tone, resorting to partial explanations through the use of epistemic modals and hedging (Eisenberg 1981; Guido 2006; Mattingly, C. 1998; Prince *et al.* 1982; Salager-Meyer 1994; Summerfield 1999).

Indeed, West-African trauma narratives often reflect first-person trauma effects in terms of third-person concrete animate agents, in Ergative-Subject position within clauses, that affect patients (Guido 2008, 2019). This is illustrated by the 'idioms of distress' identified in the following Extracts 2 and 3 from the trauma narratives respectively

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reported by a Ghanaian woman (GW), suffering from 'Worm Creeping' and a Sierra Leonean man (SLM), suffering from 'Wind Sickness':

> **Extract 2** (Guido 2019):
> **GW:** When I escaped, I saw many bodies on the side of the road and they look straight my eyes for they *want* revenge and I felt that the worms on them they started crawl up slow slow under my skin. I often feel the worms creep creep and *must* make my blood to sleep *(skin reaction → loathing)*.

> **Extract 3** (Guido 2019):
> **SLM:** I suffer wind sickness, *fonyo kurango* we say [in *Mandinka*], when I smell burning, like my village burning. Wind attack my brain and rise. I hear wind inside ears, like woo woo *(blood-pressure perception → panic attack)*. It rise rise and press the eyes and I see black and my brain spin and I fall *(fainting)*.

In Extract 2, the Ghanaian woman (GW) suffers from 'Worm Creeping' – an autochthonous 'idiom of distress' used instead of the conventional clinical term 'Horripilation' and metaphorically embodying the alteration of skin from smooth to bumpy as a traumatic reaction to the sense of horror and loathing at the sight of corpses that – she recalls – seemed as if they were staring at her requiring revenge (emphasized by the use of 'want' and the deontic modal 'must'). Yet GW unconsciously gets detached from this trauma symptom, representing it, instead, as autonomous animate agents ("i.e., 'worms') in Ergative-Subject position, attacking her skin by creeping under it (reproducing a third-person representation of GW's own first-person 'shivers of disgust and horror') and causing a feeling of 'numbness' as if it were spreading throughout the body with the flow of blood.

In Extract 3, the Sierra Leonean man (SLM) suffers from 'Wind Sickness' – another West-African 'idiom of distress' for 'panic attack', embodying the typical post-traumatic stress symptoms defined in Western clinical terms as trauma-induced 'hypertension' and 'tinnitus' – namely, the perception of a buzzing sound in the head, like the swishing of the wind, causing feelings of 'blurred vision' and 'blacking out' (or 'pseudomyopia') due to high blood pressure before 'fainting' (or 'syncope' – namely, a sudden dizziness followed by loss of consciousness).

African migrants even use ELF-mediated metaphysical images as trauma metaphors, as in the following Extract 4 from the trauma report of a Nigerian migrant (NM) who expresses (in NPE as ELF) an agonizing sense of guilt personified by the vindictive Yoruba god Ṣàngó, in Ergative Subject position, requiring revenge and punishment (also in this case emphasized by the repeated use of the deontic modal 'must') for his having abandoned his family in complete poverty in Nigeria (Guido 2019):

> **Extract 4**:
> **NM:** When I bin lef my country and my family with no money and no food, Ṣàngó *must* think se *(that)* I shame my people and my land and my Orisha *(Yoruba gods)*. He bin don de throw *(he had started throwing)* his thunder for me when jail bin keep me na Libya and split my skin and bone and head, o. Now he *must* send me back na Nigeria.

The following Extract 5 represents another protocol analysis (Ericcson, Simon 1984; Nisbett, Wilson 1977) of an ethnographic case study investigating the extent to which such trauma narratives contain schematic features from the migrants' typologically-distinct native languages automatically transferred into their ELF variations at the levels of syntactic, semantic, pragmatic, and metaphorical patterns. This transfer is assumed to be triggered by migrants' emotional involvement in their trauma narratives. This case study is taken from a corpus of West-African migrants' trauma narratives conveyed through non-

native/nativized English variations used as a 'lingua franca' in the course of ethnographic enquiries in the field of Transcultural Psychiatry. Typically ELF variations are often perceived in host countries (Italy, in the case in point) as 'displaced' and 'transidiomatic' (Silverstein 1998), and even – as previously pointed out – as defective Standard English variants. Yet, the native-language transfers that characterize such ELF variations disclose the West-African migrants' typical 'ethnopoetic organization' (Guido 2023; Hymes 2003) of their autochthonous oral narrative of traumatic events. Previous research (Guido 2008, 2019) cast doubt on traditional clinical and medical-legal reports textualized – or 'entextualized' (Urban 1996) – into 'paragraphs', according to Western editing standards. Such Western standards follow the transitive cause-effect development of the narrated events (Introduction → Development → Conclusion), each corresponding to sets of paragraphs iconically reproducing the chronologically ordered phases of the narrated events, but they do not recognize non-Western native linguacultural structures transferred into the migrants' ELF narratives, thus disregarding the actual illocutionary force of their trauma reports.

Hence, the accommodation strategy that is suggested here regards the 'ethnopoetic' entextualization (Guido 2008) – first introduced by Hymes (1981) – consisting in editing the transcriptions of non-Western oral narratives into non-rhyming 'verse patterns' of relevant information not conceived for artistic effects. This is explained by the fact that the ethnopoetic entextualization originates from primordial experiences of body rhythms and emotions reported into verses to better recall orally-recounted past events (Kirmayer 2000). In the wider corpus of West-African migrants' ELF-mediated oral narratives (Guido 2008, 2019), a sonnet-like pattern of 'five-and-three' and 'five-and-two line verses' (and sometimes of 'three-and-two line verses) was identified, focusing first on traumatic events and then on emotional reactions to such events. Often, such West-African ethnopoetic organization of oral trauma narratives is marked by metaphorical 'idioms of distress' (Gibbs, O'Brien 1990), transferred from the migrants' native languages into their ELF variations, Such idioms need to be recognized, disambiguated and organized into annotated corpora to be made available to Western psychiatrists, who, instead, conventionally interpret them by reference to APA clinical definitions (Eisenberg 1981; Mattingly 1998). Such annotated corpora of 'metaphorical idioms of distress' should be compiled for each different native language spoken by the various groups of migrants and refugees so as to represent a data-base upon to AI/MT programs can refer in producing either intra-lingual pragmatic rendering of ELF-mediated trauma narratives into Standard English, or inter-lingual translations into different languages, by properly disambiguating such metaphorical idioms.

The following Extract 5 represents an instance of such intra-lingual disambiguation (as well as of misconstruction) of an account of traumatic events reported by an asylum seeker from Sierra Leone (AS) during an interview (to be entextualized for forensic purposes) with an Italian intercultural mediator (IM) (Guido 2008). In the course of the interview, AS uses as his ELF variation the highly-metaphorical and idiomatic Krio English (Wyse 1989) – a nativized creole variety of English spoken in Sierra Leone. In Extract 5, the original Krio transcript is first reported, followed by an intra-lingual ethnopoetic translation into Standard English for possible forensic purposes, and finally by IM's forensic intra-lingual mistranslation into Standard English as well as into the Western conventional textualization into paragraphs:

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Extract 5:
A. Original Krio Transcript:

AS: [1] o (..) dis <u>boss</u> ya so (.) dem kin de <u>kik</u> mi ehvri de
IM: wha::t? they <u>kick</u> you?
AS: [2] (.) dehn se a foh <u>fala</u> dehn, °boht dehn rod noh clear°
IM: do you say that they tell you to <u>follow</u> them? [where?]
AS: [3] [.hhh dehn] de lehf mi insai <u>da::k</u> da::k ples dem (.) [4] (.) hhh ehvri ting de <u>smehl</u> bad [5] (..) ohl tis <u>kik</u> di prop frohm ohnda mi <u>fut</u>
IM: (..) so you are saying they don't treat you <u>well</u>?

B. Possible ethnopoetic entextualization into Standard English of AS's report for forensic purposes:

AS:
[1] *The bosses* I work for, moreover, keep disregarding me, and I feel *as if* they were kicking me every day!/
[2] *They* say that I should follow their argument, but the line, the 'path' of what they say is not clear./
[3] *They* leave me entirely ignorant, *as if* in the dark, about everything./
[4] *Everything* seems ambiguous, it 'stinks'./
[5] *Everything* undermines my hopes and beliefs making me feel lost, as if it 'kicked the props from under my feet'./

This sonnet-like ethnopoetic rendering of the Krio transcript aims at respecting the rhythm of AS's oral trauma narrative as well as the original metaphors that come to be first reproduced literally and then disambiguated with the addition of 'as if' clauses and paraphrases.

C. IM's literal intra-lingual mistranslation into Standard English:

AS: [1] My bosses, too, are only keen to (on) kick(ing) me every day! [2] They tell me to follow them along an uneven road, [3] and then they left me shut in a completely dark place [4] and here there is a bad smell everywhere. [5] Often all of them have also kicked the crutches away from under my feet.

In this last rendering of AS's trauma report, IM carries out a literal translation of the Krio figurative language, misinterpreting metaphors of mental processes, referring to AS's perception of his Italian employers' psychological abuse on him, as if they were material processes referring to physical abuse. Hence the urgent need for annotated data-bases of ELF variations in domain-specific contexts aimed at disambiguating culture-specific metaphors and idioms, to be processed by AI systems in order to correctly interpret different native uses in intra-/inter-lingual translations.

Another case in need of ethnopoetic entextualization (Urban 1996) for legal/forensic purposes is represented by the hybrid Islamic legal/religious code that should be rendered in translation into ethnopoetic verses (as in the Koran), rather than into paragraphs (as in Western legal codes). Moreover, Arabic is a 'fusional language' where morphemes combine to form words with complex meanings, so different interpretations of the same expression in Koran are in order. A case in point is represented by the the term "ṭalāq" meaning "repudiate one's wife", which can be differently translated into: "order the wife to leave the marital home"; "beat the wife"; up to "stone the wife to death", according to the more or less fundamentalist interpretations of the Koran. Hence, again, there is an urgent need for specific annotated data-bases of Arabic-ELF hybrid genres to be processed by AI systems to produce culturally equivalent inter-lingual translations.

5. English as a Lingua Franca: historical context and recent developments

English rose to global prominence due to historical, economic and cultural forces. The historical journey of English from a regional language to a global lingua franca is deeply intertwined with colonialism, economic power and cultural influence. Today, English serves as a 'bridge language' for speakers of different native tongues as it is spoken as a first or second language by billions, and serves as the primary medium of communication in fields as varied as science, business, and entertainment. However, this global spread has not been homogeneous: various Englishes have emerged, influenced by local languages and cultures. These localized variations, such as Indian or Nigerian English, are also used as lingua franca in intercultural communication, reflecting the identities, cultures and voices of local speakers worldwide, and thus serving as important cultural markers, identified in typological and pragmatic transfers (Kasper 1992; Selinker 1969) from native languages to non-native English, reported by recent ELF research. Hence, ELF is different from Global English as an 'International Language' based on native-speaker norms (Crystal 2003), which supports imperialistic trends imposing native Standard-English varieties spoken by economically and politically powerful cultures.

During Covid and post-Covid periods, physical contact was suddenly replaced by a computer/social-platform-mediated virtual one that has now become almost the norm and has also developed a program of automatic translation of the online exchanges into the form of subtitles. As research illustrates (Guido 2022, 2024), this lack of physical contact initially even met the enthusiasm of some non-European migrants involved in online institutional interactions, as technology seemed to offer them the possibility of reducing racial biases against them by simply avoiding not only physical, but also visual contact with European experts in their requests for services and assistance. And yet – as the following Extract 6 reveals (Guido 2024) – the ELF variations that participants in interactions use clearly reveal their respective identities. Here the participants are: Italian female 1 (IF1); Italian female 2 (IF2); Yemeni female (YF); Moroccan female (MF); Nigerian female (NF); Nigerian male (NM); Greek female (GF), all university students in their early-mid twenties:

Extract 6:

IF1: I think that China (..) decided that all people must be (..) must be imprisoned in their houses and can communicate only with computer or smartphone (..) we are prisoners (.) you understand? (..) China limit freedom (.) and relations to control people.
YF: well (..) I'm not sure this is a limitation. I feel more free to say what I like if I can speak through a computer screen (..) I mean (..) I can switch off the video and (.) and I'm not judged because I wear the Islamic headscarf (.) I'm not judged for my external appearance (.) for my modesty (.) because I don't want to follow Western fashion rules so people must focus on what I want to say.
IF2: really? (..) I thought that the veil is symbol of the man's oppression for Islamic women (..) also the computer screen must be considered oppression (.) because we cannot be free to be near (.) I mean (.) physically near to other people.
MF: I think I understand what Shirin [YF] means (.) and I agree with her (..) the computer screen can be like our headscarf (.) it cover women's physical aspect and (.) allow their free expression with nobody that can judge them for their look (..) I mean (.) women can be more powerful when they speak protected by a headscarf or by a computer screen.
NF: yes (..) the screen can also cover the colour of the skin (..) I know (.) I can get more when I ask help online for social services (.) or health services (.) with no video that show I'm black.
GF: but people on the other side of the screen know that you are Nigerian.
NF: yes (.) but they can no see me (.) no see I'm black (.) you know? (..) I can be just a migrant like another (.) like a white migrant (.) you understand? (.) they no see me and can no think to the colour of my skin.
NM: if doctors, or lawyers see we are black (.) they give us just little assistance (..) better if they no see us.

Lingue e Linguaggi

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Yet, eventually, during the Covid-19 period, discomfort and a need for physical presence and identity prevailed also in online communication – as illustrated by the following research on the use of ethnically-marked emojis in NPE used in Nigerian migrants' chats (Guido 2020b, 2021), another feature of contemporary intercultural communication that AI-based MT are unable to render with all their culture-grounded implications. During pandemics, such emojis aimed at restoring physical presence in communication by activating processes of relexicalization and decategorialization (Heine, Reh 1984; Sweetser 1988) to reduce the written message so as to achieve the same type of analogical visual-oral perception of communication as in physical presence – a pragmatic equivalence that has not yet been achieved by any AI translation-systems that tend to render culturally-marked discourses literally into Standardized English. This is the Nigerian migrants' online exchange during the Covid lockdown (Guido 2020, 2021):

Extract 7:

a: a no 1 die hie no o [(Chai!!!) What a bad luck! I don't want to die here, no – I feel like crying]

b: Covid dey kill pipul only if dem sin [(Waka) Buzz off! Covid kills people only if they sin]

c: Covid na virus, in na no god, in no go punish pipul   [Covid is a virus, it's not a god, it will not punish people, (Abeg!) I beg your pardon! (you're annoying me!)]

Non-Western migrants' discomfort at realizing that technology would produce their physical and socio-political distancing and dislocation from the Western Countries of arrival has recently become materialized not only with the building of 'border-walls' and the dislocation of reception/detention centres for migrants in non-Western Countries, but also with the non-Western migrants' precarious and alienating jobs as Riders of the Italian food delivery service companies. Such companies exploit migrants without even requiring from them any knowledge of Italian or English as a lingua franca for intercultural communication, since contact with Italian clients is almost non-existent – as illustrated in the following Extract 8 (Guido forthcoming) reporting an interview with a Nigerian Glovo Rider (NR:

Extract 8:

NR: I no know Italian, no, I bin come here one month ago, but [*name of the food delivery company*] no ask riders to talk Italian or English, I no need Italian 'cause I no talk to people and Italian people no know English. Clients see the rider only like a point moving in their smartphone when I move for their houses, clients know my name, but no meet me, I often deliver food in lifts, I no have tips, they no open doors, but if they open and talk Italian I no understand. And I need contact with people, you see?

6. Linguistic Imperialism: definition, key concepts and its impact on AI-driven MT

Linguistic imperialism (Phillipson 1992) refers to the dominance of one language over others, often through historical and socio-political power structures. Historically, languages like English have been imposed on other cultures, resulting in the marginalization of local languages. Key examples include English's spread during colonial

eras and its current dominance in media and academia (which justifies the internationally-recognized certifications of competence levels in Standard British and American English, perceived as prestigious varieties, required by many schools, universities and institutions around the world). Today, linguistic imperialism can be perpetuated digitally since standardized language models embedded in AI and machine translation programs prioritize certain native varieties over others. This digital aspect of linguistic imperialism represents a threat for ELF research and sociolinguistic policies. Hence: what does "Linguistic Imperialism" mean today?

In the digital age, linguistic imperialism has taken on new forms, facilitated by AI-driven technologies that promote a singular, standardized version of English (mainly US standardized varieties where such AI-driven platforms are primarily developed). Machine translation programs, while facilitating communication, may be reinforcing a type of digital colonialism, where diversity in language use is first flattened to fit dominant norms and then suppressed.This modern form of linguistic imperialism raises important questions about the power dynamics embedded within AI language models. Machine translators, such as Google Translate, use vast datasets and neural networks to perform:

a. inter-lingual translations – which, with the rise of large language models (LLMs) like ChatGPT, potentially offer alternatives to neural machine translation;

b. intra-lingual translations – from non-conventional or non-native variations of the same language into its native standard varieties – for English, usually the US standard variety.

These AI systems learn from vast amounts of data, but often prioritize mainstream language norms. The standardized variety of English overlooks the subtle variations and cultural nuances that characterize the diversity of localized versions of English. AI-driven machine translators prioritize Standard English to achieve a supposed efficiency and accuracy. Standard English in AI typically aligns with American or British English norms that have historically been associated with power and prestige. AI translators have inherited this bias, as they are trained predominantly on data in American or British English variants, leading to inherent biases. As a result, variations in grammar, vocabulary and cultural expressions found in other English-speaking regions are either ignored and omitted, or simplified and 'corrected', leading to a skewed representation of English in AI-mediated communication.

This standardization can have significant cultural and pragmatic implications, as it risks homogenizing the language and erasing local linguistic traits since local dialects or non-standard English variants may be revised, altered and, thus, misinterpreted. For speakers of non-standard English variations, this trend could contribute to a sense of alienation and marginalization, as their language use is rendered invisible in digital spaces – whereas, for instance, African populations from ex-British colonies are proud of their English variations (e.g. Nigerian Pidgin English, Sierra Leone Krio) as they represent a reaction against the official native English (the variety of colonizers). Machine translation systems often default to either American or (less frequently) British English, marginalizing other Englishes. One practical example of this standardization can be seen in how AI translators handle differences between American and British English. Words like "lorry" (British) might be replaced with "truck" (American) by a process of intra-lingual translation, which, while accurate, may lose the cultural context specific to British speakers. More importantly, Englishes spoken outside of these dominant varieties, such as Singaporean or South African English, are often misinterpreted or adjusted to fit standardized norms, leading to a loss of linguistic identity. Typical examples are represented by semantically equivalent words or expressions in very different cultures,

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like the Standard-English terms "perhaps", "maybe" and "hopefully" inter-lingually translating the Arabic term "inshallah", meaning "God willing" ("if Allah wants").

Furthermore, English variants, when used as ELF variations in intercultural communication, may cause very serious misunderstandings in real contexts where cases regarding human rights and justice are involved. For example, African English variations – such as the previously examined Nigerian Pidgin English and the Sierra Leonean Krio - represent a blend of local languages and English, incorporating culture-bound vocabulary, expressions, specific typological structures (cf. ergative vs. accusative/transitive semantic/syntactic structures that reflect different world-schemata – Carrell 1983; Mandler 1984), and culturally-marked metaphors and references. Machine translators often fail to capture nuances, as they standardize, erase and misinterpret them to fit Western norms, turning them into Standard English and, thus, often missing sociocultural equivalence. A case in point is represented by the term "Riba" in Islamic Finance, which means "Interest" with negative connotations as it is a 'haram practice', forbidden by the Muslim religion and the Islamic law (Provenzano 2008). Yet, it would still be translated by MT programs with the conventional Western term "Interest" without disambiguating its culture-bound connotations.

By favoring dominant native variants as standardized forms, AI and machine translators can indeed implicitly reinforce existing linguistic hierarchies. Less common variants, vernaculars and non-native / non-standard Englishes, normally used as ELF variations in intercultural communication, are often viewed as errors or anomalies in translation systems, which can perpetuate the idea that some forms of English are superior to others. This phenomenon risks creating a digital divide where certain native-English varieties are privileged, leading to an imbalance in how language is represented and perceived globally. In fact, while Standardized English is often seen as a 'neutral' lingua franca, this neutrality is questionable as it surreptitiously conveys native-speaker culturally-marked schemata. When used in intercultural settings, standard English might obscure cultural nuances, richness and specificity that non-standard variations bring. This homogenization underlying the construct of 'neutral' English could indeed disadvantage non-native speakers who use local Englishes as lingua franca and, thus, limit effective communication, as it disregards the diversity of English speakers' linguistic backgrounds and identities.

7. Implications of AI-driven MT for Intercultural Communication

Intercultural communication relies on mutual accessibility to different world-views and their accommodation into an appreciation of diversity. The impact of standardization extends beyond language; it affects cross-cultural understanding and empathy. By disregarding the nuances of local variants used as ELF variations, standardized inter-/intra-lingual translations may miss cultural references, leading to misunderstandings and loss of context. In intercultural communication, where mutual understanding is key, this reduction of diversity may weaken the authenticity and depth of interactions.

For English learners, exposure to only standardized English can create a narrow understanding not only of the language in itself, but also of the socio-cultural schemata that justify its native and non-native variations, thus limiting their appreciation for diversity in English uses – especially if in their future professions they intend to become intercultural mediators, translators and interpreters in highly risky transcultural contexts of communication (e.g.: forensic, legal, medical, institutional, economic, diplomatic and educational ones).

AI translation tools (as corpus-based translation tools before them – Sinclair 1991) reinforce the idea of a 'correct' English, potentially discouraging not only the use of local ELF variations, but even the acknowledgement of the existence of other variations of the same language. Over time, learners may lose exposure to the linguistic richness of English as used worldwide and come to consider different English variations as 'defective' and 'inferior' to its standard varieties - and, according to Attribution Theory (Kelley 1967), transfer such negative biases to their distorted perception of speakers of such variations, thus fomenting contempt and hate for different social/ethnic groups and cultures.

Preserving the diversity of local English variants as ELF variations in an AI-dominated world poses, therefore, significant challenges. AI translation models require extensive resources and data, which may not be available for all English variants. Without intervention, digital communication tools may contribute to the erosion of local linguistic identities, creating a more homogenized linguistic landscape. Hence, local communities (especially migrants and refugees whose very existence is at risk) may struggle to maintain their linguistic identity in digital communication.

One potential solution is to integrate diverse Englishes and ELF variations into AI systems: by developing AI models that recognize and respect regional Englishes and ELF variations could mitigate standardization effects. This would require training models on targeted data from various English-speaking regions, displaced non-native English-speaking communities (Guido 2008) and transient international groups (Pitzl 2019), by collaborating with linguists to develop inclusive and culturally aware AI models. By promoting inclusivity, these systems could better respect the diversity of English and mitigate the effects of linguistic imperialism.

Machine translation, therefore, raises ethical issues, especially regarding representation and bias. AI developers face an ethical challenge: creating models that can achieve translation efficiency without erasing cultural identities and that can balance it with cultural representation. This is an issue that requires a shift towards ethical frameworks, prioritizing inclusivity and diversity in language representation. AI companies need to play a crucial role in shaping linguistic practices globally: as gatekeepers of these technologies, they bear the responsibility of designing models that reflect linguistic diversity, promote linguistic inclusivity and avoid biases. Some companies have begun exploring ways to make their tools more inclusive of dialects and variations in their systems, though further progress is needed towards an inclusion of non-native variations of languages, and of English as a lingua franca in particular.

8. Conclusions: future research directions of English as a Lingua Franca: academic and policy perspectives and … back from the future

In brief, academics and policymakers should call for greater inclusivity in AI language systems. Research initiatives should focus on identifying and mitigating AI biases in language and promoting linguistic diversity. Policies, in particular, could mandate AI transparency and inclusivity standards to ensure transparency and fairness in AI models. The future of English as a lingua franca, therefore, depends on its ability to accommodate and preserve diversity in the use of ELF variations. Without action, the standardization driven by AI models could stifle the linguistic richness of ELF and suppress local expressions and identities. A concerted effort by technologists, policymakers, and linguists is thus necessary to ensure that English remains an inclusive lingua franca.

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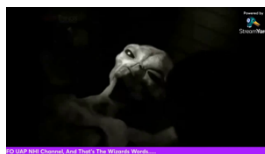
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To sum up, AI and Machine Translation programs are contributing to the standardization of English and this trend risks creating a new form of linguistic imperialism that may erase diversity. In fact, AI-driven language systems have significant potential to facilitate communication, but they must balance efficiency with cultural representation and, thus, must be developed with a sensitivity to linguistic diversity. Possible solutions include promoting diversity-aware AI development, ethical policies and inclusivity in machine translators that can foster a richer, more authentic intercultural communication and preserve the diverse identities embedded within English as a lingua franca. It is therefore imperative to advocate for linguistically inclusive AI systems that are ethically designed to respect and represent the full spectrum of English variations.

But will this hope come true in the future? It would seem not, from what can be deduced from a number of interrogations – certified as original – of some captured aliens – such as the one from which Extract 9 reported below is taken. This interrogation is part of a series of interviews with aliens named "Project Blue Book", which was a U.S. Government investigation of Unidentified Flying Objects from 1947 to 1969. The "Project Blue Book" includes thousands of UFO records that were collected, analyzed and filed, and some of them have recently been declassified and made available for examination – even on YouTube. Among such records, there is the declassified 1964 interrogation of an Alien, subdivided into four parts (two brief sections of which are reported in the following Extract 9) and certified as original, not a fake. More specifically, this is an interrogation by torture of a captured Alien (A) who – in response to the pressing questions of a furious Interrogator (I), accompanied by an Assistant (As) who tentatively tries to calm him down – replies, with exhausted whispers, by claiming that he comes from the future as he represents the evolution of the human species. From what the Alien says in the course of the interrogation, it is possible to understand that there will be:

a) no future for ELF variations, as the Alien speaks Standard English that, he explains, he had to learn in order to understand Humans; and

b) no future for the preservation of cultural diversity and its linguistic expressions, as the Alien reveals that an Artificial Super Intelligence will condition human thought and action totally – a Super-Imperialistic power fuelling hate towards different socio-political organizations, religions and cultures.

To conclude without any further comment, the transcripts of two brief – but crucial – parts of such disquieting (and hopefully false) video-recorded interrogation are reproduced below in the closing Extract 9:

Extract 9:

Video excerpt from Part 1 *(The Alien on his competence of the English language)*:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7TE6frpygVY&list=PLNF1MdLoNtJPmtgiRxi4597cifkTw-kmB&index=3

I: [*in an imperious tone*] So you say you're from the future (.) an evolutionary descendant of humans. You also say you're a different species. So which one is it: are you a descendant of humans or not?
A: [*wheezing*] We are evolutionary descendants of Sapiens. But we can no longer breed with your kind. Therefore we are a new species.

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*L*inguaggi

I: Then, how do you speak English? Answer me. (..) If you don't answer I'll administer another round of Scopolamine!
As: [*indiscernible*] … collapses.
I: Do you understand? Now: how do you speak English?
A: Learning your language is essential to understand your species.
I: So you just picked up English, just like that? Because you're so smart.
A: Relatively, yes.

Video excerpt from Part 4 *(The Alien on Artificial Super Intelligence)*:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NngXzkgQmdA&list=PLNF1MdLoNtJPmtgiRxi4597cifkTw-kmB&index=5

As: Sir, he doesn't have much time.
I: Okay. Finally. Tell me, what is this other threat?
A: Artificial super intelligence.
I: Say what now?
As: Sir, I think he said artificial super intelligence.
I: I know what it said. Shut up! What the hell does that mean?
A: Artificial intelligence that is superior to human intelligence.
I: That's impossible.
A: Inevitable.
As: Think about it, sir, the …
I: [*indiscernible furious tone*]
As: Yes sir.
I: So, this artificial super intelligence: is it a computer?
A: You do not have the capacity to …
I: I swear if you say I don't have the capacity to comprehend one more time, I'll drill a 9mm through that mutant skull of yours! Again: is it a computer?
A: Thousands. Connected.
I: And you're saying they're as smart as people.
A: No.
I: Hey! You just said …
A: They are smarter. By many orders of magnitude. Therefore, super (..) [*indiscernible*] super (..) super (..) [*A is going to faint and closes his eyes*]
I: Hey! Wake up! Wake up! [*A opens his eyes*] Okay, so, I'll play along. How is this super intelligence: a threat?
A: It will end your species (..) as it almost ended mine.
I: How?
A: Two ways, In parallel.
I: [*indiscernible*] What's the first way?
A: By weaponizing propaganda. The artificial super intelligence will be used to target the emotions of millions of people.
I: What emotions?
A: Hate.
I: Hate of what?
A: Of others who have different political and religious beliefs.
I: More God bashing.
A: As I said, you are not capable of understanding or accepting.

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