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Mutual face preservation among Asian speakers of English as a Lingua Franca

Abstract: This study identifies strategies used by speakers of ELF from Asia-Pacific countries for managing rapport in response to potentially face-threatening utterances in informal, non-hierarchical situations. The analysis, which draws on the Asian Corpus of English (ACE), reveals numerous points of contact with existing studies of English as a lingua franca. Potentially face-threatening utterances were usually – though not always – countered with a move to normalise the flow of conversation and maintain interactional rapport. There was also a preference for safe topics and an avoidance of potentially sensitive ones. Humour and laughter were frequently employed, possibly to signal equanimity with interlocutors. Yet two communicative strategies emerged which appeared to depart from the general pattern of rapport preservation. The first was mock impoliteness, which was possibly employed to signal solidarity with recipients but which risks evaluation as impolite regardless of intentionality. The second was bald on-record contradiction of or counterclaim against potentially face-threatening propositions or assessments. We theorise that these were delivered on-record to facilitate lingua franca communication: speakers avoided using complex or idiomatic language to ensure addressee comprehension, while recipients refrained from making an evaluative judgment of direct disagreement to allow for limitations or idiosyncrasies in their interlocutors' speech.

Keywords: Asia-Pacific, disagreement, English as a lingua franca, face, impoliteness, rapport management

Giữ thể diện lẫn nhau trong giao tiếp giữa người châu Á nói tiếng Anh như một ngôn ngữ chung

Tóm tắt: Nghiên cứu này tập trung khảo sát tiếng Anh được sử dụng như một ngôn ngữ chung thống nhất trong giao tiếp, từ đó xác định các chiến lược mà người giao tiếp từ các nước Châu Á-Thái Bình Dương sử dụng để giữ mối quan hệ

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cá nhân khi phản hồi lại những phát ngôn có khả năng đe dọa thể diện. Phân tích dựa trên Khối Ngữ liệu tiếng Anh của người châu Á (ACE) trong nghiên cứu này cho thấy nhiều điểm tương đồng với các nghiên cứu hiện có về tiếng Anh như một ngôn ngữ chung. Những lời nói mang tính đe dọa đến thể diện thông thường – mặc dù không phải luôn luôn – đi kèm với một động thái để bình thường hóa cuộc trò chuyện và duy trì mối quan hệ tác động lẫn nhau trong giao tiếp. Ngoài ra các chủ thể phát ngôn có xu hướng lựa chọn các chủ đề an toàn và tránh những đề tài nhạy cảm. Yếu tố hài hước và tiếng cười cũng thường xuyên được sử dụng, có thể là để chứng tỏ sự thoải mái với người đối thoại. Tuy nhiên, có hai chiến lược giao tiếp nổi lên, và được xem như xuất phát từ mô hình chung của việc xây dựng quan hệ cá nhân. Chiến lược đầu tiên là phép lịch sự giả, có nhiều khả năng được sử dụng để biểu hiện sự đồng tình với người đối thoại, nhưng đồng thời cũng có nguy cơ tạo nên ấn tượng thiếu lịch sự, bất kể ý đồ của người nói là như thế nào. Chiến lược thứ hai là bày tỏ sự bất đồng hoặc phản đối trực tiếp ngay lập tức đối với các đề xuất hoặc nhận xét có khả năng đe dọa thể diện. Chúng tôi lý thuyết hoá rằng những yếu tố sau đã được sử dụng trực tiếp ngay tại thời điểm diễn ra giao tiếp nhằm tạo điều kiện thuận lợi cho quá trình giao tiếp sử dụng tiếng Anh như ngôn ngữ chung: người nói tránh sử dụng ngôn ngữ phức tạp hoặc thành ngữ để đảm bảo người nghe hiểu được thông tin, trong khi đó người nghe hạn chế không đưa ra nhận xét có tính đánh giá về những bất đồng trực tiếp, nhằm chấp nhận những hạn chế hoặc phong cách riêng trong ngôn ngữ của người đối thoại.

Từ khóa: Châu Á-Thái Bình Dương, sự bất đồng, tiếng Anh như một ngôn ngữ chung, thể diện, sự thiếu lịch sự, duy trì quan hệ trong giao tiếp

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1 Introduction

An axiom of social interaction is that all interpersonal exchanges require attention to facework – the continual effort of participants to preserve their own face and that of others (Watts 2003). How much more complicated this must be in lingua franca communication, where not only the social setting, the type of speech event, the time urgency, and the location conditions need to be assimilated, but also the interactants' cultural worldviews, value orientations, and behavioural expectations (Ting-Toomey 2009). Indeed, the multi-layered nature of lingua franca facework management has recently become an important focus of

intercultural pragmatics research (Seidlhofer 2011). Yet the Asia-Pacific context, which encompasses a range of distinct linguacultures and where English operates as a regional lingua franca (Kirkpatrick 2010), has so far been underexplored. Kirkpatrick (2010) has called for research into the linguistic strategies employed by Asian speakers of English as a lingua franca (ELF) to repair communication breakdowns. The current study takes up the issue, drawing on data from the Asian Corpus of English (ACE) to identify salient responses to potentially face-threatening utterances in Asia-Pacific ELF discourse. After first summarising some key studies in the field and situating the current research within an appropriate theoretical framework, we will briefly describe the ACE and the dataset used in the current study. We will then outline nine communicative strategies that were applied by the participants in the dataset in response to potentially face-threatening acts.

2 Interpersonal pragmatics in English as a lingua franca

In her critical review of existing ELF pragmatics research, Seidlhofer (2004) posits some generalisations about the nature of interpersonal pragmatics in a lingua franca. These are a useful starting point for our investigation of ELF in Asia and are outlined as follows: Firstly, misunderstandings are usually said to be infrequent in ELF interaction. Meierkord (1996) observed very few instances of misunderstanding and communication breakdown in her whole corpus. There are also few communication failures in Firth's (1996) corpus data. Kirkpatrick (2007) suggests the comparative rarity of misunderstanding is because ELF speakers are conscious of the need to edit out any terms or idioms that might lead to confusion (cf. Meierkord 2000). In fact, the most likely locus of communicative failure is not lingua franca communication but native speaker/non-native speaker communication; speakers of English as a second language may struggle to comprehend the idiomatic features of native-speaker English (Seidlhofer 2011). Secondly, interference from L1 interactional norms is said to be uncommon; there seems to be a suspension of expectations regarding these. Meierkord (2000) suggested that the norms for each individual conversation are negotiated *ad hoc* depending on participants' repertoires and purposes. She found that ELF speakers' shared idiosyncrasies as second language users reduced speakers' potential self-consciousness toward linguistic irregularities, as well as the evaluation of these irregularities as inappropriate, enabling meaning and interactional norms to be negotiated without embarrassment (cf. Meeuwis 1994).

Seidlhofer's (2004) third generalisation is that ELF talk tends to be characterised by cooperation, consensus, and mutual support. But she also introduces a caveat here, pointing out that

some of the findings summarized [by her] actually seem to contradict each other. The explanation for this may be that work on ELF pragmatics is still very much in its initial phase, and the findings available to date result from research on a fairly limited database. It is therefore conceivable that further research might show some of the present findings to be a function of the type and purpose of the interactions investigated. (Seidlhofer 2004: 219)

This seems to be borne out by studies undertaken since: For instance, Jenks (2012: 386) investigated ELF talk in online chat rooms and concluded that “ELF interactants are not inherently mutually supportive and do not always seek to build consensus; on the contrary, they highlight problems or troubles in communication through laughter, joking, and ridicule.” Pullin Stark's (2010) study of power, solidarity, and humour in ELF business meetings draws on more formal and asymmetrical exchanges but makes a similar point: Disputes are inevitable among ELF speakers because they are human and therefore do not always prioritise cooperation and consensus – particularly when contesting power. Another study of business ELF by Bjørge (2012) demonstrated that in certain interactional domains (i.e., negotiation) interactional goals may be prioritised over consensus. But Bjørge did note a preference for mainstream (rather than face-threatening or face-attacking) language and reluctance to challenge opponents directly. In sum, there is certainly a tendency to cooperation, consensus, and mutual support in ELF, but it is contingent upon interactional domain and may not always be prioritised. We will explore this phenomenon in the current data.

3 Face and group rapport management

Although most scholars agree that face is a keystone of interpersonal communication (Terkourafi 2008), debate continues within and across approaches to human interaction about its characteristics (Bousfield 2008). This section outlines how we conceptualise face for the purpose of this analysis.

Face, defined as an individual's sense of self-worth or self-image “delineated in terms of approved social attributes” (Goffman 1967: 5) is not a static feature of an exchange but is continuously being enhanced, maintained, neglected, or challenged throughout a discourse. A popular conceptualisation of face comes from Brown and Levinson (1987), for whom face is individually oriented (i.e., rational individuals act in a way that they judge to be logical) rather than interpersonally

oriented. However, Asia-based scholars (e.g., Ide 1989; Matsumoto 1988) have argued that in many East Asian contexts face may be characterised by an association with groups as well as individuals and by one's position within a network of relationships (Haugh 2007). These characteristics are largely absent from Brown and Levinson's conceptualisation. An arguably more appropriate model for the Asian ELF context is Spencer-Oatey's (2002, 2007) rapport management framework, which has been successfully applied in other empirical impoliteness studies (cf. Cashman 2006; Culpeper 2005, 2011). For the present analysis we adopt Spencer Oatey's tripartite conceptualisation of face: Quality face, Social Identity face, and Relational face. Quality face is personally constructed and relates to people's desire to be evaluated positively in terms of their personal qualities (e.g., competence or intelligence). It is associated with an individual's sense of self-esteem. Social Identity face is socially constructed and relates to people's desire that their social identities and roles within a collective (e.g., as group leader or citizen of a country) be upheld. The communal aspect of Social Identity face is important to the current analysis in that "the attributes that people are face-sensitive about can apply to the person as an individual and also to the group or community that the person belongs to and/or identifies with" (Spencer-Oatey 2008: 15). The third component, Relational face refers to management and negotiation of the interactional relationship between participants (Spencer-Oatey 2007), for example being thought of as a good friend, a valued family member, or a popular teacher.

Our analysis also incorporates Spencer-Oatey's (2008) thesis that certain pragmatic parameters are central to interactants' choice of rapport management strategies: power (i.e., the ability of one interactant to control the behaviour of another) and distance (i.e., the closeness or distance of a relationship), as well as considerations of costs and benefits to the interactants in time taken, effort expended, imposition, inconvenience, and risk. Where possible we demonstrate how these parameters potentially guide interactants' responses at the sentence and discourse level.

Another point to make about face is that its multi-layered and constantly shifting nature prevents observers from definitively ascertaining an interlocutor's true evaluation of any potentially face-threatening act (Eelen 2001). We therefore refrain from attributing intentional face-threat to any utterances in the interactions but instead tentatively posit that particular utterances are open to negative evaluation by certain participants. These utterances are termed potentially face-threatening acts (PFTA).

Many of the PFTAs presented here appear on the face of it as sociable disagreements, i.e., delivered in a non-serious way that displays solidarity and protects intimacy (Schiffrin 1984), rather than conflictual (i.e., oppositional and

face-attacking) disagreements (Muntigl and Turnbull 1998). Interestingly, many of these sociable disagreements share characteristics of conflictual disagreements. We wish to highlight three types of disagreement in particular (with examples from Muntigl and Turnbull 1998): Irrelevancy claim (a previous claim is framed as not relevant to the discussion at hand, e.g., T1: *Yes it should be such a big deal because I'm moving in a week.* / T2: *So what.*); contradiction (a speaker contradicts by uttering the negated proposition expressed by the previous claim, e.g., T1: *It doesn't matter who it was.* / T2: *Yes it does*); and counterclaim (a speaker proposes an alternative claim that does not directly contradict or challenge the other's claim, e.g., T1: *We'd like to know where you are in the late late hours of the night.* / T2: *I tell you where I am but I don't have to tell you what I'm doing*). A point that will recur in the analysis is that despite the apparent sociable nature of the discourse, these shared characteristics with conflictual disagreement raise the possibility of negative evaluation by recipients, who may fail to deduce that ostensibly conflictual utterances are being used to achieve sociable conversational goals.

4 The Asian Corpus of English (ACE)

The Asian Corpus of English,¹ from which the dataset in this study is drawn, is comprised of naturally occurring, interactive English spoken as a lingua franca by Asian speakers of English, principally from the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries (Brunei, Burma/Myanmar, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam) and from ASEAN + 3 (including China, Japan, and South Korea) (Kirkpatrick 2010). The corpus is used to explore the use of English as a lingua franca in Asia and to identify specific linguistic resources and communicative techniques employed by Asian ELF speakers (Kirkpatrick 2004), and is intended as an Asia-focused counterpart to the University of Vienna's VOICE corpus of European-based ELF.² ACE will become freely accessible in late 2014.³ The data from ACE have informed a number of studies investigating features of English as a lingua franca in Asia, including

¹ The Asian Corpus of English, 2014. <http://corpus.ied.edu.hk/ace/>

² The Vienna-Oxford International Corpus of English (version 1.0 online), 2009. Director: Barbara Seidlhofer; Researchers: Angelika Breiteneder, Theresa Klimpfinger, Stefan Majewski, Marie-Luise Pitzl. <http://voice.univie.ac.at/>

³ The official European launch of ACE will be at the English as a Lingua Franca Conference in Athens, 4–7 September 2014. The Asian launch will be at the Ateneo Centre for English Language Teaching (ACELT) Conference at Ateneo de Manila, 25–26 October 2014.

communicative strategies (Kirkpatrick 2007; Kirkpatrick and Deterding 2004), phonological features (Deterding and Kirkpatrick 2006), intelligibility (Kirkpatrick 2006), and syntactic features (Kirkpatrick 2007).

The present dataset was compiled through analysis of 34 multi-party exchanges of varying lengths totalling 12.5 hours of talk. Nine nationalities are represented in examples selected from the overall dataset: Brunei, Burma/Myanmar, China, Laos, Malaysia, Pakistan, the Philippines, Thailand, and Vietnam, as well as Sudan. Speech data from the Sudanese participant is included in the analysis despite being outside the geographical focus; he contributes a small number of turns and his talk is largely incidental to the discourse. In order to maximise the dataset's situational uniformity, the selected sections of spoken data all represent non-hierarchical, multi-participant interactions in an informal setting.

We should stress that the findings presented in this paper by no means encompass all of the myriad contexts, tasks, and communities where English is employed as a lingua franca, but are limited to the dataset drawn from the ACE corpus as outlined above. Our conclusions are tentative and intended as a platform for future enquiry.

5 Mutual face preservation strategies

What follows is an outline of the most salient strategies employed in the dataset for preserving face in response to PFTAs. *Italics* are used in the extracts to indicate a potentially face-threatening act, and **bold** is used to highlight the interlocutor's response. Also, for better readability a participant identification protocol is employed throughout. It begins with two letters denoting country of origin (Br, Brunei; Bu, Burma/Myanmar; Ch, China; La, Laos; Ma, Malaysia; Pa, Pakistan; Fi, the Philippines; Th, Thailand; Vn, Vietnam; Su, Sudan). Next, gender is indicated (F/M). When several participants share nationality and gender, they are delineated by a number, e.g., ThF2. See the appendix for transcription conventions.

5.1 Bald-on-record disagreeing response with support

A frequently employed response to potentially face-threatening utterances in the corpus data was to counter with a bald-on-record disagreement followed by a supporting statement, i.e., a reason, fact, or proposition to support the disagreeing statement. (1) illustrates this strategy. The participants in this exchange are

a Vietnamese female (VnF), a Thai male (ThM), and a Filipina female (FiF), all English language teachers in Singapore for a short professional development course. They are discussing their initial impressions of Singapore.

(1)

- 1 ThM: a three day holiday right but after I came here I was very impressed by
the country because
- 2 the country is er very <1>clean</1>
- 3 FiF: <1>clean</1>
- 4 ThM: and it it is a very safe place
- 5 SX-F: mhm
- 6 ThM: so you can go anywhere at night without
- 7 FiF: mhm
- 8 ThM: danger <2>at all</2>
- 9 VnF: <2>well cos cos</2> you are a man so safety is <3>not a problem</3>
- 10 ThM: <3>no no no no</3> **but it is also for women as well right you can
go all night**

VnF makes an irrelevancy claim (Muntigl and Turnbull 1998), arguing that ThM's assessment of Singapore's night-time safety is coloured by his gender. ThM's Quality face is potentially threatened by the disagreement; indeed, his immediate bald-on-record "no no no no" – cutting into VnF's talk – implies an evaluation of VnF's remark as at least mildly face-threatening. He follows up with a supporting statement ("it is also for women"), soliciting agreement ("as well right") with his proposition. The interactional parameters may permit direct disagreement as politic and not markedly impolite behaviour (Watts 2003): the innocuous nature of the topic and the apparent lack of any internal hierarchy permit ThM to disagree on-record without reproof, though the inclusion of a supporting statement and solicitation of consensus function as mitigating strategies in case the intended illocutionary force of the utterance is miscalculated.

5.2 Bald-on-record disagreeing response without support

The interactants also employed bald-on-record disagreement as a stand-alone strategy, without providing support. An illustration of this category is (2), an interaction between two Bruneian male students (BrM1 and BrM2) and a Malaysian female student (MaF) brainstorming ideas for an upcoming debate about online social networking versus face-to-face interaction. MaF and BrM1 are suggesting a possible line of argument.

(2)

- 1 MaF: so how is facebook different from other
- 2 BrM1: social networking site?
- 3 MaF: yeah
- 4 BrM2: *no we shouldn't ponder on that*
- 5 BrM1: **oh yeah we should (.)** <1>we should just</1>
- 6 MaF: <1>then how are we</1> gonna define facebook interaction
- 7 BrM2: exactly that's what (.) you guys have to do @@@@

BrM2's unmitigated dismissal of BrM1 and MaF's idea ("No we shouldn't ponder on that") could be evaluated as threatening their Quality face by devaluing their opinion, as well as their Social Identity face as productive group members contributing to a shared interactional goal.

BrM1's bald-on-record contradiction ("oh yeah we should") of BrM2's proposition may again be partly founded in the pragmatic parameters of the situation: there is no obvious internal hierarchy and the participants appear to have a collegial relationship, potentially reducing the need for face-work in sociable disagreements. Another possible variable is the task-oriented nature of the discussion: as Thomas (1995) notes, speakers in task-oriented exchanges are likely to focus more on the propositional content of their messages than the interpersonal aspect. Also, the opposing interactants' shared nationality and gender (both are Bruneian males) may have informed their co-construction of interactional norms for the exchange, reducing the degree of face-work required and permitting bald-on-record responses as politic speech behaviour (Watts 2003).

5.3 Foregrounding potentially face-threatening nature of statement

Instances also emerged where the recipient of a potentially face-threatening utterance responded by foregrounding the face-threatening nature of the interlocutor's utterance. (3) has been selected to illustrate this category. MaF1 and MaF2 are Malaysian female students and ChF is a Chinese female student; ChF has just purchased an electronic dictionary and they are discussing its price. When MaF1 hears "two hundred" she initially believes that ChF has paid 200 ringgit (an unfeasibly low price) for the dictionary, rather than inferring that "two hundred" refers to dollars (a more appropriate price). MaF2 reacts to MaF1's error by laughing.

(3)

- 1 MaF1: I thought want buy it's two hundreds ah
- 2 MaF2: two hundred
- 3 MaF1: it is it too hot can it be two hundred
- 4 MaF2: dollars or
- 5 MaF1: @ ringgit
- 6 MaF2: @@@@<1>@@@@@</1>
- 7 ChF: <1>cannot</1> ah can but very very low quality ah
- 8 MaF1: @@ @ **why she so hey why she laugh at me ah** @ @@
- 9 ChF: @@@@
- 10 MaF1: I say that she @@@
- 11 ChF: @@@@

MaF1 clearly evaluates MaF2's laughter at her misunderstanding as face-threatening, evidenced by her foregrounding of MaF2's reaction ("hey why she laugh at me ah"). But the laughter particles interpolated into her protest mitigate its force and signal that she evaluates the threat as minor and participates in the joke. She also performs perfunctory facework to reduce the illocutionary force of her utterance, ostensibly addressing the whole group rather than directing her response directly at MaF2. This plus the informal context and the non-hierarchical group structure appear to allow MaF1 to explicitly call attention to MaF2's PFTA without threatening group rapport.

5.4 Off-record disagreement with potentially face-threatening statement

Another strategy employed by interactants was to counter utterances they perceived as face-threatening through off-record responses (e.g., hinting, association clues, or rhetorical questions), such that the speaker could not be held to one particular interpretation of the utterance (Brown and Levinson 1987: 211). In (4) disagreement with a PFTA is phrased as a rhetorical question. The participants are the two Bruneian males (BrM1 and BrM2) and Malaysian female (MaF) we first encountered in (2) preparing for a debate about online versus face-to-face interaction. A Pakistani male (PaM) also participates in the exchange. BrM1 argues that only synchronous online exchanges are legitimate forms of interaction. MaF's submission that asynchronous online comments are "delayed interaction" is immediately countered by BrM2's reply: "actually no".

(4)

- 1 BrM1: no (.) what I meant by interaction what I meant by interactive it's that
(.) like say for
- 2 example I have skype and you have skype and we can TALK (.) <1>we
can interact (.) that
- 3 one is</1>like a (.) a recorded video=
- 4 PaM: <1>yes exactly (.) so we can share with others</1>
- 5 BrM1: =and sent over and that's it. <2>you cannot interact with the video</2>
- 6 MaF: <2>it's-it's just DELAYED interaction</2> isn't it?
- 7 BrM2: *actually no*
- 8 MaF: **why people can comment on your video?**

BrM2's contradiction of MaF's submission potentially devalues MaF's Quality face as a contributor of valid ideas. In responding MaF eschews a bald-on-record disagreement with BrM2's assessment in favour of an implied disagreement: she frames her response as a rhetorical question, embedding a reason (i.e., that online discourse does constitute interaction because comments can be added asynchronously) to support her previous "delayed interaction" assessment. The off-record nature of her disagreement allows MaF to avoid responsibility for the potential face-threat, since it is left to the addressee to interpret whether a disagreement is being conveyed and whether any face-threat is implied (Brown and Levinson 1987).

5.5 Signal comity through affirming discourse markers

A function of the discourse marker *okay* in ELF discourse is to support a previous speaker's message, signalling "receipt, approval, consent, [and] generally expressing interactional cooperative stance" (House 2013b: 64). *Yes/yeah* can perform a similar role (House 2013b). Interestingly, these markers can also serve a rapport-normalising function, as analysis of the ACE data reveals. ELF interactants in the corpus responded to PFTAs with a non-committal *okay* or *yes/yeah*, the discourse marker appearing to function as a surface agreement with the potentially face-threatening utterance in order to maintain comity. (5) presents an illustrative segment from the ACE dataset. A Vietnamese female (VnF) and a Filipino male (FiM) are discussing an online multiplayer social network game called Café World. Their exchange is work-related: VnF is an assistant manager and FiM is a trainer, though no other occupational details are provided. They are arguing about whether Café World (shortened to Café in the exchange) is available in Thailand.

(5)

- 1 VnF: for the cafe h but cafe is not launched in vietnam yet
- 2 FiM: o:h ya
- 3 VnF: cafe currently only been launched in e:r thailand
- 4 FiM: I asked them they're not using it
- 5 VnF: *NO cafe they were using it*
- 6 FiM: **okay lah I'll confirm later**

VnF responds to FiM's assertion that Café World is not being used in Thailand with a bald-on-record contradiction: "NO café they were using it". There is a potential affront to FiM's Quality face because his statement is dismissed as inaccurate. Rather than go back and forth about the issue, FiM immediately normalises the conversation through the discourse marker *okay*, followed by the solidarity-marking discourse particle *lah*, and offers to confirm later on whether Café World is being used in Thailand or not.

How do *yes/yeah* and *okay* function to normalise rapport? Firstly, they allow the recipient to opt out of an oppositional response (Brown and Levinson 1987), thereby precluding further threat to rapport. Also, *yes/yeah* and *okay* are commonly affirmative, inoffensive utterances which convey not conceptual but only procedural meaning (Fraser 1999), so the likelihood of their misinterpretation or evaluation as face-threatening is low (House 2013b). These characteristics make them ideal for ELF talk, where interactants are often cognisant of the precarious nature of their intercultural discourse.

5.6 Ignore potentially face-threatening statement

One way to avoid compromising rapport in the face of a potentially negatively loaded utterance is to continue the exchange without orienting to it. (6) is indicative of how this "ignoring" strategy was employed in the ACE dataset. The three interactants are a Lao male (LaM), a female from the Philippines (FiF), and a Malay male (MaM), all English language teachers on a training course in Singapore. As language teachers they share membership of a community of practice, but the topics covered in the wider exchange (e.g., marital status) suggest that no relationship has been established.

(6)

- 1 FiF: that's why <1>@@@ we go find out from the <un>xxxx</un></1>
- 2 LaM: <1>and <un>xx</un> every islands</1> erm there are people live
- 3 FiF: not all

- 4 LaM: not all
 5 FiF: not all
 6 LaM: oh
 7 FiF: yes hm
 8 LaM: i see i see
 9 FiF: *what about your country <2>anything good</2> about it <3>@@@</3>*
 10 MaM: <2>my country</2> <3>there are a lot of tourist</3> attractions which
 you can read about
 11 in tourist brochures okay
 12 FiF: mhm
 13 MaM: hm
 14 LaM: yeah yeah
 15 MaM: i myself have not been to the east coast
 16 FiF: mhm
 17 MaM: okay i haven't been to the east coast or peninsula malaysia hh i mainly
 er travel to parts
 18 of the west coast or (.) cameron highlands is a good place cameron
 highlands because the
 19 climate there is cooler

The PFTA occurs in line 9, when FiF asks MaM *what about your country anything good about it @@@*. *Anything good about it* could be construed – particularly with the utterance-final laughter – as implying that FiF thinks there is nothing good about MaM's country. Of course, FiF's odd phrasing may simply be an unintended lexical irregularity, or she may be teasing MaM as a bonding device to increase solidarity (Boxer and Cortés-Conde 1997). Nonetheless, there is clear potential for MaM to evaluate the utterance as face-damaging. So it is significant that MaM, who has begun to respond while FiF is still talking, simply ignores the PFTA and the laughter and continues his responding turn.

Two issues surround the employment of an "ignoring" strategy. The first is the impossibility of knowing (because no response is given) whether the recipient of a PFTA evaluates it as face-damaging or not. Even if the recipient appears *prima facie* to accept the FTA and move on, the unexpressed face-damage may provoke a negative reaction later on in the exchange – or even in future exchanges (Sifianou 2012). The second issue is that ignoring a previous utterance when a response is expected may be evaluated as a snub, which both signals disapproval and impedes the interactant from conversing with the snubber (Bousfield 2008; Culpeper 1996). It may threaten an interlocutor's Quality face (implying that their statement does not warrant an answer) and/or their Social Identity face (implying denigration of their contribution as a participant in the interactional exchange).

So an interactant who applies an “ignoring” strategy to maintain interactional rapport risks jeopardising that very rapport.

Why then does the “ignoring” strategy manifest itself in the ACE data? One hypothesis is that interactional norms such as would normally guide L1 interaction are replaced in ELF talk by *pro tempore* norms which are “primarily regulated by interactional exigencies ... to achieve a communicative goal” (Seidlhofer 2011: 18), allowing “ignoring” strategies to pass without comment. Previous ELF research supports this hypothesis: Lesznyák’s (2002) study of topic management among European ELF speakers revealed a high degree of tolerance in ELF talk toward unusual linguistic behaviour, and House’s (2002) study of pragmatic competence in ELF speakers at her institution found that potentially confrontational talk is often ignored. Face-loss is not apparent among participants in either Lesznyák’s or House’s study.

5.7 Agree with potentially face-threatening statement

As well as ignoring potentially face-threatening statements, another means which participants employed to disarm potentially face-threatening utterances was to jokingly agree with the face-threatening assessment, thereby signalling equanimity and normalising the conversation. The agreeing strategy was commonly employed when the recipient appeared to evaluate the PFTA as mild or as mock impoliteness. In (7), which is drawn from the same dataset as (3), Malaysian female students MaF1 and MaF2 are talking in their dorm rooms. Chinese female student ChF is also present but does not speak during the segment. The PFTA is delivered by MaF1, who says that she decided against purchasing a small plant for her dorm room because she would have to leave it with MaF2 to look after when she was away and feared MaF2 would let it die.

(7)

- 1 MaF1: I want to buy a plant but I thought I was going to *I was going to go off*
and I thought she
- 2 will kill it @
- 3 MaF2: **I will kill it ah**
- 4 MaF1: @@@ h I thought I thought
- 5 MaF2: (.)
- 6 MaF1: you see

MaF1 appears to signal the jocular nature of her jibe by adding a laughter particle, positioning her assessment as mock impoliteness oriented to social intimacy

rather than offense. Yet she risks affronting MaF2's Quality face by characterising her as incompetent at taking care of plants. To indicate that she accepts the PFTA in the spirit presumably intended and to emphasise rapport with MaF1, MaF2 expresses humorous, self-denigrating agreement with MaF1's assessment, declaring that she will indeed kill the plant if it is left with her. (See Norrick [1993] for more about self-denigrating humour as a rapport-management strategy). MaF1's rejoinder in the following turns is to extend her jocular teasing (now that MaF2 has indicated that she recognises and participates in it) in the same mock impolite fashion ("@@@ I thought I thought" in line 4, and "you see" in line 6). In doing so MaF1 tacitly conveys her awareness that MaF2 is signalling solidarity through self-denigrating humour and that she has not taken her initial assessment as a face-threat.

5.8 Laughter

As some of the examples above have shown, laughter plays a variety of roles in the ACE data: indicating relief and delight, hiding nervousness or lack of understanding, or signalling the moment of understanding (Kirkpatrick 2007: 133). In (8) it appears to serve the function – as “nonverbal supportive back-channeling” (House 2013a: 2) – of normalising rapport after delivery of a PFTA. (7) is an exchange between a Burmese female lecturer (BuF), a businessman from Sudan (SuM), and a Malaysian female of unstated occupation. The interactants appear to have a social relationship; their informal conversation takes place over lunch, where shared information is discussed. MaF points out that SuM has not eaten very much, speculating that he will eat more and gain weight after he marries. Following general mirth, she concludes with a potentially face-threatening utterance aimed at BuF, the third member of the group: “. . . and be plump like you”.

(8)

- 1 MaF: [first name] why you finish
- 2 BuF: @@@
- 3 MaF: I think there's still a lot
- 4 SuM: {xxx}
- 5 BuF: (4) he will eat
- 6 SuM: {xxx} like this
- 7 BuF: yes {xxx} yes
- 8 MaF: (3) he afraid of gaining weight
- 9 BuF: @@@
- 10 MaF: no you must wait after he married he will eat a lot

- 11 BuF: he will eat
 12 SX: @@@@
 13 MaF: @@
 14 BuF: @@
 15 SuM: hmm
 16 MaF: (3) now he eat less
 17 BuF: {xxx}
 18 MaF: but after he get married he will eat a lot
 19 BuF: @ h: @
 20 MaF: *and be plump like you*
 21 BuF: @
 22 MaF: @@@@
 23 SuM: it depend how she cook (.) yeah
 24 BuF: (2) @@
 25 MaF: o:h:
 26 BuF: @@@@ @@

MaF's utterance "and be plump like you" is most likely mock impoliteness, i.e., surface impoliteness that is understood not to be intentionally offensive but rather to reflect and foster social intimacy (Culpeper 1996). This likelihood is supported by the positive connotation plumpness can have in some Asian cultures, implying health and wealth. Yet the statement could also impact BuF's Quality face because it targets her body image. BuF's response is to laugh, signalling to the other group members that – on the surface at least – she accepts the PFTA in a jocular spirit. The potential threat to rapport is quickly negated and the conversation continues.

The problem with mock impoliteness is its propensity for "pragmatic misfire" (Haugh and Bousfield 2012: 1112) if the addressee evaluates it as face-threatening. Worse, if the PFTA is delivered before other interactants – as in (8) – the addressee may feel obliged to accept it lightly at least on the surface, while tacitly "wounded by an accurate dart" (Brown and Levinson 1987: 229). Mock impoliteness strategies are thus inherently ambiguous, and – recipients' laughter notwithstanding – we have no way of knowing how BuF really feels about MaF's teasing.

5.9 Change topic

The final strategy to be discussed here is the topic change strategy. Early research has suggested that topic changes are a recurring feature of ELF talk (e.g., House

2002; Lesznyák 2002; Meierkord 1996, 2000). Researchers found that depending on the situational context and participants' conventional and interactional norms, ELF speakers may carefully negotiate a change in topic (cf. Lesznyák 2002), or they may simply drop one topic and take up another (cf. Meierkord 2000), particularly when the topic is potentially sensitive. Of course, such a finding reflects the type and purpose of interactions investigated, and is more common in informal small talk than in formal, goal-oriented discourse (Ahvenainen 2005). Generalisation is therefore problematic in the absence of further data. Nevertheless, a comparable tendency emerges in the ACE dataset. We will consider an example. In (9) below, ThF is a Thai female and VnF is a Vietnamese female. They are specialists, though their profession is not specified. They are meeting for lunch, suggesting a social relationship exists. ThF has introduced the topic of resolving marital tension through spending time apart from one's spouse. VnF evaluates this practice as "not good"; ThF responds with a bald-on-record contradiction: "good".

(9)

- 1 ThF: sometime fighting better make you that (.) {smacks lips} how to say er
because you're like
- 2 er (.) care {xx}
- 3 VnF: okay yeah sometime after fighting you feel that okay (.) you're getting
closer to each other
- 4 am I right (.) because <1>of the fighting</1>
- 5 ThF: <1>{xx} fighting</1> if we fighting we will keep quiet (.) he go away I go
another way
- 6 VnF: it's also not good
- 7 ThF: (.) *good*
- 8 VnF: good
- 9 ThF: yes
- 10 VnF: why
- 11 ThF: just just live (.) live different the way my husband stay computer room
I stay the kitchen
- 12 room after that communicate again
- 13 VnF: @ ok @ that's good (.) **so when are you going to have lunch (.)**

Two potential threats to rapport emerge in this exchange: the possible affront to VnF's Quality face caused by ThF's direct contradiction of her assessment; and the sensitive and potentially conflict-laden nature of the topic itself. Regarding the first, VnF's repetition of ThF's disagreeing utterance ("good") and clipped request for amplification ("why") might indicate that she evaluates the utterance as

face-threatening. As to the second, VnF's abrupt shift from a delicate topic (marital issues) to an innocuous one (lunch) appears to indicate intent to steer the conversation from its potentially face-affronting trajectory onto safer ground, revealing what House (2002: 261) identified (within her limited database) as "a resistance to any seriously argumentative talk, in which interactants' viewpoints might be challenged and conflicts explicitly stated" (cf. Meierkord 2000).

6 Discussion

Analysis of the ACE dataset revealed numerous points of contact with existing studies of English as a lingua franca, particularly with regard to rapport management. In general the orientation was to smooth communication and mutual support (cf. Bae 2002); there were no instances of blatantly conflictual disagreement in the dataset (cf. Kirkpatrick 2007). We also observed a preference for safe topics and an avoidance of potentially sensitive ones (cf. Meierkord 2000). Humour and laughter were frequently employed (cf. Kirkpatrick 2007; Pullin Stark 2010), at least partly to signal equanimity in response to PFTAs. In the majority of cases, potential face-threats were countered with a move to normalise the flow of conversation and maintain the overall rapport between interactants. That said, two communicative strategies emerged which warrant further examination because of their apparent departure from the general pattern of rapport preservation.

The first is mock impoliteness, presented in (7) and (8):

(7) MaM: I want to buy a plant but I thought I was going to *I was going to go off and I thought she will kill it @*

(8) MaF: *and be plump like you*

Although previous studies (e.g., Firth 1996; House 2002; Kirkpatrick 2006; Meierkord 2000) have revealed a paucity of mock impoliteness strategies in ELF talk, possibly due to their inherent risk of evaluation as impolite regardless of intentionality (Haugh and Bousfield 2012), such strategies do occur in the ACE dataset. Without further investigation we can only speculate as to the reasons, but it seems probable that mock impoliteness is applied for much the same purpose as it often is among speakers of English as a first language: to signal solidarity with recipients (cf. Culpeper 1996; Haugh and Bousfield 2012).

Why did participants in the ACE dataset employ such a risky strategy? A possible reason is that in lingua franca talk, actions which might attract sanctions according to first-language norms (such as mock impoliteness strategies evalu-

ated as inappropriate) are less likely to be censured. Previous studies have pointed to a high degree of tolerance toward unexpected linguistic behaviour (Lesznyák 2002), along with a tendency to ignore potentially confrontational remarks (House 2002). So interactants in the ACE corpus may have been cognisant that mock impoliteness – provided the interactional parameters of power and distance (Spencer-Oatey 2008) were favourable – would more likely be evaluated as solidarity-boosting than face-damaging.

The second apparent anomaly was bald-on-record contradictions of or counterclaims against a potentially face-threatening proposition or assessment. Two communicative strategies extracted from the ACE dataset – (1) and (2) – could be characterised as bald-on-record in that no attempt is made linguistically to minimise the potential face threat to the recipient (Brown and Levinson 1987).

(1)'

VnF: *well cos cos you are a man so safety is <1>not a problem</1>*

ThM: *<1>no no no</1> but it is also for women as well right you can go all night*

(2)'

BrM2: *no we shouldn't ponder on that*

BrM1: **oh yeah we should**

Two processes appear to be occurring simultaneously and reciprocally. Firstly, the speakers may be consciously avoiding using complex or idiomatic language which could impede addressee comprehension (cf. Mauranen 2006). In theorising this we draw on House's (2002) analysis of ELF speakers from a variety of nationalities, which noted a preference for "raw negation, addition, rejection and *disagreement shunning delay, mitigation and other face-saving means*" (2002: 255, emphasis ours; cf. Kirkpatrick 2007) so as to maximise intelligibility. Secondly, we theorise that the recipients may have refrained from making an evaluative judgment of bald-on-record disagreements to allow for any limitations and/or idiosyncrasies in their interlocutor's speech. This is linked to what Seidlhofer (2011) identified as the likely suspension of interactional norms in ELF talk; in place of these, *ad hoc* norms are co-constituted within each separate exchange, informed by specific participants' variety of spoken English, their language proficiency, and the goals of the interaction. In the ACE dataset this suspension of interactional norms appears to extend to evaluations of face-threat. It is of course very difficult to be certain *ex post facto* whether the apparent non-orientation to face-threat was merely "masking deeper sources of trouble" (House 2002: 248)

which went unstated; our conclusions about this aspect of the data are therefore preliminary and will be explored further in a future publication.

7 Conclusion

Probably the key finding of this study is that as with previous research into ELF (e.g., Kirkpatrick 2007), most of the communicative strategies employed by the participants in response to potential face-threats were oriented to mutual face-preservation and normalising the conversation. There were instances of what could be interpreted as mock impoliteness, which appears rare in other ELF contexts; yet although mock impoliteness may be employed to convey face-affront (Haugh and Bousfield 2012), the examples in the current data appear to have been about foregrounding solidarity. Even where participants countered potential FTAs by disagreeing bald-on-record, there was little indication of rancour in ensuing turns; the conversation merely continued to flow along the same trajectory. As with previous ELF studies (cf. Seidlhofer 2011), participants' own norms of appropriate politeness appeared to be suspended in ELF talk; rather, they "settle on *ad hoc*, *pro tem* norms that are adequate to the task and commensurate to the command of the linguistic resources they have in common" (Seidlhofer 2011: 18).

In sum, this paper advances our understanding of how English is used as an Asian lingua franca by illuminating some features of face-management in Asian ELF. Of course these findings are preliminary and initiatory; future research should engage a larger dataset and a wider range of situational contexts in order to provide a more granular insight into the current findings.

Appendix: transcription conventions

ACE has adopted the transcription conventions of VOICE in order to ensure researchers can easily compare the two corpora. To preserve confidentiality all names and places mentioned are replaced with [First name 1], [Place 2], etc.

<1> ... </1>	Overlapping utterances are marked with numbered tags.
@@@	Indicate laughter, with each symbol approximating a syllable.
(.)	A period flanked by brackets indicates a short pause.
(2)	The length of the pause in seconds flanked by brackets indicates a longer one.
{xx}	Signifies unintelligible speech,
CAPS	Capitals indicate a raised voice.

- = An equal sign at the end of one utterance and the beginning of another indicates a join.
- o:h A colon inserted after a vowel indicates lengthening.

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