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in couple relationships“

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List of abbreviations

ELF.....	English as a lingua franca
EFL.....	English as a foreign language
ENL.....	English as a native language
EIL.....	English as an international language
WE.....	World Englishes
GE.....	Global English
SE.....	Standard English
BE.....	British English
AE.....	American English
NS(s).....	English native speaker(s)
NNS(s).....	English non-native speaker(s)
L1.....	First language
L2.....	Second language
LX.....	any language other than L1
I1, I2, I3, I4, I5.....	Interview 1-5
I.....	Interviewer
C1, C2, C3, C4, C5, C6.....	Couple 1-6
PX.X.....	Participant X.X

1. Introduction

During the last few decades, interaction at a global level has been developed and extended. People from all over the world can communicate and connect with each other, be it in person or virtually, simultaneously, or asynchronously. This aspect of globalization has not only affected society at large but has also had a major impact on interpersonal relationships amongst individuals. Communication among international business partners, research colleagues, friends, travel acquaintances or even lovers are no longer restricted to a specific region or country but can be found anywhere today. One of the main reasons to enable these relationships is English as a global language, or better defined as English as a lingua franca (ELF). English is one of the prime communicative resources (if not the most prevalent) in lingua franca encounters and has enabled people to establish relationships at any level and depth they choose. One very intimate type of relationship using ELF as their main means of communication is the ELF couple.

ELF couples can no longer be seen as scarce or the exception amongst intimate relationships. The number of partners with different first languages who use the world language English to communicate with each other has increased in direct correlation with an ever-growing interconnected world. ELF couples are categorized as one of the most stable forms of ELF contact (Pietikäinen 2016: 195). Nevertheless, that does not imply that these multilingual couples face no struggles with ELF - quite on the contrary. Whilst ELF couples navigate and conquer the regular obstacles of any intimate relationship, they also do so in a foreign language. This process can be tricky and frustrating, enriching and motivating all at the same time, which is exactly the main interest of this paper.

Considering the increasing number of ELF couples in the 21st century, research in this field has not picked up proportionately and prioritizes ELF research in the business and academic domain. However, it is clear that ELF couples can no longer be overlooked in the academic world. Whilst extensive research has been conducted on ELF in general (Baker 2018; Crystal 2003; House 2003; Jenkins 2007; Mauranen 2018; Seidlhofer 2006; Seidlhofer 2011; Widdowson 2015; Wierzbicka 2006), only a handful of researchers have dedicated themselves to ELF couples and private ELF

(Boucher & O'Dowd 2011; Goncalves 2013; Klötzl 2016; Pietikäinen 2018; Piller 2002), coining important terms such as “togetherness” and “couple microculture” (Klötzl 2014), “linguistic relaxedness of couples” (Pietikäinen 2014), strategies to avoid miscommunication in ELF (Pietikäinen 2016/2018) or “interpersonal positioning in intimate relationships” (Swoboda & Klötzl 2019). Besides their efforts to describe the linguistic perspective of multilingual couples, other researchers have investigated aspects such as communicating emotions and general couple talk independent of language (Dewaele 2004; Duck 1993; Harris, Gleason & Aycicegi 2006; Leisi 1983; Pavlenko 2007; Tannen 1986/1990; Vaid 2001). It quickly becomes clear that ELF in general and intimate relationships in general are both widely researched phenomena. However, the specific case of intimate ELF relationships is in need of more samples and investigation in order to, on the one hand, refine the established research, and, on the other hand, further advance the emerging research flow.

Therefore, this thesis sets out to shed light on how multilingual, intimate couples deal with ELF as the main language of their relationship. To be more precise, based on five qualitative couple interviews, the purpose of this study is to gain insights into the partners' language choice ELF and how it influences their relationship. These insights include, amongst other things, knowledge on the participants' attitudes towards ELF as a couple language, specific ELF couple talk characteristics as well as any supplementary aspects of this special dynamic. The aim is to raise awareness of the advantages and disadvantages of ELF as a couple language, based on a detailed literature review on ELF in general, the private ELF and couple talk, as well as the perceptions and assessments of six long-term ELF couples. This research project further explores the findings of a previous study conducted by Julia Gundacker in 2010 at the University of Vienna. Hence, my study is designed as a conceptual replication study (Porte & McManus 2019: 83) of hers, attempting to contrast and compare the results 11 years later with the current research. Not only will my paper add new methodologies, but also include new research insights from the past decade, which is particularly interesting in the case of ELF couples, given that the last decade has been defining for the field. Moreover, the results of my study will not only reveal the similarities and differences in terms of time, but will also serve affected people, namely partners who use ELF as their main language of the relationship, to gain a deeper understanding of their linguistic struggles and successes and to think more consciously

about communicating in a foreign language and what this process implies. Especially in intimate relationships where communication is key, transparency and conscious choices are indispensable, and the insights of this paper actively contribute to that goal.

The major aim guiding this paper is to identify the influence of ELF on the intimate partners and shed light on the advantages and disadvantages of using ELF as a couple language. In order to pursue this endeavour, the following specific research questions are addressed:

1. How do ELF couples perceive the influence of ELF on their relationship? To what extent do they perceive that ELF is enabling or limiting?
2. What are some particular ELF couple talk characteristics?
3. What are the advantages and disadvantages of using ELF as a means of communication for couples?
4. How do ELF couples perceive and deal with linguistic misunderstandings and interferences?

Whilst Gundacker (2010) limited herself to interviewing exclusively ELF couples with two different first languages (neither of them being English), my study includes English native speaker partners as well because they too form part of the ELF communities of practice (Seidlhofer 2011: 5; 87).

The research is presented as follows: the first part, chapter 2, lays down the theoretical framework for the thesis by defining and discussing three relevant sections: the resource ELF, the domain private ELF, and the nature of ELF couples from a linguistic perspective. Chapter 3 describes the research design for this study. It includes various methodological considerations, the replication study approach and the major findings of the original study, the description of the participants as well as information on the data collection and analysis processes. Chapter 4 provides the results of the couple interviews. Finally, chapter 5 presents the discussion and conclusion of this paper. The discussion chapter (5.1) includes a review of the analysis section with the theory part, as well as with the original study by Gundacker (2010), concise answers to the research questions and the limitations of this research project. The conclusion chapter

(5.2) contains a summary, implications for theory and practice as well as recommendations for further research.

Before embarking on reading about this deeply intimate topic of ELF couple talk, the reader should be aware that this paper might feel like breaking the 4th wall in a romantic movie. The participating couples give me, and ultimately you, the reader, insights into their most personal couple environment and – at least for a little while – make us part of their romantic relationship. They share not only the good stories and the successes, but also the negative and frustrating tales, just as any couple would share with only each other. It is a privilege to feel included and relate to stories of such an intimate level.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 English as a lingua franca

2.1.1 Conceptualizing ELF

“English is not only an international language, but *the* international language”: it is the first second language in every school and the primary choice of international communication (Seidlhofer 2011: 2). The global rise of English has in fact resulted in a higher number of non-native English speakers than native English speakers (Crystal 2003: 69). According to Kachru’s model (1992: 14) of the concentric World Englishes circles, the inner circle (English as a first language) counts around 530 million people, the outer circle (English as an additional language) entails roughly 800 million speakers, and the expanding circle (English as a foreign language) an estimated 1.5 billion speakers (Eberhard, Simons & Fenng 2021: “English”). Seidlhofer notes, however, that this number might even be higher, given the accelerated growth of the expanding circle (Seidlhofer 2011: 2). The numbers clearly indicate the importance of English as a global language.

With this rising importance of and increased research on English as a global language, the discussions have yielded multiple confusing terms to describe the phenomenon. EFL (English as a foreign language), EIL (English as an international language), WE

(World Englishes) or GE (Global English) are often conceived as the same concept to describe English as a contact language amongst different speakers (Jenkins, Cogo & Dewey 2011: 303). However, Seidlhofer (2011: 7) uses the term “ELF (English as a lingua franca) [as] any use of English among speakers of different first languages for whom English is the communicative medium of choice, and often the only option”. Whilst some academics (for example House 1999: 74; Firth 1996: 240) believe that ELF exclusively entails conversations amongst non-native speakers of English (henceforth: NNSs), others argue that also members of the inner circle, whose L1 is English, naturally belong to the ELF community of practice, since English might still be the only language choice available (Jenkins 2007: 5; Mauranen 2018: 8; Seidlhofer 2011: 7).

When conceptualizing ELF, it is vital to keep the concepts EFL and ELF apart. In EFL, the focus is on the origin of the language and its cultural associations with its norms being oriented at a specific native speaker variety. ELF, however, is “adapted to the needs of intercultural communication” (Seidlhofer 2011: 17f). The norms here are “tacitly established” and negotiated during interactions and conversations, meaning that ELF speakers co-construct the rules to achieve their communicative goals. These goals are mutual intelligibility and the possibility of communication amongst NSs and NNSs, as well as amongst exclusively NNSs (ibid: 17f).

This implies that normative attitudes and an ENL (English as a native language) mindset are unfitting for the dynamic concept of ELF. Not only is the assumption that the English language is a stable identity out of place, but also does this native speaker orientation involuntarily put the NNS in a position of inferiority. In ELF interactions, intelligibility is dependent on multiple other factors instead of linguistic accuracy (ibid: 33ff). Seidlhofer, however, believes that ELF should not be seen as a “franchised copy of ENL” and acknowledges its independence and variation (ibid: 19). Moreover, being a NS of English does not prove to be automatically an advantage in ELF interactions; in fact, NNSs are often more skilled to use English in intercultural settings due to their experience with learning English at a later stage in life (ibid: 41).

2.1.2 Attitudes towards ELF

After establishing the concept, the following subchapter explores different attitudes towards ELF. Jenkins (2009: 202) describes two opposing positions on ELF: the first

viewpoint is of ELF as a monolithic and stable entity, where diverse cultural identity fades into the so-called ELF culture. According to this view, ELF conflates with EFL, labelling any deviances from Standard English (SE) automatically as deficiencies. Researchers such as Seidlhofer (2011: 33) highlight, however, that it is not ELF which is perceived as a stable and rigid entity, but in contrast, ENL or any approved variety of English, which questions this first opinion on ELF. The second viewpoint is of ELF as a pluricentric entity lacking standards or rules. The underlying attitude in this case is that everything is acceptable, and that ELF is merely an interlanguage (Jenkins 2009: 203).

Jenkins investigated Expanding Circle English speakers' attitudes towards different English accents (2007: Chapter 6). The results show that NNSs still firmly adhere to NS norms, even though they use English primarily with other NNSs. Furthermore, Outer Circle varieties, such as Indian or Chinese English, were rated poorly in terms of correctness, pleasantness, and acceptability, in contrast to British English (BE) and American English (AE). Jenkins concludes that Expanding Circle English speakers have a negative view on ELF and conflate the notion of "good" English with NS English. One of the main insights here is that the participants feel pressured to learn (and ultimately master) exclusively American or British English. However, the participants also mention that this pressure would be taken off their shoulders if ELF became more acceptable (Rubdy & Saraceni 2006: 11). This could be achieved if especially teachers distance themselves from conveying ENL norms and raise awareness of how English is actually used instead of teaching prescriptive language norms (Seidlhofer 2011: 56; 73).

From the opposite point of view, Seidlhofer (ibid: 28f) describes the Anglo-Saxon attitudes towards English and ELF. The notion of Inner Circle NSs being the assumed "real owners" of the English language entails a certain right of ownership and protection. Nonetheless, the growth of ELF forces even NS to rethink their role in the ELF communities of practice. The international status of English implies that this language is not the property of native speakers anymore (Widdowson 1994: 389).

This ideological power play between NSs and NNSs of English creates an interesting point of investigation, especially amongst ELF couples. As will be described later (subchapter 2.3.3), the dynamics of a NS-NNS ELF couple in particular might differ

from the native speaker superiority and non-native speaker inferiority notions due to factors of togetherness and, of course, love.

2.1.3 ELF culture and ELF identity

The debate of ownership also leads to discussions on ELF identity and ELF culture, where just as much disagreement amongst scholars can be found. Some ELF scholars argue for a strong bond between language and culture, claiming that English as a lingua franca has basically inherited the “internal Anglo cultural baggage” (Wierzbicka 2006: 312). In that sense, ELF is culturally the same as ENL, whereby British and American English are – again – meant as the norm, putting ELF in an anglophone centre. Other academics, for instance House (2003: 559f), support the view that ELF is completely culture-free. ELF is merely a contact language and provides a neutral code for communication. However, every interaction, inter- or monocultural, involves different humans and is hence categorised as a social practice. Therefore, communication cannot be neutral, as cultural traits inevitably influence any conversation. Yet another perspective is that ELF speakers create their own ELF culture. When speakers of different L1s meet and use the resource ELF to communicate, they co-construct and negotiate an array of cultural practices. These cultural practices are affected by each participants’ L1 linguacultural background and, in turn, affects ELF culture (Baker 2018: 27f).

It is important to add, however, that all these notions of ELF culture mentioned above depend on how culture is defined.

Culture [...] is most commonly viewed from a post-structuralist perspective as multiple, emergent, dynamic and at times contradictory. Individuals simultaneously orientate towards and construct many different identities in communication such as gender, ethnic, generational, professional, cultural, national, regional and religious identities (ibid: 30).

Far too often, however, culture is treated as a stable and presupposed entity, or as something people “belong to”. In this case, culture is seen as national or ethnic identity, which is called the noun phrase “culture with the name” (for example, Russian, Italian, Austrian culture). Another approach to define culture is to treat it as a verb: “to culture” (meaning: to do Russian, to do Italian). This is closely related to the post-structuralist conception and highlights the dynamicity and performance of culture (Klötzl 2014: 30f).

The question now is: where does ELF fit into this picture? As Seidlhofer (2011: 4; 81) notes, ELF is a global lingua franca, and ELF encounters are hence “de-territorialized speech events” where negotiation and hybridity are the guiding principles. ELF is a “free language [...] that is not tied to particular countries and ethnicities” and/or people’s primary cultures. ELF speakers rather use the “virtual language” English (Widdowson 2009: 47), a language disassociated from the culture of its native speakers and use it as a common ground to create and co-construct new cultural practices.

ELF research thus far has uncovered different ways in which identity is performed through ELF. On the one hand, ELF is used to create multiple identities consistent of local L1 identities and global identities. From this perspective, ELF users welcome being in-between cultures and enjoy the freer choice to identity. On the other hand, ELF speakers co-construct shared multilingual and multicultural identities. ELF speakers do not foresee issues with adopting multiple, sometimes even contradictory, identities in a neutral resource (Baker 2018: 31). As can be seen, the definition of ELF identity is subjective; ELF identity is merely an additional, non-binding, somewhat weak (in comparison to national identity, for instance) identity alongside other personal identities. An ELF identity per se is viewed as a “convenient methodological fiction” (Seidlhofer 2011: 71). Speakers, however, seem to be aware of their usage of ELF, and some might even regard it as important for their language identity (Mauranen 2018: 12). To sum up the debate on culture and identity, Klötzl highlights the fluidity and hybridity of ELF encounters: “ELF speakers are doing their own culture in their own English for their own purposes” (2014: 33).

2.1.4 Characteristics of ELF talk

In the previous chapters, the complexity and fluidity of conceptualizing ELF and its culture and identities have been described to make the concepts clearer. The global scale of ELF and its countless influences from speakers all over the world prohibit clear definitions. Describing characteristics of ELF talk are no exception here. The dynamic, rapid, and ever-changing nature of ELF makes it challenging to emphasize particular features of usage. Nonetheless, a few selected characteristics of ELF talk are elaborated below.

An important feature of ELF communication is enhanced explicitness, or also called explication. When difficulties of intelligibility are experienced or anticipated, interlocutors often resort to “paraphrasing, rephrasing and repetition, or syntactic strategies like fronting or tails” (Mauranen 2018: 13). Generally, speakers judge their language use on the communicative fitness principle: structures that are difficult to understand are avoided, whilst structures that are easy to produce are preferred. That, however, does not imply that ELF is a functionally reduced language. ELF can do everything any other language can. Nonetheless, structural simplification is a common feature of ELF, given its numerous influences and increased complexity. Morphological regularization or frequent vocabulary are only two examples thereof. It is to be added however, that wherever simplification takes place, simultaneous complexification is just as possible and probable. Unlike structural simplification, lexical simplification happens considerably less. Since lexis changes and varies rapidly, it would imply added storage and learning difficulty in both languages (the speaker’s L1 and ELF) (ibid: 13f).

As mentioned above, frequently used vocabulary is a popular choice to ensure mutual intelligibility in the lingua franca. From a cognitive viewpoint, high-frequency terms run through a stronger process of entrenchment and are therefore more likely to be used and understood in ELF encounters. Multilingual speakers also refer to their linguacultural background and abstract unfamiliar items (ibid: 15).

Two vital cognitive processes for successful ELF communication are approximation and fixing. By approximating the intended communicative goal sufficiently, hearers are able to abstract meaning and continue the conversation. The counterpart to approximation is called fixing, whereby interlocutors settle on certain well-entrenched, salient expressions for any given context and meaning. It follows the “one form one meaning” principle (ibid: 16f). Whilst approximation creates linguistic creativity and complexity, fixing strives towards reducing it. (ibid: 17).

The principle of idiom describes the phenomenon of speakers having a certain array of prefabricated structures ready at their disposal. Therefore, these structures are more likely to be used in conversations, as it is more economical to use existing ones than inventing new phrases. These idioms can, however, cause interferences and nonunderstandings in ELF encounters, which is a frequent feature observed particularly in NS and NNS conversations. When a NS indulges in native speaker

idiomaticity that is likely to be unknown to the NNS interlocutor, communication might fail. This speech event is termed “unilateral idiomaticity”. Nonetheless, unilateral idiomaticity might not always be detrimental, but can create learning opportunities for both NSs and NNSs (Seidlhofer 2011: 130; 134).

The last feature of ELF talk is the exploitation of redundancy. Grammatical forms such as the third person -s or plural markers are disregarded, as it does not impede mutual understanding. Once again, the communicative function is the guiding principle in ELF conversations, instead of grammatical ENL conformity (ibid: 144).

2.2 The domain: the private English as a lingua franca

2.2.1 The private ELF

The importance and the features of ELF have been highlighted in the previous chapters. It can be concluded that ELF is widely used all across the globe, amongst all kinds of people and all sorts of domains. Whilst ELF has been widely researched in the domains of academic, scientific, and business encounters, the private domain has been rather neglected so far, even though the number of private ELF acquaintances, friends, or partners has increased steadily with the rise of globalization. The following subchapter is concerned with ELF in the private domain.

There are several reasons why there are differences in these domains and what sets the private domain apart. As mentioned before, the main goal of ELF encounters and conversations is mutual intelligibility. Pietikäinen (2018: 324) believes that romantic partners focus greatly on the “right kind of understanding” and give less value to how this endeavor is achieved, or what sort of image is created of oneself (or the partner). The only way that this is possible is because the partners know each other very well, and additionally feel strong affections for one another. That is precisely the one of the most salient differences to institutionalized talk or formal academic or business encounters: the couple’s love and affection for each other creates an intimate environment for ELF interaction. Formal encounters, on the other hand, are marked by polite and face-saving pre-emptive strategies, other-repair, and co-construction. These strategies are less attractive to equal, loving partners. There are many more differences amongst the domains, but for the purpose of this paper it is important to

know that the intimate setting of ELF partners, works differently to conversations where the interlocutors barely know each other (ibid: 324). The purpose of the following subchapter is to describe the private ELF domain in more detail, with a focus on ELF couples.

2.2.2 Language choice and awareness

As English as a lingua franca has gained significance on a global scale, it is firstly interesting to consider the motivations behind partners for using English as their main means of communication. It might seem straightforward to choose the world language English as the language of coupledness. Nevertheless, in her investigations on English-German couples, Piller (2002: 27) found out that

[...] marriage to an English-speaking partner did not inevitably lead to assimilation to English, and if it did, it did not result from “a mindless and un-questioning acceptance of the dominance of English. Instead, there is always a struggle, at least at some level, a concern [...] to what might be sacrificed by abandoning German”.

As can be seen, there are more factors to be considered in terms of language choice. One factor, for instance, is the place of residence of the couple. The main community language is generally termed the “majority language” and, respectively, the other involved language(s) the “minority language(s)” (ibid: 27; 75). Couples, however, do not automatically choose the majority language of their environment as their couple language since proficiency plays a crucial role here. If the partners do not understand each other’s first languages equally well, partners will most likely resort to the language with the higher proficiency levels on both sides (ibid: 34f). Another factor is the perceived prestige of the languages involved. Tendency towards the more prestigious language or solidarity with the less prestigious one can both be found amongst bilingual (or multilingual) couples. Another factor of language choice is gender-related: hypotheses exist that the L1 of the male partner would dominate. Many more aspects can influence the language choice of couples, but the most significant one is proficiency (ibid: 22).

Pietikäinen (2018: 325f) notes that couples choose their language habitually at the beginning of their relationship. Since a lot of intercultural couples use English as the only common lingua franca (or the most proficient one anyway) to get to know each other, the couple language is determined at a very early stage, governed by necessity

and proficiency. Changing the couple tongue at a later stage in their relationship has been found mostly unsuccessful and unattractive in the first place. Despite having acquired a decent level in the partner's L1s, the respondents of Pietikäinen's study commented that switching the couple language completely seemed like an immense amount of work, considering the simplicity of English and the lack of valid reasons to change when communication already functions well. Another reason why changing the couple tongue seems to be challenging is the intertwined relationship between language and performance of culture and identity. "ELF couples have become familiar with each other in English, their couple identity has mostly been constructed, negotiated and nurtured in English, and so their couple identity is inextricably, although perhaps unintentionally, tied to the English language [...]" (ibid: 326). A reported valid reason for changing the couple tongue is, however, to practice and improve the other partner's L1.

Couples carefully consider their language choices in different contexts. For instance, couples reported that in certain situations, for example when they did not want their friends or family to understand something, they intentionally choose a different language. In their togetherness, however, this is seldomly done in order to avoid exclusion of their partners. This indicates the level of language awareness amongst ELF couples: mutual understanding is an important factor, thus, if the code changes, this factor might be jeopardized. Nonetheless, in long-term romantic relationships, partners are found to code-switch on a regular basis for various reasons, such as language demonstration, clarification in the L1 or LX, replacing "nontranslatables" (terms that cannot be translated easily in another language) or message emphasis. Pietikäinen found that these code-switches are not only unproblematic for ELF partners, but in fact, partners code-switch "for fun and for terms of endearment" (ibid: 322). As long as mutual understanding and smooth conversation is ensured, code-switching is widely accepted and welcomed amongst partners (ibid: 327).

An important notion that should be added here is the unaware, automatic code-switching amongst ELF partners. Automatic code alternation is "unmarked by any signs of awareness of switching such as hesitation, hedging or flagging from the speaker" (Pietikäinen 2014: 9). When ELF partners speak with each other, they can "let down the mental barriers" between the languages at their disposition and make use of their entire linguistic repertoire, with the assumption that their partner will decode the messages correctly (ibid: 9). To conclude, partners frequently create their own

language system that often resembles that of the translanguaging practice. Whilst partners are constantly aware of their own choice of language, words, and structures, as well as the other partner's comprehension, ELF couples also tend to code-switch automatically without explicit awareness. Unless these code-switches hinder mutual understanding, ELF partners are flexible with one another and accommodate to achieve successful and smooth conversations (Pietikäinen 2018: 322f).

2.2.3 Interpersonal positioning

Conversations amongst couples are marked by some pretext or motivation. Swoboda and Klötzl (2019: 41) believe that the pretext of any romantic relationship is “bringing their individual worlds into convergence with the purpose of establishing a joint couple identity that emerges and changes in the process of communication itself”. In short, a couple's pretext is to achieve “togetherness”. In order to accomplish this new couple identity, partners balance between their own and the other partner's identity, values or culture. From a linguistic perspective, this negotiation can be described by the theory of interpersonal positioning.

The theory of interpersonal positioning is based on Bakhtin's polyphony, which describes that any language use is interpersonally motivated. Any text is meaningless until an individual's culture and/or motivations attribute interpretations towards it. This process can be achieved by positioning oneself, or what Bakhtin calls the “voice”: he defines it as “a realized ideational/social position in the world” (1997: 364). This position – wherever on the continuum it might be – stands in direct relation to the interlocutor's position. Again, the progressive form “positioning” is the preferred term to highlight the flexibility and discard notions of a stable entity of one's position/voice. Thus, “polyphony [is] a dialogic process of negotiating – actualizing and realizing – voices/positions through language” (Swoboda & Klötzl 2019: 51). This concept of a dialogic process fuses two related notions. First, the relationship between the producer of a text and the receiver, and secondly, the relationship between the previous and subsequent utterances of a dialogue. From this point of view, communication is influenced by dialogic voices, as well as by an interplay between what has been uttered before and what will be uttered later. In that sense, Bakhtin perceives communication as an open-ended process with infinite potential for interpretations. Nevertheless, Bakhtin also highlights that communication heavily depends on previous texts and

anticipated texts, meaning that new creative language (in this process of dialogicality) is mostly based on conformity (familiar structures to both interlocutors) (ibid: 55f).

Based on the concept of Bakhtin's polyphony, the positioning theory in the field of psychology describes "the discursive process whereby people are located in conversations as observably and subjectively coherent participants in jointly produced storylines" (Davies & Rom 1999: 37). In that sense, the positioning of a person entails certain rights and duties which create patterns in story lines. An example of a story line relevant to this paper is ELF partners meeting each other for the first time: they establish contact, decide on English as their lingua franca, exchange looks and words and start to get to know each other. Partner 1 has the right to ask partner 2 out on a date, whereas partner 2 has the right to respond (or not respond) to this proposition (and so forth). Story lines adhere to specific genres and social conventions but are never fixed routines in nature (Swoboda & Klötzl 2019: 58f).

To sum up the positioning theory, the following features can be highlighted:

- Positioning is dependent on context. The context is dependent on whatever the interlocutors deem as important for their story line.
- Positioning is a flexible process whereby multiple positions can be taken on at the same time (even contradictory ones).
- Communication inevitably entails positioning. It is impossible to communicate without positioning oneself (ibid: 59).

Before relating the interpersonal positioning theory to ELF partners, it is important to consider Widdowson's addition to this theory in order to fully understand the continuum of positioning for the respondents of this study. Widdowson underlines that communicative purpose is an interplay between two universal principles: the co-operative principle and the territorial principle. The first one describes the drive for socio-cultural contact, whereas the latter entails the interest and protection of one's own individual values or cultural reality (hence, the personal territory). When humans merge their cultural reality with others, they find themselves in a constant interplay between those two principles: while the co-operative principle enables communication and data exchange, the territorial principle safeguards one's space (Widdowson 1984: 81-94). This added theory highlights once again the fluid notion of interpersonal

positioning: people's relationships can be seen as a constant negotiation between the two principles (Klötzl 2015: 102). The established positions on this continuum are either created through shared linguistic means (or as Bakhtin terms it "accessibility" to certain duties, powers, or story lines), or through personal decisions to not conform to these prefabricated standards (in Bakhtin's terminology "acceptability") (Bakhtin 1997: 365). From that point of view, interpersonal positioning operates on two levels. The social level (or genre level) describes these prefabricated story lines, whereas the individual level describes the freedom for a person to reject conformity and co-operation. The following example illustrates the aforementioned interplay: ELF partner 1 asks ELF partner 2 for their number, and partner 2 ultimately agrees to reveal it (conformity to a prefabricated story line). However, ELF partner 2 has a variety of other possibilities at their disposal: they could misunderstand partner 1 and lead the conversation in a different direction; they could refuse to reveal their number for any particular reason, undermining partner 1's communicative purpose, and so on (non-conformity and no co-operation) (Swoboda & Klötzl 2019: 70f).

2.3 ELF couples

2.3.1 Microculture & togetherness

The question is now how this interpersonal positioning theory exactly fits into the study of ELF couples. From the pre-established viewpoint by Bakhtin and Widdowson, ELF couples are in a constant process of interpersonal positioning. The partners use ELF as a linguistic resource to achieve a certain pretext (or communicative goal) to establish and manage the relationship (Swoboda & Klötzl 2019: 11). Klötzl underlines that this dynamic negotiation process is not about their differences in nationality but goes beyond this limited view of culture and refers to Widdowson's cooperativeness and territoriality imperatives (Klötzl 2014: 31). The partners work together to, on the one hand, receive acknowledgement and approval of their individual selves (or better: their positions); in other words, they let their partner enter their territory whilst protecting it at the same time. It is also the process of making their messages accessible to their partner. But the partners also collaborate to, on the other hand, create acceptable messages to each other. To put it another way, they cooperate so that both parties accept the intended meaning of a certain message. One way of

achieving acceptability is, for example, to use other languages than English in order to enter the partner's private space (hence, the partner's L1) (Swoboda & Klötzl 2019: 131f).

From this point of view, "ELF partners need to lower the barriers of their individual cultural spaces to create their own shared English 'idiomatic territory' and bring their own schematic assumptions, beliefs, and values into their ELF" (Klötzl 2014: 32). They do so to create mutual understanding, but also to negotiate their relationship and affect each other. This is what Widdowson refers to as the pretext of an intimate relationship: "the general achievement of domestic togetherness and closeness" (Widdowson 2004: 78f).

From a linguistic perspective, the couples create their togetherness via inventing and creating their own private language. The partners bring both their individual "contextual frames of reference into convergence", then negotiate and ultimately create their shared reference frame, which is motivated by their communicative purpose of intimacy and togetherness (Klötzl 2014: 43). They put less value on the actual languages they speak or their individual cultures and put more emphasis on their cooperation to achieve a shared ground of communication. The linguistic resources as a basis are used flexibly (ELF, partner 1's L1, partner 2's L1, other common languages, or even body language). The focus lies on the pragmatic effects: rapport, humour, or negotiation of culture and meaning are only a few common effects in ELF couple talk. Hybrid forms (a mixture of both spoken languages in a relationship) are also frequently found in ELF couple talk and are seen as a "symbolic verbal manifestation of 'their' language" (ibid: 43). In any case, the higher order pretext is to achieve intimacy and togetherness, which is a defining feature of the private ELF domain (Swoboda & Klötzl 2019: 151f).

From a cultural perspective, ELF couples create their own microculture. The fact that partners with different language backgrounds also do not necessarily share the same national culture does not impede getting to know each other on an intimate level. Even though partners cannot relate to each other on various levels or in various areas, for instance, reminiscing on similar childhood experiences or pop culture, they do have numerous possibilities for comparing their experiences and, in a second step, create their own shared ones. Hence, "they create a joint cultural in-group through sharing experiences, developing own traditions and negotiating values and practices", which

is also more commonly termed “microculture” (Pietikäinen 2018: 328). This process is not completely unproblematic: ELF couples report that cultural nuances are often interpreted incorrectly in ELF, especially at the beginning of their relationships. Moreover, culture clashes tend to happen when a couple’s microculture comes into contact with other cultures (for instance, extended families). Especially in these situations, the couples realize that their joint culture is not a sum of each other’s merged parts, but more so a negotiated and jointly constructed entity that has been established over time (ibid: 329).

The role of ELF is especially interesting in this process, tracing back to earlier discussions on the relationship between language and culture. Both ELF partners bring their cultural values as default values to the table and negotiate until they reach the optimal balance between the cooperative and territorial imperatives, between accessibility and acceptability. Klötzl suggests that ELF is not directly involved in establishing this balance, since English is also not the first language for most partners. ELF rather engages “in the process of territorialization: a pragmatic process of adaptation and accommodation of English by drawing upon any available resources, whereby ELF users reload the language with their own cultural values for particular pretextual purposes” (Klötzl 2014: 33).

ELF couple talk can therefore be seen as a complex, dynamic negotiation of territorial and cooperative maneuvers. The pragmatics of their conversations are more important than defining individual languages, terms, or cultural values. In other words, the modification of English as their lingua franca, in all its hybridity and influence from both L1’s, is more so a pretext-driven process than a culturally oriented one. That does not imply, however, that their English is culture neutral: the process of territorialization describes the acculturation of English (in this case: ENL) for their own purposes (microculture and togetherness), and in return, the partners reload English with their own couple language and modify it, again, for their own purposes (ibid: 45f). From this point of view, ELF couple interactions appear to be no different than any other couple interaction. Even monolingual couples draw from their common virtual language and modify it to achieve intimacy. The distinguishing feature about ELF couples is that they have more linguistic resources (often multiple virtual languages) to draw from and, in return, adapt it for their domestic life. Since English is the most common language spoken in these homes, ELF is also affected the most (Swoboda & Klötzl 2019: 152).

2.3.2 Characteristics of ELF couple talk

In this subchapter, I would like to get even more specific and discuss some particular characteristics of how ELF partners communicate with each other. A special feature of ELF couple talk is its endurability, which is established only after years of spending time together and having an everyday life with someone. All the couples in my study have reached this stage of utter familiarity, meaning that their linguistic choices rarely change anymore at that time. Only external factors, for instance, moving to a different country or having a baby are considered critical times to reevaluate language choices. In any other case, the couple language is established habitually at the beginning of the relationship and stays the same (Pietikäinen 2014: 2).

Even though the couples mostly communicate using ELF, code switching to other common (or even exclusive) languages is a prevalent feature of ELF couple talk. The research into code switching in ELF couple communication offers a variety of different theories. Whilst the German-English couples in Piller's study (2002: 143-148) generally condemn code-switching, the participants in Dumaning's study (2010: 229) believe that code-switching can signal solidarity, collaboration, acknowledgement or minimize face-threatening acts. Pietikäinen adds that couples code-switch "for demonstrating use of language [...], automatic code-switching, where switches occurred without flagging and passed without specific attention, replacing/clarifying unfamiliarities [...], replacing nontranslatables [...] and emphasizing the message" (Pietikäinen 2012: 11; Pietikäinen 2014: 6f). House (2013: 3), on the other hand, sees code-switching in ELF as a trademark of linguistic deficiencies, but Cogo (2012: 290) disagrees by stating that code-switching enhances mutual understanding, and additionally, code-switching is done for no particular reason sometimes. Whilst code-switching to one's L1 has the power to actively signal culture (Pözl 2003: 4), the high frequency of code-switches amongst ELF partners indicates that not all instances are flagged, but instead are used because a word is more readily available at that time, or because communication might otherwise halt. Another defining reason of code-switching is for humorous purposes or terms of endearment, as the couples in my study reported. This defining feature of ELF couple talk is only possible due to the linguistic relaxedness of ELF couples and their "let-it-pass strategy", as these automatic code-switches frequently go unnoticed (Pietikäinen 2014: 18f). Klötzl (2014: 45) adds that as long as couples create their "shared affective territory", it is up to them how multilingual their ELF will be.

More features of ELF couple talk are pre-emptive and repair strategies for possible misunderstandings. The fact that ELF couples are obliged to use a lingua franca can create challenges for them. Most of the reported misunderstandings in Pietikäinen's study (2018: 324) are vagueness-induced or due to lack of situational support (e.g.: missing objects or people). She also notes that the familiarity of partners poses a disadvantage for them: the assumption that their partner will understand them no matter how they formulate their message often results in "insufficient contextualization cues" (ibid: 330). Mustajoki (2012: 228) calls this phenomenon the "common ground fallacy". Nevertheless, ELF couples have reported using the following strategies to avoid such misunderstandings, such as

frequently applied, direct clarification questions (such as "what", "who") and minimal incomprehension tokens (e.g., "hm?", "aah?"); echoing of problematic utterances either verbatim (e.g., "it's the one you bought the first time" – "first time?") or with detailing information (e.g., "in the U.S. – or in China?"); mitigated paraphrases (e.g., "you mean X?"); active self-repair of possibly problematic utterances in the form of clarifying, repeating or paraphrasing [...]; extra-linguistic means such as acting out, showing and onomatopoeia (Pietikäinen 2018: 323f).

Contrary to popular beliefs that intercultural couples are affected more by misunderstandings than monolingual couples, these strategies actually keep the number of misunderstandings observably low. Piller too (2002: 152) was unable to find evidence of an increased number of misunderstandings between English-German couples. Nevertheless, the couples in my study reported that misunderstandings and non-understandings occur on a regular basis. In normal communicative situations, misunderstandings occur due to a violation of a Gricean cooperative principles (quantity, quality, relation and/or manner) (Grice 1989: 26f). However, inferences are to be considered within their context and their culture. In the case of ELF couples, it can be assumed that (at least) two different cultures are at stake in any conversation, which might be one reason for misunderstandings. Pietikäinen (2016: 193) argues that "misunderstandings mainly derive from lexical features such as insufficient vocabulary or atypical pronunciation". Both aspects are valid reasons for these occurrences. In any case, ELF partners' communication behaviour can be assigned to Giles's accommodation theory (Giles 2008: 164) whereby partners either reduce or intensify linguistic or cultural differences to receive approval from their partner (a parallel to the cooperative imperative by Widdowson). Specific accommodation strategies are topic fronting, repetition, or collaborative completion of sentences. Another important aspect

to consider here is that vagueness-induced misunderstandings barely interrupt the conversation flow of ELF partners and are rarely considered problematic, since a simple clarification is usually sufficient. Furthermore, mishearings play a major role as well. Other frequent instances are intentional misunderstandings for humorous purposes (Pietikäinen 2016: 200f).

To sum up, what sets ELF couple talk apart from other domains (e.g.: business or academic ELF domain) is the high level of respect for one another, the linguistic relaxedness and the couple's closeness. Their creativity and countless strategies to save face in front of one another and avoid misunderstandings defines them as quite resourceful communicators (ibid: 195). On the continuum between cooperation and territoriality, ELF partners side with the former, from a linguistic point of view. Even though the couples of this study find themselves in a stable stage of ELF contact and conversation scripts have settled, the individuals constantly work hard to be explicit, precise, and forthcoming to facilitate communication (ibid: 208f).

2.3.3 Native speakers & non-native speakers

Four out of six couples of my interview study are in fact couples with one English native speaker and one non-native speaker. Therefore, it seems worth exploring this special dynamic in ELF relationships.

ELF research in general has been concerned with notions of ideology and power. To be more specific, "standard language ideology", "native speakerism" and "the Anglophone centre" are only three notions that create power imbalances in ELF conversations (Baker 2018: 31). Seidlhofer (2011: 5) adds that the terms "native speaker" and "non-native speaker" are problematic in themselves due to the connotations they evoke: native speakers are from the inner circle and speak "correct" English, whilst non-native English speakers have a "faulty" English full of deficits and mistakes. According to this view, NSs are immediately put into a position of superiority, and NNSs involuntarily into a position of inferiority. The view of ENL as an international language (instead of ELF) privileges NSs and puts all foreign learners at a disadvantage (ibid: 55). The conceptual issue at hand is that NNSs frequently feel the need to strive for native speaker-like skills and see it as the norm. Moreover, if anything deviates from this norm, it is immediately categorized as a deficit. However, in ELF conversations, mutual intelligibility is dependent not only on linguistic accuracy, but

also on factors such as body language, facial expressions, or mediating ethnic, racial, linguacultural differences appropriately (ibid: 35). Therefore, Seidlhofer pleads for new neutral terms, because as long as ELF is approached with an ENL mindset, NNSs will remain in the position of inferiority (ibid: 38f).

This power imbalance amongst NSs and NNSs is a product of both parties, however. On the one hand, NSs cannot seem to reconcile that they lost the ownership to their language and fail to acknowledge the global status of English. The creative language ELF users is not to be seen as signs of deficits or errors, but to be analysed as an addition to the existing virtual language to enable and facilitate language contact on a global scale (ibid: 28f). On the other hand, NNSs suffer from an inferiority complex. The notions of nativeness and standard are completely conflated, which renders NNSs more insecure about their own skills (ibid: 52; 58). Seidlhofer (ibid: 41) adds that

It will be obvious that simply being a native speaker of English is not an advantage in ELF interactions - if anything, it is more likely to be a drawback because [...] it is non-native ELF speakers who often find it easier to use English appropriately in intercultural settings.

One specific example in that context is the case of unilateral idiomaticity. In ELF interactions, NSs (but also sometimes NNSs) indulge in idiomaticity and behave un-cooperatively. Thus, they use idioms or phrases specific to their culture and/or language, even though intelligibility might be jeopardized or impeded for the interlocutor. Whilst this behaviour is not always detrimental, as it can create learning opportunities, it does convey strong connections to the territorial imperative of NSs (ibid: 134ff; Pietikäinen 2016: 192).

The partners in my study perceive themselves to be all highly proficient in English and frequently replicate NS idiomatic language use. This behaviour also cannot be considered as “territorial encroachment”, because in an ELF context, cultural values are detached from the virtual language. Rather, it can be traced back to their extensive exposure to NS culture and language with their partner (Seidlhofer 2011: 132).

So how can the power dynamics in an NS and NNS couple be described? Piller (2002: 5) highlights that the private, intimate relationship between two people does not necessarily represent the dynamics in society at large. The roles are constantly being negotiated and repositioned. Whilst Pietikäinen (2018: 324) argues that the mutual appreciation and love for one another makes ELF partners – no matter who is the NS

or NNS – completely equal, it will be interesting to analyse the attitudes and experiences of my participants with regards to notions of superiority, inferiority, and equality.

2.3.4 Characteristics of couple talk

Characteristics of conversations with an intimate partner cannot be conflated with conversations with any other interlocutor. Intimate partners are people who share feelings, emotions, and memories on a daily basis. They are constantly in negotiation – linguistically and culturally – and they prioritize togetherness and closeness over territoriality and individuality. Thus, intimate partners have a unique way of communicating.

Multiple researchers have studied the language use of couples (be it monolingual or multilingual couples). Whilst Tannen (1986 or 1990) has conducted foundational work on how couples communicate with one another from a gender studies perspective, Duck (1993) has investigated couples from a cognitive angle. The theoretical framework used for this paper has been provided by Leisi (1983): he investigated intimate couples from a purely linguistic perspective. Even though Leisi's research has been conducted almost 40 years ago, the findings for face-to-face couple interaction are still relevant up to today.

In his research, Leisi claims that intimate relationships are heavily guided by and based on language. In an attempt to analyse and categorize the language of long-term intimate partners, Leisi lists five defining characteristics of couple talk: language as a private code, language as an erotic stimulant, love according to texts, interferences and misunderstandings, and language as a means of memories (Leisi 1983: 8f).

The first category is *language as a private code*. Long-term partners seem to have a secret language, where certain words have deviating or even altogether different meanings. The language use amongst the partners is creative and high in productivity; neologisms as well as borrowed words are common structures observed in couple conversations. The question is now if love influences and creates this private code or vice versa. Leisi's answer is that this dynamic is neither cause nor effect, but rather a vital part of the whole. Gazes, facial expressions, mimics, gestures, and touch also belong to the private code of couple communication. A specific linguistic example of

the private code are nicknames. Their function is not only to express endearment or affection, but also to mark a new chapter in their lives and establish loyalty and belonging (cf. the co-operative imperative by Widdowson). Couples mostly tend to use nicknames originating from their personal collective memory, experiences, or environment. Whilst nicknames are rich in diminutives, metaphors, animal names, erotically attractive body parts, or sweets, couples – particularly bilingual couples – frequently invent their own, making use of their entire collective language repertoire. Furthermore, nicknames can change on a regular basis, dependent on common experiences or length of the relationship. Overall, Leisi believes that the language of couples is more creative than the standard language (i.e.: amongst acquaintances). However, couples do not only invent nicknames for each other, but also invent (or mostly reinvent) words, structures or phrases that are only intelligible to the couple. Whilst some couples only have a handful of these private formulas, others literally create their own dialect. Leisi distinguishes two different kinds of private words or phrases: those invented by the couple and those imported from their environment. The latter category is usually more common. Another aspect of the private code of couples are language games or word games. Leisi connects this behaviour back to childish and playful elements in mature relationships (ibid: 13-50).

The second category is called *language as an erotic stimulant*. Leisi believes that language is necessary for achieving erotic happiness in a relationship. Language as an erotic stimulant is not solely limited to so-called “dirty talk” in the bedroom but is more so described as an interplay of calming down and unsettling the partner. The change in emotional states leads to vulnerability, which is the core concept of language as an erotic stimulant. Vulnerability is frequently achieved by annoying the partner, teasing, rallying or similar games. In a second step, the script is completed by giving compliments. Giving and receiving compliments is almost a ritual amongst life-long partners. Whilst giving compliments is not only a statement of acknowledgement but also an implicit wish to deal with something (for instance a body part) more intensely, receiving compliments seems to be – even in an intimate relationship – an act of coyness or embarrassment. Another component of an erotic ritual is the love confession. Partners have a fundamental necessity to express their love and reconfirm it over time. Another specific speech act in this area is breaking taboo topics. An intimate partner is usually the first choice to discuss uncomfortable, erotic, risky, or

indecent topics. Lastly, Leisi mentions that language as an erotic stimulant can be separated by time and place. The verbalized act can take place in advance of anything physical and vice versa (ibid: 57-70).

The third category of couple talk is called *love according to texts*. Texts, such as books, songs, poems, movies, or TV series, have certain scripts or structures (emotional, acting, and relational scripts) that lovers copy for their own private relationship. To be more specific, partners directly transfer linguistic formulations from texts into the private code of their relationship (the second category of “borrowed/invented” private code). This category tends to have a negative connotation, because partners often refuse to admit that their love is anything but unique and original. Nevertheless, imitation and copying are natural processes. Moreover, partners usually do not identify with a whole character of a movie, but rather with a certain cultural script, a line, or a certain emotion, termed punctual identification. Leisi admits that this category is especially difficult to research because only a few couples will admit to having idols or “stolen goods” in their relationship. Overall, these borrowed scripts add to the feeling of togetherness. These scripts are usually humorous, playful, and mocking, but also loving and emotional. Many couples use these prefabricated scripts to express themselves in difficult situations because it tends to be easier to convey important points. The only prerequisite of using a certain text in the coupledness is that the text is experienced together (either both partners are already familiar with it, they acquire it together or one partner transfers the knowledge to the other) (ibid: 74-105).

The fourth category is concerned with *interferences*. Leisi highlights that there are a multitude of different types of interferences, but he exclusively investigates the ones of a linguistic nature. Interferences affect the relationship, but in most cases will not disrupt it. In fact, some interferences or misunderstandings can strengthen it. Interferences can occur due to differences in code (whether completely different languages or dialects) or insufficiency in the shared code of either or both partners (in this paper’s case: ELF). Whilst misunderstandings can occur on a morphological, phonological, syntactical, or semantic level, the most frequent interferences are found in phonology and lexical semantics. An example of the latter category, relevant for ELF couples is, that a certain word or element in code A has a neutral or positive meaning, but has negative connotations in code B. Another typical interference is when an element is an active, productive part of partner A’s language repertoire, but partner B

can only recall it passively. Leisi adds that factors like intonation and pronunciation can be areas of interferences too. Moreover, stereotypes can play a major role, especially amongst intercultural couples. Social differences can be reflected in differing linguistic codes and may cause misunderstandings as well. If both partners have insufficient language skills to communicate properly with one another (for instance in their common lingua franca English), interferences are likely to take place, since the partners do not know how to tell each other how they feel, what they like or dislike – hence, basic communication strategies to make a relationship work. No matter what the language backgrounds or proficiency levels are, it is up to the partners to be specific and keep misconceptions at a minimum. Leisi sees another type of interference amongst intimate partners, namely those caused by speech acts. For instance, generalisations are common linguistic interferences. When partners are angry or annoyed, expressions like “always” or “never” (“you always forget... you never do”) arise and can cause misconceptions. Other examples are indirect requests, imperatives, or humour. Ironical paraphrasing or direct quotes can be formulated in a hurtful or untruthful way and cause interference. Generally, conflicts arise frequently depending on the amount of verbalisation. Being silent, for instance, is constantly interpreted by the other partner and carries meaning; the other extreme is verbalising every thought and emotion. If the partners are not on the in agreeance about their amount of verbalisation, that is when interferences typically happen. The same is valid for the amount of metacommunication: if couples do not talk sufficiently about metacommunication, they talk too much about it, or partner A feels like they want to talk more about it than partner B, these scenarios can evoke linguistic problems as well (ibid: 110-144).

The last category of Leisi’s couple talk characteristics is *language and memory*. Memories that involve verbalized language are generally more deeply engrained than memories without language. Even though emotions (beautiful and traumatic ones alike) can stay intensely vivid in our memories, those that involve language are rooted higher in our consciousness. In terms of couple memories, Leisi differentiates between preservation of the partner and preservation of their microculture. Through language, older couples (or more advanced couples) identify themselves with joint memories of their younger versions. They preserve their microculture and protect it from vanity. Couples frequently ask each other “do you remember, back then...” and validate their

memories time and again. Therefore, memories have two different points of language use: the language used at the time of the experience (if language was involved) and the language used to relive and remember memories together. In terms of preservation of their partner, Leisi believes that language can keep lost partners (whether parted or separated) alive in their memories (ibid: 145-152).

Leisi's model has been developed primarily for monolingual couples. The participants in my study, however, are all multilingual speakers who choose ELF as the language of their relationship. Navigating a monolingual relationship (linguistically) is already a complex process, as can be seen from Leisi's insights. But "add different languages and cultures to the relationship, and the crossroad becomes a very busy intersection" (Piller 2002: 5). So, what does Leisi's framework mean for the respondents of my interview study? How can an ELF perspective be added to these five highlighted characteristics?

The first characteristic is language as a private code. The previous section (subchapter 2.3.2) has shown how ELF couples create their private code: by drawing from both linguistic repertoires, code-switching or creative language use. Nicknames or secret language structures may be used in either commonly spoken language of the partners.

In terms of language as an erotic stimulant, the partners can again choose between all their spoken languages for stimulating or cooling down their relationship. Since this is a very intimate and emotional area, the language choice is respectively guided by emotional principles. Whilst some researchers found that NNS partners sometimes feel more emotionally detached in English and therefore feel freer in their word choices, ELF is also the main language of the relationship – hence, the language in which the partners discuss everything else in life (Kinger 2004: 160; Klötzl 2014: 36). Pavlenko (2005: 131) sees that partners prefer to use their first language when expressing intimate feelings or emotions. For example, partners have reported that saying "I love you" in their L1 carries more emotional meaning than in an L2 (in this case: English). Especially the female participants in her study claim that the words "I love you" carry no emotional weight in English, as they are uttered so frequently. It will be interesting to see what the participants of my study perceive in terms of language choice for intimate and erotic situations.

The third characteristic is love according to texts. Since English is the lingua franca of these couples, the texts used in their relationship are presumably also in English. In case a couple actively (or passively) uses a text from either partner's L1 in their relationship, it shall be elaborated in which context or area it is used. Generally, the partner's L1 is used for humorous purposes, to show respect and acknowledgment, pre-empt misunderstandings or simply to learn their language (Pietikäinen 2018: 322).

The fourth characteristic is concerned with interferences. As I have established in the previous section (subchapter 2.3.2), misunderstandings, misconceptions and interferences form an active part of ELF relationships. Even Leisi mentions that differences in codes can create interferences. Nevertheless, Piller's study (2002: 152) confirmed that misunderstandings are in fact not as common amongst ELF couples as previously assumed due to their vast repertoire of pre-emptive and repair strategies.

The last category is language as a means of memories. In the span of their relationship, ELF couples create memories in multiple languages. A study by Marian & Neisser (2000: 361) has shown that their participants remember more when "the language at retrieving matches the language at encoding" for two distinct reasons: the first is due to associations to specific words in the same language, and the second is due to the "overall effect of linguistic ambiance". The question is now whether ELF partners remember more in their common lingua franca English or their individual L1s. Moreover, if they try to recount memories to their families or friends, is it difficult for them to translate them and shift to a new code?

Communicating emotions

Intimate couples frequently find themselves in language situations where they communicate their innermost feelings and emotions. These interactions are especially interesting, because with intercultural couples, an interplay of various language and culture backgrounds and scripts can be observed. This "clash" could lead to disruptions in the encoding and decoding processes of communication. Nevertheless, communicating emotions is a vital process of co-constructing the couple identity and contesting current feelings to the partner. For this paper, I have selected two areas of emotional talk that are relevant to the couples of my study: communicating anger, frustration, and arguments, and communicating love and affection.

“Very often, the person one feels the deepest love and affection for is also likely to be the most irritating person in one’s life” (Piller 2002: 3) is a quote that captures the ongoing negotiations of couple talk. Feeling frustrated, being angry or having discussions and arguments are as much part of “doing coupledness” as expressing love, laughing, and feeling happy. In his studies on language choice for the expression of anger, Dewaele (2006: 146f) found that multilingual speakers prefer their L1 over any L2s due to the emotional attachment. This can change, however, after extended socialization to the L2 language and culture. Generally, the language choice for expressing anger and frustration is dependent on proficiency, social environment, and the language learning process. The participants who have purely acquired an L2 in an institutionalized context reported lacking proper anger scripts and repertoires in the foreign language (ibid: 148). The same is valid for the use of swear words or taboo words. The perceived emotional force of such words is reportedly higher in the L1 than LX (with the exception of extended socialization of LX). Multilingual speakers have said to be insecure when using swear words in an LX due to the “danger of undesirable perlocutionary effects” (Dewaele 2004: 219).

In the case of a NS-NNS couple, having arguments or discussions – a delicate language situation where correct wording and precise expressions are crucial – creates power dynamics between the partners. The native speaker is immediately in a privileged position, whilst the NNS might struggle for the correct terms and expressions in such situations (Piller 2002: 154). NNSs have an “adversary” with superior linguistic skills, which means that “the use of anger scripts in confrontations with native speakers is limited to those L2 users who have had the time and opportunity to acquire the nuances and the linguistic and conceptual fluency to carry it off” (Dewaele 2006: 148f).

“Fighting is relatively easier than dealing with the aftermath, which often requires us to swallow our pride and reaffirm our love for our partner” (Takahashi 2010: 204f). Dewaele (2010: 11) adds that “the one thing that nobody would wish to get wrong is a declaration of love”, pointing out the trickiness of expressing love in a bilingual/lingua franca setting. Expressing love is a cultural, emotional script that may resist precise translation and therefore may cause misconceptions in ELF couples (Ożańska-Ponikwia 2019: 495). Whilst perceiving and expressing emotions is mostly an innate and universal process, every culture embodies love linguistically in a different way. Dewaele (2008: 1753) attempted measuring the emotional force of saying “I love you”

in multilinguals' language use and found that it was the strongest in their L1. Pavlenko (2008: 157) suggests that factors such as context of language acquisition (institutionalized or naturalistic), language dominance, and extended socialization to an L2 culture can increase emotionality of an L2. This implies that advanced users of ELF may feel more emotional in their lingua franca because of the history, microculture and togetherness built in English. It will be interesting to see how the couples of my study perceive emotionality in ELF and their L1s respectively. It is, however, important to highlight that expressing emotions produces a very personal reality and that there are "no set rules, as some bilinguals prefer to use one language, some the other, and some continue to use both of them" (Grosjean 2010: 133).

Communicating humour

The last aspect relevant to the ELF couples of my study is communicating humour in a lingua franca setting. Humour is a "bonding agent" in intimate relationships: it can create intimacy, regulate stress, improve serious situations, or add to a couple's microculture. Humour is, however, linguistically and culturally bound to certain in-groups (e.g.: a country, a speech community etc.) (Grosjean 2021: 219). The question arises now how ELF partners communicate humour effectively when there are multiple frames of reference of several cultures at stake. How can partners understand, convey, and appreciate each other's humour when it is quite likely very different to their own?

Chiaro (2009: 228) researched long-term bilingual and bicultural couples and their use of humour. Her findings include that in normal conversation, couples tend to use one specific language for a specific purpose (different domain – different language principle), but with humour, all languages are involved equally. Examples of bilingual couple humour are bilingual puns, (directly) translating names, accent humour (with a special mention of dialect humour), inadvertent humour (the meaning of a word is interpreted in the other language), or code-switching (creative and unusual uses of all spoken languages) (Vaid 2006: 157ff). Grosjean (2021: 220) highlights, however, that the key to appreciating humour from one's intimate partner – even though it might not be understood fully – is to acknowledge that it is indeed humour.

The couples of Chiaro's (2009: 211) study have also reported various difficulties in communicating humour. Grasping British irony, sarcasm, and understatements, for

instance, were rated as strenuous. Translating jokes is reportedly often “disastrous”: either the meaning of the joke is completely lost, or it is misinterpreted. Furthermore, the lack of a common frame of reference (usually culturally) sometimes impedes or prohibits partners from making a joke altogether. Nevertheless, these negotiations can “help overcome the myriad of intercultural difficulties such relationships inevitably face” (Grosjean 2021: 221).

In the special case of NS-NNS ELF relationships, the non-native speaker is, to express it colloquially, “put to test”. The use of humour is frequently seen as a hallmark of native-speaker proficiency, or advanced mastery of a language. That is due to the “require[d] knowledge of the linguistic and cultural conventions of a speech community, which prescribe what can be talked about and how” (Vaid 2006: 155). Therefore, non-native speaker’s proficiency in English is a major factor in understanding and appreciating humour in ELF with NSs.

3. Research Design

3.1 Replication research

3.1.1 The replication study approach

The study conducted as part of this research project is of a replication nature. An attempt is made to replicate the study described in the following section (3.1.2) with the objective of testing whether the results of the original study by Gundacker (2010) also apply to a different context in 2021. When replicating a study, different factors must be considered to opt for an appropriate form of replication. A description of what “conceptual replication research” entails is provided below.

The objective of conceptual replication research is not direct comparison to the original study, but to “widen the application, relevance, or generalizability of the underlying theory or hypotheses of the original study” (Porte & McManus 2019: 83f). For instance, this could imply a completely different set of data, a different research approach, improved methodology or a different method of data analysis. The focus is therefore not on the original study’s reliability or validity, but rather in how far the results can be

viewed in a new context. “Conceptual replication encourages us to test multiple manifestations of the construct and thereby try to arrive at a consensus about the generalizability of the outcomes” (ibid: 85). The major difference to close and approximate replication is that the variables of the database do not necessarily need to be replicated as closely as possible, but modifications are allowed in order to obtain an extended set of data. Moreover, the aim of conceptual replication is to test whether the results of a study hold across larger modifications and new contexts. Porte & McManus underline that especially in the field of applied linguistics, where ambiguity is a prevalent phenomenon, conceptual replication holds an important place in the cycle of research (ibid: 91). Thus, conceptual replication situates itself at the end of the “replication continuum”. Any comparisons to the original study must be considered carefully since direct comparison with the procedure and results is not the main objective. “Rather [...] the possibilities for extending its hypotheses or building further upon the theory behind it” are what sets conceptual replication apart (ibid: 93).

This definition of conceptual replication research means that multiple variables may be modified, and that the focus lies exclusively on the results of the original study, but not the procedure and theoretical background. These aspects can be taken into consideration or may be used entirely, but that is where conceptual replication research differs to close or approximate research: they do not necessarily have to be the same, as generalization in different domains or contexts is the main objective (ibid: 93).

A reason to conduct replication research in the first place is to benefit from “renewed attention” to a relevant study (ibid: 4). Factors such as validation, reliability and generalizations are tested, confirmed, or delimited. Furthermore, having different researchers approach the same subject matter increases the chance of validity (ibid: 5). Another reason to do replication research is to choose an outdated study that is, however, still relevant, and revisit it with new and improved insights. The aim here is to replicate the study as closely as possible, but not to replace it. “Rather, the two studies would stand as evidence in their respective times and with their corresponding methods and outcomes” (ibid: 84).

3.1.2 The original study

The original study by Julia Gundacker entitled “English as a lingua franca between couples: motivations and limitations” was written as a diploma thesis in 2010 with Prof. Seidlhofer as supervisor at the English Department of the University of Vienna. Based on five ELF couples, Gundacker investigated the advantages and disadvantages, the motivations and limitations, as well as the potential of ELF as a future family language for intimate couples.

Factors such as communicating emotions in ELF (love and anger) and typical couple talk characteristics were also considered in her research project. Gundacker conducted five couple interviews and questioned them with the help of a self-developed, semi-structured interview guideline. This guideline contained twelve points, starting from basic information about the couples’ cultural backgrounds and history of their love story, to how the couples handle linguistic misunderstandings and in which language their joint memories are engrained in. The entire second part of this guideline is based on Leisi’s (1983) five characteristics of couple talk.

The results of her investigation show that the main motivations for those five lingua franca couples to choose English as their main means of communication are the high level of proficiency, its international status, and the factors “fairness, neutrality and comfort” (Gundacker 2010: 112; 120). In terms of limitations of ELF, the couples reported none, leading to the conclusion that “ELF can serve as the language of couples just as any other language can” (ibid: 120). Furthermore, Gundacker reports that the advantages of ELF as a couple language outweigh the disadvantages. Enabling the couple to establish a relationship, its neutrality and fairness, improving their English skills, and heightened language awareness are a few listed advantages. Reported disadvantages are the possibility of restrictive conversations, unequal proficiency of the partners, greater difficulty in expressing intimate feelings, losing important nuances in language transfer, and decelerating the language learning process of the partner’s L1s. The participants had mixed feelings about ELF as a future family language: whilst its international status and the thought of one neutral family language are appealing factors, the participants voiced doubts about teaching their kids ELF instead of ENL, and the added confusion of raising their kids multilingually. In terms of ELF couple talk characteristics, Gundacker reports no major differences to

monolingual couple talk, but notes that differences in active and passive vocabulary repertoires of the partners are the biggest factors of miscommunication (ibid: 112f).

At the end of her thesis, Gundacker adds some additional insights into her research project. She mentions that “ELF can be the language of couples and the language for their relationship, but it cannot be guaranteed that it will be the language for their social life”, alluding to difficulties in communicating effectively with family and friends (ibid: 115). Another interesting point mentioned is the gender difference as a source of miscommunication. Gundacker states, “In my view, ELF, or language in general, is more important for the women than it is for the men”, verifying her claim with various quotations from the female and male participants of her study and establishing a cross-reference to Tannen’s work (1989) on male-female conversations (Gundacker 2010: 117). The last additional point mentioned is the emotional detachment in ELF. Gundacker’s participants reported using ELF for expressing love but preferring their respective L1s for expressing anger and humour (ibid: 118). To summarize, Gundacker’s study showed diverse insights into the advantages and disadvantages of ELF as a couple language.

3.1.3 My replication study

My justification for using a replication research approach for this specific study consists of two major reasons. First, I see various benefits in revisiting Gundacker’s study due to its relevance in 2021. The ever-increasing number of ELF couples create a pertinent research subject that is interesting to a great number of people, which is reflected in the high number of couples that asked to participate in my study. Secondly, Gundacker’s research has been conducted prior to major academics dedicating resources towards ELF couple research (i.e.: Dewaele, Klötzl, Pavlenko or Pietikäinen). Gundacker’s study is therefore an appropriate piece of research to replicate and to incorporate all these new perspectives and insights from current researchers. Furthermore, Gundacker’s research interest (the advantages and disadvantages of ELF as a couple language) completely coincides with mine. Reading her paper made me immediately think of my participants (lots of whom are good friends) and my own ELF relationship. Therefore, it was logical to conduct replication research, both from a personal and an academic point of view.

Now that I have elaborated on the reasons for my replication research approach, the following paragraphs contain a few selected variables that explain the nature of this conceptual replication research.¹

Whilst the basic data of the participants is fairly similar to Gundacker's study (see subchapter 3.3 for a more detailed overview), the biggest difference between our studies is that Gundacker exclusively investigated NNS couples, whereas I include NS partners as well. The reason for this is that, as I have established in the theory part of this paper, NSs belong to the ELF communities of practice just as much as NNSs do. Moreover, I myself am in an ELF relationship with a NS, as are a lot of my close friends. Therefore, I naturally have an interest in this specific type of ELF relationship. Another difference in the participants is that in Gundacker's study, the respondents are all de facto partners, whereas in my study, the majority of the participants are already married. Gundacker (2010: 53) mentions that being married or unmarried was not a deciding factor, but rather coincidence. The same is valid for my study.

The variables defining the data collection process are also replicated in an approximate way. The qualitative, semi-structured interviews were conducted with Gundacker's interview guideline with minor adjustments. These adjustments mostly entail added questions for the NS participants, or the substitution of topic 12 ("ELF as a family language") for "Native speaker and non-native speaker partners". I too interviewed two befriended couples together due to Gundacker mentioning the fruitfulness of a joint couple interview (ibid: 56f). The only differences in the data collection are the lengths of the interviews (my interviews resulted much longer than Gundacker's), and the dates of the data collection (February/March 2009 vs. June/July 2021).

The variables in the data analysis differ slightly. Whilst Gundacker used an inductive category approach, I use a mixture of deductive categories and inductive ones (see a more detailed explanation below in subchapter 3.5). The basic approach, namely the qualitative content analysis according to Mayring (2015), is the same.

¹ A detailed overview of all prerequisites and a comparison of the variables to the original study by Gundacker (2010) can be found in the appendix.

3.2 Research questions

The empirical part of this research paper investigates six ELF couples and how they use their common language English in their relationship. As I have stated in my introduction, a multicultural and multilingual relationship is exciting and enriching, but can also be tricky and frustrating, especially from a linguistic point of view. This is precisely what I am attempting to capture in this paper. More specifically, I want to focus on how the six participating couples perceive the influence of using a lingua franca (English) on their relationship, what the advantages and disadvantages are, and what some particular ELF couple talk characteristics might be. The following research questions have been developed and adapted throughout the process of writing this paper and coding the data material:

1. How do ELF couples perceive the influence of ELF on their relationship? To what extent do they perceive that ELF is enabling or limiting?
2. What are some particular ELF couple talk characteristics?
3. What are the advantages and disadvantages of using ELF as a means of communication for couples?
4. How do ELF couples perceive and deal with linguistic misunderstandings and interferences?

At this stage I want to emphasize two limitations of this study. First, this study is approached in qualitative manner, meaning I only interviewed 6 couples in total. Therefore, any conclusions that might be drawn are specific to those six couples and merely serve as an insight into how those ELF couples work, speak and handle linguistic matters. They can hardly be taken as generalisations. Nevertheless, this was never my intention in the first place, but the reader should keep this in mind. Secondly, my data material is based on self-assessments, perceptions, and individual experiences from those twelve respondents. It is therefore important to remember that their answers are based on personal and emotional attitudes and might deviate from their real perceptions. Since the participants are asked about their private lives with their partners, this deviation is (sometimes) not done on purpose, but rather subconsciously due to the delicateness of the subject matter.

3.3 The participants

A total of 12 people (6 couples) participated in this research project and agreed to be interviewed. The participants were carefully chosen in accordance with the original study by Gundacker (2010). My aim was to replicate the basic data of the participants as closely as possible. A few of the most important prerequisites for participation were:

- The main couple language is ELF
- The partners are in between the ages of 20 – 35 years old
- The partners have been in a relationship for a minimum of 1.5 years
- The partners currently live together in one household in Austria

As can be seen in the following, the six participating couples form a rather homogeneous group in terms of similar age groups and length of their relationships, which offers a solid basis for a more controlled experiment. Gundacker highlighted that her participants needed to fulfil three criteria: they had to be interested in her piece of research, open-minded about the delicateness of the topic, and reliable interviewees (Gundacker 2010: 51f). My participants fulfilled all these criteria as well. A major difference between Gundacker's and my research project is that I include English native speaker partners whereas Gundacker exclusively investigated NNSs. The following few paragraphs contain brief descriptions of the participating couples, followed by a quick table for a better overview. For the purpose of anonymity, the names of the couples have been changed to pseudonyms.

Couple 1 (C1, type NNS-NNS) consists of Elaine (P1.1), from Nicaragua, 32 years old, her mother tongue is Creole (a pidgin language of Spanish and English), and Sven (P1.2), from Austria, 30 years old, his mother tongue is German. Whilst Sven also speaks a little bit of Chinese (work-related), Elaine speaks a bit of German. They met during their exchange years at university in Taipei and have been involved for 7 years. They moved to Austria together in February 2017 and are currently expecting their first child.

The second participating couple (C2, type NS-NNS) is Jarrad (P2.1), from Australia, 29 years old, an English native speaker, and Carina (P2.2), from Austria, 27 years old, a German native speaker. Jarrad's foreign language is German, and Carina speaks

some Dutch, French, and Spanish. They met in Vienna while Jarrad was travelling and have been in a relationship for 7.5 years. For visa purposes, they got married within their first year of dating. It is the first relationship for both of them using ELF.

Couple 3 (C3, type NS-NNS) consists of Alex (P3.1), from Canada, 28 years old, an English native speaker, and Nadine (P3.2), from Austria, 30 years old, with L1 German. Alex moved to Vienna for work, which is where they met. They have been together for 3 years. Alex is also learning German at the moment.

Couple 4 (C4, type NS-NNS) is Joe (P4.1), from the USA, 29 years old with English as his L1, and Johanna (P4.2), 32 years old, a German native speaker from Austria. Johanna also speaks a little bit of French and Spanish while Joe is currently learning German. They met couch surfing in Australia and not long after settled in Austria, as Joe said in the interview, “I was basically following the love of my life over here” (I3, P4.1). For both Johanna and Joe, this is the first relationship where ELF is the main means of communication (or in Joe’s case, a foreign language is involved).

The fifth couple (C5, type NS-NNS) consists of Carly (P5.1), from Australia, 35 years old with English as her L1, and Stefan (P5.2), also 35 years old, from Austria, with Austrian German as his L1 (note that out of all the Austrian participants, Stefan is the only one who named Austrian German as his L1). Stefan only speaks English as a foreign language and Carly is at an advanced level in German. They met in 2012 in Stefan’s Tyrolian hometown in a bar (Carly was working there as a ski representative). They too got married within their first year of dating for visa purposes and have been together for 9.5 years. A few months before the interview in July 2021, Carly gave birth to their first son. C5 lived in Vienna for almost 10 years and have recently moved to Australia, but they have shown such great interest in my research project that I was happy to interview them in a virtual meeting regardless of their current place of residence.

The last couple (C6, type NNS-NNS) is Olena (P6.1), from the Ukraine, 33 years old, speaks Ukrainian, and Oliver (P6.2), from Austria, 32 years old, a German native speaker. C6 has quite a few foreign languages in their common repertoire: Olena also speaks Slovenian, Russian and German, and Oliver speaks Turkish and Spanish at a beginner level. They also met through work in Vienna (at the same company as Nadine

and Alex) and have been in a relationship for 3 years. They married last year and are currently expecting their first child.

The table below summarises the profiles of the participating couples².

Couple 1			
Abbreviation	C1	Type	NNS - NNS
Length of rel.	7 years	Status	married
Partner 1		Partner 2	
Abbreviation	P1.1	Abbreviation	P1.2
Name	Elaine	Name	Sven
Gender	female	Gender	male
Nationality	Nicaragua	Nationality	Austria
L1	Creole	L1	German
Age	32	Age	30
Couple 2			
Abbreviation	C2	Type	NS - NNS
Length of rel.	7.5 years	Status	married
Partner 1		Partner 2	
Abbreviation	P2.1	Abbreviation	P2.2
Name	Jarrad	Name	Carina
Gender	male	Gender	female
Nationality	Australia	Nationality	Austria
L1	English	L1	German
Age	29	Age	27
Couple 3			
Abbreviation	C3	Type	NS - NNS
Length of rel.	3 years	Status	de facto
Partner 1		Partner 2	
Abbreviation	P3.1	Abbreviation	P3.2
Name	Alex	Name	Nadine
Gender	male	Gender	female
Nationality	Canada	Nationality	Austria
L1	English	L1	German
Age	28	Age	30
Couple 4			
Abbreviation	C4	Type	NS - NNS
Length of rel.	6 years	Status	married

² A detailed overview of the participants' profiles and interview details can be found in the appendix.

Partner 1		Partner 2	
Abbreviation	P4.1	Abbreviation	P4.2
Name	Joe	Name	Johanna
Gender	male	Gender	female
Nationality	USA	Nationality	Austria
L1	English	L1	German
Age	29	Age	32
Couple 5			
Abbreviation	C5	Type	NS - NNS
Length of rel.	9,5 years	Status	married
Partner 1		Partner 2	
Abbreviation	P5.1	Abbreviation	P5.2
Name	Carly	Name	Stefan
Gender	female	Gender	male
Nationality	Australia	Nationality	Austria
L1	English	L1	German
Age	35	Age	35
Couple 6			
Abbreviation	C6	Type	NNS - NNS
Length of rel.	3 years	Status	married
Partner 1		Partner 2	
Abbreviation	P6.1	Abbreviation	P6.2
Name	Olena	Name	Oliver
Gender	female	Gender	male
Nationality	Ukraine	Nationality	Austria
L1	Ukrainian	L1	German
Age	33	Age	32

3.4 The interview

The reason for choosing a qualitative study approach via interviews was not exclusively based on the original study by Gundacker, but also suited my research project best. The possibility of follow-up questions and the free format are both appealing factors of conducting interviews instead of opting for a quantitative data collection method. Furthermore, the fact that the couples can also raise their own topics within the conversation seemed important to me.

Since the subject of the interview is ELF as a couple language, I never considered interviewing the partners separately. As a matter of fact, it was nice to see how the partners constantly reconfirmed their statements with each other, seeking approval or their opinion on a specific question. These subtle looks or mini-conversations in-between were also very interesting to observe. I tried to make the participants feel as comfortable as possible and emphasized, that they can regard this interview as a casual conversation whereby I mostly listen. It was of utmost importance for me that the participants never have the feeling of an interrogation about their private life, but feel comfortable sharing their personal stories with me. That being said, I let the participants choose the place of the interview. Some chose their own residence, whilst others preferred my apartment. I interviewed two couples (C3 and C4) together, since they are good friends and agreed to do the interview as a group. This evening was especially fruitful since the couples interacted well with one another and commented on each other's experiences.

Before recording, I established the roles during the interview. Since I know some of the respondents personally, it was important for me to clarify my positions as researcher and listener. Another important preparation step was avoiding researcher bias: the fact that I myself am in an ELF relationship at the time of writing this thesis forced me to be extra aware and cautious of anticipating responses, overlooking subtle nuances, or steering the conversation in a particular direction based on my personal experiences. Cameron (2001: 22) warns of researchers having too many preconceptions, which could influence the results of the research project. Therefore, keeping an open mind, not adding my own perspective and constantly being aware that other ELF couples have different perceptions was key to keeping this study objective. Whilst Gundacker (2010: 57) called herself a "layperson" and the participants "experts", I do not believe that in this paper I can call myself an expert. Rather, I am a researcher, studying a personal topic from an academic point of view by interviewing other ELF couples.

As mentioned previously, I have chosen interviews over questionnaires (or similar quantitative data collection methods) for various reasons. The exact approach used for this research is called the "Interview Guide Approach". It was the ideal choice for my study because it offers greater flexibility in terms of adding topics, but also has a comprehensive structure and a systematic data collection structure (Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2007: 271). The interview guideline used was minimally adapted from

Gundacker (2010: 133-136). Since Gundacker exclusively interviewed NNS couples, I added a few questions specific to the native speaker partners. Additionally, I added one entire subtopic entitled “NS and NNS partners”, where the couples deal with notions of superiority, inferiority, and equality from a linguistic point of view. Even though some of the participants are expecting or have just had a child, I erased the topic of “ELF as a future family language” because the topic of children is, first, not the subject matter of this thesis, and secondly, seems like a territorial encroachment. All the other 11 out of 12 subtopics from Gundacker were used for my thesis, with minor adaptations and additions.³

3.5 Data analysis

Due to the openness of the respondents and their willingness to share in great detail, the data obtained for this paper is rich and extensive. As mentioned previously, the approach chosen for coding the data is the qualitative content analysis according to Mayring (2015). To be more specific, a mixture of the summarizing and structuring data analysis approach is applied to the exhaustive material in order to obtain precise answers to selected aspects of ELF couple talk. These aspects are, on the one hand, pre-defined by Gundacker, and, on the other hand, added by me. That means that the category formation in this paper is deductive (Gundacker’s categories) as well as inductive (my own categories based on the responses of my participants) (Mayring 2015: 67f).

In the following, a few vital parameters of data analysis are defined. The level of reduction is considerably high due to the vast amount of data material. The process of obtaining these reductions is from original utterance to paraphrase, then to generalisation and lastly, reduction (ibid: 76). The analysis units are defined as follows: the minimum unit of coding is a phrase, whereas the maximum unit of context can stretch over various paragraphs (due to the partners often interacting with each other) (ibid: 63).

³ The full version of the interview guideline can be found in the appendix.

The deductive categories defined by Gundacker (2010: 60ff) are: motivations for choosing ELF, the importance of ELF, advantages and disadvantages, Leisi's 5 characteristics, and ELF as a means of expressing emotions. The inductive categories added in the course of coding the data are: the influence of ELF, humour in ELF, and NS and NNS partners. The following chapter shows the results of the empirical part of this paper.

4. Analysis

4.1 Influence and attitudes

4.1.1 "It was just much easier" – motivations for choosing ELF

Choosing ELF as the language of their intimate relationships can be traced back to two major reasons mentioned by the six participating couples. The first reason is that the language choice depends on where the couple met. Considering that the partners are from two different countries, one of the partners has always been abroad (or sometimes both, for example, C1 and C4). The international and global status of English is the prime choice of communication and getting to know each other on an intimate level. "There are several reasons, but the main reason was, we met in Australia, and I was kind of speaking English to everyone there" (I3, P4.2). Couples C3 and C6 met at work in Vienna. Since the company and working language is English, they continued using the same language with each other in the private domain too.

The second main reason for choosing ELF is the very essence of ELF itself – its lingua franca status. For all six couples, English was the only contact language available that both partners could use proficiently enough to allow them to get to know each other and build a relationship. C5 reported, "I couldn't speak German to begin with, and his English was native level, so it was just much easier" (I4, P5.1). C1 adds

We met in Taipeh, I had no German, he had no Spanish, and also, we didn't think it was gonna end up like this, so there was no effort on any side to learn the other language, [...], so by the time we decided that we want to do this, we were already just a year fully communicating in English⁴. (I1, P1.1)

⁴ An overview of the transcription conventions used for this paper can be found in the appendix.

All six couples stated that they have always communicated in English with one another, and that English is still the majority language of their relationship. Some couples even listed that 99% of all conversations are held in English (I3, C3 and C4), or even claimed that they use English “basically all the time” (I1, C1) or “for literally any situation” (I2, C2). The main reasons mentioned for a continuing use of ELF is its simplicity, the fact that they got to know each other in English, that it would feel estranged switching to a different language, the fact that they have clearly established ELF as their common couple language, or the comfortability and pleasure of speaking English with one another. P2.2 comments on the possibility of switching to her mother tongue German when speaking to her partner in the following way: “I know that his German is good enough to actually discuss everything in German, but for some reason I feel awkward speaking in German to him now because I'm so used to, like, speaking in English to him” (I2, P2.2). Nevertheless, all couples have tried to integrate German at one stage in their relationship, the mother tongue of one of the partners and the majority language of their country of residence Austria. “We tried to implement German when Elaine moved to Austria, but it's not so easy. We would always fall back to English” (I1, P1.2). The main reason for remaining with ELF is not only the comfortability reason and that conversations can happen faster and more fluently in their common lingua franca, but also because of frustrating experiences:

German could be in the mix at some point, but we had many frustrating experiences in the beginning when he couldn't speak any German and he would ask me stuff in German and I'm also a shitty teacher, because German is my mother tongue, and I also can't explain why we say things a certain way. So, it always kind of ended up in a fight and then we kind of just stopped (I3, P4.2).

The German native speakers seem to struggle with teaching their mother tongue to their partners. C6 mentioned the added difficulty of understanding and learning the Austrian dialect as another compelling reason for the continued use of ELF for their relationship. C1 mentioned that the discipline to implement German as an equal resource to ELF depends on both partners: whilst the foreign partner needs to consistently and actively study, the German native speaker partner also needs to support this process by reliably speaking their mother tongue at home as well.

One noticeable shift in the language choice of three of the couples is due to family planning. C5 has just had their first-born child and C1 and C6 are expecting. They all

declared that German would take on a more active role in the relationship, especially with regards to language education for the baby.

4.1.2 “It’s a comfort zone” – importance of ELF

The importance of ELF is perceived similarly amongst the non-native speakers and the native speakers of English. Generally, the NNS partners like English and enjoy speaking English on a regular basis. P1.2 and P5.2 even stated that English holds a greater importance for them than their mother tongue German due to their work. Other positive attitudes towards ELF are its simplicity, it’s “comfort zone” factor, or that it is plain and the “smallest common denominator” of languages (I4, P5.2). When asked about their perceptions on English as a contact language, P1.2 underlines as well, “It’s a tool to have a universal connection point” (I1, P1.2). The NNSs, however, also mentioned some negative attitudes and perceptions towards English. Even though English seems to be an easy language to learn, its impreciseness in terms of vocabulary evoked negative feelings especially in the beginning of their relationships or learning English in general. “There’s one word in German but there’s 10 words in English, so how could I be precise? But I think I got over it pretty quickly” (I2, P2.2). P3.2 also admitted to having stomach pains before meeting people abroad years ago due to her perceived deficiencies in speaking English fluently.

The English NS partners had very similar views on their mother tongue and ELF too. They all called it a “comfort zone” and perceive it a privilege to speak their mother tongue despite living in Austria. It is also the language they grew up with and the language of all their memories. Even though the NSs acknowledge the international and lingua franca status of English, they all do not perceive it to be more important than any other language. In fact, P3.1 says, “In Austria I feel bad for speaking English, often I’m the only non-Austrian here and I feel like the ‘stupid foreigner’ who can’t speak German” (I3, P3.1). P2.1 adds that he doesn’t want to “disrespect the Austrians” by sticking to his mother tongue. In terms of their ELF relationships, some NS partners also agreed to feel bad for not fully knowing and speaking their partners mother tongue (in this case German).

As I have established previously, the couples stated to use English generally all the time in their private life. Therefore, it resulted to be easier to ask when they use a different language on purpose in their relationship. The answers included: when

learning or practising German, for secret gossiping in public (because less people would understand German than English when travelling, for instance), with family and friends in Austria who do not speak English (that well), for jokes and humour (which I will elaborate in subchapter 4.3.3), for expressing anger, frustration or swearing (this exclusively applies for the German speaking partners in the relationship), or, one very specific example, for giving directions in the car. Most of the respondents use English outside of their relationship as well with friends, family or at work, meaning that the participants use ELF not just as the language of their coupledness, but are frequently immersed in ELF encounters in other domains as well.

When asked if they would prefer it if they both spoke the same mother tongue, all six couples disagreed. Some partners did acknowledge some difficulties that might have been avoided by speaking the same L1, such as a smoother integration into Austria, mutual understanding of jokes, sayings and phrases, a clearer expression of feelings, or enhanced relatability of each other's cultures. Nevertheless, the advantages of speaking a foreign language in the relationship clearly outweigh any challenges for the participants. "It's a bit of a challenge, and it's a bit edgier on the relationship, and not just boring relationship stuff" (I3, P3.1); "It's something cool that adds some spice and specialness to a boring relationship that everybody else has" (I3, P3.2); "I kinda like that I was forced to learn a second language" (I2, P2.1); or "It makes us work harder, think harder and communicate better" (I4, P5.1) are just a few selected statements from the participants.

4.1.3 "You're a product of your environment" – influence of ELF

When asked about how ELF influences their relationship, some couples could not think of anything, whilst others had a very clear idea of how communicating in a lingua franca has affected their coupledness, like C5:

It has a massive impact, because from my observations, native speakers have a habit of speaking a dialect of their language and not focus on the structure. Australian English ends every sentence in a question intonation, which causes disruptions. It's very inaccurate. [...] So, the impact is substantial, because I was faced with an insane amount of misunderstandings, even though I'm a reasonably competent English speaker (I4, C5).

Other couples also acknowledged the fact that choosing ELF for their relationship has caused an elevated number of misunderstandings, especially in the beginning of their

relationship. C2 leads this back to P2.2's lack of proper expressions in English, but also said that it was never a big issue, but just took longer to explain things. C1 also said that using ELF means to be more careful in word choice and to think longer about certain topics for the other person to fully understand. In their joint interview, C3 and C4 both mentioned that, especially in the beginning of their relationship, they fought less or ended fights and arguments early due to ELF. The reasons mentioned by the NNSs for this were the extra effort of fighting in another language, the uncertainty, and the lack of motivation to go into detail using a foreign language. On the other hand, the NSs of couples C3 and C4 perceived the influence of ELF strongest in the division of tasks and chores in their domestic life. Since they were unable to, for instance, call tradesmen for work around the apartment in Vienna due to linguistic issues, their female, NNS partners had to take over these tasks. P3.2 evaluates the resulting influence of these behaviours as follows: "Right now, his German is good enough to call, let's say, the lamp guy, but I don't know how much is 'I can't' and 'I don't want to'" (I3, P3.2).

From a linguistic perspective, all the participating native speakers do acknowledge the added stress and difficulty for their NNS partner, and all agreed to trying to be more precise, clearer, and forthcoming when using their mother tongue. Since all NS partners are from outside Europe, they reported becoming more aware of multilingualism and lingua franca encounters when moving to Austria. Moreover, the native speakers of C3 and C5 mentioned reducing their Canadian and Australian slang or phrases when speaking with their partners to avoid confusion and misunderstandings.

The biggest influence of ELF per se mentioned by the majority of the couples is, that "it made it possible in the first place" (I4, C5). "If we didn't speak English, we would have never met, and this relationship wouldn't function" (I2, C2). ELF also influences their friendships in Austria; ELF couples tend to have a common friend circle that also use ELF so that both partners can comfortably communicate in a common language.

The discussions on the influence of ELF inevitably lead to perceptions on ELF identity. The NNS individuals perceive themselves very differently when communicating in English. P3.2 admitted to having major identity issues in the beginning of their relationship:

I had a big identity problem after like one year, and said, I don't know, I completely lost myself, as didn't have the right balance. My life is fully in English, and I thought, that's not me anymore, and I thought like... I was standing next to me, it was such a weird feeling (I3, P3.2).

The other NNSs do not believe that they lost or gained an identity per se but mentioned various differences when using ELF or their mother tongue German. P2.2 expressed uncertainty in her intonation and vocabulary choice in ELF, which results in the feeling of unpredictable perlocutionary effects. P4.2 reported added exhaustion when discussing delicate topics and a lack of proper expressions thereof, and P5.2 said that his pitch is deeper in English than in German, because he feels slightly more insecure. He also said that sometimes the “right words aren’t accessible” in English (I4, P5.2). The only NNS who believes that ELF adds to her identity is P6.1, because it feels familiar and comfortable for her. All other NNSs had the feeling there is a “85-90% overlap” in language identities (I4, P5.2).

Regarding the NSs’ ELF identities, none of the participants said to feel less of a native speaker. They occasionally reduce their slang or “gibberish” and generally try to speak clearly and precisely, but other than that, no major identity shifts or changes were detected.

To conclude the discussion on the influence of ELF, I asked whether they think that their relationship would be different if they spoke the same mother tongue. All couples agreed that it would be different, listing factors such as a smoother integration into Austria, a better and deeper connection to their Austrian families, a more equal division of chores or a better alignment of their jokes. In general, however, the couples were sure that their relationship would be worse:

You're a product of your environment, if your environment changes then of course your experience changes, but I don't know, if we spoke the same language, maybe it would have taken some of the mystery...fantasy part out of the relationship. The fact that we both spoke different languages was kind of exciting and mysterious and intriguing, generally (I2, P2.1).

P5.2 even stated, “From my side, we wouldn’t be a couple. Probably @@@” (I4, P5.2).

4.1.4 “English is the reason why we’re here” – advantages of ELF

When asked about the advantages of using ELF as their couple language, the respondents found it quite difficult to list specific examples – or advantages at all. Only

after thinking long and hard and giving them some examples from the literature review, the couples were able to recount the benefits of ELF for their relationship.

One advantage mentioned by all six couples is making (joint) friends while travelling. Since English is the world language, it is also the easiest one to connect with people, as C5 described it as a “common fluency denominator”, or C2 as “having access to a more diverse world”. The couples mentioned travelling not just as an individual activity, but also as a joint couple activity: “When we speak it to someone else, it feels like we’re in our world” is the summary of C6’s experience with making new friends together (I5, C6).

It also leads to the next advantage, namely the fact that the partners genuinely enjoy speaking English. C1 underlined that they never get tired of speaking English, even though sometimes it may be difficult. The reason why the participants like speaking English so much can be traced back to their high proficiency. C1 also stated that they both learned English before meeting each other, and they were both highly proficient already, which was advantageous for their relationship.

Other couples perceived their high proficiency in ELF beneficial for getting to know each other on an intimate level. The respondents believe English to be an easy to learn language, or as C6 put it, “it’s very easy to slide into” (I5, C6). C5 listed their high proficiencies in English as the most important advantage for their relationship, terming it the “smallest gap in language discrepancy” (I4, C5).

A few other perceived advantages of using ELF as the couple language are being able to watch movies and TV series (with a special mention of Hollywood/American productions) together as a couple activity in the original version, enhanced confidence in speaking English at work due to the vast exposure at home, cooking with English recipes together, and a noticeable selection of cultural references (with a special mention of “The Simpsons” TV series) to use in their daily domestic life.

Another major advantage mentioned by a few couples was that ELF enabled a smoother transition into Austria for the foreign partners. The fact that English is a world language and ELF frequently presented itself as the only contact language available made ELF specifically beneficial for the participants. C4 underlined that if one of them spoke another language, they would consider their relationship and integration impossible. In that regard, ELF shows major advantages in comparison to other languages.

C6 is of the type NNS-NNS. Their perceptions towards the advantages of ELF entail slightly differing aspects than the couples of the type NS-NNS. C6 thinks of ELF as a “neutral ground” for their relationship. Not just the fact that ELF is neither their first language, but also the fact that they have similar language proficiency levels makes them feel like equals in a positive way:

We are on the same level. It doesn't feel like someone is... you know in politics, or when they're debating, the native language person has an advantage, but we are kind of same level. Also, it helps that we are on the same level of English, like, we're both not perfect, so that's good (I5, C6).

Lastly, C5 explains the reason why the participants found it difficult to come up with advantages of ELF in the following way:

The reason why we struggle to answer this is because for the first three years, you [P5.1] wouldn't have had a personality. You would have been like 'Hallo, wie geht's', and that's it. It wasn't really a choice. So essentially you could list everything in our relationship here. English is the reason why we're here” (I4, C5).

This quote captures the essence of ELF's advantage for multilingual couples: the lingua franca status enabled the partners to give themselves personalities, gave them a chance to get to know each other on an intimate level and ultimately, fall in love and build a long-term relationship.

4.1.5 “English is a blocker” – disadvantages of ELF

The respondents also found it difficult to think of disadvantages of ELF. The main reason is that all of them genuinely like using ELF as their couple language and claim that any disadvantages are heavily outweighed by the advantages of a thrilling and challenging multilingual relationship. Nevertheless, in this part of the interview, the couples managed to list more specific situations where ELF resulted to be a drawback.

One disadvantage mentioned by a few couples is gossiping in public. Since English is a world language and most people would understand it in public, the couples feel unsafe talking about secret things in that environment. “German would be better for that, because when we're travelling, not everybody understands that, but everyone understands English” (I1, C1).

Another disadvantage – which has previously been mentioned as an advantage in comparison to other languages – is that ELF complicates a smooth transition and integration into Austria. In terms of their intimate relationships, that meant connecting

with Austrian families and friends. “Talking to my family was really difficult, especially in the beginning. I had to translate pretty much everything” (I2, C2). C6 also claims that the language barrier prohibits a full integration: “Yeah, the integration part is difficult. It doesn’t feel fully integrated. Not in Austria. The same is valid for when we’re in the Ukraine” (I5, C6).

Another factor of ELF that has been mentioned previously is its perceived impreciseness in terms of vocabulary and expressions. C5 admitted that this has had the biggest negative influence on their relationship in the past, because it frequently caused misunderstandings or minor disruptions. C5 pinpoints the problem at the specific variety of P5.1 and explains it the following way: “Australian English is very difficult to adapt to. Similar words mean nuanced things, and they’re not that quickly obvious. Months can go by without realizing” (I4, C5). C5 also mentions that the impreciseness of English complicated emotional talk for the NNS. He feels like choosing the right words for different emotions, for instance excitement or disappointment, is challenging to grasp. “To find the right words and facets in between is very difficult. [...] The emotional mapping into English, I never completed that” (I4, C5).

The NNS partners of C3 and C4 both admitted to struggling with differences in tonality, intonation, and vocabulary in ELF. They perceive German as a rather monotonous, direct language, whereas English is rather soft, melodic, and “more polite”. These differences in tone, pitch, and cultural scripts caused misunderstandings in the past:

P4.1: She’ll talk to me in an attitude... it’s not even an attitude, it’s just her speaking her direct German tone.

P4.2: Oh yeah, that’s also very true.

P4.1: And I’ll be like, ‘don’t talk to me like that’...

P4.2: Yeah, that’s true. I notice it with my friends, now that I’m together with him, when they speak to each other, it sounds kind of rude, or like... not kind and nice, and then I experience with myself that I’m also talking to him sometimes that way, even though I don’t mean it at all, and then we get super aggressive immediately and a fight develops out of nothing. Because I said something in the wrong tone, and I didn’t mean it. And he got it the wrong way (I3, C4).

In a related notion, most of the participants of this study claim that expressing anger in ELF is more difficult than expressing this emotion in their L1. The reasons mentioned

for that is the insecurity in ELF due to a lack of proper anger scripts, and the fear of unwanted perlocutionary effects. Especially tonality, intonation and vocabulary choice are the areas of insecurity when it comes to expressing anger. The couples of this study have also mentioned fighting in ELF as a disadvantage due to the inequality in linguistic proficiency skills. C5 even mentioned that the NNS partner resorts to his L1 German when a discussion becomes too overwhelming, indicating the limitations of ELF as a couple language (subchapter 4.3.1 will go more into detail on the expression of anger in ELF).

In terms of expressing and understanding humour in ELF, the couples of this study also noticed some difficulties and disadvantages. First, the NNSs find it more difficult to express humour in ELF and perceive themselves as funnier in their respective L1s. Humour is seen as a high achievement in the language learning process. For their coupledness, the differences in their humour cultures are highly noticeable because the couples tend to use their own humour in ELF in order for both partners to enjoy humour. Whilst the couples do not mention this as a disadvantage of ELF per se, it did influence their relationship significantly and impeded bonding over humour for a while (subchapter 4.3.3 will go more into detail on humour).

C6, the type NNS-NNS couple, mentioned that a disadvantage of using ELF for their relationship is the “missing common ground”. Culturally, they claim that they are both very similar, since the Turkish roots of P6.2 and the Ukrainian heritage of P6.1 generally align well (for instance, they mention that their families and themselves are both rather “collectivistic”). ENL culture, on the other hand, is perceived as rather “individualistic”, which does not appeal to either of them (I5, C6). In terms of their common ground, however, they miss having a stable linguistic entity that both can speak perfectly.

Another disadvantage of ELF is the inequality in effort perceived by the NNSs (in relationship type NS-NNS). The German speakers put in a lot of effort to become more fluent and more proficient in speaking English with their partner, but the same effort has not been reciprocated for their mother tongue German. Therefore, the NNSs believe ELF to be a disadvantage because its world lingua franca status puts it immediately in a position of favouritism over other languages. On a more personal level, the inequality in effort has negative consequences for their intimate relationship. C4 admits that staying in their “comfort zone English” resulted in “little effort to learn

German and find a job here” (I3, C4). C5 also admits that “My mastery of English is one of the reasons why Carly didn’t improve German faster” (I4, C5).

This leads me to the last section of disadvantages. The following factors cannot truly be categorized as disadvantages of ELF per se, but rather as disadvantages of the German-learning process of the foreign partners living in Austria and the effects on their relationship. The couples mentioned, for instance, that the German native speakers were obliged to handle any official government documents for their foreign partners, or rather, had to take care of anything for their move, integration, and daily life in Austria. C2 openly admitted that “Jarrad needed help for literally anything” (I2, C2). Respectively, C6 captures the dependency of the foreign partner on the German native speaker as follows: “English is a blocker for a lot of things, for example, when we need to sort something out here in Austria. I cannot do it. That’s a disadvantage for me, but also for him” (I5, C6). This inequality in their relationship is therefore heavily dependent on the majority language of their place of residence.

4.2 Characteristics of couple talk

4.2.1 “Shmoops” & “Lieb du” – private code

In the section of the couples’ individual private codes, we discussed two different areas: first, giving each other nicknames, and second, any other kind of private talk that is exclusively intelligible to the couple – either borrowed or self-invented expressions, words, or phrases.

In terms of nicknames, the participants generally preferred their nicknames in ELF over German or any other first language, with a few exceptions. What all couples had in common was the fact that generic nicknames like “honey” or “baby”, which are perceived as linked to ENL culture, are not popular choices. They all wanted their nicknames to be unique and special. Living in Austria, most of the couples therefore chose English nicknames (or Spanish in the case of C1) because it detaches them from their Austrian friends and adds the uniqueness of an intercultural relationship to their coupledness. C1 confirms this by saying, “I wouldn’t prefer a nickname in German. I like ‘cosita’ because it’s different” (I1, C1). C2, C4 and C6 all claimed to have invented their unique nicknames out of English words, but only C4 was willing to reveal it during

the interview. They call each other “shmoops” but cannot think of how they invented it. C6 elaborated that their nicknames are very specific to their interests, and they were also altered to new interests over time. P5.2 also says that “I rarely use Carly’s nickname because it has a meaning”, further proving that individual, thoughtful nicknames are preferred over generic ones (I4, C5). The only participant who likes “Schatz” (“but never Schatzi!”) is P5.1, one of the Australian native speakers. The NS in C4 also created a unique German nickname for his Austrian partner, which is “Mein kleiner Kirbis” (literally: my little pumpkin, but they emphasized that the pronunciation [ˈkɪʁbɪs] is important). This nickname resulted from a day where P3.2 simply wore an orange sweater. P3.2 complained, “My exes always gave me those generic German nicknames. I love this one because it’s different. And I love the pronunciation. It makes me laugh and it’s unique” (I3, P3.2).

With regards to other private language that the couples use exclusively with each other, the respondents were unable to think of a lot of examples or if they use any private language at all. C4 claimed that they are “too uncreative” for that, but later on mentioned “lieb du” as one of the constructions that only they use (the NS in C4 literally translated “love you” into German with the result of “lieb du”, and now they use it on a frequent basis). C1 uses the phrase “Bestie!” to communicate to each other when one of them has to pee, which is inspired by a video on social media. C1 also claimed, however, that Creole (P1.1’s mother tongue) could be seen as their secret private code (I1, C1). C5 also believes that their body languages are their secret language: “I think there’s a third language that we developed. Our body language. We know each other’s body language insanely well. Carly’s body language is much more truth telling than what comes out of her mouth” (I4, P5.2). C5 also raised an additional point concerning private language in general, “I think we’re both not a big fan of tribal language, because we are both used to multilingual groups and hate exclusion. We want to avoid that at all costs, because we both know the feeling” (I4, P5.2).

4.2.2 “German would be a hard cool-off” – language as an erotic stimulant

Since the topic of language as an erotic stimulant was the most intimate one of the interviews, I was happy with any information the participants were willing to share. Surprisingly, the couples were open to talk about language as an erotic stimulant for

quite a while. The data obtained, nonetheless, is rather superficial, which was to be expected due to the delicacy of the topic.

In terms of language choice, all six couples agreed that speaking German in intimate situations “would be a hard cool-off” (I2, C2), both for German native speakers and their foreign partners. “I mean, we speak English everywhere else, so we also speak English in the bedroom”, is what C2 recounts (I2, C2). All couples, however, claimed that they are “not big talkers” in such intimate situations. C5 prefers “less verbal and more written or physical” expression of love and eroticism (I4, C5). C1 likes using Spanish in such situations due to its nice sound. C6 also agrees that German would not be a suitable option for them and emphasize the emotional value of English, as it is their couple language: “I would say things in English I wouldn’t say in German. [...] It might be because it fits better, or feels easier... yeah, I think another language would feel unattractive. [...] Also, because English is our intimate language” (I5, C6).

4.2.3 “Friends” & “Seventh Heaven” – love according to texts

In this section, the respondents answered questions on whether and how they use references, words or phrases from TV shows, movies, books, or songs (thus, any “text”) in their relationship. The couples answered very differently: whilst couples C2, C3 and C6 perceive not referencing ever, or at least not on purpose, C1, C4 and C5 admitted to using references from texts a fair bit in their couple talk. C1 said that P1.1 occasionally weaves in some quotes of the TV show “Friends”; however, they reported that their joint references are circumstantial and change over time, dependent on which series or movies they have recently watched together. The NS partner of C4 said that they frequently use 90s Disney movies references, such as songs from the movie “Ariel”. He also admitted to using some references from texts for humorous purposes where he knows that his partner would not be familiar with them: “I usually take advantage of it, because I know there’s a bunch of funny things in English that I’ve heard, or something from a movie, and I say it and she thinks it’s from me” (I3, C4). Lastly, C5 also said to reference a fair bit in their relationship but prefer common experiences or cultural references over pop-culture references. One specific TV show mentioned was “Brooklyn 99”, but C5 also highlighted the fact that these references go through phases: they are heavily used for a while and then fade rather quickly again (I4, C5).

Turning now to the results of how the partners learned, use, and adapt their romantic talk with one another, all NNS partners reported that they did not learn love declaration scripts in school. Instead, most of them took extra university classes in English or travelled abroad. The biggest influence on their romantic talk skills derives from English TV shows, movies, and books. Examples mentioned were the American TV show “Seventh Heaven”, the historical fiction drama “Outlander”, the book series “Lord of the Rings” or poems by Shakespeare during school times. The majority of the NS partners, on the other hand, admitted to adapting their romantic talk especially in the beginning of their relationship, but not doing so consciously, but rather adapting to an ELF relationship to ensure mutual understanding. The NS in C4 specifically mentioned that in American relationships, a lot of “baby talk” can be found, which he actively does not use in his ELF relationship because it does not fit in this context. To the question whether they think that romantic talk is something intuitive or copied from texts, C1 answered, “You might want to think it’s intuitive, but I would not even be able to know how much of that is really just influenced” (I1, C1). They argued that the daily exposure to TV shows, movies, songs, and books heavily influence their behaviour, including their romantic talk.

4.2.4 “That’s not what I’m saying” – interferences & misconceptions

All six participating couples admitted to being faced with frequent misunderstandings, interferences, and misconceptions in their relationship on a daily basis, especially in the beginning of their coupledness. None of these are, however, disruptive for their relationship or pose serious negative consequences; in most cases, these interferences can be solved within seconds. According to the couples, misunderstandings happen due to linguistic and cultural differences, discrepancies in the way the partners were raised, or “typical boy girl stuff” (I5, C6), hence, the way women and men communicate differently in general. Since this is a linguistics paper, I mainly focus on the linguistic misunderstandings and interferences mentioned by the respondents.

According to C1, misunderstandings happen nowadays because of their familiarity with one another. The fact that they assume that the other person understands them all the time has sometimes led to interferences. “When we do have a misunderstanding, it’s because we know each other so well, we’re like ‘what did you mean’, and the other

person immediately realizes ‘oh crap I constructed that so weirdly’” (I1, C1). Evidently, the partners occasionally take their intimate status with each other for granted and do not actively think about how they construct their messages. These cases are frequent, yet easy to fix. C5 reported similar behaviours, especially when the NS partner assumes that the NNS partner understands without difficulty: “I’m kind of... 50% I’m accepting things as they are, but 50% I’m like, ok, now I’m too tired to decipher what you actually want, so just tell me” (I4, C5). The NS in C4 also admits to sometimes speaking “carelessly” with his NNS partner and only realizing afterwards that the message has not been understood correctly: “Sometimes I say something, and she misunderstands, and I’m like ‘no that’s not what I’m saying’ and I try to explain. It takes a lot of effort. [...] Sometimes fights happen because we talk past each other” (I3, C4). The couples also mentioned a few specific linguistic misunderstandings (which, however, can never truly be separated from cultural differences). C1, for instance, have different conceptions of the meanings of “here” and “there” in ELF. C2 mentioned that their differences in the use of swear words caused interferences especially in the beginning of their relationship:

Swearing was a big one for us. Like, swearing in Australia... I think it’s relatively normal to swear, I mean, I hear it a lot in Australia [...] and in Austria, or at least in my environment, swearing is really, like, an absolute no-go. Like, it would be the most disrespectful thing you could possibly do. Especially in my family, I’ve never heard my family swear to each other ever in my life. So, I think that was a huge misunderstanding in the beginning (I2, C2).

When asked about strategies used to pre-empt or avoid misunderstandings and interferences, the couples listed similar techniques. Trying to be more precise and clearer, using simpler or more common words instead of jargon, and active work on their tonality in ELF were a few mentioned strategies. Furthermore, frequent confirmation checks are part of C2’s communication routines nowadays:

I’m generally the type of person who likes to have things confirmed a few times, but I don’t know if that was a product of our relationship or because we’re already like that. Maybe it’s something I developed a bit further from the beginnings of our relationship where we maybe had some misunderstandings (I2, C2).

C4 also said to “think twice about what you want to say” (I3, C4). C5 adapted a completely new way of communicating with one another: they generally assume that they have not been understood, instead of vice versa. They said that this rethinking

was hard in the beginning but is now a habit for them and pays off as it pre-empts a lot of potential interferences (I4, C5). C6 was the only couple to report misunderstandings when texting with each other. The inclusion of emojis to convey messages more vividly is their strategy to avoid “machine-like” messages (I5, C6).

Whilst all couples said that they are at a language proficiency level where active improvement of their skills is not necessary anymore, the NNSs occasionally do look up words to be sure of their meaning or expose themselves to English language input (e.g.: movies, series, or books) as a matter of respect to their partner’s language and culture. In that regard, the partners mentioned that English does not need to be actively improved anymore, but German was mentioned frequently by the foreign partners in Austria.

4.2.5 “Speckknödl are not just bacon dumplings” – memories and language

In terms of memories, language choice and preference, the couples answered once again similarly, even though the participants have a multitude of language backgrounds. All individuals agree that their joint couple memories are engrained and stored in ELF, regardless of their mother tongue. Since the partners use ELF most of the time, their memories are recalled in that same language. The only exception is the NNS partner of C5, who believes that his memories have no language whatsoever.

When I asked the NSs about memories that happened in Austria where German was involved, they claimed that these memories are merely “German themed” (I3, C3). P2.1 continues that German memories are hazier and that he doesn’t retain what he says in German very clearly, because he struggles so much at the time of speaking that the memorizing part is even harder (I2, C2).

Most of the respondents answered that they found it challenging to recount stories and memories to friends and family in their mother tongue if the memory happened in the other language. To be more specific, the NSs found it “weirdly difficult” (I3, C3) to translate memories that happened in Austria in German into English, and the NNS partners thought it to be difficult to tell their ELF memories to German native speakers. The respondents believed, however, that this phenomenon is not based on language deficiencies or difficulties in translation, but in the audience’s unfamiliarity with their environment and the lack of cultural knowledge. C5 elaborated that the memories that

happened in Austria are not difficult to translate to other Austrians, because they have experienced similar the situations. They continue:

P5.2: The people that I'm talking to know the cultural framework. If the story happened in Australia, a lot of stories that Carly and I *could* share make no sense to them, and it's not that the words don't add up, but because they can't connect.

P5.1: [...] yeah, I can tell them the dry facts, but the nuances are mostly lost. Like, trying to explain the Viennese humour to someone who hasn't lived in Vienna, or trying to explain quirky Austrian weird shit.

P5.2: Or just simple things. For example, Speckknödl are not just bacon dumplings, that's so not the same. Like very very very different. And if you try to explain, they do not care about the specification of it (I4, C5).

Other couples have similar experiences with translating memories for friends and family. C4 believes that the audience must know the language and possibly also must have lived abroad to truly grasp the story. C6 also recounts linguistic difficulties when translating memories to Ukrainian: "I often struggle. I realize that sometimes it doesn't sound the way I perceived it, or how I remembered, when I try to translate it, it sounds very different" (I5, C6). C5 captures the difficulties of sharing stories with friends and family with a language barrier by saying, "it makes stories quite bland" (I4, C5).

4.3 Supplementary aspects

4.3.1 "It rolls off my tongue" – expressing anger

With the exception of C6, all NNS participants preferred German to express emotions such as anger, frustration, or swearing in general. The respondents explain this behaviour with two different reasons: the first one is that swearing in their mother tongue feels better. P4.2, for example, prefers swearing in her L1 because "it comes out naturally in German" (I3, C4). The same is valid for P1.1 who prefers swearing in her mother tongue Creole: "I don't know what it is, it just feels better. It rolls off my tongue" (I1, C1). P5.2 also claims that swearing in his mother tongue Austrian German "has more *umpf*" (creates a more tangible effect for him) (I4, C5).

The second reason for using their L1's for expressing anger and frustration is the previously mentioned notion of insecurity in ELF. To be more specific, the participants

mentioned that they cannot gauge these negative emotions proficiently enough in ELF and fear unwanted perlocutionary effects. Especially factors such as intonation, vocabulary choice, and emphasis are areas of insecurities on part of the NNSs. Moreover, P2.2 mentioned that swear words, for instance, do not hold as much emotional value in ELF as they do in her L1 German, meaning, it gives her less satisfaction to swear in ELF.

The NNSs of C3 and C5 also discussed the difficult situation of expressing anger during fights or heated discussions with their partners. P5.2 says that these situations are not scripted for him, which implies that he needs to think more about his word choices for the “emotions to not go overboard” (i.e.: using unintended words) (I4 C5). Therefore, he reported to resort to his L1 when the situation becomes too complex in ELF: “When my backs against the wall, I switch to Austrian” (I4, C5). P4.2 also mentioned struggling with adequate vocabulary choices in ELF in the beginning of their relationship:

And then we would also have some fights where I would say “you're dumb” or “you're stupid”, but I just didn't have the softer synonyms that I would use in German, so I was really hurting and direct, and then, when I always said “well I can't speak that well” he would say “you speak English well enough, don't come with this stupid excuse”, and then I thought “na super. If we had this fight in German, we would all be set and fine” (I3, C3).

This example highlights the added difficulty of expressing anger in ELF for the NNS. As P4.2 recounts, the feeling of not being fully in command of the language and being unable to truly gauge the effects of words renders her to prefer German for these situations (I3, C4).

4.3.2 “English makes it easier to talk about” – expressing love

In terms of communicating love, the couples and individual participants had different perceptions of emotional weight and language choice. One aspect all couples agreed on is the fact that they are flexible with their language choice for verbal love declarations, but the partners habitually both choose the same language. Thus, both partners use the same language, but never each their own mother tongue or vice versa. An important factor for this choice seemed to be the uniqueness of an ELF relationship. C1, for instance, said that they switched together to ELF and now both to Creole over time. The reason for this shift is that because they live in Austria, and their

nicknames are already in Creole as well (“cosita”), it “highlights [their] biracial relationship” (I1, C1) and their uniqueness in a country of German-speakers.

C2 and C6 both use ELF for their love declarations and claim, that it feels more comfortable and familiar since ELF is the language of their relationship in general. C6 mentions that because they met each other using ELF, it would not feel authentic to say “I love you” in their respective mother tongues, and it would in fact feel more distant. C2 agrees that it would feel estranged to declare their love in German when their entire relationship is fuelled by ELF: “Emotions is the one thing that sticks most out to me in English because it makes it easier to talk about, because I don’t have as many words as I have in German, so it makes it easier to be precise, in a way” (I2, C2).

C4 and C5 both mentioned that NSs in general frequently use “baby talk” or “love you” in their relationships, which is unattractive to them because of their ELF status. C5 said to use “love you” frequently during the day, for instance, when they leave the room or the house, but when they want to make a sincere love declaration, they both use German. For the NNS (thus, the German native speaker), saying “Ich liebe dich” holds more emotional weight because German speakers tend to say it less frequently than English NSs. The NS, on the other hand, perceives the German version as “sincere and cute” and mentions that it has the effect of “pulling you out”, which makes it even more special to her (I4, C5). As previously mentioned, C3 uses their own construction of “lieb du” (a direct transfer from English into German) for their relationship.

4.3.3 “You need to be so advanced for this” – humour in ELF

The topic of humour in the respondents’ ELF relationships was arguably one of the most interesting ones, because most of the couples raised the topic without my input. Understanding humour and making jokes in ELF is perceived as rather difficult by the participants and one of the factors that causes most difference between the partners on a daily basis. The respondents see humour as a respectable achievement in a foreign language. For instance, C1 describes it as, “Humour is the hardest to communicate in a foreign language... Cause of course, the plain meaning of a word - it’s easy. But then the humour behind is very tough” (I1, C1). C5 finds similar words to describe humour, “Humour feels like an achievement you unlock when you speak a foreign language. [...] That almost seems unattainable to me. To have culture, language, and word all at once” (I4, C5).

C3 continued to discuss that humour and culture are closely interrelated, which is why the partners styles of humour often do not match. P3.2, for example, said that she cannot laugh at the stand-up comedian Dave Chapelle's jokes, but she considers "Alltagsgeschichten" (an Austrian TV show about everyday people) hilarious. Her Canadian partner perceives it vice versa: he does not truly understand German or Austrian humour, and even if he finds something funny, he is unsure whether he grasped the true joke or meaning or just a superficial facet thereof. The NS partner of C4 also had similar experiences, sharing that he cannot relate to Austrian cabarets and does not consider Austrians a funny people.

Therefore, the couples' solution to this challenge is adapting their humour with their partner. The partners of C2, for instance, both slightly changed their preference of humour for the sake of their relationship: "When you get to know someone beyond a language, you really start to understand what they find funny or not, so you kind of adapt it to suit the person that you're around the most" (I2, C2). Furthermore, they claim that the connection between humour and language is flexible: even with monolingual friends, they adapt their humour accordingly and find different things funny. For them, that implies that, "you don't really lose any of your humour, or what you like, you just put a part to the side for now, and when you speak more languages, there are more sides to it... like, more material" (I2, C2). C6 also notices how when the NNS is with his German-speaking friends, he enjoys the banter, but he does not miss it per se in his relationship. With one another, they simply enjoy different humour together. C1's solution is to use ELF humour instead of German or Spanish humour because it is something they can both enjoy and avoid translation errors. They reported that often they "get completely lost in translation" and stop it because humour is too challenging to translate, also because of the cultural differences (I1, C1).

In terms of making jokes, most of the NNSs perceived that they were less funny using ELF than their mother tongue. The NNS of C6 said, "In my mother tongue I'm way funnier. It's not completely gone, but my humour is very different to the humour of English native speakers" (I5, C6). The NNS of C5 also perceived himself as not funny, but rather "dorky". He claims that understanding humour – even complex or cultural jokes – is a skill he has acquired, but voicing humour is difficult. C3 has a similar view on understanding and making jokes in ELF: "You need to be very advanced to understand English jokes, but even more advanced to make jokes, and Alex would be smiling and surprised that I pulled it off. So, it's very difficult and you need to spend a

lot of time with native speakers” (I3, C3). From the other perspective, even the NSs notice how their NNS partners can play with humour more effortlessly in their L1 instead of ELF. The following extract shows C4 and C3 discussing making jokes in German and ELF:

P4.1: [...] also when we're with her friends, I see that she can make them laugh. But with me... I don't think she ever really makes me laugh...
[@@@ all participants] ... no like cracking jokes!

I: So, you're saying she can't make you laugh *in English*?

P4.1: In English, exactly, right.

P4.2: But you don't understand my German, so I can't make you laugh, apparently. @@@ Period.

P4.1: @@ No, but if we were around a bunch of English speakers, would you be cracking jokes?

P4.2: Hm... no...

P3.2: I think you need to be very careful. You need to be so advanced for this, I think that's why we wouldn't do it (I3, C4 and C3).

The challenges of juggling humour in ELF and intercultural humour have become visible above. Nevertheless, the couples also perceive positive aspects about having two or more different facets of international humour in their relationship. C4, for example, mentioned humour as one of the prime factors to fall in love with her partner: “That's what drew me to Joe in the first place, because he was so different than any other Austrian I knew, so much more fun. That's how I fell in love with him, with his humour. I didn't really know it, but it's very upbeat, and chippy” (I3, C4). Another aspect that brings great joy to the couples is trying to make their partners laugh in their respective L1s. C3 mentioned how the NS would keep trying to make jokes in German by using phrases or idioms he had heard. When asked what they specifically like about it (or find funny), P3.2 answered in the following:

We don't laugh about the German, but we laugh about those little sayings that they learned, and they do it so plain, and it's also like... it's not child German, but kind of like teenager German, so it's also not fully eloquent language. It's usually one sentence, very short, and that's it, like, ‘don't ask me anything else’ @@@ so it's very cute and funny (I3, C3).

As examples, they listed sentences such as “Meine Hausschuhe sind wirklich praktisch” (a typical Austrian sentence) or “Schlange in der Gras [sic]” (a German idiom).

4.3.4 “It costs us effort” – NS & NNS partners

The last topic of the interview was only discussed with the couples of type NS-NNS, thus, couples 2, 3, 4 and 5. Since the literature review showed that in ELF encounters, the NS is in a position of superiority due to their full language command, and the NNS is automatically put in a position of inferiority, I was curious to find out if the couples perceive these notions in their intimate ELF relationship as well, purely from a linguistic perspective. Whilst all NS partners clearly acknowledged their linguistic superiority, especially during heated discussions, fights, or emotional talks, the lines are still blurred. The reason for this is the couples' place of residence, Austria.

On the one hand, the NSs perceived themselves as linguistically superior, which was also acknowledged by their NNS partners. In C2, for instance, the NNS partner often feels helpless and at a lack of words during discussions, even though in regular communicative situations she can express herself effortlessly. The NS partner explains this in the following way:

The more emotional the conversational topic becomes, the more the upper hand... or superiority really starts to tip over in the hands of the native speaker. Because when you're emotional you don't think as clearly, you naturally go back to old ways of dealing with things, like, there's less control in general (I2, C2).

C3 has a similar view on this and underlines the added difficulties for the NNS partner in emotional situations: “It costs us effort to receive it, translate it, think about it. There's two steps falling away for a native speaker” (I3, C3). The NS in C4 also admitted that while they fight, it is easy to take advantage of the fact that he is a native speaker, although he said he does not take this opportunity. Nevertheless, he knows that it has an effect on his NNS wife. Especially in the early months of their relationship, C4 noticed the linguistic superiority and inferiority: “The language barrier in the beginning... oh yeah I had an advantage. [...] Now I see it. She was processing and listening. [...] I would freak out if the roles were reversed” (I3, C4). Moreover, C5 clearly acknowledged the fact that the NS is linguistically in an unfair position of superiority, let alone because she is a writer, and her family includes lawyers who argue for a living. In general, however, all couples frequently reassured that they are equals in every other respect of their relationship.

On the other hand, the notions of superiority and inferiority were immediately switched around when the NSs moved to Austria and reported needing help for setting up life. C2 mentioned how P2.1 was “helpless without her” in the first years in Austria due to the language barrier (I2, C2). The NSs of C3 and C4 also claimed that they never perceived themselves as superior, but rather inferior because they felt like the outsiders who were only able to speak one language. They also mentioned feelings of intimidation and embarrassment concerning European’s multilingualism and general language awareness in contrast to English-speaking countries like the USA or Canada. Again, the German native speaker partners openly admitted to feeling linguistically superior to their English NS partners. In C5, for example, they both notice a drastic change in language use (especially vocabulary, dialect, and pitch) when Stefan is in his hometown in Tyrol, because he feels comfortable and confident.

The next question was only directed at the NNS partners about whether they want to acquire native speaker-like skills. All four individuals answered with yes, but to different degrees. P2.2 wants to use expressions, vocabulary, and slang like a NS, but does not care too much about her pronunciation or accent: “[...] but, like, my pronunciation and accent, not so much, because we live in Austria. It would actually be a bit weird if I started to sound really Australian, because, like, I have no connections to Australian English other than Jarrad” (I2, C2). She also mentioned that it is important to her to “sound credible” to her partner’s family and friends in Australia. P3.2 would also like to have the language skills of a NS, because she feels like NSs treat other NSs with more respect and trust. This feeling, however, is purely work-related. On the other hand, she also perceives her accent as a “likeable trait” (I3, C3). P4.2 once had a negative experience where she “felt like a zoo animal” on a visit in the USA because people were mocking her Austrian accent in ELF (I3, C4). This is only one reason why she would also like to acquire native speaker-like skills. Nevertheless, she perceives both her English and her German skills to get worse in her relationship: “With him, I’m not trying my best, like, if he doesn’t understand me, I just try to explain whatever I want with super simple words or kind of rephrase in a wrong English. And my German, because I’m speaking less German” (I3, C4). Lastly, the NNS in C5 found it very important to have native speaker-like skills:

I was mortally offended when I found out recently that my English is very Germanic, and it annoys me more than I’m willing to admit. The ten years

in Vienna left their mark. [...] In Ireland I was indistinguishable to a native speaker. I soak up accents quite quickly. But now... (I4, C5).

P5.2 also believes that it is a sign of respect to want to master the language of their partner.

When I asked the NSs how they perceive the language level of their NNS partners, they all answered similarly with “He’s native”, “She’s perfect” or “She’s at a perfect level”. P3.1 claims that the language level of his partner is at such a high level that their intimate ELF relationship has never been imposed: “I don’t think we’d be together that long if I couldn’t tell her everything” (I3, C3). The only deficiencies mentioned were pronunciation errors and mistakes, which the NS participants perceive as adorable and entertaining rather than a deficiency, or nuances of ENL that make the NNSs insecure. P2.1 explains that “the things that are missing can’t be learned with a textbook, but comes with time” (I2, C2, [sic]).

5. Conclusion

5.1 “Our English is a hybrid English” – discussions

The obtained data of this research project has contributed with rich, extensive, and detailed information on how six ELF couples communicate and use ELF as their couple language. In the following section, I will discuss the results of the analysis in accordance with the literature review in order to understand how these six ELF couples perceive their language use in their relationships. Then, I will answer the research questions of this paper.

5.1.1 Discussion of the results

Influence and attitudes

The respondents mentioned two different reasons for choosing ELF as their couple language. The first one is the place of their first meeting point, which is inevitably an international setting for at least one of the partners. The prime language choice for these international encounters is ELF. The second reason, and arguably the most relevant one, is proficiency. For all six couples, English was the only lingua franca

available that both partners could speak well enough to facilitate establishing an intimate relationship. Piller (2002: 34f) agrees that the most important factor for choosing a couple language is, in fact, proficiency. Factors such as the majority language of the country of residence, gender or prestige have not been mentioned by the participants. The couples also reported that they prefer ELF as their couple language due to its comfortability, simplicity, and velocity of conversations. Pietikäinen (2018: 325f) also found that couples determine their joint language early on in their relationship and hardly switch due to a lack of valid reasons. One reason to implement another language is the birth of a baby, which is also mentioned by Pietikäinen (ibid: 326).

All participants had rather positive attitudes towards ELF, naming it a “comfort zone” and perceiving it as simple. Most of them also use ELF outside the relationship, indicating a wide use of ELF in cross-domain situations. The only negative attitude by the NNSs was the factor of impreciseness in terms of vocabulary in English, which caused insecurity in the past. Seidlhofer (2011: 28) said that NSs need to reject the view that the English language is their property and adapt an ELF attitude. The NS respondents of this study have fully acknowledged the international status of ELF and actually almost go the other way: the NSs feel privileged that ELF holds such a great importance in Austria, because they do not view it as more important than any other language. Due to their partners’ high proficiency in ELF, they feel guilty for not speaking better German while living in Vienna. As could be seen, the interplay of “minority” and “majority” languages (Piller 2002: 27) play an important role for the couples. Even though they use the minority language ELF in Austria, the wish for a more equal distribution exists for most of them.

The respondents have also reported to use ELF basically all the time in their relationship, with the limited exceptions of speaking to Austrian family and friends, practising each other’s L1s, swearing or secret gossiping. Pietikäinen (2018: 322; 327) listed all these reasons for switching to a different common language as well. Interestingly, Pietikäinen also mentioned that couples code-switch for language demonstration and clarification of “nontranslatables”, which the couples in my study did not mention at all.

Whilst some of the couples could not think about how ELF influences their relationship, others had a very clear idea of its effects. An increased number of misunderstandings

(especially in the beginning of their relationship), the need to be more precise and careful with utterances and the added stress and difficulty for the NNS partners were the three most mentioned influences. NSs also admitted to using less slang. Mauranen (2018: 15) says that being explicit and precise in ELF encounters to ensure mutual understanding is key for any successful communication, which can also be seen in the responses of the participants. By using less slang, the NSs try to avoid unilateral idiomaticity (Seidlhofer 2011: 130), for instance. The influence of ELF can therefore be seen in their adapted communication styles with their partners.

From a cultural angle, the participants also noticed the influence of ELF in their language identities. The NNSs of the study claimed to feeling more insecure in ELF (especially in the beginning of their relationships), having identity issues due to the increased time of using ELF instead of their mother tongue, or uncertainty of perlocutionary effects in terms of vocabulary or intonation. Baker (2018: 31) said that there is no ELF identity per se, but a person rather has multiple (language) identities, which are – for most multilingual speakers – unproblematic. This holds true for my participants as well. Whilst their L1 identities are still the strongest ones (also given that the NSs do not perceive any changes in their identity in their ELF relationship), their secondary ELF identities come with many different struggles, yet manageable ones. To conclude, all couples perceive the influence of ELF as an intriguing and exciting factor for their relationship and are happy to conquer the challenges that come with it.

Contrary to my initial expectations, the couples found it very difficult to come up with advantages of ELF specifically for their relationship. Most advantages mentioned were visible in other domains (e.g.: business or leisure), but not the private, intimate domain. The reason why the couples struggled to answer that is that, by now, it is so normalised to use ELF in their relationship that the initial excitement and thrill or difference to mother tongue couple talk has completely faded and normalized for them. As Pietikäinen (2016: 195) states, an ELF couple represents one of the most stable forms of ELF contact; after years of this stability, the advantages of ELF do not stand out anymore.

Nevertheless, a few advantages mentioned were the international status of ELF to enable them to make joint friends while travelling, watching English movies and TV series together, and a smoother integration into Austria (in comparison to other, less

spoken languages). All these aspects can be seen as facilitators of the couples' pretext in the first place: to create their own microculture and togetherness using ELF (Klötzl 2014: 32). Joint hobbies and getting to know each other's families are major parts of any intimate relationship, and ELF has facilitated this. The NNS-NNS couples mentioned that ELF is beneficial for them because it presents a neutral ground for them. House (2003: 559f) also mentioned two NNSs are completely equal when communicating in ELF, which avoids any unfair linguistic power dynamics in their intimate relationship.

In terms of disadvantages, the couples also found it challenging to list strong aspects for their relationship due to their genuine like of using ELF. The disadvantages they did eventually list are sometimes quite contradictory, because the very same aspects have been previously mentioned as benefits. For instance, they mentioned that ELF prohibited a smooth integration into Austria, which before was mentioned as an advantage of ELF in comparison to lesser spoken languages. I would categorize this merely as a drawback of any multilingual relationship, but not specifically of ELF as a couple language. Furthermore, the NNS-NNS type couples perceived it advantageous that ELF is a neutral ground for them, but also lacked a common cultural ground linked to language.

A few genuine examples of disadvantages of ELF are that public gossiping is more difficult because most people understand English, and ELF's impreciseness in terms of vocabulary. Especially the NNSs struggle with unintentional illocutionary forces and perlocutionary effects. The differences in their fight and humour cultures often lead them to resort to their respective L1s due to its familiarity and the insecurity in ELF. These perceptions are in line with Pietikäinen's (2016: 193) argument that "misunderstandings mainly derive from lexical features such as insufficient vocabulary or atypical pronunciation" and Dewaele's view (2006: 148) that multilingual speakers prefer their L1 for the expression of anger.

The other disadvantages mentioned by the couples relate back to the interplay between the majority language German and the minority language ELF whilst living in Austria. Especially the Austrians perceive ELF in a position of favouritism, meaning that they had to put in more effort than the English NSs (in terms of learning the language, but also taking over chores and organizing their lives in Austria). Again,

these aspects are not directly targeted at disadvantages of ELF per se, but rather bilingual relationships as such.

Characteristics of couple talk

Leisi (1983: 23) claims that some couples almost speak in their own dialect, whilst others only have a few secret words they use for their private couple code. As the results show, the six participating couples rarely use secret words or phrases in their relationship, neither in ELF nor in any other language. The participants say that they are not creative enough, or that they dislike “tribal language” and exclusion of others. Interestingly, Leisi argues, however, that the language of couples is more creative than the standard language, and that couples generally like having their own linguistic bubble. These factors were not detected in the participating couples. In terms of nicknames, the couples generally use English nicknames, but not the generic ones like “baby” or “honey”, but specific nicknames adjusted to their interests and qualities. Having nicknames in the minority language of their country of residence (hence, ELF nicknames in Austria) highlights their specialness and uniqueness of their international relationship. Pietikäinen (2014: 18f) also believes that code-switching for terms of endearment is widely reported amongst ELF couples, which could be seen in a few variations in German or Spanish.

Concerning language as an erotic stimulant, the couples said to mostly stick to ELF since they established it as their couple language, and therefore also use it in intimate situations (Kinging 2004: 160). Klötzl’s hypothesis (2014: 36) that partners feel more emotionally detached in ELF and prefer their L1s for intimate talk could not be attested with my participants.

Three couples have admitted to using texts from movies, books, and series frequently in their relationship, whilst others do not reference at all. The references they do use are circumstantial, change over time, and are often taken from common experiences. Leisi argues that couples generally have negative connotations towards referencing in their relationship, and that it is difficult to research because couples dislike admitting that their relationship is not original (Leisi 1983: 74; 76). In my study, however, there are no negative connotations towards using texts from movies or series in the relationship, and it was also not difficult to research due to the couple’s mindsets, but rather because they could not think of examples. In terms of the partner’s romantic talk, the NNSs said to have taken extra classes at university or taken phrases from

movies, books, and TV series. The majority of the NSs adapted their romantic talk to fit the ELF environment, for instance, by using less “baby talk”, which is a prevalent feature of American ENL coupledness.

In terms of interferences and misunderstandings, the six couples related most misconceptions to culture and gender differences, but also said that they are faced with a lot of linguistic misunderstandings too. As Piller’s (2002: 4) study shows, however, most misunderstandings do not disrupt the relationship and can be avoided by using pre-emptive strategies. The strategies mentioned by my participants were being more precise and clearer with their messages, confirmation checks, simple language and being more thoughtful. The areas that do see the most misunderstandings are, just as Leisi (1983: 121) said, in phonology (pronunciation, intonation and tonality) and lexical semantics (for instance, the use of swear words). The couples handle misunderstandings quite easily, which implies a strong cooperative principle amongst the partners (Klötzl 2015: 102). A prevalent feature mentioned is the “common ground fallacy” (Pietikäinen 2018: 330), but also their linguistic relaxedness and their “let-it-pass strategy” (Pietikäinen 2014: 18).

The last category of the characteristics of couple talk is language as a means of memories. Marian & Neisser’s (2000: 261) findings that if “the language at retrieving matches the language at encoding” brings more vivid memories has also been confirmed by my participants. The joint couple memories are perceived to be engrained in English, whereas the NSs only have “German themed” memories where German was involved. The transfer, however, is challenging for most participants, but not because of linguistic deficiencies, but because of lack of cultural knowledge on behalf of the audience.

Supplementary aspects

The two overarching emotions investigated in this paper are anger and love. Almost all participants prefer swearing and expressing their anger in their mother tongue and not ELF. The three major reasons are the authentic feeling, avoiding the feeling of insecurity in ELF, and undesirable perlocutionary effects. Dewaele (2004: 2019) agrees that multilingual speakers prefer their L1s for swearing to avoid unwanted effects. Moreover, Dewaele (2006: 148) found that speakers who learned a second language exclusively in school (like my participants) lack proper anger scripts and repertoires. The participants also mention that heated discussions are tricky in ELF

because their emotions impede any rational language use. As my participants stated, the NNSs are in these cases disadvantaged, which are also the results of Piller's study (2002: 154). Interestingly, Dewaele (2006: 146f) argues that multilingual speakers generally prefer their L1 for emotional talk due to their emotional attachment to it. I can confirm this hypothesis for expressing anger, but not for expressing love.

My participants stated that they are flexible with their language choice for love declarations, but in general most of them prefer ELF because it has been established as their intimate language in the beginning of their coupledness. Therefore, the respondents – who are all advanced speakers of English – prefer ELF for love declarations, which is in accordance with Pavlenko's (2008: 157) findings. The participants did, however, mention that the quick "love you" holds little emotional weight for them, which is because they perceive it to be linked to ENL culture.

Discussing humour in ELF was arguably the most interesting topic, because most couples raised the topic without my input. The participants admit that humour differences are the most influential factor on their ELF relationships on a daily basis. They perceive humour and culture to be closely interrelated. As Grosjean (2021: 219) says, humour is a "bonding agent" and is culturally bound to certain in-groups, meaning that an ELF couple lacks this common frame of reference. The couples' solution to this challenge is adapting their humour and sticking mostly to ELF so that both partners can equally enjoy it. Whilst Chiaro (2009: 211) said that bilingual couples appreciate jokes and humour in all languages available, my participants only use German, for instance, for short idioms or sayings to make their partners laugh. Most of their humour is still in ELF.

Especially the NNSs perceive themselves to be less funny in ELF. Vaid (2006: 155) claims that NNSs see making jokes in a foreign language as a hallmark sign of NS proficiency, which is exactly what my participants believe as well. Hence, the NNS respondents feel rather insecure in attempting to make jokes in ELF. Nevertheless, the difference in humour is also seen as a positive and refreshing aspect to their relationship.

The last topic investigated was concerned with the NS-NNS dynamic in the ELF relationship. Whilst Pietikäinen (2018: 324) assumes that ELF partners' mutual appreciation and love for each other impedes them of admitting notions of linguistic superiority or inferiority, it was refreshing to see the participants honesty and candor

about their situations. Both NSs and NNSs acknowledged that the NSs are in a superior position, especially during heated discussions or fights. The NNSs often find themselves at a lack of words, and the superior linguistic skills of their NS partners worsens the situation. Nevertheless, the majority language in Austria (German) plays a major role too and reverses the positions of superiority and inferiority immediately. When the NSs moved to Austria, they needed help for everything due to the language barrier and therefore felt inferior, intimidated, or even embarrassed.

As Seidlhofer (2011: 5) says, the notions of NS and NNS evoke connotations of “correct” and “faulty” English respectively. The participants in my study perceive it like that as well, which is reflected in the NNSs wishes for NS-like skills. The notions of nativeness and standard are completely conflated, also for my respondents (ibid: 52). Nevertheless, the NNSs find it easier to adapt to intercultural settings, which also applies for my participants (ibid: 41). The fact that the NNS partners strive for idiomatic language use of NSs could either be seen as “territorial encroachment”, but is more likely just highly proficient NNSs exposed to NS culture via their partners (Pietikäinen 2016: 132). Once again, Piller’s study (2002: 5) of bilingual couples is more relevant than ever: whilst their linguistic superiority and inferiority in their ELF relationships are confirmed, the majority language German plays a bigger role in these power dynamics than initially suspected.

5.1.2 Answers to the research questions

In the following, I want to focus on the main research interest of this paper and answer the guiding questions.

- 1. How do ELF couples perceive the influence of ELF on their relationship? To what extent do they perceive that ELF is enabling or limiting?*

Generally, the ELF couples of this study perceive ELF as a “comfort zone” and have established ELF as their intimate and emotional couple language since the beginning of their relationship. Therefore, ELF is their prime choice for communicating, discussing, fighting, love declarations, and intimate situations. In fact, most participants feel more emotional weight in ELF than their L1s because it is a trademark of their coupledness (nevertheless, those quick “love you’s” are generally rejected because they belong to ENL culture). They perceive ELF to be an intriguing and exciting factor for

their relationship and appreciate the specialness of speaking multiple languages together.

ELF, however, affects various parts of their relationships in negative ways too. The respondents report an increased number of misunderstandings or added stress and difficulty in communication (especially for NNSs). Furthermore, some participants mention ELF identity issues and feelings of insecurity in this lingua franca. The influence of ELF is also visible in the partners' adaption of humour, which they generally keep in ELF to ensure mutual understanding and enjoyment. For expressing anger, the individuals prefer their L1s because the anger scripts are pragmatically clearer, and a higher feeling of security is given. The influence of ELF can also be seen in their joint couple memories, which are engrained in ELF.

The special case of NS and NNS partners show that NSs are indeed linguistically superior to their NNS partners, but the majority language of their place of residence (in this study, Austria) plays as big a role as the couple language in terms of superiority and inferiority. The NNSs are, however, heavily influenced by ENL norms instead of ELF norms since they all expressed strong wishes for NS-like skills.

All in all, the couples mention various factors how ELF influences their relationship. Some factors mentioned are enabling, some are limiting. I would argue, however, that the ELF couples of this study do not perceive ELF as either; their stable contact in ELF "enables" them to do just what any monolingual relationship can do, and the factors that "limit" them are not perceived as obstacles, but challenges they are both happy to overcome.

2. What are some particular ELF couple talk characteristics?

The ELF partners attempt to speak more precisely and clearer, use frequent confirmation checks, and the NSs use less slang with their partners to ensure mutual understanding and avoid potential miscommunication. Establishing a private code with secret words or phrases is not popular amongst the six participating couples, due to their perceived lack of creativity and their dislike of exclusion of others. Nicknames are mostly created in ELF because they perceive it as special (with regards to living in Austria), but they reject generic nicknames like "baby" or "honey" deriving from ENL culture. In terms of referencing, the ELF partners use little to no phrases or words from movies, books, or TV series in their relationship due to differing tastes. These ELF couple talk characteristics can almost be categorized as the same characteristics of

monolingual couple talk, with the exception of frequent explication and foreign nicknames. Furthermore, the couples code-switch (intended or automatically), mostly for humorous purposes or practice of their respective L1s. In general, however, the language level of the participants is so high in ELF that no other characteristics emerged from the interview data.

3. What are the advantages and disadvantages for couples using ELF as a means of communication?

Due to the normality of using ELF on a daily basis with their partners, the couples found it difficult to list advantages and disadvantages. As benefits they mention the international, global status of ELF, which enabled a smoother transition into Austria in comparison to other languages, their high proficiency in ELF and their genuine like of using ELF, as well as the fact that ELF enabled them to build their microculture and togetherness as a couple. For the NNS-NNS couples, ELF represented a neutral ground for their communication, where the partners are completely equal.

The disadvantages mentioned are sometimes contradictory to the advantages. A difficult integration into Austria or lacking a common ground for NNS-NNS couples are rather categorized as drawbacks of any multilingual relationships, but not specifically of ELF as a couple language. The fact that ELF is in a perceived position of favouritism – even in Austria – is again a power play of majority and minority language instead of ELF per se. Disadvantages specific to ELF, however, are its impreciseness in terms of vocabulary, which creates not only misunderstandings but also insecurity for NNSs, differences in fight and humour culture which results in misunderstandings, adaptations and more insecurity for the NNSs, and the fact that public gossiping is more difficult for the couples because ELF is easily intelligible worldwide.

4. How do ELF couples perceive and deal with linguistic misunderstandings and interferences?

The ELF couples of this study perceive culture and gender related differences to cause more misunderstandings instead of linguistic ones. Their rich repertoire of pre-emptive strategies to avoid misunderstandings (being clear and precise, confirmation checks, simple language, thinking twice before speaking) are perceived to be most effective. Most linguistic misunderstandings that do occur are in phonology (pronunciation, intonation, and tonality) or lexical semantics (for instance, meaning of swear words). When interferences occur, the ELF partners are unencumbered, showing strong

cooperative principles. Especially instances of the common ground fallacy are usually reversed within seconds, and misunderstandings are forgotten that same minute, as reported by the participants.

5.1.3 Comparison to Gundacker (2010)

In the following, I would like to close the conceptual replication research process and contrast and compare my results to those from the original study by Gundacker (2010).

Gundacker reported no limitations in terms of ELF as a couple language and claims that ELF can do everything any other language can do (ibid: 120). The results of my study show somewhat similar results: whilst it became apparent that ELF truly can do what other languages can for the purpose of an intimate relationship, my respondents did mention a few limitations. Nevertheless, these limitations are rather seen as challenges ready to overcome instead of genuine disadvantages. In that respect, ELF couples clearly do not mind the added burden of communicating in a lingua franca and perceive no deficiencies for their relationship.

Gundacker's findings also report that the advantages clearly outweigh the disadvantages (ibid: 112f). In my case, the respondents found it difficult to come up with either in the first place. In general, however, the couples genuinely like ELF as their couple language and see more benefits than drawbacks, hence, our findings coincide. Whilst the specific advantages listed by Gundacker's study are similar as those of my ELF couples, the disadvantages are quite different. Gundacker's couples mentioned the possibility of restrictive conversations, unequal proficiency levels in ELF or greater difficulties in expressing emotions. These factors are completely irrelevant for the participants of my study. Loosing nuances in the language transfer and a decelerated language learning process of German are, however, factors that are detected in both studies. The most striking difference in this section is that Gundacker's participants were able to come up with many specific advantages of ELF, whereas mine found it very difficult. This could be traced back to the fact that my study contained four NSs, and Gundacker interviewed exclusively NNSs.

In sum, Gundacker reports that there are no differences to monolingual couple talk in terms of misunderstandings. Most interferences derive from differences in active and passive vocabulary repertoires (ibid: 112f). These results are completely different to mine again since the couples mentioned having lots of misunderstandings in the

beginning of their relationships and putting in place specific pre-emptive strategies to avoid these instances. Nevertheless, all couples perceive gender and culture related issues as more prevalent than linguistic issues.

Last but not least, Gundacker reports that ELF is more important for the women of her study than for the men (ibid: 117). This gender perspective on the matter has not been investigated by me, but after finishing my research project, I can say that this claim is not valid for the participants of my study. Whilst my participants did mention “typical boy-girl” complications various times, they never specified that language was more important for either gender.

Another insight of Gundacker’s and my study is the fact that since 2010, the perceptions on communicating emotions and communicating humour have not changed (ibid: 118). The partners prefer ELF for expressing love, as it is their couple language, but prefer their respective L1s for expressing anger and swearing. In terms of humour, Gundacker’s participants also preferred their L1s, whereas mine adapt to ELF for the sake of togetherness and their microculture.

5.1.4 Limitations of the study

As previously mentioned (subchapter 3.2), the study at hand shows an arrange of limitations which I would like to highlight again for the purpose of interpreting this study adequately. First, the number of participants in this small-scale qualitative study is low, meaning that any results or conclusions drawn from this analysis are only valid for these six ELF couples. They can hardly be seen as generalisations. Whilst the couples’ similar profiles allowed a more controlled experiment and a more homogenous group, these factors also contribute to the limitations of this study. All participants are resident in Austria (except for one couple who recently relocated to Australia), have roughly the same age frame and length of relationship. Additionally, all NNS partners are Austrian (i.e.: German native speakers). Therefore, the study presents more limitations in terms of the participants and the linked results: ELF couples with other L1 languages, other age frames or shorter relationship lengths might answer the questions differently. Therefore, I would like to highlight again that the results of this study can only be read in the context they appear in.

Another indicator in dire need of mentioning is the fact that the interview data is based on perceptions, self-assessments, and attitudes. Therefore, the data might vary or deviate from the actual state of affairs. Moreover, the interview situation might inhibit the participants from being completely honest and open about their personal affairs. The most important part of this limitation is, however, that the data is merely a reflection of the couples' attitudes towards ELF and not natural language behaviour. This can be seen, for instance, in the section "private code": whilst the couples reported to not use references or invent words in their coupledness, the data does not show if this is actually the case.

Despite all the limitations mentioned above, the research project gives an insight into six ELF couples living in Austria with similar backgrounds. The results are highly contextual and based on a homogeneous group of participants.

5.2 Conclusion

The study at hand attempted to shed light on how intimate ELF couples perceive the influence of ELF on their relationship, with a focus on the advantages and disadvantages of ELF as a couple language for their daily lives. The study, based on the perceptions and self-assessments of six ELF couples, has shown that the partners perceive the influence of ELF in many different facets of their relationship, for instance, the adaption of humour to suit both partners from different cultural backgrounds, the numerous pre-emptive linguistic strategies to avoid misunderstandings, or their joint memories engrained in ELF. Moreover, the study has highlighted that the couples prefer ELF as the language of intimate, romantic moments, but prefer their respective L1s for other emotional talk like fighting or swearing. This research project also investigated a special type of ELF relationship, namely that of an English native speaker with a non-native speaker of English. The results show that whilst the NS is, in fact, linguistically superior to the NNS (especially during heated discussions or similar speech events), the majority language of their place of residence (in this case, Austria) plays as big a role as their couple language. All these results imply that language and culture can never be separated, especially in ELF encounters of this intimate level.

The focus of this study was put on the perceived advantages and disadvantages of ELF as a couple language. Contrary to initial assumptions, the participants found it quite challenging to come up with convincing and strong advantages or disadvantages of ELF, and rather mentioned benefits and drawbacks of any multilingual relationship. The reason behind this is the advanced level of proficiency of all participants in ELF, and their solid establishment of ELF as their couple language years ago: the normality of using ELF everyday with their partners impeded clear advantages and disadvantages. Whilst the couples see various advantages of ELF, such as its international status, their high proficiency, or the possibility of building their microculture, the disadvantages mentioned are the impreciseness of ELF's vocabulary and occasional insecurities in terms of perlocutionary effects. The couples repeatedly assure, however, that any drawbacks mentioned are simply factors that belong to their multilingual relationship and they are happy to overcome any obstacles for this exciting and intriguing ELF relationship. To sum up, any advantages and disadvantages are merely a representation of the current state of affairs and do not reflect strong perceptions on part of the respondents.

The replication research approach has indicated very similar results to the original study by Gundacker (2010). The findings of both studies show that ELF as a couple language can do everything any other language can do. Whilst Gundacker's participants listed numerous advantages and disadvantages of ELF, my participants, as indicated above, focused more on the influence of ELF in general. Despite other minor differences, the results of this study at hand are generalizable to those of Gundacker's.

The research project at hand has revealed rich insights into how ELF couples perceive the influence of ELF on their relationship. The results are, however, highly context-bound, since the number of participants is rather small and restricted to couples living in Vienna, Austria. Therefore, it would be interesting for future researchers to investigate ELF couples in other places to further explore the dynamic of majority and minority languages in connection with ELF, since this turned out to be a major factor for the participating couples. Moreover, research into ELF couples from a gender study or cultural study perspective might shed some more light on the matter from other angles.

Word count: 30.500

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7. Appendix

7.1 Interviews overview

First interview			
Abbreviation	I1	Date	18.06.2021
Duration	49:30 min	Time	17:00 – 18:00
Place	C1's place	Interviewer	Magdalena Höller
Couple 1			
Abbreviation	C1	Type	NNS - NNS
Length of rel.	7 years	Status	married
Partner 1		Partner 2	
Abbreviation	P1.1	Abbreviation	P1.2
Name	Elaine	Name	Sven
Gender	female	Gender	male
Nationality	Nicaragua	Nationality	Austria
Mother tongue	Creole	Mother tongue	German
Age	32	Age	30

Second interview			
Abbreviation	I2	Date	18.06.2021
Duration	47:24	Time	20:30 – 21:30
Place	Interviewer's place	Interviewer	Magdalena Höller
Couple 2			
Abbreviation	C2	Type	NS - NNS
Length of rel.	7.5 years	Status	married
Partner 1		Partner 2	
Abbreviation	P2.1	Abbreviation	P2.2
Name	Jarrad	Name	Carina
Gender	male	Gender	female
Nationality	Australia	Nationality	Austria
Mother tongue	English	Mother tongue	German
Age	29	Age	27

Third interview			
Abbreviation	I3	Date	22.06.2021
Duration	1:09:32	Time	20:00 – 21:30
Place	C3's place	Interviewer	Magdalena Höller
Couple 3			
Abbreviation	C3	Type	NS - NNS
Length of rel.	3 years	Status	de facto
Partner 1		Partner 2	
Abbreviation	P3.1	Abbreviation	P3.2
Name	Alex	Name	Nadine
Gender	male	Gender	female
Nationality	Canada	Nationality	Austria
Mother tongue	English	Mother tongue	German
Age	28	Age	30
Couple 4			
Abbreviation	C4	Type	NS - NNS
Length of rel.	6 years	Status	married
Partner 1		Partner 2	
Abbreviation	P4.1	Abbreviation	P4.2
Name	Joe	Name	Johanna
Gender	male	Gender	female
Nationality	USA	Nationality	Austria
Mother tongue	English	Mother tongue	German
Age	29	Age	32

Fourth interview			
Abbreviation	I4	Date	09.07.2021
Duration	1:25:06	Time	10:30 – 12:15
Place	Virtual meeting	Interviewer	Magdalena Höller
Couple 5			
Abbreviation	C5	Type	NS - NNS
Length of rel.	9,5 years	Status	married
Partner 1		Partner 2	
Abbreviation	P5.1	Abbreviation	P5.2
Name	Carly	Name	Stefan
Gender	female	Gender	male
Nationality	Australia	Nationality	Austria
Mother tongue	English	Mother tongue	German
Age	35	Age	35

Fifth interview			
Abbreviation	I5	Date	03.08.2021
Duration	39:10	Time	19:00 – 20:00
Place	Interviewer's place	Interviewer	Magdalena Höller
Couple 6			
Abbreviation	C6	Type	NNS - NNS
Length of rel.	3 years	Status	married
Partner 1		Partner 2	
Abbreviation	P6.1	Abbreviation	P6.2
Name	Olena	Name	Oliver
Gender	female	Gender	male
Nationality	Ukraine	Nationality	Austria
Mother tongue	Ukrainian	Mother tongue	German
Age	33	Age	32

7.2 Declaration of consent form

Declaration of consent - MEd Thesis

Research project: Advantages & disadvantages of using ELF in intimate relationships

Dear participants,

Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed as part of the above research project. Ethical procedures for academic research require that interviewees explicitly agree to being interviewed and how the information contained in their interview will be used. Therefore, please read the information and then sign this form to certify that you approve the following:

- 1) the interview will be audio recorded
- 2) the interview will be analysed by Magdalena Höller as research investigator
- 3) only relevant parts of the interview will be transcribed and may appear in an academic paper (my MEd Thesis)
- 4) the findings of the interviews will appear in an academic paper (my MEd Thesis)
- 5) everything you say may be quoted directly or indirectly, paraphrased or summarised
- 6) all your data is handled confidentially and your identities will remain anonymous
- 7) in case you would like to change, retract or elaborate on any of your statements, you may contact the researcher at any time in written or spoken form
- 8) the actual recording will be kept by the researcher Magdalena Höller only

By signing this form, you agree that:

- a) you are voluntarily taking part in this research
- b) you have been able to ask questions before, during and after the interview
- c) you have understood and approve of how your data will be used in this research project

Do you consent to the conditions of this interview study?

☐ yes

☐ no

Name of the couple

Your answer

Date

Date

tt.mm.jjjj 

Submit

Clear form

7.3 Interview guideline

1. Information about the couple's cultural backgrounds

- Where are you from and what's your mother tongue?
- Do you speak any other languages?
- How long have you lived in Austria?
- Why did you decide to live in Austria?
- Do you like it here?
- Is Austria the first foreign country where you have lived?
- Would there be any other possibilities for you two?

2. Information about their relationship

- How long have you been together?
- Where did you meet?
- Is this your first relationship where you use English or another foreign language as means of communication?
- Have you always communicated in English?
- Why did you choose to use English to communicate with each other?
- Did you think of other languages?
- Would there be another possibility for you two?

3. English as the choice of their means of communication

- What perceptions do you have towards English?
- What does English mean to you? (Is it more/less important than your mother tongue or another foreign language?)
- In which situations do you use English with one another? In which situations do you use another language (on purpose)? Examples?
- NNS: Do you use English outside your relationship as well? Or is it reduced as the language of your coupledness?
- Do you pay special attention to your language choice so your partner can understand you? (e.g.: when you are with family, friends...)
- Would you prefer it if you both had the same mother tongue?

- Do you like English as the language of your relationship or what would you hypothetically change?

4. The influence of English

- How would you say speaking English with each other influences your relationship?
- NNS: Do you think that when you speak English, you feel like a different person? If yes, how could that affect your relationship? Did or do you ever feel like you gained/lost an identity?
- NS: Do you feel any different when you speak to your non-native English partner than with a native speaker?
- How would you say English has influenced your relationship in the past?
- How do you think it will influence it in the future?
- Would you think your relationship would be different if your partner spoke the same language? How so?
- NNS: Does it feel different to communicate love in your mother tongue or in English? What about anger or frustration?
- How do you handle humour in your relationship? NNS: is it difficult/different to communicate humour in English? NS: do you adapt your humour?

5. The advantages of English

- What would you say are the advantages of using English in your relationship?
- Can you think of some situations where using English was an advantage for your relationship? (e.g.: enabling you to resolve a fight, clearly communicate emotions, helped you get out of a mess, helped you to get to know each other on an intimate level, it's neutral for both of you, feel less shy to say something, feels more comfortable, humour, makes it exciting, language improvement...)

6. The disadvantages of English

- What language-based problems occur in your relationship?
- Can you think of situations where English has caused problems? (e.g.: where you were frustrated that the other person doesn't speak English well enough,

with extended family/friends, at gatherings or parties, contracts, doctor, laziness to speak a foreign language, discussion domination, limited expressions available...)

- What could you do to prevent such problems?

7. Language as private code (Every couple has some kind of a private code which develops during the course of the relationship: e.g.: nicknames)

- Have you given each other nicknames in English or another language?
- Why do you think you gave your partner nicknames in this language? How did you come across them?
- Do you like these nicknames or would you prefer a nickname in your language/local dialect?
- Do you have any other kind of secret language? For example, phrases or idioms that only you two know? And in which language are those? (e.g.: potato shaver)

8. Language as erotic stimulant (It can stimulate your relationship, as well as it can cool it down) → share as much or as little as you want to!

- Can you think of anything of that kind relating to English or any other languages you speak?
- Do you think there would be any differences if you spoke in your mother tongue?

9. Love according to texts (Very often it focuses on already existing language clusters: e.g. novels, poems, songs, movies...)

- Do you use phrases or words from movies/series/songs/books in your relationship?
- Where do they come from? Are they all in English or other languages too?
- NNS: Where did you acquire the English skills you need for a 'romantic talk' with your partner? Did movies/series/books help you with that?
- NS: Do you adapt your "romantic talk" for your partner?

10. Interferences and misconceptions

- Would you say that some misconceptions and interferences of your relationship are due to linguistic problems?
- Can you describe situations in which misconceptions arose due to language problems? (e.g.: fighting because of a misunderstanding, friends/family, wrong translation)
- Do you use specific strategies to avoid misunderstandings? (e.g.: being over explicit, using simpler language, using common words)
- Do you think it is important to (actively) improve your English skills/communication skills for your relationship?

11. Language as a means of memories

- Is the language important for you when you think back of situations that happened in the past? Do you remember certain memories in certain languages?
- When you want to tell somebody else what you have experienced with your partner, is it difficult to translate it into your mother tongue? (for NS: from German into English)
- NNS: Do you think your memories with your partner are engrained in English or your mother tongue?

12. Native speaker & non-native speaker

- Do you perceive any superiority, inferiority (or completely equal) being the NS/NNS in the relationship? If yes, in how far?
- Can you think of any instances when you felt superior/inferior/equal?
- For the NNS: is it important to you to acquire native speaker-like skills (pronunciation, accent, vocabulary, expressions...)?
- For the NS: how do you perceive the language level of your partner for your relationship?

7.4 Overview of replication research variables

*Variables in **bold** were adapted in my research project

Variables	Gundacker (2010)	Höller (2021)
Participants	<i>Number:</i> 5 couples <i>Criteria:</i> interested open-minded reliable Only NNSs couples Met abroad and fell in love there 20 - 33 years old Not married Min. 1.5 years in relationship ELF as a major means of communication Live in one household Live in Austria	<i>Number:</i> 6 couples <i>Criteria:</i> interested open-minded reliable NSSs + NNSs couples Met abroad and fell in love there 27 - 35 years old Married or de facto Min. 1.5 years in relationship ELF as a major means of communication Live in one household Live in Austria
Data collection	Qualitative interviews (with guideline) semi-structured “Interview Guide Approach” <i>Place:</i> mostly at their homes Joint couple interviews possible Two couples interviewed at the same time	Qualitative interviews (with guideline) semi-structured “Interview Guide Approach” <i>Place:</i> mostly at their homes Joint couple interviews possible Two couples interviewed at the same time

	Sharing 12 points in advance <i>Data type:</i> perceptions, attitudes <i>Length of interviews:</i> ca. 40 min. <i>Date:</i> 2009 February - March	Sharing 12 points in advance <i>Data type:</i> perceptions, attitudes <i>Length of interviews:</i> ca. 50 min. <i>Date:</i> 2021 June - July
Data analysis	Qualitative content analysis Inductive category approach	Qualitative content analysis Deductive & inductive category approach
Transcription	only include transcription relevant for the results	only include transcription relevant for the results
Interview roles	<i>Interviewer:</i> lay person <i>Participants:</i> experts	<i>Interviewer:</i> expert <i>Participants:</i> experts

7.5 Transcription conventions

used for direct quotations in this research paper

.	falling intonation
?	rising intonation
!	loud voice or exclamation
@	laughter
[text]	comment of researcher/interviewer
...	long pause
[...]	omission (due to irrelevance)
'text'	air quotations made by participants or direct speech
<i>text</i>	emphasis

7.6 Abstract in English

In an ever-growing, interconnected world as it is today, English as a lingua franca couples are no longer just a rare phenomenon. Whilst ELF couples have previously been neglected in academic research, the last decade has brought some valuable insights into this specific domain of private ELF talk. This study aims to continue the research flow by investigating the influence of ELF as the main means of communication of life partners. Specifically, its purpose is to capture perceptions and self-assessments of ELF couples on factors such as identity (co-)construction, interferences and private couple talk in a foreign language that in turn affect the opportunities and limitations as well as the advantages and disadvantages of ELF couple talk.

The study at hand is designed as conceptual replication research from Gundacker (2010), who investigated the same matter during the earliest stages of ELF couple research. In both studies, five (and six) long-term ELF couples were interviewed and asked about their perceptions on how ELF affects their relationship in various aspects of everyday life. Based on their answers, valuable insights into the advantages and disadvantages of ELF as a couple language were gained. The results show, amongst other things, that the couples feel the influence of ELF in the areas of humour, misunderstandings, shared memories, emotions, or language identity. However, none of these factors are seen as advantages or disadvantages per se. The advanced language level of the participants and the long-term use of ELF as a couple language are the main reasons why the respondents can only list unconvincing advantages and regard disadvantages only as small hurdles that they are happy to overcome for an exciting, intercultural relationship.

The results of the study also indicate that the interplay between the majority language German and the minority language English has a major influence on the participating couples, especially with regard to the linguistic superiority and inferiority of the partners. Future research projects could address this special dynamic between intimate partners.

7.7 Abstract in German

In einer ständig wachsenden, vernetzten Welt wie sie heute ist, sind Englisch als Lingua Franca Paare (kurz: ELF) nicht mehr nur ein seltenes Vorkommen. Während ELF-Paare bisher in der akademischen Forschung vernachlässigt wurden, hat das letzte Jahrzehnt einige wertvolle Einblicke in diesen speziellen Bereich des privaten ELF-Gesprächs gebracht. Diese Arbeit zielt darauf ab, den Forschungsfluss fortzusetzen, indem der Einfluss von ELF als Hauptkommunikationsmittel von Lebenspartnern untersucht wird. Der Zweck besteht insbesondere darin, Wahrnehmungen und Selbsteinschätzungen von ELF-Paaren zu Faktoren wie Identitäts-(Ko-)Konstruktion, Interferenzen und privatem Paargespräch in einer Fremdsprache zu erfassen, die wiederum die Möglichkeiten und Grenzen sowie die Vor- und Nachteile von ELF im Paargespräch beeinflussen.

Die vorliegende Studie ist als konzeptionelle Replikationsforschung von Gundacker (2010) angelegt, die das gleiche Thema in den frühesten Stadien der ELF-Paarforschung untersuchte. In beiden Studien wurden fünf (bzw. sechs) Langzeit-ELF-Paare zu ihren Wahrnehmungen der Auswirkungen von ELF auf ihre Beziehung in verschiedenen Aspekten des täglichen Lebens befragt. Basierend auf ihren Antworten wurden wertvolle Erkenntnisse zu den Vor- und Nachteilen von ELF als Paarsprache gewonnen. Die Ergebnisse zeigen unter anderem, dass die Paare den Einfluss von ELF in den Bereichen Humor, Missverständnisse, gemeinsame Erinnerungen, Emotionen oder Sprachidentität spüren. All diese Faktoren werden jedoch weder als Vorteile oder Nachteile gesehen. Das hohe Sprachniveau der Teilnehmenden und der Langzeitnutzen von ELF als Paarsprache sind die Hauptgründe, warum die Paare nur schwache Vorteile vorweisen können und Nachteile nur als kleine Hürden sehen, die sie gerne überwinden für eine spannende, interkulturelle Beziehung.

Die Ergebnisse der Studie zeigen ebenfalls, dass das Zusammenspiel der Mehrheitssprache Deutsch und Minderheitssprache Englisch einen großen Einfluss auf die teilnehmenden Paare hat, vor allem im Hinblick auf Über- und Unterlegenheit der Partner. Zukünftige Forschungsprojekte könnten sich dieser speziellen Dynamik zwischen intimen Partnern widmen.