On Under-coded English and Linguistic Accommodation

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Introduction

Much that is said about the spread of English today speaks of English hegemony: the "ideology that glorifies the dominant language (or variety) and serves to stigmatize others" (Phillipson, 1999, p. 40; the addition in brackets is mine). But the contradictory and significantly more current truth is that the user of English as Foreign Language (EFL) is no longer his/her former disadvantaged and disenfranchised self. In adopting English for significant life-purposes, s/he has produced a distinctly under-coded version of English (representing formally much less than full meaning, UE for future reference) which is rapidly gaining acceptance as the most widely used World English (WE) variety.

Learnt and used under pressure for complex and demanding academic and/or professional cross-global exchange, EFL today is under-coded systematically and comprehensively, and yet effective. It works, however, largely because it is readily accommodated by an interlocutor committed to ensuring its communicative success.

Cooperation that furthers successful communication is an integral part of social exchange (Grice, 1975). But in the EFL context, communicative success is bolstered by a more particular incentive—successful communication across the North-South divide has become strategic and self-serving for westerners contending with the sudden and extraordinary rise of China and the broader 'emerging' world. Hence, the blatant deviance from accepted norms that UE constitutes and which at one time met with resistance, if not outright rejection, today receives tacit acceptance and accommodation. This covert tolerance is highly significant because it entails a radical shift in the balance of responsibility in the act of communication—from the message framer, to ensure s/he is understood, to the interlocutor to ensure s/he achieves understanding. Therefore, UE succeeds because the interlocutor is actively engaged in ensuring its success.

The linguistic phenomenon of UE is interesting therefore, both in itself and as evidence of significantly shifting power dynamics around the world, one that both fuels its spread and secures its survival. In this paper, I will explain the notion of under-coding, give evidence of its comprehensive and systematic use by fairly advanced EFL users, and argue that its successful use is a consequence of a highly invested, geo-politically conscious, and therefore, profoundly accommodating interlocutor.

Understanding Linguistic Under-coding

The term 'under-coding' refers to the character of mapping between the coding means and the functional domain it serves to represent (Blakemore, 1992; Grundy, 1995; Tickoo, 2011). In under-coding, the representational means do not capture the function to the 'full' degree of specificity. Interestingly, a specific manifestation of under-coding is an inherent part of the linguistic system, as is evident in an assessment of the English possessive (cf. Blakemore, 1992; Grundy, 1995): Whereas, 'John's book' (1a) is

the book he owns, 'John's father' (1b) is not the one he owns, nor is 'John's job' (1c) the one he owns.

1a. John's book = The book that John owns.

 b. John's father = The man who fathered John.

 c. John's job = The work that John is engaged in carrying out.

Clearly, the various meanings of the possessive have not been given individual and well-distinguished linguistic representation.

Strategic Under-coding

It is also true that it is easier, more efficient and more economical, to use language without exploiting its full potential to mark functional specificity, when the context permits it. So whereas 'John's book' is either the one he authored or the one he owns, where shared context can be exploited to help disambiguate it, under-coding makes for greater communicative ease, economy and efficiency.

Under-coding is more Natural than Full-Coding

Since speech normatively occurs in a shared context, interlocutors fully accommodate under-coding and in doing so take on the more active decoding role that this entails. It is, therefore, reasonable to assume that under-coding appropriately, with proper sensitivity to the character of the shared context, is acquired naturally.

A Comprehensive Comparison of Full-Coding and Under-coding

Full-coding, by contrast, is an artifact of formal (academic and literary) written language, although paradoxically it is also the point of reference for under-coding, which is typically used in informal speech. If we compare full-coding in formal written language with under-coding in informal speech, for some key linguistic features of the task of message framing, we can illustrate both the character, and comprehensive kind of impact, of this difference. This is done below for (a) indefinite reference, (b) the representation of temporal and atemporal intersentential relations (c) the signalling of genre.

Under-coded Indefinite Reference

Referring successfully is a key requisite skill in message framing. But unlike definite referents which can be made identifiable (cf., 2(b) versus 2(a)), indefinite referents do not become identifiable irrespective of how they are expressed (cf., 3(b) versus 3(a)). Though 'a girl I had met at the local bar', 3(b), is more specific than 'a girl', 3(a), she is not any more identifiable. Hence, while the 'full' coding, 3(b), required in writing is different from the under-coding, 3(a), accommodated in speech, under-coding does not result in less communicative success.

2 (a) The girl is studying with me. (referring to one out of a group of girls)

 (b) The girl in the red dress is studying with me. (referring to one out of a group of other girls who are not dressed in red)

3 (a) I was goin' with a girl, one time. (From Labov & Waletzky, 1997, p. 9) (Speech)

 (b) I was dating a girl I had met at the local bar. (Writing)

Under-coded Intersentential Relations

Intersentential relations are just as crucial in the task of message framing as reference framing. They realize very specific coherence-types in

writing, but in speech uphold no more than a broad conformity to the coherence constraint.

In example 4 below, one has to interpret 'He had killed one man…' as parenthetical, in order to connect the age of the doctor with the following statement about the youth of his wife, but this is not formally represented. In written language, this clause is formally marked as parenthetical, as in example 5 in which it is a modifying relative clause and is also placed in parenthesis.

4. "the Doc was an old man... He had killed one man, or - had done time. But he had a young wife, *and* [italics added] those days I dressed well. *And* seemingly she was trying to make me." (From Labov & Waletzky, 1997, p. 5) (Speech)

5. "the Doc was an old man... (of whom it was said that he had killed one man, or - had done time.) *But* [italics added] he had a young wife, *and* apparently she was trying 'to make me' *because* [italics added] those days I dressed well *and* therefore looked attractive." (Writing)

With the overt formal marking of the informationally parenthetical role of this clause, the following 'but' also sets the age of the man in contrast with the youth of his wife, as a point of salience to the comment that follows. This explicit capture of nuanced propositional connection does not happen in the spoken version (example 4). There is a resulting diminished impact of 'but'.

This is also accompanied by the over-use of 'and', which is also not constrained by the functional requirements that govern its written counterpart. A loose informational parallelism holds between the first pair of 'and'-linked clauses—'he had a young wife' and 'I dressed well'. The second 'and' even more clearly marks a general coherence tie: "But he had a young

wife, and those days I dressed well. *And* seemingly she was trying to make me".

The use of 'and' in example 5, however, is clearly functionally constrained by parallelism: 'and' connects 'she was young' and 'she was trying 'to make me"; 'and' also connects 'I dressed well' and 'I looked attractive'.

Speech under-codes intersentential ties, but, while this calls for more active and independent interpretation, it does not lead to any lack of understanding.

Temporal intersentential ties are as necessary for message framing as atemporal ties. We can examine 'then' marked temporal progression as an example. 'Then' marks a distinct temporal movement in writing; it is used between two successive telic events, when both are informationally new and informationally salient (Tickoo, 2002, 2011), as in 6(c):

6 (a) I arrived early full of trepidation and foreboding.

(b) I hesitated for several minutes at the front door, torn between the need to know and a keen sense of self-preservation.

(c) *Then* [italics added] I picked up courage and rang that dreaded doorbell.

Although 'hesitated' in 6(b) is also telic and informationally new, it is not salient in its context of occurrence, hence 'then' in this context would be infelicitous.

Temporal 'then' used in speech, however, is much less functionally constrained. Compare, for example, the use of 'then' in the following examples 7 and 8.

7. "And seemingly she *was trying* [italics added] to make me. I *never noticed* [italics added] it. Fact is, I *didn't like* [italics added] her very well, because she *had [italics added]*—she *was* [italics added] a nice looking

girl until you saw her feet. She *had* [italics added] big feet. Jesus, God, she *had* big feet! *Then* [italics added] she left a note one day she was going to commit suicide because he was always raising hell about me. He came to my hotel. Nice big blue 44, too." (Labov & Waletzky, 1997, p. 5) (Speech)

8. She sought my attention night after night at the local bar, but I never noticed it. *Then*, one day, she left me a note. (Writing)

In 7, 'then' merely marks a point of transition in the story; it does not follow a preceding telic event. But in the written version in 8, it follows a repeated, but in each instance, telic (i.e., completed) preceding event ('sought my attention').

It is clear from these examples that informal speech under-codes the functional specificity of the temporal 'then', but with no evidence of any resulting lack of clarity.

Under-Coded Genre-Signaling

Signalling the genre of the message is also crucial in communication. In the written medium, genre is signalled redundantly, using multiple linguistic marking systems. But there is much less formal representation of genre distinction in informal speech. In storytelling, for example, there is considerable difference in the marking of the passage of time (the defining feature of a narrative) in the conversational and written medium (Tickoo, 2003, 2011). It is marked as varying in pace and quality of movement in written stories, but is frequently even/invariant in conversational narratives. Compare example 9, which uses one kind of temporal passage, 'and', with example 10, which uses two well-differentiated kinds of temporal passage (represented in a and b, below):

(a) VP-conjunction ("I got next to him, *and* [italics added] positioned myself so

that….”), which marks a rapid pace along less individually salient constituent successive actions, and

(b) 'and then' ("*and then* [italics added] I hit him …") which marks a more deliberate pace along constituent actions of greater individual informational salience.

9. *And* [italics added] he hit me, man, like I hit him. *And* like, I - I got next to the guy. He didn't get a chance to use nothing, *and* I put something on him. (Labov & Waletzky, 1997, p. 9) (Speech)

10. He hit me…I got next to him, *and* [italics added] positioned myself so that I didn't give him a chance to do anything, *and then* hit him with all my might.

There is a less nuanced capture of temporal passage in conversational storytelling, therefore, and yet no evidence of resulting lack of clarity.

In general, informal speech systematically under-codes relative to the full-coding in formal written language, but while this requires more active engagement in message decoding, it does not appear to produce any loss of communicative effectiveness.

EFL Data Assessment

Because under-coding eases message framing without loss of comprehensibility, it has inherent appeal in the EFL context. In what follows I will suggest that EFL writing is undercoded in the same way as the casual speech of L1 users, evidenced above. I will also suggest that this under-coded writing is fully accommodated by the prototypical interlocutor.

In providing evidence of under-coding, I draw from my previous assessments of indefinite NPs (Tickoo, 2002a, 2011), atemporal intersentential relations (Tickoo, 2001, 2005, 2011), temporal

intersentential relations (Tickoo, 2002b), and the signalling of story as genre (Tickoo, 2003, 2011), all using large samples of prose passages by high-intermediate EFL university students, with Cantonese as L1. Each of these individual assessments showed linguistic under-coding on the pattern found in L1 English speech, illustrated above. The following are some illustrative examples:

EFL users under-code indefinite reference in their prose, exactly as do L1 users in informal speech (cf. example 11, compared to the felicitous example 11(a), below).

11. "I shared a table with *a man* [italics added]." (Here, 'a man' is not used to contrast with 'a woman'.)

11(a) I shared a table with *a man whose appearance amused me* [italics added].

EFL users also under-code intersentential relations, marking a general coherence rather than specific kinds, much as do L1 users in informal speech. This is illustrated in 12.

12. Dealing with the stress of college life

1) In everyone's life, stress seems to be unavoidable.

2) When one grows up, one will face different kinds of stress in different stages.

3) In the college life, students have to face the stress that comes from themselves, from their classmates as well as from their families.

12(a)

1) In everyone's life, stress seems unavoidable.

2) One faces it in every phase of life, and

3) Each phase comes with its own kind of stress…

Sentence 2, of 12, is coherent in its context of use, but it does not mark the required 'encapsulating' relationship (Hoey, 1994; Tickoo, 2005) to the preceding sentence that would signal retention of the point of sentence 1 in sentence 2.

In 12(a), the reformulated version, the original sentence 2 of 12 is fragmented into two sentences, 2 and 3. Sentence 2 of 12(a) relates back by using the relationship of 'encapsulation', which retains sentence 1 in the proposition of 2. For this reason, we can rephrase 2 of 12(a) as "because stress is unavoidable, one faces it at every stage of life". After this, 3 of 12(a) uses the relationship of simple addition, adding the fact that one faces stress in a unique manifestation at each such phase.

Hence, whereas in the EFL passage (12), sentence 2 relates to 1 as merely loosely coherent, in standard academic writing, 12(a), coherence is marked in an individualized way, leaving nothing for the interlocutor to work out.

In EFL usage, temporal 'then' also appears in an under-coded manifestation, as in L1 informal speech (13).

13 (a) "I just wanted to go to sleep.

(b) *Then* [italics added] I had a wonderful night sleep."

It is clear that 13(b) does not follow a telic preceding event since 'want' is a state, and, therefore, without an end point.

Additionally, EFL users under-code genre specificity, using for example, an even/unvarying temporal passage in storytelling, as is evident in the following example (14), rather than the variable passage that marks the genre in its written manifestations, as do L1 users in their conversational storytelling.

14. First time, I went out with my girlfriend. She invited me to go to her sister birthday party. I went to the birthday party, I saw a lot of people.

I felt very nervous with them.…Then she found me and her a good place to seat…I was sitting next to her, then I was talking with her very excited at that time.…Then I felt really better now.

Accommodating Under-Coding

In EFL context, the interlocutor in a typical exchange readily accommodates under-coding. The most discerning interlocutor in communication with the EFL user is likely to be the university EFL teacher. His/her reaction to under-coding must, therefore, be regarded as noteworthy. In this study, we examined feedback from six experienced university EFL teachers on the prose samples that were assessed earlier in the text to identify instances of under-coding. Assessment of their feedback showed that they did not say anything about under-coding. There was no negative feedback on any instance of under-coding, and, therefore, one must also assume no failure to understand because of it.

The Emergence and Acceptance of UE

It is reasonable to conclude that EFL users under-code in contexts where highly proficient users would not, and do so much as do L1 users in informal speech contexts. Like L1 users in casual speech, EFL users under-code because it is more natural, easier and more efficient than full-coding—a feature of specialist language use which must be formally learned. They also under-code because, as we have established above, their interlocutors (in particular their teachers, the most discerning amongst them) readily accommodate it.

Interlocutors in EFL exchange accommodate under-coding first out of a strategic interest in making communication work (Grice, 1975); they compensate for it by over-investing in decoding in proportion to the amount of under-coding. Additionally, they are responsive to compelling present-day geo-political and economic incentives, which further bolster such accommodation. Today, Western countries are willing to bend over backwards to benefit from the astonishing growth of China and the rest of the 'emerging' world. A part of this self-serving accommodation manifests as an unprecedented tolerance for the rapidly learned, less demanding coding systems of the new UE. In consequence, UE works and its effective use provides tacit approval for its continued use. It is fair to say, therefore, that UE is rapidly establishing itself as the most widely used of WE varieties.

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