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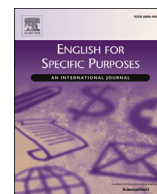
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# English for Specific Purposes

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## Commentary on Louhiala-Salminen et al. (2005): Launching the notion of BELF



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### ABSTRACT

Inspired by English as a Lingua Franca approach in linguistics, Louhiala-Salminen et al. (2005) introduced the notion of BELF (then called Business English Lingua Franca) in their article on internal communication between Finns and Swedes in two Nordic corporate mergers. It was a game changer in its approach to English as a professional tool getting the job done, while empowering internationally operating business practitioners and emancipating them from the role as failed native speakers. Using a mixed-methods approach with a survey and interviews on intercultural communication as well as meeting and email data enabled context-based findings on communicative practices: business was primary, linguistic correctness secondary. The notion of BELF has functioned as a springboard for empirical studies within (socio)linguistics, business/professional communication and even international management and has affected teaching and learning practices in various business schools. In the superdiverse business environment, avenues for further BELF studies are promising, exemplified by topics such as digitalized and virtual work contexts, developing business structures, translanguaging and multilingualism and ever more important issues of inclusion, diversity and power. Methodologies such as ethnography enabling close interaction with the everyday business practice are needed to understand where, why, and how interactions take place.

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## 1. Significance

When Louhiala-Salminen et al. (2005) introduced the notion of *BELF* (then called *Business English Lingua Franca*) in their article on internal communication between Finns and Swedes in two Nordic corporate mergers, the discussion about language issues at work had just started in Northern Europe (e.g., Björkman et al., 2003; Gunnarsson, 2000). The article was inspired by the real-life practices in multinational companies (MNCs): the traditional shared language Scandinavian (a mixture of the Nordic languages) or Swedish (the other official language of Finland) had started to give way to English as the corporate language. The authors were encouraged by the novel *English as a Lingua Franca* (ELF) approach in linguistics (e.g., Seidlhofer, 2001) but, being based in a business school, were adamant about the significance of the ‘B’ in BELF: it emphasized the common denominator of the business context, the purpose of the interactions and the language users as communicators in their own right.

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This context-bound perspective made the article ground-breaking together with its mixed-methods approach: the findings of a survey combined with semi-structured interviews of employees in the two mergers were used to provide background about Finns' and Swedes' intercultural communication and to identify the communicative practices to be studied in detail. The respondents and interviewees agreed that some differences existed in their mutual communication, especially in view of the issue vs. interpersonal orientation. The subsequently collected BELF meeting and email data confirmed some of them but highlighted how business – getting the job done – was primary and linguistic correctness secondary.

At the time of its publication, [Louhiala-Salminen et al. \(2005\)](#) was a game changer in its approach to English as a professional tool, while empowering internationally operating business practitioners and emancipating them from the role as failed native speakers of English (see [Nickerson, 2015](#)). Later the authors have clarified how the abbreviation – BELF – focuses on using English as a *Business Lingua Franca*, not on 'Business English' with its particular vocabulary and phraseology (e.g., [Kankaanranta & Louhiala-Salminen, 2013](#); also, [Karhunen et al., 2023](#)). BELF evolves in each situation as a result of the interaction between BELF users and requires knowledge and skills of the 'B' achievable via business education and socialization to the business community ([Kankaanranta & Louhiala-Salminen, 2018](#)). Without any *a priori* standard, BELF cannot contain "language mistakes", and any linguistic inaccuracies become irrelevant.

## 2. Influence on the field

Ever since its introduction, the notion of BELF has functioned as a springboard for empirical studies on language issues in global business within (socio)linguistics, business/professional communication and even international management. Not surprisingly, definitions of BELF vary from *a* specific language variety to an emerging social practice or something taken as a given without any conceptualization. BELF research (for an overview, see [Ehrenreich, 2016](#)) has dug deeper into several different foci, while conceptual studies have highlighted the gap between BELF and standard English ([Kankaanranta et al., 2018](#); [Karhunen et al., 2023](#); [Komori-Glatz, 2018a](#)). Empirical BELF studies have addressed, for example, situation-specific discourse ([Bjørge, 2012](#); [Roshid et al., 2022](#)), accommodation practices ([Cogo, 2016](#); [Vettorel, 2019](#)), use of multimodal resources ([Birlık & Kaur, 2020](#); [Räisänen, 2020](#)), mother tongue influence ([Kankaanranta & Lu, 2013](#)), translanguaging and multilingualism ([Cogo, 2012](#); [Räisänen, 2018](#); [Takino, 2020](#)), emotional benefits and performance costs ([Nurmi & Koroma, 2020](#)), and the role of BELF as corporate language ([Räisänen & Kankaanranta, 2020](#); [Sanden & Kankaanranta, 2018](#)). As business communication instructors, the authors of the original article have been enticed by language/communicative competence and pedagogy in their later research, using their home base, one of the leading European business schools, as a case (e.g., [Kankaanranta et al., 2015](#); [Kankaanranta & Planken, 2010](#); [Louhiala-Salminen & Kankaanranta, 2011](#)). Overall, BELF research has influenced the learning materials, activities, and assessment of future business graduates (see e.g., [Komori-Glatz, 2018b](#); [Pullin, 2015](#); [Vettorel, 2019](#)). For example, [Ly \(2016\)](#) has highlighted the importance of emulating the real-life practice by using role enactments. Fortunately, BELF research has also reached corporate trainers through researchers' (e.g., [Nickerson, Cogo, Kankaanranta](#)) talks in professional conferences (e.g., the Business English Special Interest Group (BESIG) of the International Association of Teachers of English as a Foreign Language (IATEFL)).

Interestingly, the value of the BELF notion shows in the way it has spread into publication outlets ranging from *Journal of English for Specific Purposes* to *International Journal of Business Communication* and *European Journal of International Management*. Transcending disciplinary boundaries, [Karhunen et al.'s \(2018; also 2023\)](#) article in the *Journal of Management Studies*, a top business journal, is breaking ground for a more fine-grained conceptualization of language and English in management research, and potentially contributing to future research.

## 3. Future

With a new generation of researchers investigating what is going on in global business, the future of BELF studies looks bright. As languages will continue to mix, translingual practices in the world of trans-everything are becoming the order of the day; maybe BELF will change names to *BMF, Business Multilingua Franca*. In a post-pandemic workplace, the global community of digital nomads and remote professionals will undoubtedly attract more research attention. Similarly, as the business structures are becoming more versatile, not only MNCs operate across linguistic borders, but also – and increasingly – born-globals, start-ups, and different kinds of 'transient international groups' (see [Pitzl, 2018](#)), where individuals only work for short periods of time. Such changes in the operating environment call for tighter interaction of the researchers in the everyday practice of the professionals so that they can understand where, why, and how interactions take place. Ethnography has proven its ability to do just that. Such methodology may also mean that language competence would likely be conceptualized as resorting to bodies and artifacts in the physical and virtual environments. Finally, in the increasingly superdiverse (business) world, topics related to inclusion, the role of language as it relates to diversity and power issues would need to rank high on the research agenda.

Despite the radical changes nobody could have even imagined in 2005, the very final sentence of [Louhiala-Salminen et al. \(2005\)](#) still holds true: "And if they (students) become flexible, they will have learned one of the most important skills needed in the rapidly changing business community of today" (p. 419).

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