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DIPLOMARBEIT

Titel der Diplomarbeit

"English as a lingua franca in online communities:
The language of Internet memes"

verfasst von

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Abstract

This thesis is aimed at contributing to research in the field of English as a lingua franca and investigates conceptualizations of English with a view to online communication in virtual communities. Recent research has provided valuable insights regarding the characteristics of English as a lingua franca in weblogs and forums, however, social media have received little attention in that respect. The aim of this thesis is to describe how English as a lingua franca, being one among several plurilingual resources at users' disposal, shapes the construction of identity in various virtual communities. For this thesis, the community *9gag* was analyzed in order to allow for conclusions about the roles of culture, identity and multilingual practices with a view to English as a lingua franca. For this purpose, an outline of theoretical key concepts of ELF is presented. Since the medium of communication exerts vital influence on the communicated content, theoretical information on languages online is provided. This is followed by a discussion of the role of memetics in linguistics and its applicability on Internet memes. For the empirical part, a corpus consisting of humorous posts on a website was compiled over the period of one month. This was followed by a qualitative analysis of lexico-grammatical features, strategies of successful communication employed in ELF conversations as well as the use of multilingual practices and the role of culture in ELF conversation. The analysis offers support for the conclusions that lexicogrammar in ELF usage deviates from ENL standards and that users of ELF emphasize their primary linguaculture while identifying as users of English as a lingua franca. Even though Standard English attitudes were found to be persistent, users of ELF can be described as multicompetent language users since they resort to various linguistic resources at their disposal. These findings were then used to gain insights into the way Internet memes can be used in the pedagogy of English as lingua franca.

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List of abbreviations

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CMC	Computer-Mediated Communication
CMDA	Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis
EFL	English as a Foreign Language
ELF	English as a Lingua Franca
ELT	English Language Teaching
ENL	English as a Native Language
ESL	English as a Second Language
L1	first or primary language
LN	additional language (s)
NNS	non-native speaker
NS	native speaker

1. Introduction

The number of Internet users has risen steadily since its emergence in the US as an "experimental network which quickly grew to include military, federal, regional, university, business and personal users" (Crystal 2001:3). At present, the Internet penetration rate has reached a total of 42,3% of the world population, which equals 3,035,749,340 Internet users worldwide. Its growth in popularity has led to a broad range of research available seeking to analyze its significance for human communication. In line with Crystal, who predicted a "linguistic revolution" (2001:viii), Cook (2004:104) emphasizes the importance of the Internet for human interaction and highlights the interrelation between communication technologies and communication itself. According to usage statistics, English is the dominant language on the web, with approximately 800,600,000 users resorting to English, followed by Chinese, Spanish, Arabic, Portuguese, Japanese, Russian, German, French and Malay. Due to the prominence of English online, research into the influence of communication technologies on languages has primarily focused on English (Cook 2004:105). While on the one hand, the dominance of English is seen negatively as "linguistic imperialism" (Phillipson 1992), Crystal (1997:110) considers the tendency to resort to English in a variety of contexts as a normal and natural development. In many situations both online and offline, English is used as a lingua franca, a shared linguistic resource for communication, thus constituting "the communicative medium of choice among speakers of different first languages" (Hülmbauer & Seidlhofer 2014:388).

The omnipresence of English has not only facilitated face-to-face communication between speakers of different first languages and for whom English is a shared means of communication, but also between users of entertainment websites such as 9gag, a humorous social media website for sharing user-generated content created in 2008 (Page et al. 2014:7), which this thesis sets out to examine. As Zappavigna (2012:101) states, users themselves refer to the image-text combinations characterized by formulaic language and the use of typographic devices as *memes*. In its original sense, the term *meme* as suggested by Dawkins (1989:192) was used to illustrate the similarity between the transmission of memes as a cultural product and the transmission of genes.

> Just as genes propagate themselves in the gene pool by leaping from body to body via sperm or eggs, so memes propagate themselves in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain via a process which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation. (Dawkins 1989:192)

In popular culture, however, the term *meme* is used to refer to Internet memes as relatable experiences represented in image-text combinations in the form of humorous posts. With a view to ELF, the aim of this thesis is to examine the roles and functions of English used as a lingua franca in Internet memes shared on 9gag. This analysis of the content shared at entertainment websites such as 9gag raises the question of underlying motives for sharing memes with other users. Zappavigna (2012:101) suggests that first and foremost, Internet memes are used for social bonding and the creation of social affiliation, whereas the transmission of information plays a minor role. From a linguistic perspective, the analysis of Internet memes should aim at describing "how people explicitly use language to construe social bonds by creating interpersonal meaning" (Zappavigna 2012:10). With this suggestion in mind, this thesis aims at combining description of formal features of ELF communication online with a view to their functions in communication – a shift in focus that is characteristic for research into ELF: Generally, ELF research has shifted from a descriptive approach towards functional analyses of features and communicative strategies typical for ELF (Jenkins, Cogo & Dewey 2011:291). Similarly, Seidlhofer (2009:241) suggests an expansion of research into English as a lingua franca to not only describe its characteristic features, but also allow for conclusions about underlying functional motivations and thus

> to take a much more processual, communicative view of ELF, of which linguistic features constitute but a part and are not investigated for their own sake, but as indications of the various functions ELF fulfills in the interactions observed. So the crucial challenge has been to move from the surface description of particular features, however interesting they may be in themselves, to an explanation of the underlying significance of the forms: to ask what work they do, what functions they are symptomatic of.

With this suggestion of a more holistic approach to the analysis of ELF and its particularities in mind, I intended to both analyze the salient features of ELF in a corpus of Internet memes as well as contribute to an understanding of their respective communicative functions. With regard to their use as a means of

creating bonds online and sharing experience, the individual Internet users, the *memeing ELFers*, also construct, re-invent and shape their identities. Hall's notion of fluid and at times contradictory identities (1992:277) becomes even more relevant in virtual online communities, which have significantly facilitated communication and which are characterized by an unprecedented diversity of members. Social media networks such as 9gag enable the exploration and depiction of numerous aspects of one's identity. The so-created online identities are in a constant process of being reinvented, however, as Abbott (1998) emphasizes, online identities and offline identities do not compete with each other. Rather than being an alternative to the real world, the online realm complements it.

Just like the real world, social networks show a wide variety concerning the linguistic diversity of their users, and ELF as their communicative medium of choice, is "realised within and through linguistic diversity" (Hülmbauer & Seidlhofer 2014:388). Especially in the realm of social media, a melting pot of users from various linguacultural backgrounds which this thesis sets out to investigate, it would be inappropriate to talk about a single culture which the speakers identify with. Androutsopoulos (2007:225) emphasizes the need to cut the traditional ties between language and culture in favor of a "glocal youth culture", and Baker (2009:568) calls for a reconceptualization of culture in ELF, suggesting that

> cultures in ELF should be conceived as liminal, emergent resources that are in a constant state of fluidity and flux between local and global references, creating new practices and forms in each instance of intercultural communication.

It has thus become clear that traditional concepts of stable speech communities can no longer account for the diversity inherent to ELF conversation. Canagarajah (2006:211) and Seidlhofer (2011:86) suggest a different conceptualization of communities which can accommodate to the hybrid nature of ELF, a language characterized by its lack of native speakers. Wenger (1998:72ff) considers mutual engagement in shared practices, participation in jointly negotiated enterprises and the use of its members' shared repertoire as the main criteria for communities of practice. This model has been enriched by

Dewey (2009:77ff), who pointed to the potential for variation in practices, and by Ehrenreich (2009:134), who warned about pigeonholing communities of practice resorting to ELF.

However fluid, the nature of communities of practice still allows for the use of speakers' entire linguistic repertoire in ELF communication. According to Hülmbauer and Seidlhofer (2014:397), the traditional labels for phenomena of language contact can no longer be applied, since in ELF, all linguistic repertoires are constantly activated. Hülmbauer and Seidlhofer (2014:399) observe that "ELF speakers tend to skillfully gauge their shared linguistic resources". As an alternative to code-switching, multilingual resources (Pennycook 2007:35) can account for the situationality of ELF, whose users are "interacting across different linguistic and communicative codes". Members of social media websites, too, operate across the aforementioned codes, thus shaping ELF rather than merely being exposed to it.

Even though English is omnipresent in online communities, it might not be the native language of the majority of their users, but their shared linguistic resource. My teaching experience at an Austrian vocational school has revealed to what extent the students are exposed to social media on a daily basis, and still, our teaching material had a strong focus on the standards suggested by a normative view of English as a Native Language, henceforth ENL. Jenkins (2012:492-493) noticed a deficit-oriented view which is dominant in English Language Teaching, henceforth ELT. ELF, however, attempts to avoid any imposition of teaching norms in favor of an informed choice on behalf of the leaners. In this thesis, I aim to outline how classrooms could benefit from heightened awareness of ELF by means of a communicative medium many students use on a daily basis – social media websites.

With this in mind, I believe that the analysis of Internet memes might lead to valuable insights into ELF conversation. For this purpose, the major aim of my thesis is to elaborate on the question what role ELF plays in social media websites. More precisely, I want to describe both the way speakers resort to ELF in online communication and the functions of particular lexico-grammatical features which are fulfilled in communication. Additionally, an analysis of

communicative situations leading users of ELF to resort to their plurilingual repertoire will be provided together with an investigation of comments triggered by switches within an ELF environment. In order to investigate the role of ELF in social media websites, a collection of posts taken from the Hong Kong-based website 9gag consisting of a visual and a textual component as well as a comment function was compiled to enable a qualitative, though not representative, analysis of ELF on a particular social media website. The decision to investigate posts on a social media website involved numerous ethical considerations.

Up to the present, there are unfortunately no internationally recognized codes of conduct regulating the use of social media for research purposes. It is the researcher's responsibility to avoid any possible harm to people whose interactions are investigated, so caution has to be exercised when it comes to the research design, implementation and dissemination of results. It has been argued that the question whether human subjects or texts as decontextualized objects are at the core of an analysis is decisive in this respective, however, it is not always easy to distinguish because online interactions help users construct their identities on the World Wide Web. Decisions thus have to be made for each and every case individually and carefully (Page et al. 2014:58-61). The protection of the right to privacy is of utmost importance for this thesis, especially when considering the fact that the target audience of 9gag is of a very young age. According to Elm's model for online privacy (2009), 9gag can be considered as a public environment because it is accessible for anyone who has access to the Internet. Irrespective of the public nature of the content provided, it should be kept in mind that what is regarded as public and what is regarded as private largely depends on cultural norms and is thus subject to interpretation. For my thesis, I took these principles as guidelines.

As concerns research design and methodology, the website 9gag was chosen for a qualitative and content-centered analysis using computer-mediated discourse analysis, and in the process of item selection, a non-intrusive approach was intentionally chosen in order to avoid a possible observer's paradox. For the purpose of this thesis, the items were selected by hand with a

preference for posts relevant to my interest in ELF. In the course of 2015, Internet memes were selected from the website's *hot* and its *trending* categories, where the most popular posts were featured. In a subsequent step, the items were investigated with ELF-specific lexico-grammatical characteristics in mind. In other words, I started my analysis with a description of formal features which are typical for ELF utterances (Cogo and Dewey 2006) and used these formal features as a point of departure for a description of functional motivations. My personal interest lies in the various functions of 9gaggers' use of their plurilingual resources within an ELF environment, which is why the analysis of the use of languages other than English received considerable attention. Having established that, I investigated the integration of plurilingual resources. For that purpose, I oriented myself towards Vettorel's (2014:185ff) discussion of findings obtained in recent research on ELF in the blogosphere. To summarize, this thesis sets out to provide insights into the relatively new field of ELF in the context of humorous posts on a social website. However, it is beyond the scope of this diploma thesis to explore the vast amount of content available on 9gag, and although it would have been of interest to gain insights into the users' linguistic backgrounds, I deliberately decided against doing so for reasons of privacy and data protection. Nevertheless, I hope to spark an interest in this relatively new field of research, which certainly yields interesting insights.

Before the findings of the study are revealed, a theoretical framework of key concepts of ELF will be established. This is followed by a discussion of virtual communities and communities of practice. In a later step, the relevance of culture and the Third Space for the construction of identity in a multilingual environment will be discussed. To enable a better understanding of the items selected, information about the Internet and communication online as well as anonymized user statistics of 9gag with a view to their linguistic background will be offered prior to a discussion of the origins of the study of memetics. In a following step, the data and methodology selected will be described. Chapter 4 deals with the presentation of my findings and conclusions. Possible implications for teaching will be presented, before I move on to summarize my findings and provide a final conclusion to allow for suggestions for further research and illustrate the limitations of my research.

2. Theoretical framework and key concepts

This chapter sets out to provide an overview of research into English as a lingua franca and elaborates on the key concepts of ELF relevant to my thesis. The first section explains how, in the age of the omnipresence of English, the notion of Standard English has become challenged by the globalization of English. Even though estimates vary greatly, it has become widely acknowledged that non-native speakers of English outnumber native speakers of English by far (Seidlhofer 2011:197). While early research into ELF mainly described lexico-grammatical features of successful communication in ELF, a shift towards a consideration of the functions they fulfill has been noticed in recent years. For the purpose of this thesis, I will adhere to this tendency and start with an explanation of the emergence of ELF. This will be followed by an investigation of strategies for successful communication as described by Firth (1996). In a subsequent step, a discussion of the roles of community, culture and identity with a view to ELF will be provided in order to enable a later application on communication online, where users put a large amount of effort into the creation of their online identities. This section will explain how ELF is not free of culture, but instead, a place where a "linguistic masala", a hybrid culture is shaped (Meierkord 2002). As an example, in an analysis of the Italian-based blogging world, Vettorel (2014) reported on the signaling of culture online to mark in-group membership. In a similar way, this thesis aims at describing the functions of the use of speakers' plurilingual resources. This is followed by an analysis of 9gag as the communicative medium of choice, a social media website founded in Hong Kong in 2008, which enables both registered and unregistered users to spread, up-and downvote as well as comment on humorous posts. I will then outline characteristics of computer-mediated communication and language online before proceeding to a discussion of Internet memes with Dawkins' (1989) original use of the term *meme* in mind.

2.1. An outline of ELF

In our contemporaneous interconnected world, English is omnipresent and affects many domains of people's lives. Traditionally, great prominence has been given to native speakers of English, henceforth NS, and Kachru (1992) suggested a model consisting of three concentric circles to represent the status

of English and its users worldwide. At its core, we find native speakers of English who use English as a first language, whom Jenkins (2009:15) defines as "those born and raised in one of the countries where English is historically the first language to be spoken". As an example, the inner circle can be represented by speakers of American English. Kachru then goes on to describe the outer circle as consisting of speakers of English as a Second Language, henceforth ESL, which Jenkins (2009:16) refers to as the language spoken by a large number of territories which were once colonized by the English". Finally, speakers of English as a Foreign Language, henceforth EFL, who are dependent on the norm provided by speakers in the inner circle, are located in the expanding circle. In the countries belonging to the periphery, English is used as a foreign language. Kachru's model thus imposes a hierarchical structure governing the circles and falls short to accommodate speakers who grew up in a multilingual environment. Moreover, it misrepresents the numerical relationship between NS and NNS of English. Native speakers of English are depicted as the owners of English and the norm to adhere to. As I have already outlined in the introduction, nowadays, many speakers resort to ELF as "the communicative medium of choice among speakers of different first languages" (Hülmbauer & Seidlhofer 2014:388). Although Kachru (1996:908) is aware of the growing number of non-native users of English, it is difficult to locate ELF in any of the circles. Seidlhofer (2011:81) emphasizes the need to perceive of ELF as "an addition to other Englishes, whether native or nativized, whether ENL, ESL, or EFL, whether global(ized) or local(ized)" instead of a replacement. According to Knapp and Meierkord (2002:10), the term *lingua franca* refers to the functions of language, and Seidlhofer (2011:81) points to the fact that

> ELF cannot be primarily identified with any of the Kachruvian circles but is a function of the transcultural exploitation of the communicative resources of all three. ELF thus needs to be added as an option to be made use of when appropriate, and as a conceptual innovation reflecting the realities of globalized communication in the 21st century.

Contrary to perceptions of the spread of English as a threat, Seidlhofer thus considers ELF as a resource to resort to with a particular function to fulfil in mind. ELF can also include NS and speakers of ESL. Having established the problems that are likely to arise when trying to apply Kachru's circular model to

communicative contexts where English is used as a lingua franca, I will elaborate on questions of standards, standardization and the emergent ELF.

2.1.1. Standard English

Standard English is the model preferred by ELT professionals, and the vocational school where I teach English to future engineers is no exception: There is a tacit urge to strive for native-like proficiency; our textbooks are clearly in favor of American English, and the grammar book we work with was published by a well-renowned testing institution. It is clear that our model in mind is an educated native speaker. Trudgill and Hannah (1996:1) defined Standard English as "the variety of the English language which is normally employed in writing and normally spoken by 'educated' speakers of the language". As Trudgill and Hannah (1996:1) point out, the notion of Standard English is used to describe grammar and vocabulary while excluding pronunciation. Given the continuously rising number of speakers who use English as a lingua franca, it seems surprising that Standard English is a "prestige variety" (Jenkins 2009:33) spoken by relatively few speakers in the inner circle. Up to the present, Standard English is thus the dominant variety which learners and users of English strive for. Norms are set in a geographically located area, and these norms are then imposed on learners, at times without taking their individual communicative needs into account.

2.1.2. Non-standard English and Standardization

As I have outlined previously, speakers of English outside the primary linguaculture, for whom English is a second language, are labelled as members of the expanding circle in Kachru's terms. Jenkins (2009:37) remarks on negative connotations associated with non-standard native varieties by stating that "[i]n the case of the non-standard native varieties, lack of acceptance appears to have connections with attitudes towards race in the US and class in the UK". These connotations paint a dark picture of the acceptance of deviation from the standard, however, as stated by Jenkins (2009:94), there is a need to consider the conflict between local needs on the one hand and international intelligibility on the other hand. She argues that while Englishes are supposed

to fulfil "local needs", there is still an aim for being distinguishable from other Englishes with their local features and characteristics. Another factor exerting pressure in that respect is the need for intelligibility. While Jenkins points towards the tensions inherent in non-standard varieties, Saraceni (2010:42) makes a plea for the equality of Englishes by stating that "all languages are integral to the lives of those who use them".

2.1.3. The emergence of English as a lingua franca

According to Crystal (2003:3), "[a] language achieves a genuinely global status when it develops a special role that is recognized in every country". It is undoubted that English nowadays fulfils such a role, and the numbers of users speak for themselves. English has spread widely throughout the world, which led Crystal (2003:69) to estimate that, using Kachru's circular model, the inner circle comprises between 320-380 million speakers, the outer circle includes around 300-500 million speakers, and the expanding circle consists of 500-1000 million speakers. However difficult it may be to give such estimates due to the difficulty that the assessment of speakers' level of proficiency entails, Crystal (2006:425) states that "one in four of the world's population are now capable of communicating to a useful level in English". To summarize, non-native speakers outnumber native speakers by far, which is why ownership of the English language is shifting. Widdowson (1994:385) illustrates this shifting power.

> How English develops in the world is no business whatever of native speakers in England, the United States, or anywhere else. They have no say in the matter, no right to intervene or pass judgement. They are irrelevant. The very fact that English is an international language means that no nation can have custody over it.

Any standard model is thus irrelevant to the development of English since the power to shape English resides within those who use it for their purposes. English is learned, used and adapted worldwide, which is why it is no longer possible to adhere to a "distribution view" (Widdowson 2003:50) of English as a "stabilized and standardized code" much like the distribution of Pizza Hut or Coca Cola (Widdowson 1994:387). Instead of perceiving of English as a language franchised by its native speakers, Widdowson (2003:50) suggests thinking "of English as an international language not in terms of the distribution

of a stable and unitary set of encoded forms, but as the spread of a virtual language which is exploited in different ways for different purposes". This perspective thus focuses on the possibilities which English provides for adaption, whereas the distribution view could only be held up if language were a stable and fixed code adopted by users who conform to its rules and do not have any right to adapt it according to their needs. In this interconnected world where English is omnipresent, there are no more clear-cut territorial boundaries for English. In Saraceni's (2010:2) view, "this constitutes an unprecedented form of relocation of a language out of its original home, at least from a physical point of view". Although ELT aims at students' development towards proficient users of English, it disregards what has become a day-to-day reality for students, which is precisely the fact that they are communicatively effective users of ELF. Jenkins criticizes current approaches to ELT for their tendency to aim for native-like proficiency with a preference for native speakers as teachers and the adherence to NS norms when it comes to assessment and testing (2009:119). Not only is it difficult to measure native-like proficiency, it is also likely to result in a deficit view of learners of English, which is observed by Graddol (2006:83):

> When measured against the standard of a native speaker, few EFL learners will be perfect. Within the traditional EFL methodology there is an inbuilt ideological positioning of the student as outsider and failure – however proficient they become.

With ELF in mind, the student is no longer seen as an aggregate of deficits and rather as an individual user who, due to increased contact extending over preexisting boundaries and technological advancements, needs a language of communication, which Firth (1996:240) has referred to as "contact language". To sum this up, communication in English is influenced by manifold external forces, such as increased contact, developments in communication technology and historical developments linked to the expansion of English. Additionally to the external forces influencing the English language, Widdowson (1983:109) has identified two opposing social forces which shape language and communication. On the one hand, the territorial imperative focuses on a group's or an individual's identity and space and measures taken to defend them, and on the other hand, the cooperative imperative refers to the way they adapt their language in order to be comprehensible and thus enable communication.

Seidlhofer (2009:197-198) has elaborated on the way these imperatives operate in ENL as opposed to ELF and concludes that while in ENL, speakers adhere to conventions and shared knowledge of idiomatic language for the sake of successful communication, in ELF, the use of idioms, which often lack semantic transparency, might lead to the exclusion of speakers who do not know about these conventions and thus service the territorial imperative. In the context of ELF, she emphasizes (2009:200), knowledge of idiomatic language specific to ENL is not a necessity, and would stand in opposition to the cooperative imperative. However, although in ENL idiomatic language use can serve the territorial imperative as described by Widdowson (1983) and thus exclude speakers from ENL territory, in some cases, users of ELF make use of idiomatic expressions and thus violate the cooperative principle in favor of more native-like language production (Seidlhofer 2009:201).

Seidlhofer (2009:202) goes on to emphasize that in general, however, users of ELF tend to adhere to the cooperative principle and aim for semantically transparent utterances by resorting to the open-choice principle, which facilitates production rather than the idiom principle, which Sinclair (1991:110) defined as the availability of pre-constructed phrases activated as single units for the sake of less effort and shared human experience as well as requirements of ad-hoc communications. On the differences between ENL and ELF speech, Seidlhofer notes that the preference for the open-choice principle "results in creative expressions which do not conform to what native speakers would recognize as the established idiomatic wording" (Seidlhofer 2009:203). It is important to notice that in ELF the open-choice principle and the idiom principle do not stand in direct opposition because users will aim to cooperate and produce intelligible utterances in order to communicate successfully. So on the one hand, through idiomatizing, speakers cooperate and create creative idiomatic language, and on the other hand, they identify as members of the ELF group and thus service the territorial function. Seidlhofer (2009:206) stresses the co-existing nature of the territorial and the cooperative imperative and states that "the co-construction of these pro-tem idiomatic expressions serves not only the cooperative function of communication, but also the territorial function of establishing shared affective space". To sum this up, ELF is by no means void

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of idiomatic language, instead, speakers aim for a balance between the cooperative imperative and the territorial imperative.

While idiomatic language use requires the ability to decode them, the open-choice principle provides ELF users with seemingly endless possibilities of creating new utterances based on what Hülmbauer (2013:47) following Widdowson (1997:138) has defined as the "latent possibilities within English beneath the surface of the encoded". As in many situations, ELF is the only shared communicative medium available to speakers, the virtual resources inherent in English often "interact with elements from without English" (Hülmbauer 2013:47), and hereby, Hülmbauer refers to the ELF user's background characterized by multilingual resources:

> Considering the fact that ELF is both integrated into larger multilingual environments and integrative of the plurilingual resources available through these environments, virtuality in the lingua franca has to be extended by a plurilingual dimension. (Hülmbauer 2013:54)

Hülmbauer thus emphasizes the creative potential inherent to ELF which allows for utterances beyond what is encoded. To sum this up, the possibilities of the virtual language combined with speakers' plurilingual resources enable speakers to communicate successfully in ELF.

2.1.4. Strategies for successful communication in ELF

In the previous section, I have elaborated on the possibilities of creating innovative utterances in the contact zone between the virtual and the plurilingual element in ELF. Seidlhofer (2011:118) contests the Chomskian view of an existing dichotomy between creativity and conformity to the rules governing the possibilities for utterances. Indeed, as Seidlhofer (2011:118-119) recommends, the creative potential inherent to the virtual language and the conformity to conventions should not be seen as opposing forces, rather, the relationship depends on perceptions of what constitutes the norm:

> The essential point to be made is that conformity to virtual rule does not preclude creativity but actually provides the necessary condition for this occurrence: the very identification of what is creative obviously depends on the reference to some norm or other that it does not conform to (…) these are inherent in the virtual language at different

levels. They are not those which have been grammatically fixed as the standard language of ENL, and they are available for exploitation in ELF.

As Seidlhofer thus points out, ELF is operating under different conditions. The dynamic nature of ELF usage has also been acknowledged by researchers focusing on the pragmatic aspect of ELF. In a seminal work on the pragmatic strategies, Firth (1996:256) examined "lingua franca interactions" and thus rejected the until then dominant deficit view of communication between NNS. Applying a conversation analysis view, Firth (1996:242-246) identified various manifestations of "interactional work" with the main aims of maintaining conversation and to render conversations normal. Among these kinds of interactional work, there are the let-it-pass concept, which suggests that interactants may choose to disregard unclear utterances because they might become clear or irrelevant later, and the make-it-normal concept. The latter suggests passivity on behalf of the listener, however, it is the listener who is "actively though implicitly engaged in the task of attempting to *make sense* of what is being done and said" (Firth 1996:245 [original emphasis]). Contrary to what one would expect, in his study on business conversation, this was not achieved by other repair or candidate completion, but by taking over marked expressions in one's own expression (Firth 1996:246). These studies, Firth argues, are an attempt to make ELF interactions, which might be at times vulnerable and fragile, "interactionally robust" (Firth 1996:248) and "stable" (Firth 1996:252). In a later work, Firth (2009) raised the question whether a lingua franca factor truly exists and came to the conclusion that this factor does not lie in the language produced sui generis, but in what he termed *entailment* and *metatheory*. While entailment refers to "the inherent interactional and linguistic variability that lingua franca interactions entail", the term metatheory refers to theoretical assumptions and perceptions that arise when analyzing languages from a lingua franca perspective (Firth 2009:150). The metatheory sphere thus influences the way norms exert an influence on pragmatics, and in ELF, this refers to NS norms. All the previously mentioned strategies are intended to facilitate understanding, create an impression of normality and enable successful communication. With a view to my key concern of the expression of linguacultural identity, Mauranen's (2006:144) observation regarding communication

difficulties which should not be linked to differences in the interactants'
linguacultural backgrounds is highly relevant:

> I found no clear evidence of culture-based comprehension
> problems…Apart from the most surface—level misunderstandings
> concerning the linguistic meaning of items, the other types are not
> specific to lingua franca communication but likely to occur elsewhere
> independently of the speakers' native language.

Mauranen's findings could thus be interpreted as an appreciation of the potential
which the diversity regarding speakers' linguacultural backgrounds and its
integration in communication yields. Other strategies to facilitate understanding
have been identified by Kaur (2009), who applied a conversation analysis
approach in order to determine potential sources of misunderstanding and how
nevertheless, understanding is created in ELF. With ELF in mind, Kaur (2009:50)
used the term *repair* to refer to "the interactional procedures that are employed
both to pre-empt as well as to resolve problems of understanding". Kaur
(2009:70-73) further identified *repetition* as a strategy which is used by the
speaker or the recipient to "negotiate and secure understanding". Similarly to
repetition, *paraphrasing* (Kaur 2009:123-124), i.e. the use of different
formulations, is a common strategy to negotiate meaning and result in mutual
understanding. Other confirmation and clarification practices, such as the "You
mean" formulation, identified by Kaur (2009:181-187) in his ELF corpus "reflect
a move on the part of the participant to address a potential or a real problem of
understanding". In a later work on criteria for successful users of ELF, Kaur
(2011:53-57) identified further strategies such as turn sharing, the use of
cajolers, multilingual practices and safe topics as well as back-channeling, which
are employed for facilitated understanding. To sum this up, Firth opened a new
research paradigm by investigating pragmatic strategies in ELF. Further
research has been devoted to pragmatic strategies applied in ELF aimed at
successful communication. One such criterion for successful communication is
pragmatic fluency, which House (1996:228) defined as "the combination of
appropriateness of utterances and smooth continuity of ongoing talk". Her
observation of the behavior of adult language learners led her to deduct the
following criteria constituting pragmatic fluency. These are the use of pragmatic
strategies such as discourse strategies, the ability to initiate and change topics,

the ability to keep conversations going and carry weight, the ability to take turns and the use of an appropriate pace of speech, pausing and repairs (House 1999:151). For the purpose of this thesis, however, it needs to be kept in mind that House's and Kaur's criteria were designed to describe spoken interaction. Since my focus is on Internet memes, with the distinctive property of imitating spoken conversation, some of the aforementioned strategies of pragmatic fluency, though not all of them, may apply.

As I have outlined in the initial introduction to ELF, earlier research into ELF mainly focused on a description of formal features, with a tendency to include functional considerations. Seidlhofer (2005:RQ92) established lexico-grammatical features which are frequently found in ELF conversation. Later research (e.g. Breiteneder 2009, Vettorel 2014) elaborated on the question how these findings are reflected in the Vienna Oxford International Corpus of English. The formal features include the tendency to omit 3rd-person singular present tense –s marking, the preference for using the relative pronouns who and which in an interchangeable manner, a heightened flexibility when using definite and indefinite articles as well as the pluralization of mass nouns. Furthermore, ELF usage is characterized by its combination of *this* in its function as a demonstrative pronoun with both singular and plural nouns and the extension of meaning when it comes to the use of certain verbs with high general meaning. Moreover, speakers tend to make use of one invariable question tag and may insert additional nouns and prepositions to increase transparency and ensure comprehensibility. To conclude, users of ELF shape the norms provided by Standard English to suit their communicative needs. Cogo (2009:270) points out that "successful ELF communication relies on crucial adaptive accommodation skills along with appreciation and acceptance of diversity". Just like the norms are prone to shift with the advent of ELF, so are the communities. The following section sets out to describe the effects of changes in communication in English on the notion of communities.

2.1.5. Virtual communities and communities of practice

Traditional concepts of speech communities as geographically bound entities are no longer suitable for the reality of ELF which "emerges out of and through

interaction" and thus cannot be perceived of as stable and fixed, since "it might well be that ELF never achieves a stable or even standardized form" (Meierkord 2004:129). Its formal features are subject to variability and ad-hoc negotiation through constant processes of renewal and modification resulting in "hybridized linguistic resources" (Jenkins, Cogo & Dewey 2011:303). If ELF is constantly reshaped and fluid, the concept of community must be able to accommodate its hybrid nature as well. Seidlhofer (2011:86) emphasizes the need for a reconceptualization of the traditional notion of a locally bound, self-contained and stable speech community, since

> with the current proliferation of possibilities created by electronic means and easy global mobility , changes in *communications* have accelerated and forced changes in the nature of communication: the *media* now available have change the *modes* of use. And in all this, English is in a pivotal position: already established as a widespread language, it is particularly well placed to play a crucial role in these changed conditions, where communities can no longer be defined mainly in terms of face-to-face contact, and certainly not by a common native language […] Wider networking needs a lingua franca. [original emphasis]

This need for a lingua franca, brought about by technological advancements is catered for by the emergence of ELF. Wenger (1998:72ff) suggests the concept of virtual community to cater for the aforementioned need of a lingua franca and lists shared practices, participation in a "jointly negotiated enterprise" and the use of a "shared repertoire" as core criteria for communities of practice. Wenger's approach to the classification thus focuses on the situationality due to a common purpose of communication instead of territorial boundaries. According to Seidlhofer (2011:87), there are no native speakers of English as a global language, and Canagarajah (2007:925) attributes the absence of native speakers to the multilingual nature which is a characteristic feature of ELF interactions. ELF, he argues, cannot be located geographically with its users often resorting to languages other than English in their local environment. However, they resort to ELF as a "shared linguistic resource" irrespective of the linguacultural heterogeneity. Due to the very nature of the shared purposes and aims which they use ELF for, ENL is not suitable as a norm to base assessment on. Instead, Canagarajah calls for a reconceptualization of proficiency of ELF users to accommodate for heightened linguistic awareness which is due to cross-linguistic

contact and the exploitation of hybrid resources in communication (Canagarajah 2007:925).

The growth in popularity of the Internet has definitely contributed to the change in the perception of speech communities and the blurring of linguistic boundaries (Danet and Herring 2007:7). New possibilities for communication in real-time across the constraints previously set by time, space and territorial restrictions are the result of changes in communication technology. Pennycook (2007) described the way "transcultural flows" in English are enabled through global interconnectedness. Similarly, Wright (2004:175) recognized the need for ELF for

> more than the usual reasons for adopting a lingua franca. It is not only being learnt because it gives access to the power and prestige of the centre, but because it enables the flows, networks and structures of an increasingly postnational system. It is the medium which allows individuals to transcend their group membership, and this is what people appear to want to do.

Wright thus highlights networking which is enabled by the use of English as a lingua franca. This can also be observed in 9gag, where ELF is a resource its users resort to in order to engage in their shared enterprises of bonding and sharing human experience through memetic representations. The question whether or not 9gag as a group of people who interact through a social media website can be considered as a community in its own terms will be measured against Herring's (2004:351-352) criteria for online communities. She defines online communities as having a "core of regular participants" who share a mutual background as concerns "history, purpose, culture, norms and values" and who are characterized by "solidarity, support and reciprocity", but who nevertheless allow for criticism and conflict and have means to counteract potential conflicts at their disposal. The group thus presented is self-aware of its distinct identity and dissociates from other groups, allowing for an "emergence of roles, hierarchy, governance and rituals". The aforementioned criteria presented by Herring can be grouped under the labels sociability, support and identity. The application of Herring's criteria for a discussion whether or not 9gag can be seen as an online community shows that users are aware of their identity and in-group membership, which becomes evident in their self-designation "9gaggers". Furthermore, it can be stated that there is a core of regular participants. The fact that this core is fluid

may be due to the website's popularity among younger users, which will be elaborated on in a later detailed discussion of the medium. This instability of the user core can be related to what Herring described as the possibility for roles and a hierarchical structure to emerge. The very nature of 9gag as a humorous website already reveals that its users have a historical background, certain values and norms which are quintessential to the understanding of humor and the sharing and decoding of memes in common. However, cultural differences are bound to arise due to the overcoming of national boundaries. In terms of values and norms, variation is thus likely to occur. Users exhibit solidarity, support and reciprocity and don't hesitate when it comes to voice criticism. To conclude, the users of 9gag fit Herring's definition of an online community, but additionally, they can also be referred to as a community of practice in Wenger's (1998:72ff) terms if expanded by a dynamic factor to explain what Dewey (2009:7) referred to as "modification of practice" itself, since in the ever-so-quickly changing online world, the enterprises as tasks in themselves change constantly. All the tasks ELF users are faced with on a regular basis exert an influence on their identities, just like the networks and communication channels they use do. In Wright's (2004:159) terms,

> [w]e may be just as disposed to construct our identities in relation to the transnational networks we belong to as we cross former boundaries to our information contacts and exchanges. The satellite television channels we watch, the websites we access, the email groups we belong to may well be as influential in the construction of our group identity as our national media.

Wright has thus emphasized the importance of the medium used to transmit messages and present oneself and its significance to fluid construction of identity, which is a vital prerequisite in the context of social media, where messages are sent in real time and actuality is crucial.

2.1.6. Culture(s) in English as a lingua franca use

English as a lingua franca is recognized as an additional communicative resource of choice for interlocutors who do not share a common native language. In the following section, the role of culture(s) in ELF conversation will be examined. Since my focus is on ELF interaction in an online medium as a melting pot of users from different linguacultures, I will take Baker's definition (2009:573) of culture as a

discourse or discourse community which is dynamic, complex, and negotiated and one of many possible means of interpreting meaning and understanding in interactions […] It is this more fluid, emergent stance on how culture and language interact in intercultural communication, embodied in notions of third space and liminality that perhaps offers the most interesting means of investigating the role of culture in ELF communication.

Baker's definition is thus able to account for the constant interplay between languages and cultures in ELF conversations. Given the fact NS can, but need not be present in ELF conversations, the cultures of the standard language only play a minor role. In House's definition (1999:74), communication in ELF refers to "interactions between members of two or more different linguacultures in English, for none of whom English is the mother tongue" which she estimates to be "extremely frequent now and will increase rapidly in the future". Following House's definition, ELF can thus neither be perceived of as a neutral code, nor is it culture-free, but instead, it is free from NL culture. As my investigation of 9gag as a virtual and situational community revealed, NS culture might be activated in case its members resort to what Widdowson (1983) has termed the territorial imperative and purposefully wish to identify with the culture of the target language as a means of signaling in-group membership. This observation ties in with Meierkord's (2002:110) view of speakers and their preference to express temporary and situational membership in certain groups for vocational, political, national or other purposes. In a seminal analysis of how lingua franca users show cultural identity and identification with their primary culture, Pölzl (2003) observed the presence of speakers' and co-participants' primary language and primary culture and stresses that even though speakers may not wish to identify with the linguaculture of the target language, ELF cannot be seen as a culture-free language and suggests that it should be seen as a "native-culture-free code" (Pölzl 2003:5). In her view, "ELF users have the freedom to either create their own temporary culture, to partly 'export their individual primary culture into ELF or to reinvent their cultural identities by blending into other linguacultural groups" (Pölzl 2003:5). Pölzl's analysis of the role of culture in ELF interactions thus highlights the hybrid and situational nature of ELF, where the interactants' linguistic and cultural background is constantly activated and the cooperative and territorial imperative (Widdowson 1983) are both exploited and balanced according to the interactancts' communicative purposes.

The fact that native culture plays a minor role in ELF interactions does not mean, however, that these interactions take place in a cultural vacuum, since

> ELF users have the freedom to either create their own temporary culture, to partly 'export' their individual primary culture into ELF or to reinvent their cultural identities by blending into other linguacultural groups. (Pölzl 2003:5).

The potential to broaden one's cultural horizon which Pölzl ascribes to ELF conversation has also been observed by Alptekin (2010:103), who perceives of English-knowing bilinguals as being likely to encounter and familiarize themselves with multiple cultures. In other words, ELF as a communicative resource enables its users to transcend cultural boundaries and even create a situational inter-culture (Meierkord 2002). As Baker (2009:574) states, these "linguistic and cultural forms expressed through ELF are likely to be hybrid, dynamic, and continuously adapting to local needs, global influences, and the demands of communicating across cultures". Baker's concept of the presence of culture in ELF strongly highlights the functional aspect inherent to ELF interactions, which has also been taken up in recent analyses of plurilingual practices (e.g. Hülmbauer 2013, Hülmbauer and Seidlhofer 2014, Vettorel 2014). While the use of ELF on the one hand enables interactants to express their primary culture and make use of the territorial imperative, they also create a new 'inter-culture' and thus adhere to the cooperative imperative. The degree of identification with this newly created inter-culture largely depends on the communicative situation itself as well as on the purpose the interactants wish to achieve. In ELF interactions, "co-participants can 'export, appropriate or re-invent their cultural identities". Pölzl's analysis (2003:7) of a corpus consisting of twenty hours of recordings of speakers in diverse settings and of different levels of proficiency revealed that "within this newly co-created ELF inter-culture they can engage in diverse memberships and/or signal their own". Indeed, the omnipresence of ELF entails a need to venture beyond traditional conceptualizations of the relationship between target language and target culture in order to create awareness for the fluid cultures and processes of negotiation involved in the creation of inter-cultures (Baker 2009:567). This understanding of the interplay of language and culture includes global, national, local and individual considerations due to the tendency to transcend territorial boundaries (Baker 2009:570) and travel between cultures (Clifford 1992:96) with cultural and

linguistic forms constantly being "in a state of flux, always changing, always part of a process of the refashioning of identity" (Pennycook 2007:8). Due to its hybrid and dynamic nature, ELF is a suitable communicative resource to respond and adapt to "local needs, global influences, and the demands of communicating across cultures" (Baker 2009:574). In order to respond and adapt to changing communicative environments and a variety of linguistic backgrounds, identification with the native language and the native culture is not necessarily needed and nowadays, no direct relationship between nationality and cultural identity can be observed. Instead, the differentiation between primary and situational culture as suggested by Meierkord (2002:111ff) proves to be better suited to accommodate the constantly changing communicative environment typical for ELF interactions, where the influence of speakers' linguacultural background manifests itself through "turn-management, pauses, simultaneous speech, topic choice, speech acts and codeswitching".

2.1.7. Identity and Third Space in English as a lingua franca use

According to Hüllen (1992:304ff), language is not only used for a mutual exchange of information and to exert an influence on participants in a conversation, but also for self-representation and social bonding in which the speakers' identity plays a vital role. As traditional conceptualizations of identity were fixed and stable, they cannot be used in a hybrid ELF context. For the purpose of this thesis, I will be working with Pölzl's definition (2005:95) of linguacultural identity as "the identification of participants with the linguistic and pragmatic conventions acquired in their primary culture and expressed in their primary linguaculture" which "reflect and encompass the values, beliefs and attitudes of that linguaculture". In ELF encounters, participants share and shape aspects of their identities through communication. In Pölzl's terms (2005:112), the speakers from different linguacultural backgrounds using ELF as their communicative medium of choice create a "Third Space", a place to "share fragments of their life worlds with each other in ways which are comprehensive for others". The *Third Space* is "an imagined space of negotiation and at the same time 'encountered hybridity' through which new intercultural meanings, practices and identifications are created", consisting of "the intercultural community, the different linguacultures which create

hybridity and the language [to construct the Third Space]" (Pölzl 2005:112-113). Pölzl's definition of *Third Space* is capable of integrating a dynamic view of identity and identification as being constantly negotiated and changed in the process of communication (Collier & Thomas 1988:112). For an analysis of the role of identity from a linguistic perspective, I will be working with Bucholtz and Hall's definition (2009:19ff) of identity shaped in interaction. Bucholtz and Hall regard language as an "emergent product" shaped by temporary and interactional conditions and indexical processes, which is "intersubjectively constructed through several, often overlapping, complementary relations, including similarity/difference, genuineness, artifice, authority and delegitimacy" (Bucholtz and Hall 2009:21). In the present interconnected world characterized by an interplay of local and global influences (Giddens 1991:5) it is "important to understand the roles of pleasure and desire, and the possibilities that popular culture may hold out for the new cultural linguistic relations and for new possible modes of identity" (Pennycook 2010:65). Indeed, the trend towards deterritorialization can also be observed when analyzing the relationship between the individual and the communal, which has been observed by Czisér and Dörnyei (2005:30) who conclude that "English is rapidly losing its national cultural base and is becoming associated with a global culture". However, for the purpose of my thesis, I personally believe that it is too simplistic to speak about one single global culture, since my analysis revealed that speakers do signal their linguacultural identities as part of an ELF community of practice. While it might thus be problematic to perceive of one single emergent linguaculture, the influence of the environment on one's linguistic identity is acknowledged. Pavlenko and Blackledge (2004:1) define language choice and attitudes as being "inseparable from political arrangements, relations of power, language ideologies and that interlocutor's view of their own and others' identities". In a similar way, Jenkins (2007:199) states that

> while some speakers may currently wish as individuals to identify themselves linguistically (but rarely in other ways) with NSs of English, they may at the same time feel more 'at home' in English as part of their own linguacultural community or even an international NNS community, and wish to signal their affiliation to these groups linguistically.

In other words, Jenkins thus observes NNS' adherence to Standard English

ideology and their aim for native-like proficiency, while at the same time linguistically identifying with an ELF community of practice. In order to be able to determine linguistic identity, Omoniyi and White suggest flexibility, situationality, variation, social influences on both social relationships and communication as well as simultaneous activation as being constitutive of one's linguistic identity (Omoniyi and White 2008:2). This set of criteria provided by Omoniyi and White can also be applied to the online world, where "both what people say about themselves and how they behave with others contributes to the perception of personal identity online" and "the use of language is of immense importance in cyberspace, for it is through the use of language that people construct their identities" (Wood and Smith 2005:60). These identities are constantly negotiated when in contact with the environment. At this interface of sameness and uniqueness, the duality of one's wish for social bonding meets the wish to reveal one's own identity – be it one's name or one's total of various identities (Fishman 1994:86ff). The fact that identity is based on sameness and uniqueness is not contradictory by definition, but should rather be seen as complementary, for "self-interpretation is based primarily on a single self-aspect that one shares with other, but not all other, people in the relevant social context" (Simon 2004:49). On social media websites, where users continuously shape and reshape their very unique biographical narratives by navigating through and negotiating a vast option of choices, the correlation of the local and global becomes more visible than ever before.

2.1.8. Multilingual Practices in ELF

Being the shared linguistic resource for speakers who do not share any other means of communication, ELF interaction is characterized by its speakers' multilingual background. Traditionally, research into multilingual practices followed normative conventions and associated negative attitudes with multilingual practices, and any interference with an interlocutor's other linguistic resources at hand was considered a deficit. Since this thesis aims at describing participants' decision to resort to their multilingual resources in an online community, my focus will be on the functional motivations underlying multilingual practices in ELF. Earlier research into bi-and multilingualism implied clear-cut conceptualizations of languages as well as territorial notions, which becomes apparent in early

definitions of phenomena of language contact, such as code-switching, defined by Milroy and Muysken (1995:7) as "the alternative use by bilinguals of two or more languages in the same conversation". This definition is clearly based on assumptions of languages as separately activated means of communication. In light of ELF as a contact language (Firth 1996:240), however, phenomena of language contact are taken to be natural and positive contributions to the transmission of meaning.

> Cross-linguistic influence is an inherent and essential feature of lingua franca communication. As effective ELF talk does not depend on native-like performance but rather on situational factors determined by the lingua-culturally diverse speakers themselves, plurilingual resources can be exploited as appropriate in the communicative context. Approached from this perspective, 'transfer' phenomena, which have tended to be regarded negatively in traditional applied linguistics, can appear in a new light when observed in an ELF way (Böhringer, Hülmbauer & Seidlhofer 2008:16)

Böhringer, Hülmbauer and Seidlhofer thus illustrate how transfer from the L1 into the target language can enrich communication and add meaning. The variability and flexibility of ELF enables transfer of L1 constructions into English (Hülmbauer 2010:77), however, it proves challenging to measure multilingualism, leading Hülmbauer and Seidlhofer (2014:390) to suggest speaking of multilingualism "as a matter of degree" due to the productive flexibility characteristic for ELF interactions. It is this very flexibility that allows ELF users to deviate from previous Standard English norms and adhere to a "'polylingual norm' perspective", leading users to "employ whatever linguistic features are at their disposal to achieve their communicative aims as best as they can, regardless of how well they know the involved languages" (Jorgensen 2008:163). In other words, ELF users are competent in exploiting ELF as an additional code and exhibit "multilingual and multicompetent language behavior (Firth 2009:162), which is constantly negotiated in each communicative event and for shared practices and purposes. The resulting variety likely to arise in ELF encounters due to the integration of a shared situational resource is inherent to ELF conversation. Differently to early conceptualizations of bi-and multilingualism, Cook (2008:23) emphasizes the fact that linguistic repertoires are constantly activated and cooperate simultaneously to a certain extent. It would thus be inappropriate to attempt at categorizing the

multilingual practices in terms of core-periphery models such as Kachru's circles. Instead, languages are dislocated, reintegrated and adapted to the local environment of use (Hülmbauer & Seidlhofer 2014:392). In that respect, Hülmbauer and Seidlhofer argue that NNS are in an advantageous position due to their relatively high flexibility and freedom in language production and can thus resort the potential provided by the virtual language (Hülmbauer and Seidlhofer 2014:402).

> A plurilingual speaker operating in an intercultural mode like ELF can be assumed to have both more leeway and more means for linguistic creativity than a monolingual person because he / she has more resources to draw on, manipulate and be creative with for the purposes of an ongoing conversation. Similarly, the plurilingual recipient has more resources available to base his / her interpretation and understanding on. (Hülmbauer & Seidlhofer 2014:396).

To sum this up, multilingual language users have a competitive advantage due to their linguistic resources they can draw upon and the creative potential provided by the exploitation of the virtual language. The creative potential to add meaning entails the need for reconceptualization of traditional notions of language contact phenomena in the context of intercultural communication. Exploiting one's linguistic repertoire does not mean being a deficient, ineffective language user, rather, it constitutes a switch within ELF. Linguistic diversity is even aided by the integration of plurilingual resources which are constantly activated at various degrees (Cook 2008:23), and it would be false to see them as a possible threat to linguistic diversity. In Hülmbauer's (2010:98) words, the exploitation of multilingual resources bears the potential of increasing communicative effectiveness. Due to the hybrid nature of ELF, traces of languages other than English are likely to emerge, which, according to Heller (2007:11) contradicts the perception of languages as separate domains where no interplay is possible. In general, speakers of ELF tend to opt for semantically transparent utterances, and MacKenzie (2011:88) highlighted the independence of the ELF user to create effective utterances:

> In a hybrid variety and speech community, there is no need to use standardized NS formulaic sequences, and every reason to calque or translate useful expressions and idioms that you think will be understood (i.e. not totally lexicalized or opaque ones).

MacKenzie's observation ties in with Widdowson's (1983) notion of a territorial and a cooperative imperative which, according to Seidlhofer (2009:197ff), do not stand in opposition, but rather complement one another. Speakers thus aim for communicative effectiveness, and one way of achieving communicative effectiveness is by resorting to creativity, which, according to Pitzl (2012:42) manifests itself as variation on a lexical, syntactic and morpho-syntactic level. Therefore, variation in terms of innovative lexical and structural usage frequently occurs in ELF interactions due to influences by at least three languages, namely the involved speakers' L1 and any additional linguistic resources they can draw upon in order to fulfil their communicative purposes (Klimpfinger 2009:348). In an analysis of VOICE, Klimpfinger (2009) was able to identify quotation marking, addressee specification, interjection, reiteration, message qualification, personalization and objectivization" as discursive strategies. In an ELF context, Klimpfinger (2009:351), observed that code-switching can concern "word-fragments, single words and clauses up to whole passages". As I have pointed out previously, research into ELF has shifted towards the inclusion of a functional paradigm, and multilingual practices are no exception (e.g. Vettorel 2014, Klimpfinger 2007). Traditional labelling was used by Klimpfinger (2007:57), who concluded from an investigation of VOICE that

> ELF speakers switch to another language to direct what they say to one or more specific addressees, they switch to get assistance of another speaker, or because they feel another languages is more appropriate to express a certain idea. Furthermore, ELF speakers switch languages to communicate their bi-/multilingual identity and show group membership.

According to Klimpfinger's findings, in an ELF context, speakers switch from one language to another, which implies a static one-language-at-a-time notion. This notion has been contested by Hülmbauer and Seidlhofer (2014:400), who suggest that all languages are activated at all times. This holds especially true for online interaction, since "the internet has produced a large additional space, relatively free from normative constraints, in which speakers can practice multilingualism in written, computer-mediated communication" (Sebba 2011:5). Sebba's quote illustrates the changing research paradigm towards an interest in multilingual practices from a descriptive perspective and an acknowledgement of speakers'

multilingual resources. The fact that the communicative medium of choice, for the purpose of my thesis the online community 9gag, exerts a high influence on the communicated content is highlighted by Androutsopoulos (2013:675):

> While CS in CMC obviously qualifies as written in terms of the written representation of linguistic signs, it also bears resemblance to spoken conversational CS, most obviously in terms of its dialogic contexts and its discursive functions.

In an online context, spoken language is thus imitated, even though the content is stored in a written form, thus containing elements of both spoken and written communication. Various research has investigated the use of multilingual resources online, such as by Leppänen et al., who investigated online interactions of Finnish users employing multilingual resources. Their findings revealed that users made interlingual and intralingual choices while communicating online (Leppänen et al. 2009:1082). In other words, the Finnish online users exploited multilingual resources and were aware of different registers and styles within one language. The exploitation of multilingual resources has never been as visible as it has become due to new communication technologies. According to Androutsopoulos (2007:227), the Internet itself does not further language change and maintenance, rather, it provides a platform for a virtual community to draw upon their multilingual repertoire, which will result in the need to acknowledge multilingual practises as the norm rather than deviation from it. The need to eventually reconceptualise multilingual practices has also been highlighted by Hülmbauer and Seidlhofer (2014:399), who are convinced that "ELF is part of multilingualism and plurilingual elements are part of ELF". In order to enable a thorough description of multilingual practices, multilingual resources should be considered as "phenomena in their own right" (Hülmbauer and Seidlhofer 2014:399) caused by globalisation and the heterogeneity it entails. This should also be taken into account by language policies and education, which are expected to create the required preconditions for the exploitation of multilingual resources (Hülmbauer and Seidlhofer 2014:402). Hülmbauer and Seidlhofer conclude that

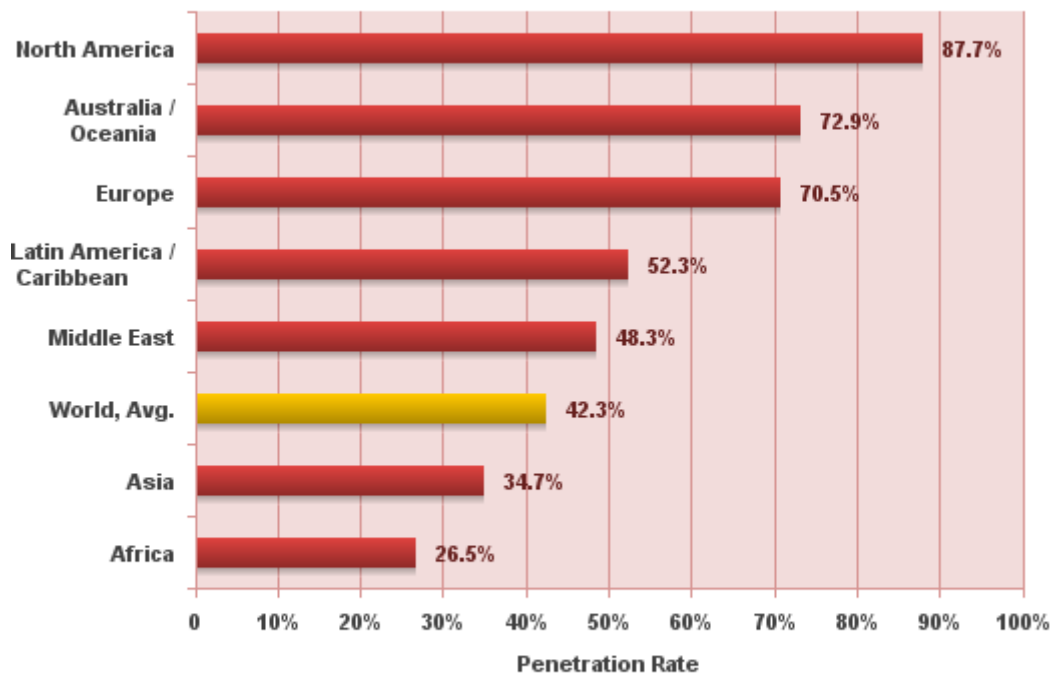> [t]he phenomenon multilingualism /plurilingualism leads us to revise

our views of the very nature of language and to see it as a continuously variable and adaptable resource for communication, which defies the traditional concept of languages as completely distinct and separate entities. The implications of both an investigation of ELF in particular and multilingualism research in general are thus far-reaching and offer points of contact for various disciplines dealing with language in the 21st century. (Hülmbauer and Seidlhofer 2014:403)

To conclude, ELF sees multilingual practices as the norm of communication and not as a sign of communicative inefficiency. Speakers who resort to their plurilingual repertoire within an ELF interaction do not deviate from ELF, since plurilingual phenomena are an essential part of communication in any ELF communication.

2.2. Communication online

The rise of the Internet has undoubtedly facilitated cross-cultural exchange and communication. Pennycook (2007:25) attributed the power of "enabling immense and complex flows of people, signs, sounds, images across multiple borders and in multiple directions" to recent advancements in technology, thus leading to the creation of "complex networks of communication and cultural flows" (Pennycook 2007:31). The fact that globalization has pushed previously existing territorial boundaries has been acknowledged by Dewey (2007:336-337), who observed a tendency to venture beyond local communities and towards global communities. These global practices are then re-localized; in Dewey's terms, they are "locally consumed, and in their consumption are remodeled, reconstituted, reformed" (Dewey 2007:337). In our contemporaneous globalized society, we are "developing hybridized realizations that are locally enacted" (Dewey and Jenkins 2010:79). The Internet can be seen as a medium which has enabled both globalization and re-localization, as the following Internet penetration rates according to geographic regions illustrate:

World Internet Penetration Rates by Geographic Regions - 2014 Q2

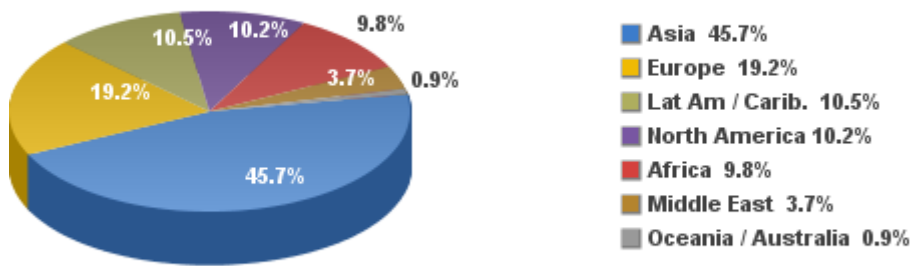| Region	Penetration Rate
North America	87.7%
Australia / Oceania	72.9%
Europe	70.5%
Latin America / Caribbean	52.3%
Middle East	48.3%
World, Avg.	42.3%
Asia	34.7%
Africa	26.5%

Source: Internet World Stats - www.internetworldststs.com/stats.htm
Penetration Rates are based on a world population of 7,182,406,565
and 3,035,749,340 estimated Internet users on June 30, 2014.
Copyright © 2014, Miniwatts Marketing Group

Figure 1: world Internet penetration rates by geographic regions – 2014

Figure 1 illustrates the Internet penetration rate published by www.internetworldstats.com according to geographic regions based on a population rate of 7,182,406,566 and an estimated total of 3,035,749,340 Internet users worldwide. The highest Internet penetration rate was estimated for North America with 87,7%, and the world average is expected to be around 42,3%. The Internet penetration level in Europe is supposed to have reached 70,5%. Below-average Internet penetration rates were estimated for Asia and Africa, which might be a consequence of socioeconomic reasons and power constellations in the areas affected. When taking a closer look at numerical representation of Internet users in Figure 2, constellations shift:

Internet Users in the World
Distribution by World Regions - 2014 Q2

9.8%

10.5% 10.2%

3.7% 0.9%

19.2%

45.7%

■ Asia 45.7%
■ Europe 19.2%
■ Lat Am / Carib. 10.5%
■ North America 10.2%
■ Africa 9.8%
■ Middle East 3.7%
■ Oceania / Australia 0.9%

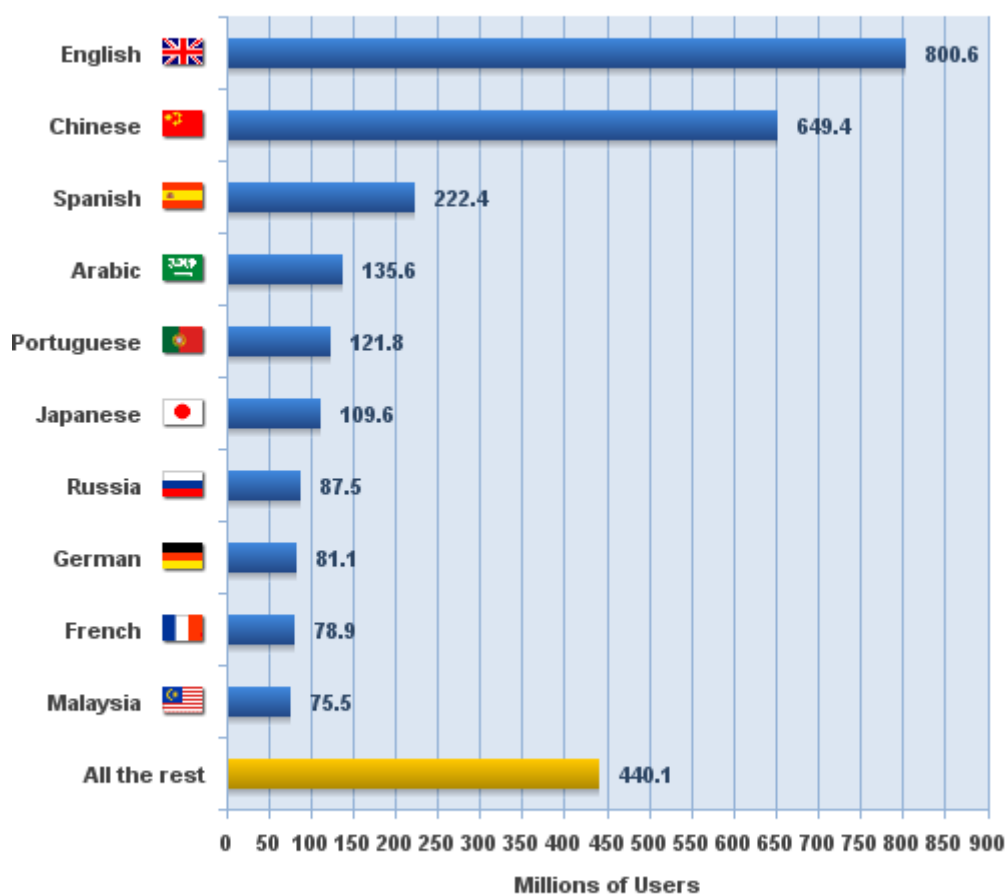Source: Internet World Stats - www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm
Basis: 3,035,749,340 Internet users on June 30, 2014
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Figure 2: Internet users in the world by world regions – 2014

Figure 2 illustrates the distribution of Internet users by world regions based on an estimation of 3,035,749,340 Internet users by June 30, 2014 according to www.internetworldstats.com. Due to population density, almost half of all Internet users (45,7%) are located in Asia, whereas one fifth (19,2%) is located in Europe. North America, Africa and Latin America / the Carribbean account for around 10 % of Internet users each. The smallest number of Internet users seem to be located in the Middle East, home to around 3,7% of Internet users, and Oceania / Australia with 0,9 % of the total of Internet users. At this point, I would like to clarify that these figures need to be treated with caution due to the fact it remains unclear whether these figures are based solely on estimations of Internet accounts or on actual users. Also, the device which is used in order to acccess the World Wide Web is not specified. Given the fact that a large number of users use mobile devices such as Tablets or Smartphones to access the Internet, future estimations may take into account the nature of the device used to navigate online when estimating the amount of Internet users. Since Asia has the hghest number of Internet users, one might be tempted to expect an equal representation of Asian languages when analysing the linguistic situation online. As the following figure will show, however, the estimated number of Internet users within a certain region does not necessarily correspond to the numbers of Internet users by langauge.

Top Ten Languages in the Internet
2013 - in millions of users

Figure 3: estimated Internet users by language in 2013

Figure 3, published on www.internetworldstats.com, is supposed to illustrate estimations of Internet users by language in 2013. Before interpreting the data represented in Figure 3, I would like to emphasize the fact that in today's interconnected world, estimations of Internet users by language might be problematic since territorial notions of one nation neatly corresponding to one language might no longer be valid in certain circumstances. After careful scrutiny of the methodology applied in the process of data collection involved in the estimations, I do not know whether or not users were assigned a language based on their residency shown in their URLs. For that reasons, the following figures should just be taken as estimates to give an impression of numerical relations of Internet users. Around 800.000,000 speakers of English rank in the first position,

followed by Chinese, Spanish, Arabic, Portuguese, Japanese, Russian, German, French, and Malaysian Internet users. Less prominent languages are reported to account for 440,100,000 of Internet users by language. As I have outlined previously, though, these figures should be merely taken as guidelines to get a first impression of languages present on the Internet. A well-documented study on European Internet users' language preferences was carried out by the European Council in 2011. The Flash Eurobarometer[1], henceforth Flash°313, investigated Internet users' linguistic preferences in the then 27 member states by means of a total of 13,752 interviews. To be more precise, the survey examined the use of languages apart from their L1 and differentiated between receptive purposes, i.e. reading and watching content, and written production (Flash°313 2011:4). In total, 55% of the participants stated using at least one language apart from their L1 for receptive purposes, while 35% claimed to resort to at least one language other than their L1 for written production. Thus, participants were more likely to use languages other than their L1 in order to consume web content. Additionally, the survey revealed that English was the most prominent language to be used apart from the participants' L1 since an EU-wide total of 48% of the participants use English in order to read and watch content online and 29% claimed using English for written purposes (Flash°313 2011:5). Heavy users were reported to be more likely to resort to English as an additional language than users who were less frequently online (Flash°313 2011:8). In Austria, 61% of the participants stated to resort to English in order to read and watch content, and 42% mentioned using English for written purposes (Flash°313 2011:13-16). As regards the aims Internet users wished to fulfil, an EU-wide total of 62% reported using a language which is not their L1 to communicate with friends, and 29% stated browsing the Internet for entertainment purposes at least occasionally by using a language other than their L1 (Flash°313:18ff). To sum this up, English is a highly prominent language to be used additionally to the participants' L1 for various purposes and to varying degrees, with written interaction being less likely to be carried out in English as an additional language than tasks which merely require the use of receptive

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[1] The full Flash Eurobarometer report on user language preferences online can be accessed at http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/flash/fl_313_en.pdf.

skills.

Even though the Flash°313 can merely provide insights into the use of languages other than speakers' European L1s, it still points to the fact that English is co-present with other languages online. This ties in with Crystal's (2003:120) conclusion that "on the web, all languages are as equal as their users wish to make them, and English emerges as an alternative rather than a threat". The emergence of English as a highly present language on the web is partly due to globalization and spread (Widdowson 2003:50), and partly due to its origins in North America (Danet and Herring 2007:7). At its very beginning, the Internet was mainly planned and created in North America, which led to a preference for English since planners were primarily concerned with needs of an English-speaking target group. According to Danet and Herring (2007:7), the "text transmission protocol on the Internet is based on the ASCII […] character set", with ASCII standing for "American Standard Code for Information Interchange". This set of characters was created in 1960 and is based on the sounds of English on the one hand and the letters of the Roman alphabet on the other hand. Therefore, distortion might have been likely to result from languages using a different inventory of letters. In order to make up for these shortcomings, improvisations were made by Internet users who used roman characters while still writing in their own languages (Danet and Herring 2007:8). The ASCII character set was continuously modified and extended in order to enable expression in language groups other than Roman (Danet and Herring 2007:9). As the previous figures have illustrated, linguistic diversity is still present online, although its extent may be difficult to determine. The following figure attempts to give an impression of linguistic diversity in online posts.
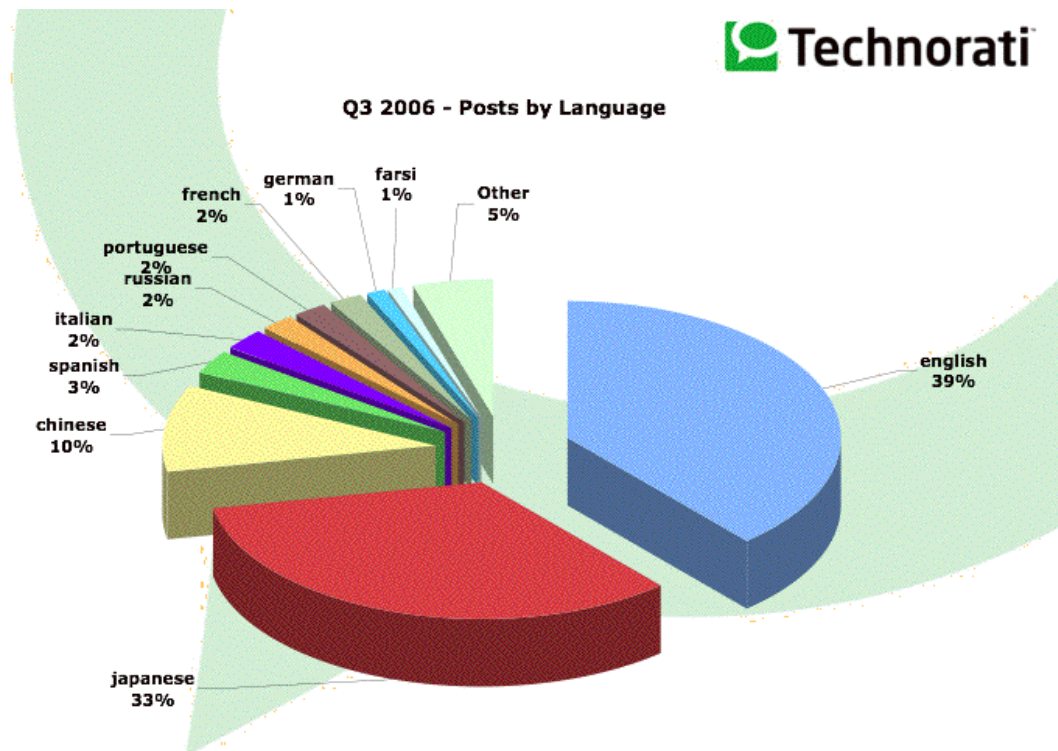
Figure 4: posts by language

Figure 4 illustrates the languages present in a 2006 State of the Blogosphere Report[2], at that time tracking more than 57 million blogs. The report illustrates the prominence of English, Japanese and Chinese, with 39% of blog posts written in English, 33% published in Japanese and 10% published in Chinese. However, Spanish, Italian, Russian, Portuguese, French, German, Farsi and other languages are represented in the blogging world, too. Block (2004:35) has observed a similar distribution of languages on the Internet:

> Greater diversity does not necessarily mean that all languages are equal: bigger is still better in the pecking order of world languages as much of the proportional weight wrested away from English has been in favour of a few major languages. Thus Japanese, German, Chinese, Spanish, Russian and other languages of the economically advantaged nations of the world, have managed to establish a strong presence on the internet.

Block's observation focuses on the total of languages used online and highlighted the omnipresence of English online. The question to remain unanswered is in how far languages of the economically less advantaged nations

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2 The entire State of the Blogosphere Report can be accessed at
http://www.sifry.com/alerts/archives/2006_11.html

will be affected by these tendencies. To conclude, English is a language which is omnipresent online. However, it is of utmost importance to keep in mind that, in its use as a lingua franca, English serves as an additional communicative resource rather than a threat to linguistic diversity. Vettorel (2014:18) states that "English on the Internet is frequently employed in its role of lingua franca, rather than as a native language, across linguacultural backgrounds, by and for people who wish to communicate with an intentionally-oriented audience". Given the fact that "one in four of the world's population are now capable of communicating to a useful level in English" (Crystal 2006:425), ELF thus seems like a reasonable means of communication for the numerous communities of practice (Wenger 1998:72ff) who use the Internet for their specific purposes. In Seidlhofer's (2011:86) terms, this contact zone "needs a lingua franca". With the rise of Web2.0, this need has become even more evident, since with Web2.0, participation was rendered possible. According to Androutsopoulos (2011:4-5), Web1.0 relates to "the accessibility of localized, bottom-up productions and distribution of on line content", whereas Web2.0 "refers to the fusion of formerly distinct technologies and modes of communication into integrated digital environment". On a similar note, Herring (2012:12) mentioned the possibilities for "participatory information sharing" as well as "user-generated content; an ethic of collaboration and use of the web as social platform" among the most striking features to distinguish Web 2.0 from its predecessor. Web 2.0 as a social platform imitates features of orality, among which Androutsopoulos (2010:209) identified "spoken-like and vernacular features, traces of spontaneous production, innovative spelling choice, [and] emoticons". At this point, though, it is important to emphasize that characteristic features of computer-mediated communication, henceforth CMC, do not necessarily constitute characteristic features of ELF, even though they may coincide. Among the characteristic features, orality is a key element. Baym (2010:63) objected to clear-cut distinctions between spoken-like and written-like language and instead suggested positioning speech and writing along a continuum because "it might be more fruitful to think of digital communication as a mixed modality that combines elements of communication practices embodied in conversation and writing". When thinking about the modality of language as a continuum, Crystal (2006:28) states that "much of the urgency and the energetic force" used in

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online communication would be closer to spoken conversation, even though he agrees that both ends of the continuum are served. This hybrid nature of online communication has also been observed by Vettorel (2014:76), who suggests that

> [l]anguage on the internet appears to be of a hybrid nature in that it includes traits that can be ascribed both to speech and writing, in different measures depending on the CMC mode in which it is employed: for instance, while web-pages are more written-oriented, other genres such as e-mails, chats or virtual groups can display several speech-like features.

In other words, the Internet and communication online contain thus features that could be described as spoken-like, and others whom one would associate with written interaction, with it all being a matter of degree. According to Kytölä (2012:108), the potential to shape language resides within the users, since "language users, social actors, *appropriate* any technological innovations or new communication formats to whatever usage they prefer" [original emphasis]. It is thus the user who exploits the possibilities residing within the medium, though the user might be urged to adapt linguistic expression in terms of spelling, morphology and syntax, with a preference for "genre-specific typographic conventions" (Crystal 2006:34) in order to make up for other ways of expressions that are missing in CMC, such as gestures or intonation. Although CMC does not provide the possibility to resort to certain extra-linguistic features typical for face-to-face interaction, it still enables to convey emotions, through the use of emoticons, punctuation, spelling, capitalization, and informal language "to create an air of conversationality" (Baym 2010:103). CMC is thus by no means void of affective expressions, rather, its users find their own ways of conveying emotion in CMC.

2.3. Internet memes

While the previous section aimed to describe communication online, and particularly communication using English online, the following section will focus on the medium 9gag, its history and mechanisms. In its core, 9gag can be described as a social media site which enables uploading and sharing of user-generated content. It was founded by Ray Chan[3] in Hong Kong in 2008 and

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[3] http://allthingsd.com/20120412/meet-9gag-the-community-comedy-site-thats-growing-like-crazy/

enables users to upvote, downvote and comment on humorous posts generated or shared by other users who may, but need not register or log in in order to see the Internet memes. According to web traffic trackers[4], the online platform receives 11,1% of its visitors from the United States, 11,6% from India and around 7,8% from Germany. This illustrates how diverse the community of practice, meeting at 9gag for their shared entertainment purpose, is. Its users can access 9gag via the desktop version as well as via mobile apps on iOS, Android, Windows Phone and for BlackBerry in search for memes they can relate to.

Users of 9gag, or 9gaggers, as the community refers to its members, share, upvote, downvote and comment on what popular culture refers to as *memes*. As I will clarify in a later step, the term *meme* was originally used by Dawkins (1989) as an allegory to Darwinian evolution and then taken over into linguistics. For the time being, I would like to use Zappavigna's (2012:101) definition of Internet memes as

> formulaic language that users themselves mark as memes, often with typographic devices such as hashtags. This popular sense of meme, appropriated by internet discourses, refers to online trends or fads, sometimes also described more generally as internet phenomena. The multimedia shares spreads virally through the various networks that constitute the internet.

It is thus the users themselves who appropriated the term meme to refer to what Milner (2013:1) referred to as "discursive artefacts spread by mediated cultural participants who remix them along the way", "balance the familiar and the foreign", from "universal to particular". What adds to the popularity of Internet memes is the potential of variation as they are "remixed" in Milner's terms, and the possibilities to relate to other user's experience and thus enable social bonding (Zappavigna 2012:101). The degree of variation inherent to memetic transmission will be explained in more detail using Dawkins' comparison of human culture to Darwinian evolution. The fact that meme production allows for creativity has been acknowledged by Tannen (2007:29), who sees creativity as a result of "the eternal tension between fixity and novelty", and also by Burgess

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[4] http://www.alexa.com/siteinfo/9gag.com and http://www.similarweb.com/website/9gag.com

(2007:32), who ascribes "vernacular creativity" on the basis of "**commonness**" [original emphasis] to Internet memes. The resulting language which is employed in memes has been labeled a "'media lingua franca' which is decided by social process" by Milner (2013:2). In the following, Milner (2013:5) defines proficiency in this "media lingua franca" as follows:

> On the networks of mediated cultural participation that produce memes, proficiency in fixed conversations and contexts is required for entry into the discussion, and vernacular novelty is required to create and innovate them from familiar forms.

The very reason for Internet memes to be relatable is thus their interplay between well-known routines and formulae on the one hand and added novel elements which deviate from the fixed expressions on the other hand. Successful memes are then spread virally on social media websites for various reasons, an integral reason being "social affiliation" (Zappavigna 2012), since it is a basic human need to form communities around shared interests and purposes. According to Zappavigna (2012:101), humor can serve the purpose of establishing relationships and bonding with other users. Most Internet memes are humorous and evolve from insider jokes into widespread use in participatory websites, where in-group membership is central and it is considered desirable to be familiar with latest trends and memes. To conclude, Internet memes are at the same time a product and a medium of popular culture, with their main purpose being the creation of social bonds with other users by means of humor. In a Darwinian sense, however, memes were considered as replicators of human culture, as the following section sets out to explain.

2.4. Memetics and language

The study of memetics is based on the assumption that human culture has undergone, and is still undergoing, a process of Darwinian evolution of replication, selection and variation (Dawkins 1989). Dawkins compared the propagation and evolution of genes to the evolution of memes, which he had previously defined as "a unit of cultural transmission, a unit of *imitation*"(Dawkins 1989:192 [original emphasis]). In a description of the role of replicators and the process of imitation, he suggested that

> Just as genes propagate themselves in the gene pool by leaping from body to body via sperms or eggs, so memes propagate themselves in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain via a process which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation. (Dawkins 1989:192)

The main criteria for successful memes are "high longevity", "high fecundity" and "high copying fidelity" (Dawkins 1989:35). These "culturally transmittable" patterns of information (Ritt 2011:476) are located "in brains as constituents of human knowledge" and allow for variation due to imperfect copying as a result of selection. In other words, successful memes are characterized by stability, a high number of copies, and a high degree of similarity within the copies. However, just like in any evolutionary process involving replication, variation can occur. As concerns linguistic memes, a lot of potential still remains since the field has been relatively unexplored up to the present. In a seminal approach to analyzing the concept of Darwinian evolution and Dawkins' notion of memes from a linguistic point of view, Ritt (2004) described the use of phonemes as linguistic replicators as being illustrative of "linguistic **COMPETENCE**" (Ritt 2011:476 [original emphasis]). In order to examine the process of meme replication in linguistics, Ritt suggests that they "need to be plausibly conceptualized as material patterns with determinable and empirically detectable structures" whose modes of replication need to be examined before being able to identify certain underlying patterns of replication (Ritt 2011:476). In the case of language, Ritt (2011:476) mentions "communication, acquisition and accommodation" as being involved in the process of replicating memes and enriches Dawkins' notion of evolutionary human culture with the addition of language competence as opposed to its manifestation as a product, which, for the purpose of this thesis, would be visual Internet memes. The questions of what constitutes a manifestation of a product, and thus whether it is residing as an abstract competence within the human brain, or whether it is uttered as a manifestation of it, led Dawkins to revise his original definition of memes as "a unit of cultural transmission, or a unit of imitation", such as "tunes, ideas, catch-phrases, clothes fashions, ways of making pots or of building arches" (Dawkins 1989:192). Dawkins' revisited definition (1982:109) clarified the "distinction between the meme itself, as replicator" and the resulting products as "phenotypic effects" and concludes that memes as replicators are located as "a unit of information residing

in a brain". Ritt (2004:169) favors the revised definition with a focus on the difference between competence and manifestation, which reads as follows:

> A 'meme' represents an assembly of nodes in a network of neutrally implemented constituents, which has (a) a definitive internal structure, (b) a definable position within a larger network configuration, (c) qualifies as replicator in Dawkins' sense.

Ritt's definition sees memes thus as individual replicators residing in neural networks. Language itself, however, does not qualify as a replicator since no two speakers talk alike (Ritt 2001:209), and instead, he suggests the analysis of smaller units, such as phonemes, which, in his view, count as replicators. He clearly distinguishes between the memes as mentally stored competence on the one hand and the observable behavior as a realization of the meme, but not the meme per se, on the other hand. What this all amounts to is that in popular culture, the use of the term *meme* denotes a user-generated humorous visual representation of a relatable situation based on the interplay of the familiar and the foreign shared in the respective social networks which can qualify as communities of practice. In a Darwinian sense, however, the term *meme* is used to refer to "a unit of cultural transmission" (Dawkins 1989:192), based on the assumption that human culture underlies processes of Darwinian evolution including replication, selection and variation. As the term *meme* found its way into linguistics, it was then used to describe "replicating constituents of linguistic **COMPETENCE**" (Ritt 2011:476 [original emphasis]). For the purpose of this thesis, the questions thus arise in how far Internet memes in a popular sense serve as illustrative examples of Darwinian evolution; and if so, whether or not the language used in memes by means of fixed, pre-patterned templates qualifies as replicators in Dawkins (1989) sense. Finally, the use of ELF as a shared linguistic resource for the creation, spread and discussion of Internet memes needs close consideration. As my thesis aims at analyzing the use of ELF on a social media website, I would like to consider Internet memes as memes in Dawkins' sense as a mode of cultural transmission for they depend on replication, selection and variation. By selecting from and replicating pre-existing patterns while adding novel items, variation is achieved and evolution the resulting consequence, however, due to the immediacy of the social media websites, longevity is a matter of degree. However, just like linguistic

competence, they reside as abstract categories within the brain, and what is shared, commented on, up-and downvoted on social media websites is not the actual meme as an abstract category, but its visible representation, brought to life as a cultural artefact. Similarly to the way language memes are replicated by "communication, acquisition and accommodation" (Ritt 2011:476), constituent categories of Internet memes are replicated online through familiarization processes, exchange and accommodation to the communicative environment. To sum this up, the popular use of "Internet meme" deviates from Ritt's definition of memes as in the former, the product and not the underlying competence is referred to. Even though I am fully aware that these definitions cannot be used interchangeably, I will refer to humorous visual representations of relatable situations spread virally within communities of practice as "Internet memes" since it has become widely acknowledged within CMC discourse analysis.

2.5. Summary of theoretical key concepts

The aim of this preliminary introduction into the theoretical framework was to give an insight into basic concepts of ELF which are relevant to the questions what role ELF plays in online humorous websites and which functions are fulfilled by using ELF and other plurilingual resources in online communication. This was done by providing an overview of the research which has investigated ELF, starting from Kachru's (1992) circular model which has been proven to be inadequate to account for ELF as a day-to-day reality for its users due to its underlying assumptions of English being bound to territorial areas. While previously English was supposed to reside within NS, the omnipresence of English led Widdowson (1984:385) to conclude that the way English develops is highly influenced by NNS. Previously existing Standard English ideologies, which favored English as it is spoken by the inner circle, were challenged by an emerging use of English "in its own right", namely ELF (Seidlhofer 2001:137). Contrary to views perceiving of English as a language distributed out of its territorial home, ELF spreads as a virtual language (Widdowson 2003:50). Its users balance both the cooperative imperative as they aim for successful communication and the territorial imperative by creating communities of affiliation (Seidlhofer 2009:206). As ELF is used as a shared linguistic resource among

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speakers who might not share a common L1, a plurilingual dimension is added to communication (Hülmbauer 2013:54). Various strategies are employed to facilitate successful communication, whereby creativity as a characteristic feature of ELF interactions does not equal deviation of conformity (Seidlhofer 2011:118-119). Due to increasing interconnectedness and globalization, the traditional notion of speech communities is not applicable in an ELF context where speakers create situational communities of practice, a concept which goes in line with Herring's (2004:351) concept of online communities. Even though communication in an ELF setting is likely to involve NNS and NS alike, Pölzl (2003:5) argues that ELF is a code freed from native culture. Rather, its users create a situational culture, enabling to venture beyond cultural boundaries (Meierkord 2002).

With a view to online communities of practice, the creation of identity is thought of as a fluid and hybrid process: a hybridity which can also be attributed to the "Third Space" where speakers share experiences with others, and characterized by its hybridity (Pölzl 2005:112-113). In order to communicate successfully, speakers exploit their plurilingual resources as part of ELF (Hülmbauer & Seidlhofer 2014). Eventually, the rise of ELF will entail the need for reconsideration of traditional notions of language contact phenomena (Hülmbauer & Seidlhofer 2014:397). The Internet is a place of contact where English is highly present due to its historic base in North America and its preference for Roman language character sets (Danet and Herring 2007:7). An analysis of the language on the Internet revealed that both features of spoken and written language are present (Vettorel 2014:76), however, clear-cut distinctions should be abandoned in favor of a view of language production along a continuum (Baym 2010:63). As this thesis sets out to examine English as a lingua franca and its use in Internet memes, a distinction between the use of the term *meme* in popular culture as opposed to its use for a description of the evolution of human culture and language was suggested.

In the following chapter, I will outline how I will put the theoretical framework into practice in order to be able to answer the questions what role ELF plays in communication via online humorous websites and which functions are fulfilled by

using ELF and other plurilingual resources in online communication. The following chapter will thus focus on methodological considerations as well as a contextualization of the data which I will be working with.

3. Corpus, Research design and methodology

This chapter sets out to describe the research design and methodology chosen for the investigation as well as the data I will be analyzing in Chapter 4. Taking into account the medium of conversation which my corpus is based upon, I chose computer-mediated discourse analysis in order to allow for a qualitative analysis of communication in an online community of practice whose audience is international and for whom ELF is the communicative medium of choice. This was done in order to answer the questions how ELF is used in the community, how plurilingual resources are reflected in both memes and comments on them and which attitudes towards Standard English and ELF are frequent among users.

3.1. Research methodology

My purpose has been to investigate the communicative behavior of potential ELF users who constitute an online community of practice and generate, share, rate and comment on Internet memes in a synchronous way for entertainment purposes. As I have outlined in chapter 2.3, 9gag is used by an international audience, with a large share of its traffic coming from the U.S. and India, thus resulting in English as the prevailing language being used. The characteristics of the medium hosting the Internet memes have informed the methodological choice, which I will elaborate on in this chapter before considering ethical issues in a chapter on methodological considerations.

As Herring (2004:338) pointed out, research on online communication yields the danger of being "anecdotal and speculative" with researchers disregarding the medium under scrutiny and the implication it has for the choice of methodology. In order to enable researchers to describe and identify online behavior in a thorough and meaningful analysis and allow for replicable observations open to scrutiny, Herring (2004:339), in a seminal work, described computer-mediated discourse analysis as an "approach rather than a 'theory' or a single 'method'" which combines methods used in fields such as rhetoric, communication studies and linguistics in order to apply them on computer-mediated communication. Computer-mediated discourse analysis can be combined with other empirical

methods of research, both qualitative and quantitative, but what all analyses have in common is "the analysis of logs of verbal interaction (characters, words, utterances, messages, exchanges, threads, archives, etc.)". Herring (2004:339) concludes that computer-mediated discourse analysis can refer to "any analysis of online behavior that is grounded in empirical, textual observations". However, as the purpose of my analysis is to analyze online communication from a linguistic and ELF-informed perspective, I have chosen this approach since

> it views online behavior through the lens of language, and its interpretations are grounded in observations about language and language use. This perspective is reflected in the application of methodological paradigms that originated in the study of spoken and written language, e.g., conversation analysis, interactional sociolinguistics, pragmatics, text analysis, and critical discourse analysis. (Herring 2004:339-340)

In other words, computer-mediated discourse analysis is thus informed by various linguistic disciplines and their distinctive approaches. It enables the researcher to analyze various levels of language ranging from "1) structure, 2) meaning, 3) interaction, and 4) social behavior" (Herring 2004:341). Computer-mediated discourse analysis is considered as a suitable approach for the analysis of linguistic behavior on a micro level and thus lends itself to investigate morphological processes, register, lexis, structural organization and multilingual practices as well as phenomena such as gender, identity and community on a macro level (Herrings 2004:340). However, Herring (2004:343) suggests keeping in mind that the content communicated in computer-mediated communication can, but need not be influenced by its technological features since at its core, it is an approach for "language-focused content analysis". As concerns the selection of data, Herring (2004:351) points out that this procedure is not done at random, but rather, is informed by relevance to the present analysis. In her words, "data samples tend to be motivated (e.g., selected according to theme, time, phenomenon, individual or group), or samples of convenience (i.e., what the researcher happens to have access to at the time)". To sum this up, computer-mediated discourse analysis was chosen as a suitable approach to investigate the use of ELF in a corpus consisting of humorous posts shared in an international online community because it facilitates the analysis of ELF with a view to the medium. Additionally, this approach to the analysis of

computer-mediated discourse takes into account the high degree of orality in a medium that is located along a continuum between spoken and written communication (Baym 2010:63). CMDA can be combined with a qualitative analysis and analyze various levels of language.

 After this preliminary outline of the advantages of applying computer-mediated discourse analysis for the purpose of an analysis of ELF used in Internet memes, the research design will be described in the following section. The study is based on a corpus consisting of Internet memes compiled over the period of one month. These Internet memes were selected from the website's "hot" section, where the items upvoted most frequently are featured, if they were considered relevant to the present analysis. In total, 50 Internet memes which were compiled by hand were chosen for close scrutiny. Out of these, 20 were chosen for a description in chapter 4. Compared to the vast amount of material available on 9ag, the corpus size is extremely small, however, due to limitations of space, the decision for a qualitative analysis of a smaller corpus was made. This decision was informed by Herring's (2004:352-353) recommendation of a sample size depending on frequency of the phenomenon being investigated on the one hand and the number of variables taken into consideration in the course of the study on the other hand. Even though the results generated cannot be considered as being statistically relevant, the formulation of clear research questions and a rather narrow focus of the study might lead to relevant findings. As Sacks (1992:298) points out, "[i]t may be we can come up with findings of some considerable generality by looking at very singular, particular things, by asking what it takes for those things to have come off". In a similar way, Cogo and Dewey (2012:35) argue in favor of smaller corpora used for close analysis by stating that their research, just like ethnographic methods,

> does not aim at being fully representative. Instead, we set out to undertake analytic induction, which involves determining to what extent a given case can be regarded as telling. Each case is thus analyzed in order to identify what phenomena it illustrates and what issues it gives rise to, the findings from which analysis can be then transported to other contexts to see how they compare.

The decision to resort to a corpus of a smaller size was thus made for reasons of limitations of space as well as the aim to conduct a close analysis of very

particular features. Since the users' right to privacy and data protection are of utmost importance to me, a covert and non-intrusive study was conducted. In other words, I did not create an optional user account and decided not to announce my presence as an observer. This decision was based on my aim not to have any influence on the language produced and to avoid the distortion of my findings by a possible observer's paradox. Throughout the course of the study, the websites' desktop version was used for reasons of convenience. Since I carefully paid attention not to intrude on the users' right to privacy I did not create an account and was thus not granted permission to the website's *NSFW* section, the *not safe for work* category where potentially disturbing and implicit content is located. For reasons of privacy, I accepted this potential distortion of results. After the selection of a total of 20 memes for a description they were stored together with the corresponding URLs in order to facilitate retrieval and enable transparency. Subsequently to selection and storage, the memes were analyzed with ELF-specific lexico-grammatical features as presented in chapter 2 in mind. In order to allow for an investigation of functional motivations underlying the use of language, communication in the comment section was analyzed. In this step, I paid utmost attention so as not to unmask users' identity or violate their right to privacy and thus masked any possible user name and profile pictures. Any information that was considered potentially harmful or might be harmful to users' anonymity online was not included in this thesis. The reactions triggered by the spread of an Internet meme and by comments were included in a qualitative analysis of functional motivations. This was followed by an analysis of instances leading community members to resort to their plurilingual repertoire. In the course of this step, it was noticed that speakers frequently verbalized their attitudes toward non-native use of English and thus, these attitudes were included as an additional category for reasons of relevance. Therefore, I analyzed both instances of plurilingual practices in Internet memes and in the comment section as well as verbalized attitudes towards both Standard ideologies and ELF use as well as the resulting effects on communication in order to allow for generalizations about the exploitation of speakers' multilingual repertoire.

3.2. Methodological considerations

The analysis of linguistic material available online automatically raises questions of data protection, ownership of content and anonymity. For the purpose of the thesis at hand, computer-mediated discourse analysis was chosen as a suitable approach to enable the analysis of communication in a social media website where ELF is a shared linguistic resource. This choice was partly informed by ethical considerations, which will be outlined in the following section.

During the past decades, the question whether or not, and if so, to what extent, the Internet can be used for scientific research without causing any harm to the individuals involved has received considerable attention. Unfortunately, this question cannot be answered in a straightforward and clear-cut manner since up to the present, there are no internationally applicable regulations on the use of the Internet for research. In my opinion, McKee and Porter's (2009:82) view of the Internet as being "a publicly available archive" is certainly problematic, considering the fact that conversations on the Internet might be intended to be private, even though they take place on a publicly accessible ground. This has lead various institutions worldwide to release codes of conduct to be respected when conducting research. The responsibility to avoid any potential harm to people whose interaction are being investigated lies within the researcher. With a view to research on the World Wide Web, it is at times difficult to distinguish whether it is a human subject or the text as decontextualized object produced by a human subject that is being investigated. For that reason, Page et al. (2014:58-61) suggested to make individual decisions for each and every potential research project. Herring's (1996:159) view on the question of what is it actually that is being analyzed is that "the focus of linguistic investigation is the form rather than the content of the utterance", which led her to conclude that linguistic behavior of an individual subject is not that important since "what is important are patterns across groups of speakers, rather than individual linguistic variation". For the purpose of my thesis, I referred to Elm's (2009) criteria to assess the privacy of the website 9gag, which made me conclude that I am investigating a "semi-public" environment (Elm 2009:74) which, in principle, is open and accessible to anyone with a connection to the Internet, but requires the creation of an account

in order be able to share Internet memes, to up- and downvote them and to comment on them. As I have outlined, the perception of privacy depends thus on the focus of the analysis as well as the site requirements. Other factors helping to determine the degree of privacy and thus its potential for linguistic research without causing ethical problems are the interactant's purpose of interaction in mind and thus the "appropriateness of the situation" (Nissenbaum 2004:106). In other words, conversations with a content and purpose that is not intended for a public audience and where roles of participants and their identities are revealed should be considered of a private nature. For Nissenbaum, it is the context that determines integrity. For McKee and Porter, who likened the internet to a "publicly available archive" (2009:8"), it is the cultural context with influences how the degree of privacy of material available online is perceived (2009:78-79). This notion proves to be highly problematic, since the Internet is a medium which connects a diverse international audience with equally diverse cultural backgrounds. As this overview of ethical considerations arising when conducting linguistic research using material available online has shown, it can be difficult to assess whether or not internet research violates the right to privacy online. From a different perspective, it could be argued that scientific research does not necessarily mean a violation to the right to privacy and instead can be seen as an acknowledgement through academic interest. Throughout the course of this study which involved collecting data, categorizing and labelling as well as analyzing and interpreting and storing it, I respected the users' right to privacy. Identities of users were carefully masked and the focus of my research was clearly on the texts as products of users and not the users themselves. The decision for the approach chosen for this study was informed by questions of academic integrity and scientific codes of conduct. By conducting research on the use of ELF on a social media website, I do not intend to violate the right to privacy, but I do aim at contributing to the research in the field of ELF.

4. Findings

In the previous chapters, I presented theoretical key concepts which I deemed relevant to the purpose of my thesis. I provided a description of the Internet as the medium under investigation and compared memes in Dawkins' sense to Internet memes as they are referred to in popular culture. Thereafter, I reported on the advantages of computer-mediated discourse analysis as the methodological approach chosen for this thesis. This was followed by a discussion of methodological considerations mostly related to the protection to the right to privacy as well as anonymity online. With this in mind, chapter 4 will provide insights into the questions guiding the thesis. As I have mentioned previously, my major aims were to find out how ELF is used on the website 9gag by focusing specifically on lexico-grammatical features characteristic for ELF usage as well as the exploitation of plurilingual resources and the representation of linguacultures. The following sections will reveal preliminary insights into the way ELF was employed in a selection of Internet memes before analyzing prototypical examples.

4.1. Preliminary findings

In the present interconnected world, English occupies the position of a lingua franca and the online world is no exception of its omnipresence. The unprecedented spread of English as a virtual language (Widdowson 2003:50) has led to estimations that at present, NNS outnumber NS of English (Seidlhofer 2011:197). A factor contributing to the spread of English as a virtual language is the Internet which, according to Danet and Herring (2007) exerted a vital influence on communication in general and English in particular, being the language originally preferred by web designers. As a consequence, users were faced with the possibility to transcend territorial boundaries, which rendered traditional notions of stable and fixed speech communities incapable of accounting for the reality of speakers in situational communities of practice (Wenger 1998:72ff, Dewey 2009:7). The following section is intended as a description of 9gag as constituting such a community of practice (Wenger 2002:4).

4.1.1. 9gag – a community of practice?

As a website receiving traffic from visitors from various countries and based in Hong Kong, 9gag offers a sanctuary for its users in search for entertainment. Its users have the possibilities to watch humorous content as well as rate and comment on it, and they can also get involved by actively contributing to the spread of humorous posts. This is achieved via websites such as www.knowyourmeme.com , which enable the generation of memes and provide background information on the aforementioned. Being privy to the discovery and spread of Internet memes is of utmost importance, as Lankshear and Knobel (2006:242) point out:

> Online, contributing directly to spreading a new, mutating meme is considered cool, and generating an entirely new meme is even cooler. Being among the first to spot a potential online mutating meme is perhaps coolest of all.

Lankshear and Knobel have thus recognized the importance of involvement in the discovery, spread or even generation of Internet memes for the expression of identity online. The practices characteristic for 9gag and its users meet the criteria for virtual communities in Wenger's early definition as sharing practices, negotiating enterprises and making use of a shared repertoire (1998:72ff). First, cultural awareness regarding matters of interest appropriate to the user profile structure is a prerequisite and can be described as a shared enterprise. Second, users are supposed to make use of Internet memes in the right situation and for a suitable purpose, since "[p]art of the memetic lifecycle is this point at which a meme is declared to be passé by its subcommunities, who go on to adopt other memes with which to distinguish themselves" (Zappavigna 2012:102). It is thus vital to be familiar with the latest Internet memes. Also, users are recommended by others not to over-extend a meme in a situation which it was not originally meant to describe. Third, both registered and unregistered users of 9gag are united by shared practices, such as up-and downvoting Internet memes as well as commenting on them. Also, the website offers the possibility to chat via the 9chat app and includes links to its Facebook, Twitter and Instagram accounts. To conclude, 9gag constitutes a community of practice following Wenger (1998:72ff), who later revised his definition and referred to communities of

practice as "groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis" (Wenger et al 2002:4). Wenger's revised definition of communities of practice, which emphasizes the situationality of the community on the one hand and the users' dedication to the community on the other hand, can also be used to classify 9gag as a community of practice. Its users are aware of the worldwide popularity of the website and its independence from territorial boundaries. As I have outlined in section 2.3, 9gag receives traffic from countries all over the world, and as a native speaker of German, I was rather impressed by the fact that around 7,3% of traffic to the site comes from Germany. The website's high popularity among users worldwide is reflected in the use of ELF as a means of expression. In the following section, I will describe how 9gaggers use ELF as their shared linguistic resource.

4.1.2. 9gag using ELF

As the analysis of posts on the website 9gag has revealed, English is the language of choice among its users. This was also observed by Harris and Hiltunen (2014), who discovered that for many users of social media websites such as 9gag, English is not a native language. Instead of being a native language for users online, Tagg and Seargeant [5] described English as "a shared linguistic resource across these groups" appropriated "as one resource, alongside other languages and communicative strategies, in constructing and maintaining translocal networks". Having purposefully chosen a non-intrusive approach for the investigation of 9gag, I was unable to infer the participants' L1s. In an interconnected online realm, however, drawing artificial boundaries would not make any sense since ELF conversation comprises NS and NNS of Standard English alike. The analysis of the corpus revealed that, with an international and linguaculturally diverse audience in mind, none of the posts had top captions in languages other than English. The use of speakers' multilingual repertoire became apparent in image macros, which can be appropriated on various websites, and also in the comment section. This illustrates not only the

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[5] Tagg, Caroline and Seargeant, Philipp. 2012. "The role of English as an online lingua franca: code choice and translocality on social network sites". Abstract submitted in the course of Sociolinguistics Symposium 19, August 21-24, 2012. http://neon.niederlandistik.fu-berlin.de/ss19/paper/784

synchronous mode of 9gag enabling users to react to other participants in a way that indicates orality (e.g. Baym 2010:63), but also the ability of ELF users to adapt to the communicative environment and the virtual community they are interacting with, as Seidlhofer (2011:101) points out:

> [m]uch of ELF is negotiated ad hoc, dependent on content, purpose, and constellations of speakers and their own linguacultural backgrounds (in terms of discourse conventions, interactional styles, etc.). ELF discourses are creative local realizations, or performances, of a global resource that continually gets appropriated and re-fashioned in speakers". (Seidlhofer 2011:101)

9gaggers can thus be said to spontaneously react to communicative situations and the interactants involved as well as their linguacultures. While users of 9gag thus exploit the creative potential inherent to ELF, Standard language ideologies were found frequently, as the following section will illustrate.

4.1.3. Standard English ideologies

Even though 9gag is a community whose members use English as a lingua franca, Standard English ideologies were found to be deeply entrenched in some of its users, and numerous users aim at "enforcing Anglo-centric language standards" (Harris and Hiltunen 2014). This tendency to measure linguistic production by ELF users against NS norms as the standard, however, proves to be problematic since it can be difficult to define an acceptable standard and its characteristics already when comparing varieties of native Englishes (Björkman 2009:230-231). Also, computer-mediated communication exerts an influence on the communicated content and its formal features, which Baron (2008:169) referred to as "linguistic whateverism" manifesting itself in younger users' inconsistency and deviation from a perceived standard when it comes to communication online. After having conducted research on successful communication and identity creation online, I do have to take issue with the term "linguistic whateverism" used to refer to features arising due to the requirements of the medium of communication. On 9gag as a synchronous medium of communication, immediacy of communication is of utmost importance since users are urged to comment without undue delay, maybe even via using the mobile app on their Smartphones or Tablets, including emoticons to convey

emotions, considering the creation of social bonds more important than the exchange of information (Zappavigna 2012:101). While on the one hand, users visit social media for the sake of entertainment, some users, who are somewhat inappropriately referred to as *Grammar Nazis* by popular culture, seem to take pleasure in the correction of mistakes relating to spelling, pronunciation and grammar. They might either politely refer to standard norms to correct the mistake or purposefully ridicule the mistake and use it to position themselves as experts (Harris and Hiltunen 2014), which will be illustrated in a more detailed analysis. With 9gag being a community using English as a shared linguistic resource, questions relating to ownership (Widdowson 1994:387) are no longer of interest. Instead, Saraceni (2010:42) suggests a function-oriented perspective by stating that "all languages are integral to the lives of those who use them".

4.2. Formal features of ELF

Two forces are shaping conversation in ELF talk: while a certain degree of convergence to rules is a decisive factor whether or not communication is perceived as being successful, variation is bound to occur in communicative interactions where ELF is used as "an established resource in many people's communicative routine and serves as a reliable means of intercultural exchange in which miscommunication is the exception rather than the rule" (Hülmbauer 2009:324). Variation, which is likely to occur in ELF conversations, is caused by the context of use, and the description of formal features has to consider "its situationality features and the processes for making meaning developed by the participants within individual interactions" (Hülmbauer 2009:330). In other words, it is important to take into account its situative use when describing ELF and its typical features. As I have mentioned previously, current research paradigms are in favor of functional rather than formal descriptions of interactions. For the purpose of this thesis, I will use formal descriptions of features typical for ELF (Seidlhofer 2005:RQ92, Cogo and Dewey 2006, Hülmbauer 2009) because I believe it is necessary to refer to a norm in order to establish characteristics of ELF. However, I do not intend to assess ELF interactions by means of standard norms, since deviation from the norm is "not important for judging the success, let alone correctness of ELF performance – a backdrop needs to be provided in

order to discern variation and innovation in ELF" (Mauranen 2005:275). ELF conversations might thus not always adhere to normative conventions, but they can still be described as communicatively effective. Communicative effectiveness was defined by Seidlhofer (2001:148) as the participants' satisfaction with the outcome of communication involving processes of negotiation and the establishment of criteria. In general, ELF communication is successful and effective, and as House (1999:74-75) states, "there are surprisingly few misunderstandings / communication breakdowns". This high degree of effectiveness can be attributed to the relative independence from NS norms on the one hand, and the creative potential resorted to in ELF conversations on the other hand. Speakers have various strategies at their disposal in order to communicative success:

> [c]larity can be enhanced by giving prominence to important elements, redundancy added or exploited, explicitness can be increased by making patterns more regular, word classes or semantic relations generally can be made more explicit" (Seidlhofer 2011: 99).

As Seidlhofer states, speakers can thus exploit strategies to increase clarity and raise explicitness, which is due to the fact that there is no need for them to adhere to NS norms at all costs. In the following description of formal features manifested in my collection of Internet memes, I will provide an insight into how users of ELF thus achieve communicative effectiveness through processes involving "exploiting redundancy, enhancing prominence, increasing explicitness, and reinforcement of proposition" (Dewey 2007:339). Of course, this does not imply that items which do not conform to ENL standards are always affective (Hülmbauer 2009:331). What is remarkable, though, is that "forms identified as 'typical ELF' are often remarkably similar typologically to those that have already developed in both native and post-colonial Englishes" (Jenkins 2012:488).

4.2.1. Regularized pluralization

In ELF conversations, deviation in form can contribute to functional effectiveness and illustrates the potential inherent to the virtual language (Seidlhofer 2011:127). Vettorel's (2014:132) analysis of an international blogosphere with a high number of its users being located in Italy has revealed that the tendency to regularize plural forms resulted in non-conforming, but still efficient forms on the

phrasal and lexico-grammatical level. Her findings are supported by Hülmbauer (2009:489), who observed a "tendency for uncountable nouns to become countable across all three English-using groups (native, post-colonial and neither)". In an ELF context, users might thus tend to increase clarity and regularize for the sake of economy of expression. A highly productive way of forming plurals of nouns in English is to add a plural –s marker. However, this strategy proves to be ineffective when it comes to mass nouns, since the question whether or not nouns are countable is "a tricky area of English grammar" (Crystal 2003:362). The analysis of Internet memes revealed that the plural –s marker is added to mass nouns and thus enhances explicitness by making the plural visible. Figure 5 refers to a new law which was passed in France in April 2015 and aims at regulating the use of food as either donations or material for animal feed production after its sell-by date. Up to the present, there are no comparable laws in other European countries. A post on 9gag which deals with this new French law gave rise to vivid discussions in the comment section, with a high number of users expressing their opinion and describing the situation in other countries.

(1) Amazing idea! Hopefully more countries will follow their lead...

Figure 5: Amazing idea! Hopefully more countries will follow their lead...

Speaker 1: Here in Italy someone would whine about it like: "I have to work to buy me stuff and now the poors get all this for free? And maybe some immigrants get this stuff too? LET'S ALL VOTE FAR-RIGHT PARTIES!"

Speaker 1 successfully and sarcastically describes potential reactions triggered by the introduction of a similar law in Italy and imitates sceptics. In a possible attempt to highlight the fact that while one has to buy food for oneself while others don't have to buy it for themselves, speaker 1 inserts the reflexive pronoun *me*. Moreover, the plural marker –s is added to the mass noun *poor* to clarify that a large amount of people will benefit from the donations. This deviation from the norm should not be regarded as a mistake on behalf of the speaker, but rather as a means chosen to refer to one person buying food facing many others getting it for free. As Seidlhofer (2011:126) points out, "[t]hese forms have evolved to meet some functional need". In this particular case, *poors* was probably considered to be more effective since it indicates a high number of poor people. Additionally, speaker 1 identifies as a resident of Italy and continues to explain a tendency in Italy to disregard the needs of poor people and vote for far-right parties. Since not all users of 9gag might be familiar with social standards and living conditions of poor people in Italy, speaker 1 exports his or her primary culture into a spontaneously created situational culture. This ties in with Pölzl's observation that "ELF users have the freedom to either create their own temporary culture, to partly 'export their individual primary culture into ELF or to reinvent their cultural identities by blending into other linguacultural groups" (Pölzl 2003:5).

Similarly to the example quoted in (1), the following example relating to the same law found in another meme (2) illustrates how the productive way of adding a plural –s marker to nouns which, from a normative point of view, are uncountable, enhances clarity.

(2) GG France

> Speaker 1: It seems that you get the informations wrong ! Muslims in France live very very well !

In (2), speaker 1 adds a plural –s marker to the noun *information*, which is classified as a mass noun in normative use, with a possible intention to clarify the amount of facts that another commenter does not comprehend. In French, however, *information* can be pluralized by adding the plural marker –s, resulting

in *informations*. A possible reason for the use of *informations* in ELF might thus be speaker 1's plurilingual resources including knowledge of plural formation processes in French, which might have been triggered by the context of describing French legislation.

4.2.2. Zero present tense third-person singular marking

The analysis of humorous posts on 9gag revealed that zero present tense singular marking is employed by users of English as a lingua franca. In Standard English, -s or -es are added to verbs in third person singular if used in the present tense. Trudgill finds this to be rather uncommon since "Standard English is unusual among the languages of the world in having marking in the present-tense only in the third-person singular" (2002:104). Since the marking of third person singular –s in present tense is sometimes omitted, the question arises as to what function its realization and its non-realization serve. This issue was addressed by Cogo and Dewey (2006:88), who point out that

> [a]mong the world's languages English then is something of an oddity for its inflection of only one of the present tense verb forms, and especially so for its attachment to the third person singular. The more pertinent and certainly more justifiable question then with regard to 3rd person singular -s is not why the L2 speakers and some speakers of L1 dialects use the zero form, but precisely the opposite – why in standard varieties of English does the 3rd person singular carry morphological marking? Zero marking for first, second, and third person plural makes the use of the singular -s an unexpected irregularity, and surely the phenomenon that most requires explanation.

According to Cogo and Dewey, the very use of third person singular –s marking is an exception to the zero marking for first person singular, second person singular, and plural uses in present tense. However, Cogo and Dewey purposefully described this phenomenon as zero realization, thus highlighting the fact that it is an ELF speaker's functional choice instead of an inability to adhere to NS standards. In the following Internet meme (3), the speaker resorted to a 3rd person singular zero:

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(3) After the Egyptian goddess

Figure 6: After the Egyptian goddess

Figure 6 relates to an unfortunate dog's name given by a friend of the original poster, who explains that the friend in question will need suitable clothing for going to Israel. The zero third person singular present tense marking does not impede on the successfulness of the communication by means of an Internet meme. Speaker 1 does not only exploit the phrasal template *before it was cool,* which indicates that his or her friend was privy to an insider joke, but also resorts to zero plural marking for *need.* To sum this up, non-conformity to the Standard English third-person singular present tense marking does not result in a communicative breakdown. Instead, it reflects speaker 1's strive for communicative efficiency by redundancy reduction.

4.2.3. Redundancy reduction in the use of demonstratives

According to Standard English norms, the demonstrative pronoun *this* is used to refer to singular nouns and noun phrases, whereas *these* is used to refer to plural nouns and nouns phrases. Hülmbauer (2010:84) argues that the process of using *this* instead of *these* as required by NS standards illustrates the speakers' intention to reduce redundancy. A plural is already included in the plural -s marker added to the following noun or noun phrases so the use of *this* can thus be considered as an example for redundancy reduction. The demonstrative *this*

was attested to co-occur together with the plural *two words* in my findings, which indicates the speakers' wish to reduce redundancy in (4).

(4) What your drink says about you

> Speaker 1: I'm from Germany and i don't understand this two words as this combination of "light" and "beer". Can sombody tell me what they did to the gloriously brewed liquid gold named beer. But pls be careful with me, i don't want to cry..

In (4), speaker 1 identifies as a resident of Germany who does not seem to want to understand that in some countries, light beer is a popular alternative to lager beer. The speaker is involved in a process of co-creating a situational culture by asking other users for clarification, and the explanatory responses triggered by this comment revealed that other speakers were eager to co-construct meaning. By using *this two words* to refer to the words *light* and *beer*, it is evident that the speaker points to *light* and *beer* by reducing redundancy and adding to communicative efficiency. Also, the speech utterance creates an in-group with Germans being experts in brewery within the situational community of practice.

4.2.4. Shift in patters of preposition use

According to Seidlhofer (2011:145-147), the use of prepositions in ELF deviates from ENL norms, which is backed by examples from VOICE, where instances of the use of prepositions in order to reduce redundancy or add emphasis were found frequently. Seidlhofer points out that in ELF, prepositions can be used to replace direct objects, such as in "discuss about", which is considered communicatively effective, even though it does not adhere to ENL norms. The use of preposition illustrates the tension between stability and flexibility in ELF, and according to Cogo and Dewey (2012:52), "[p]repositions represent an area of lexicogrammar that is inherently unstable, and therefore particularly open to widespread variation". On the question as to what kinds of usage are susceptible to deviate from ENL usage, Cogo and Dewey (2012:52) state that variation is likely to occur in case "a preposition has little or no semantic value, such as with 'dependent prepositions' where the selection of one preposition over another is entirely dependent on its collocation with a preceding lexical item". The following

question a speaker raises in the comment section of 9gag illustrates the arbitrariness inherent to the collocation of *proud of.*

(5) Anyone shares my thought?

> Speaker 1: why are you so proud for being cheap.

In (5), speaker 1 uses the preposition *for* in *for being cheap* and thus deviates from ENL norms while having chosen a functionally effective form which emphasizes the very reason to be *proud of.* Using Seidlhofer's (2011:147) wording, this utterance might thus be considered not so much as an "evidence of error", but rather as illustrative of a "functional motivation".

4.2.5. Article use in ELF

According to Seidlhofer (2011:127), "a preference for zero article has been observed where ENL article use is idiomatic". Dewey's corpus study illustrates ELF users' tendency for a zero-realization of articles especially if deemed redundant, as described in cases

> where a speaker elects to use the zero article in contexts where the preferred English as a native language (ENL) pattern would involve the definite article. This is often the case where an ENL norm for definite article use involves a degree of idiomaticity and / or redundancy, such as ordinals (the first, the second, etc.) or superlative adjectives (the best, the most) where the definite article is communicatively redundant due to the semantic value of words like first and best[…] (Dewey 2007:341)

The use of articles differs greatly when comparing ENL to ELF usage, and the complete omission might be due to processes of redundancy reduction. In Mauranen's words, choices regarding the use of articles, resulting in non-conformity in realization, redundant insertion of articles or complete omission according to ENL norms are realized in functionally effective yet deviant ways in ELF (Mauranen 2010:18). In (5), speaker 1 omitted several articles which would have to be used if adhering to ENL standards:

(6) "Fastest man alive", ready to go

> Speaker 1: Attosecond is time what it takes for light to travel the length of 3 hydrogen atoms, not from end of molecule to another. Yes, I am a nitpicker.

In this example, an attempt was made to clarify the meaning of the term *attosecond*, which had aroused vivid discussions in the comment section. In this case, redundancy was reduced since ENL would prefer the use of definite and indefinite articles, resulting in somewhat like *an attosecond is the time it takes for light to travel the length of 3 hydrogen atoms, not from the end of a molecule to another.* The omission of articles in this example, however, does not result in unclear messages, since the speaker specified the time by means of a relative clause, and it is clear that the distance between molecules was not described. To sum this up, redundancy reduction was exploited in a possible attempt to focus on the core message again. In example (6), an article was inserted where Standard English norms would not require the use of an article:

(7) Hi. Sorry abt the bad English.

In the top caption of an Internet Meme, speaker 1 already asked other users to pardon the level of proficiency in English used within the meme he or she had posted. Not only does this plea for pardoning any mistakes imply a Standard English ideology the user might strive for, but also, a definite article was inserted where it would not have been used in ENL. According to Dewey (2009:65), the definite article can be inserted in case the speaker wants to emphasize the following noun or the following attention by drawing attention to it via the article.

4.2.6. Zero derivation

At the lexical level, speakers may resort to the process of zero derivation and thus use a lexical item in a different word class without having made any prior changes, which Bauer (1983:227) referred to as the change of word class "without any concomitant change of form". As Bauer (1983:226) explains, there are no observable restrictions as regards the suitability of lexical items to undergo this process. This productive strategy of economy of expression was used by the speaker in (7), who expressed an opinion on the French law

regulating the use of food after its use-by date:

(8) Amazing idea! Hopefully more countries will follow their lead...

> What law are you referring to? AFAIK "Imperfect" fruits are not forbidden, they just don't fit the EU norms. You would have to distribute them separately, for a lower price and won't be able to sell all of your higher quality fruit, because people could buy the cheaper ones (you'd be your own competition) - that's why it's cheaper and economically smarter do discard them right now.

The commenter in (8) resorted to zero derivation by using *competition* in order to refer to a person who can be described as being competitive. The speaker's decision not to mark any change in form might have been due to reasons of economy of expression on the one hand, and it might also add to the perceived extent of competition

4.2.7. Extension of meaning of verbs with high general meaning

Conversations in which English is used as a lingua franca allow for a high degree of variability and ad-hoc negotiation while also illustrating the hybrid nature of the linguistic resources at a speakers' disposal (Jenkins, Cogo & Dewey 2011:303). Hülmbauer (2010:84-85) described the tendency of ELF users to extend the meaning of words with high general meaning beyond their original context of use. This is the case with verbs such as *make*, *do*, or *have* in order to allow for added meaning. The following comment posted on 9gag illustrates the extension of meaning of the verb *give*, which is used in numerous contexts in English:

(9) Just Europe things

> Sorry you are wrong. Im a gay. Going to catholic church. In belgium. Not only are me and my husband well accepted but they even gave some informing nights about family diversity inside catholicism… things are changing

In this example, the commenter shares his opinion on the acceptance of gay marriage in European countries and provides information as to why this topic is relevant to him. The commenter describes an event initiated by the Catholic Church aimed at informing about family planning. For that purpose, the meaning

of the verb *give* was extended to illustrate how church representatives hosted an informative event. The use of *give* in this case might be due to the speaker's knowledge of ENL-attested collocations such as *give a speech*, which was then adopted to suit the speaker's communicative needs. Moreover, the commenter uses the adverbial phrase *inside catholicism*, where ENL usage might have favored *within Catholicism*. This choice results in additional emphasis on the fact that even the core representatives of Catholics are starting to welcome family diversity.

4.2.8. Ellipsis of objects / complements of transitive verbs

Cogo and Dewey's analysis (2006) of two small-scale corpora of spoken ELF interactions confirmed the existence of most ELF-typical lexico-grammatical features put forth by Seidlhofer (2005:RQ92) and provided support for the existence of redundancy exploitation when it comes to the "ellipsis of objects/complements of transitive verbs" (Cogo and Dewey 2006:75), such as in "You can borrow". This tendency to omit objects becomes apparent in the following comment in which speaker 1 provides culinary information on the origins of a dish depicted by the original poster:

(10) I'm having wi-fi for lunch

> Speaker 1: to be correct borek or whatever you call is greece's, turkey's and many balkan's dish, maybe even more countries. remember that, turkish and greek people have very similar culture and food traditions. Sorry for my poor english.

In (10), speaker 1 omitted any possibly object, which ENL norms would have required, and exploited redundancy by means of choosing the semantically rich verb *call*. By doing so, a reference to *borek* or *it* is made implicitly, and speaker 1, who apologizes for speaking *poor english*, has thus produced a functionally effective explanation. Similarly, in (11), the transitive verb *cost* is used without any object or complement:

(11) Childhood vs Adult Fears

> I'm gonna go ahead and surprise you all. Even here, in socialist Sweden, depending on age and what region you're in, a visit to the doctor will cost you. It's cheap, but none the less, it's not free

In (11), a commenter discusses the costs of medical care in Sweden, warning that a visit to the doctor *will cost you,* without mentioning any direct object. However, it is clear from the context that other commenters are being warned about financial costs to expect.

4.2.9. Lexical creativity and innovation

Creativity is a common feature of Internet memes, whose appeal is partly due to the variation in the process of replication, and ELF conversation, where creativity manifests itself at the lexical level. Seidlhofer (2011:108) rejects the view of innovative ELF creations as "a matter of arbitrarily replacing a St[andard]E[nglish] pattern with 'just anything'" by stating that in ELF conversations, creativity and innovation show the potential inherent to the virtual language. The realization of creativity is enabled by referring to a virtual rule (Seidlhofer 2011:118-119). The comment in (12) illustrates the potential inherent to the virtual language realized by a speaker who reveals his or her primary linguaculture in a vivid and emotionally charged discussion about the image of Arabs within society. In this comment, typical patterns of semantically untransparent language occurring frequently in the context of Internet memes intermingle with ELF- typical zero derivation an initial reference to the speaker's nation of identification:

(12) When I tell someone I'm an Arab and they ask me

> Speaker 1: I completely agree with you, I'm an Arab and I'm disgust to be on this time of ignorance between Arabs, you see all these Arabs from the gulf countries bragging about their unearned money and cars when they don't have a clue of what biology/physics/chemistry is, if our ancestors would look at us now they would be face palming a lot

In this comment, the speaker emphasizes that some people from the gulf countries have not earned the money they are *bragging about* themselves, resulting in the situationally appropriate and innovative use of *unearned* in order to refer to money that is not earned by oneself. The co-created meaning in this specific ELF context thus deviates from *unearned* as it is used in contexts dominated by ENL norms. The fact that this communicative exchange takes place in an ELF context can also be seen as an example for the co-creation of a situational culture and the speakers' hybrid identity. Regulars of 9gag are surely familiar with the meaning of the verb to *facepalm* as zero derivation of the noun *facepalm*, referring to the action of putting one's hand on one's face in embarrassment or disappointment. The author of this comment can be said to construct his or her identity by identifying with 9gag as a community of practice as well as by identifying as a user of ELF and a critic of Arab society.

Another user exploited the creative potential inherent to the virtual language and thus enhanced clarity of expression in (13). It might be safe to conclude that (13), which is the top caption of an image displaying what the fingertips of musicians might look like after intense rehearsals, was posted for the sake of social bonding.

(13) Only string instrument musicians will understand

Only string instrument musicians will understand

In this caption, the speaker exploited redundancy and thus contributed to increased clarity of meaning by means of resorting to the compound noun string instrument musicians. This choice results in semantic transparency and comprehensibility, irrespective of the fact that ENL might favor a description of the concept.

To conclude, formal features such as regularized pluralization, zero present tense third-person singular marking, redundancy reduction and shifts in patterns of article and preposition use as well as zero derivation, extension of meaning of verbs with high general meaning, ellipsis of objects and complements of transitive verbs and lexical creativity, which are typical for communication in ELF, can be found frequently in the Internet memes and comment sections on 9gag.

As stated previously, however, the major aims of this thesis were to investigate how members of the 9gag online community exploit their plurilingual resources, how attitudes towards ELF and ENL are displayed and how culture, identity and belonging contribute to conversation in ELF. The following section thus focuses on questions of culture, identify and attitudes; shifting away from a description of formal features and moving towards a description of how factors that are, at a first glance, external to linguistic production, shape the communicative environment.

4.3. Plurilingual resources

As I have previously established, traditional notions of languages bound to territorial areas are no longer applicable in today's interconnected world. Due to technical advancements as well as increased mobility and its past as a colonial power, English has become omnipresent in various domains of life. It is frequently used as a shared means of communication by speakers who do not share any other common linguistic resource. However, the fact that ELF serves the purpose of a shared means of communication does not mean that speakers' LN play a minor role: Hülmbauer and Seidlhofer (2014:400) emphasize the fact that in ELF conversations, all languages are activated at all times. In a similar way, Cook (2008:23) describes the linguistic resources of L2users as being "always present at some level of activation whichever language is being used". Taking a holistic view on speakers' linguistic repertoire, ELF does thus not present a threat to linguistic diversity, but rather helps to promote it. Due to the hybrid nature of ELF conversations, "the virtual possibilities within English combine with the virtual possibilities provided by the speakers' plurilingual repertoires" (Hülmbauer & Seidlhofer 2014:395). Hülmbauer (2009:329) highlights ELF speakers' "ability to approach languages in a more holistic, integrated way and to establish meta-linguistic links between them". Hülmbauer (2007:11) goes on to point out, their "multilingual backgrounds open up manifold possibilities of dealing with language, which may or may not bring about effective communication". In House's view (1999:74-75), however, communication in ELF is successful in most cases, with a very small number of conversational breakdowns. Not only do users of ELF familiarize themselves with other

interactants' plurilingual resources, but also, they have a high chance of expanding their cultural horizons through exposure to and familiarization with other speakers' cultural backgrounds (Alptekin 2010:103). The following section will reveal how ELF users on 9gag exploit and express their plurilingual resources and how this interacts with their cultural identities. According to Hülmbauer and Seidlhofer (2014:397), traditional labels for language contact phenomena may no longer be applicable. First, multilingualism is "a matter of degree" (Hülmbauer & Seidlhofer 2014:390), and second, speakers' multilingual repertoires are constantly activated and operating online (Cook 2008). While for the reasons stated above, I will not be working with traditional labels classifying language contact phenomena in my analysis, the functions ascribed to them (e.g. in Klimpfinger 2009) proved to be particularly useful for a description of plurilingual phenomena in Internet memes. Following Klimpfinger (2009), my analysis thus refers to the use of plurilingual resources in order to specify an addressee, to introduce another idea, to signal culture and to appeal for assistance. It needs to be kept in mind, however, that these functions collaborate in the process of making meaning.

4.3.1. Specifying an addressee

(14) Fellow German and Belgian 9gaggers, your beer is the best

> Speaker 1: stop making mixed beer happen, its never going to happen. En gutes Weißbier muss man pur genießen! ;)

This comment relating to alcoholic beverages urges speaker 1 to switch to German in an entire exclamatory sentence as one resource among his or her plurilingual resources within an ELF conversation online. Moreover, the speaker exploits the phrasal template *stop making (noun) happen*, *it's never going to happen* which he or she assumes to be shared knowledge within the situationally created community of practice. Moreover, the speaker uses *en* as a dialectal realization of the article *ein* and thus specifically addresses speakers of palatine German dialects. This appeal to users whose plurilingual repertoire comprises understanding of (palatine) German illustrates how

actors in new media environments often operate in a multidimensional linguistic and discursive universe where they simultaneously make their choices interlingually – drawing and combining resources from more than one language – and intralingually – selecting and combining features associated with registers, genres and styles of one language" (Leppänen et al 2009:1082).

In an ELF context, speakers can thus appropriate ELF as a shared linguistic resource enabling communication on a global scale and re-localize it for their communicative purposes (Dewey 2007). To conclude, this comment illustrates how ELF conversation in Internet memes is shaped by its users' plurilingual resources and the memetic replicators as well as a shared cultural system of beliefs.

4.3.2. Introducing another idea

In a similar way, the image of a unique vending machine in Austria selling hemp seeds posted on 9gag elicits comments in which the users co-construct cultural understanding and discuss conventions.

(15) Sausages in Germany, books in Istanbul and office supplies at the
       university. But no one beats Austria!

> Speaker 1: exactly where in Austria???
>
> Speaker 2 – original poster: near the swiss and german border hehehe
>
> Speaker 3: no, it's the province Vorarlberg. Innsbruck is more inland, nowhere near the Swiss border.

This post illustrates the commenters' awareness of an international audience who might not be familiar with the fact that Austria is divided into federal regions. For that reason, the word *province* is used to accommodate to other interactants who had asked about the location of the vending machine previously. The speakers' use of *Inland* indicates speaker 3's possible awareness of the fact that ENL *up-country* might carry a negative connotation, and that ENL *inland* is mainly reserved for legal purposes. In this post, the speakers cooperate by accommodating to each other while still exploiting the potential inherent to the virtual language which enables to describe a cultural concept more precisely. In

Hülmbauer and Seidlhofer's terms, the speakers in (15) are thus moving "towards the integratedness of linguistically diverse resources in today's intercultural communication contexts" (Hülmbauer & Seidlhofer 2014:402).

Apart from the use of plurilingual resources to add other ideas, their integration in ELF communication can also signal cultural identity. In (16), an image of a scene in a videogame has initiated a discussion about the location the image is based upon, with the majority of commenters agreeing that it has to be located in Austria.

4.3.3. Signaling culture

(16) This street in Germany

> Speaker 1: I think this is Vienna and not germany it is where Hunderwasserhaus is
>
> Speaker 2: the hundertwasserhaus is basically on my doorstep, it Stands in plochingen
>
> Speaker 3: Captain here! This isn't Germany, it's Austria.... and the town is vienna and this street is by Hunderwasser's house *flies away*
>
> Speaker 4: That street is in Fakehausen!

Some of the speakers involved in the discussion in (16) identify as having affiliations with Austria and Germany and export elements of their L1 / LN into the ELF conversation, which results in the exploitation of redundancy by speaker 1 and the use of the preposition *by* instead of *near* by speaker 2, which might have been preferred in ENL usage. This discussion might indicate the use of speakers' plurilingual resources in an aim for social bonding and sharing information while implicitly identifying as experts on the subject and thus balancing the cooperative and the territorial imperative (Seidlhofer 2009:206). Phrasal templates typical for Internet memes are used by speaker 3, who declares himself the *Captain* – a typical move carried out when a situation is clarified by an expert – and then **flies away** – again referring to the shared repertoire within the community based on assumed shared knowledge of the TV

series *Southpark*. Speaker 4 mentions that the street has to be located in *Fakehausen* and combines knowledge about the composition of nouns in German with discourse-specific potential of the virtual language in order to produce *Fakehausen*.

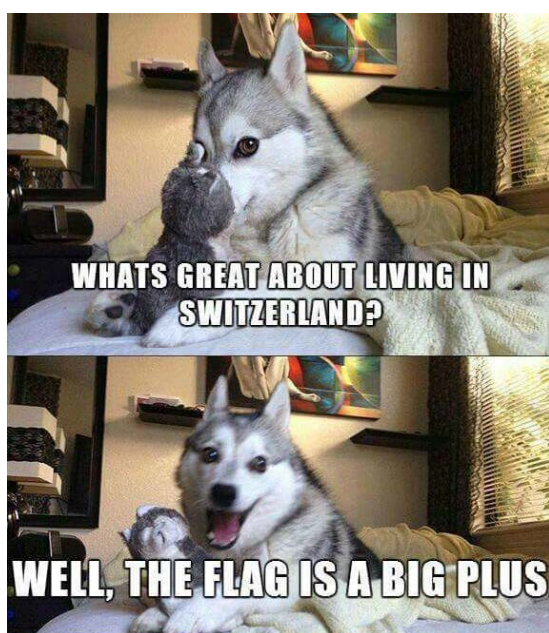### 4.3.4. Appealing for assistance

(17) Can't argue that

Figure 7: Cant' argue that

Speaker 1: Swiss and aproves

Speaker 2: ap..rooves? aproves? apruves? Teacher?

Speaker 3: approves, my fellow eidgnoss

In (17), a macro-image is used in order to share a user's relatable experience of living in Switzerland masked as an inside joke with others. The reaction triggered by the joke can be described as an agreement on behalf of speaker 1, speaker 2 and speaker 3. They express their incertitude about the spelling of approves – yet another structure used frequently on 9gag consisting of the *template (noun) + and approve*s in order to express agreement – and appeal to a *teacher* for assistance. In the following response, speaker 3 identifies as being Swiss,

provides the established normative spelling *approves* and seeks to bond with speaker 2, whom speaker 3 has found to be another Swiss. By doing so, speaker 3 signals culture and simultaneously specifies an addressee. To conclude, (17) illustrates that in ELF conversation, various communicative functions operate simultaneously to negotiate meaning.

4.4. Culture and belonging in ELF

The networks people operate in have gained considerable importance since the rise of communication technology which has facilitated venturing beyond territorial borders (Wright 2009:159) and exert a vital influence on the construction of identity. In 9gag, a place where members of diverse linguacultures mingle, these networks play an even more important role. The following examples aim at illustrating the importance of both ones' primary linguaculture as well as the situational culture established in conversation for the construction and representation of an online identity. Hülmbauer and Seidlhofer (2014:392) point out that

> "[a]s globalization processes trigger the 'disembedding' of cultural structures (cf. Giddens 1990) such as language, these structures need to be made locally relevant again during their use. Thus in intercultural settings, the adaptability of a linguistic resource is paramount".

For Hülmbauer and Seidlhofer (2014:392), the process probably most relevant to ELF conversation is thus accommodation. The following example depicts a speaker's awareness of the need to co-create a situational culture for understanding Balkan cultural structures:

(18) I'm having wi-fi for lunch

Figure 8: I'm having wi-fi for lunch

> Speaker 1: Well this is Balkan traditional food; it has no English name... There are meals like SARMA, PASULj, PLjESKAVICA, ZELjE (zeljanica) that don't have a name in English. *flies away*

The original poster of (18) shared an image of a traditional dish and thus initiated a search for the dish's origin. Speaker 1 serves as a mediator and adds the information that proper names of various dishes cannot be translated directly into English and inserts individual borrowings from Serbian. By doing so, speaker 1 accommodates to the international audience of 9gag and explains that direct translations of proper names might sometimes prove to be problematic. The relation of speakers' plurilingual repertoires to English was explained by Hülmbauer (2009:327), who emphasizes that "[w]hat has to be borne in mind is that it might not only be relevant how the speakers' L1s and LNs relate to English, but also how they relate to each other and thus influence the communication process". To conclude, speaker 1's use of proper names in Balkan languages supports the fact that in ELF conversation, "the ability to approach languages in a more holistic, integrated way and to establish meta-linguistic links between them clearly appears to be an asset" (Hülmbauer 2009:329).

4.5. Attitudes towards ELF and Standard English

Standard English has been defined as "the variety of the English language which is normally employed in writing and normally spoken by 'educated' speakers of the language" and which has been chosen as the model for ELT professionals. (Trudgill and Hannah 1996:1). However, the notion of a standard does not only describe a variety of English used by educated NS, it is also relevant for speakers' identity. Widdowson (1994:381) considers Standard English "not simply as a means of communication but the symbolic possession of a particular community, expressive of its identity, its conventions, and values". The analysis of communication on 9gag revealed that speakers associate native-like or near-native-like proficiency with power and in-group membership. These associations with power and community reveal that linguistic choices are closely related to its users' identities, as Saraceni (2010:42) points out:

> anything said about the 'value' or the 'quality' of any language cannot escape being, really, about its users. ...So, as language is never divorced from the people who use it, the "club of equals" did not refer only to varieties of English as such, but also, and primarily, to users of English.

Members of 9gag have been shown to relate language use to the users themselves and draw inferences about them based on their linguistic performance. The following section is aimed at providing an insight into the presence of Standard English ideologies on 9gag and attitudes associated with them. The analysis of posts and comments on 9gag has revealed that Standard English is perceived as the norm for communication online by many users. They refer to themselves as *Grammar Nazis* and correct speakers' mistakes even in cases where one would be tempted to regard communication as being successful:

(19) Bruhh…

Speaker 1: this incident will be reported to your parent, and the headquarters will call your parent to come to the school, and you will fucked up
Speaker 2: I really wanna correct your English but I'm trying to be nice today
Speaker 1: ahh, i forgot to put (sorry for my bad english)

By mentioning that speaker 2 would like to correct the use of English in speaker 1's utterance, speaker 2 claims to be an expert when it comes to the use of English and implies that speaker 1 is not part of the "club of equals" accessible to norm-adhering users of English only (Saraceni 2010:42). The fact that speaker 2 does not refer back to the content communicated in the comment posted by speaker 1 could be interpreted as a lack of interest in the previous post. In this case, one might thus be tempted to assume that communication was interrupted not by faulty ELF usage, but rather by speaker 2's normative standards in mind. In (19), effective communication is thus hindered by speaker 2, who uses speaker 1's comment to construct his / her identity and establish power relations. By doing so, however, speaker 2 disregards that the use of English by speaker 1 constitutes an everyday reality for users of ELF. In a sarcastic way, speaker 1 replies stating that he / she should have apologized for the use of English that speaker 2 feels a need to correct. The same adherence to norms provided by ENL can be observed in (20), where the original poster criticizes the fact that NS of English are still taken to be the standard which to refer to for measuring one's own proficiency when learning English as a foreign language. According to Graddol (2006:83), "[w]ithin the traditional EFL methodology there is an inbuilt ideological positioning of the student as outsider and failure - however proficient they become" and where "native speakers are believed to be equipped with a genetically endowed capacity to teach the language" (Selvi 2010:174).

(20) Scumbag native speaker
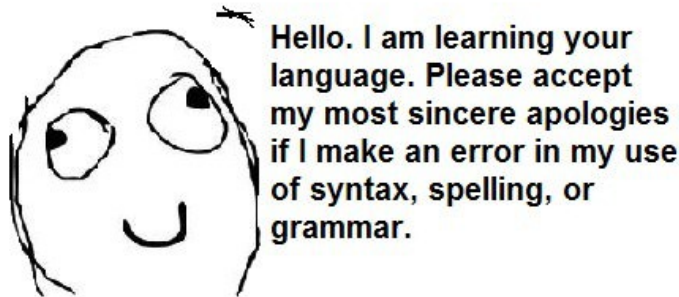
Figure 9: Scumbag native speaker

This rage comic with the typical *le + agent* structure explains how ELF users frequently apologize for any possible mistakes, while ENL users often use not very elaborate, but untransparent language. Le *native speaker's* reply reveals *le ELF user's* attitude towards notions of standards and illustrates the fact that NS can no longer claim ownership of English (Widdowson 1994). What is remarkable, though, is the fact that correction by NS also concerns the use of French in an ELF context. In (21), a presumably non-native user of French is corrected by a NS claiming authority over the language. This example clearly illustrates how speaker 2 exploits the territorial function in an ELF context while also highlighting primary and situational culture:

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(21) Wedding Cake in Quebec City!

Figure 10: Wedding Cake in Quebec City!

Speaker 1: J'ai jamais vu qqc si beau que ca dans ma vie

Speaker 2: well, that's almost French

Speaker 3: So judgmental. I'm gonna go on a limb and guess that you're from the old continent? Arrogance is so ugly; and it's the reason Europe declined.

Speaker 4: you do understand he was just shortening his words/using slang, right...? Je m'en doute fort que t'es français, toi...

Speaker 5 : ce sont les francophones qui font souvent le plus de fautes... just saying (je ne suis pas francophone)

In (21), a picture of an unconventional wedding cake served in francophone Canada made out of poutine aroused vivid discussions in the comment section. The communicative situation is marked by its location being Quebec and the dish being a staple in francophone Canada. In this example, it is thus the communicative environment which triggers the use of French among both native speakers and non-native speakers within an ELF context. After having expressed his / her admiration for the beauty of the wedding cake in French, speaker 2

passes judgement upon speaker 1's utterance by stating that the utterance does not classify as being French due to an implied deviation from the standard. This can be interpreted as a refusal on behalf of speaker 2 to accept speaker 1's appeal to (francophone) addressees and to signal in-group membership in a situationally created community. For that purpose, speaker 2, in turn, resorts to ELF and thus exploits the territorial function (Widdowson 1983:109) of language via the exclusion of one of its members. This refusal is met with skepticism by other commenters, who appeal to and direct criticism at speaker 2 as their addressee. In fact, speakers 4 and 5 reject the intolerance of speaker 2, which is expressed in the use of French to appeal to speaker 2. To conclude, notions of standard, be it in English or in French, are subject to criticism, which might lead to the assumption that in (19), (20) and (21), users of ELF are aware of their status as independent language users in their own right. In example (22), however, users of ELF take the offensive and point out that NS of English lack grammatical knowledge and rely on their status as NS:

(22) I saw this in my French textbook and couldn't stop laughing

Figure 11: I saw this in my French textbook and couldn't stop laughing

> Speaker 1: You are*
>
> Speaker 2: Native English speakers need to learn some English.
>
> Speaker 3: because only native speakers are retarded enough to confuse your and you're, than and then and loose and lose

In (22), speaker 1 corrects the original post, and speaker 2 and speaker 3 assume that the original poster is a NS of English, which leads them to criticize the lack of grammatical competence. Due to the misspelling, interpretation becomes more difficult, since the pronoun *you* is expected to be followed by a noun phrase. Again, NNS of English criticize standard ideologies, and in this particular case, speaker 3 points to NNSs' knowledge of the grammatical system, which is considered as an asset. This comment illustrates a tangible tension between asking for acceptance of non-standard, but effective lexico-grammatical forms of ELF on the one hand and the adherence to ENL norms on the other hand. It seems to be contradictory to have users of ELF criticize NSs' language use by recommending to *learn some English* on the one hand and promoting diversity and tolerance by reminding to be less *judgmental* on the other hand. At this point, it has to be kept in mind that the concept of Standard English is closely related to power relations – with power residing within those who adhere to the norm, which Widdowson (1994:381) referred to as "the symbolic possession of a particular community, expressive of its identity, its conventions, and values". The comments can be interpreted as a claim for equality for users of English, regardless of territorial boundaries. Up to the present, Standard English ideologies are still deeply entrenched in the minds of students and ELT professionals, which becomes particularly evident in (20). The alleged ownership of English by NS has even developed into an inside joke, such as in (19), where speaker 1 ironically apologizes for having forgotten to include the usual *sorry for my bad english.* This standard apology confirms Jenkins' (2012:493) observation of a *"*growing receptivity towards ELF, especially among younger ELF users and researchers*".* From that perspective, diversity arising as a consequence of shared purposes is at the heart of ELF. As Widdowson (1994:385) points out, "[a]s soon as you accept that English serves the communicative and communal needs of different communities, it follows logically that it must be diverse".

4.6. Discussion of the findings, limitations and implications for further research

In chapter 4, the findings of the analysis of ELF used in Internet memes on a social media website were presented. First, an overview of 9gag as a community

of practice united by shared practices, shared purposes of interaction and a shared repertoire was given. Second, I explained how linguaculturally diverse users of 9gag adapt to their communicative environment and the situational communities in a medium that displays features of orality and resort to ELF for their communicative purposes. Third, the dichotomy of Standard English ideologies on 9gag on the one hand and the informal nature of interaction for entertainment purposes on the other hand was emphasized. In a close analysis of ELF communication on 9gag, I then described lexico-grammatical features of ELF following Cogo and Dewey's (2006) analysis of smaller-scale corpora of spoken interactions in ELF. The analysis has shown that both adherence to norms as well as variation were present, depending on the communicative situation, which Hülmbauer (2009:324) referred to as the "situationality factor". The speakers in my corpus were found to exploit redundancy, increase clarity and add explicitness by resorting to both the territorial and the cooperative principle in order to communicate successfully and create situational communities of practice. They revealed and constructed aspects of their identities they wished to emphasize in a given context. On the lexico-grammatical level, this resulted in the regularization of plural forms, zero present tense third-person singular marking, redundancy reduction in the use of demonstratives, shifts in patterns of preposition and article use as well as zero derivation, the extension of meaning with verbs with high general meaning and the ellipsis of objects and complements of transitive verbs as well as creative and innovative utterances. Moreover, the analysis proved that speakers resort to their plurilingual repertoires within communication in ELF in order to address particular audiences with whom they usually wish to create affiliation, to introduce new ideas, to appeal for assistance and most importantly, to signal cultural identities. Thus while on the one hand, plurilinguality is a well-established and appreciated means of constructing identity as well as communicating successfully on 9gag, various examples led to the assumption that the same welcoming attitude could not be found for deviation from NS norms. NNS of English were found to encourage NS to *learn some English,* and at the same time, speakers (at times ironically) introduced a new topic by voicing a plea to pardon *the English.* To conclude, communication on 9gag shows both a persistence of ENL norms and speakers' willingness to use ELF – a dichotomy illustrative of a co-existence of

NS standards and successful ELF communication.

While I hope that the insights into ELF communication on 9gag presented in this thesis have contributed to the vast area of research into ELF, I am aware of the limitations of my analysis. Since its creation in 2008, 9gag has gained popularity worldwide, and with the surge in Internet memes uploaded daily, it would go beyond the scope of this thesis to analyze all the content available on the website. For that reason, I intentionally decided to select Internet memes for their relevance to my research interest, which has led me to disregard others that might also have been worthy of scientific attention. Due to my own plurilingual background and the fact that other than in English, I consider myself proficient in German and French, I was tempted to focus mainly on these languages for the analysis of speakers' use of plurilingual resources. Since I have chosen a non-intrusive approach for my thesis, I could not gain any introspective data about speakers' attitudes and beliefs about ELF online as well as about their linguistic backgrounds, age structure and level of education. For future researchers interested in the use of ELF in social media websites, it might thus be promising to collect quantitative data on the share of languages other than English used within ELF interactions. Moreover, the analysis of the origins of the term *meme* revealed that the expression has been adapted from its initial use in the context of evolution of human culture (Dawkins 1989:192). Later, it was introduced to linguistics in order to describe the replication of linguistic units if considered highly fecund, long-lived and possessing high copying fidelity. In popular culture, *Internet memes* refer to mostly humorous posts aimed at sharing relatable human experience for the purpose of social bonding. During an early stage of compiling a corpus of Internet memes, I noticed that Internet memes do not possess high longevity since it is considered *cool* to be among the pioneers to discover and share memes. For researchers in linguistic evolution, it would be promising to investigate language used in phrasal templates and possible impacts on language use outside 9gag as a main repository. For time and space constraints, these research questions would extend the scope of my thesis. Given my own interest in language teaching, I will dedicate the following section to a discussion of implications of research into ELF on ELT professionalism a discussion of the value of Internet memes to raise awareness for ELF.

5. Teaching implications and the potential of using Internet memes to raise awareness for ELF

As the analysis of ELF interaction in social media has revealed, ELF is a highly useful resource for users of 9gag to achieve their communicative purposes in a situational community of practice. In this view, ELF is "an established resource in many people's communicative routine and serves as a reliable means of intercultural exchange in which miscommunication is the exception rather than the rule" (Hülmbauer 2009:324). Whereas communicative success in an ELF context relies on speakers' ability to adapt to the environment and the willingness to accept diversity (Cogo 2009:270), successful EFL communication relies on the adherence to ENL as its target model (Hülmbauer 2009:328). The fact that NNS of English are seen as deficient is highlighted by labels for transfer phenomena such as "interlanguage errors" in case a NNS is still learning the language, and as "fossilized" in case a NNS does no longer engage in learning the language (Jenkins 2012:488). In an ELF research paradigm, however, a speaker's status as a NNS is valued, since users of ELF can "rely upon the non-native status as a resource for sense-making" (Firth and Wagner 1997:290). Wherever NS of English are involved in ELF conversation, they need to accommodate to changed communicative environments and adapt their receptive and productive skills accordingly (Jenkins 2012:487). While ELF has become a widely acknowledged shared linguistic resource for communication across territorial boundaries, ELT still favors ENL as its target model. Questions relating to teaching practices in an ELF-informed way are currently receiving scientific attention. Gnutzmann and Intemann (2005:21) claim that "[t]here is no thoroughly described – let alone institutionalized – variety of ELF as yet and so it is not possible to teach and learn it", which is why they suggest teachers and learners to focus on functions of ELF. At this point, I have to take issue with Gnutzmann and Intemann, for it is not the aim of ELF to impose any ELF standard. Instead, from a post-normative point of view, as taken by Dewey (2012:166), ELF is "a framework of choices available when deciding whether / to what extent / which (if any) language norms are relevant to their immediate teaching contexts". What Dewey highlights is the fact that in an ELF-informed approach to teaching English, it is the learners who are given the freedom to

choose which English best suits their communicative purposes. Findings from ELF corpora studies have supported the claim that ELF users exploit the potential of the virtual language in a way that "runs contrary to received wisdom in ELT profession discourse" (Dewey 2012:142). This opinion is shared by Seidlhofer (2011:186), who confirms that what is attested in ELF does not represent English as it had been taught, but the English that had been acquired. In Seidlhofer's view (2011:187), learners of English successfully acquire the English that, to them, has the highest potential for use in communication. The ability to recognize what has high communicative value can be helped by an ELF-informed approach to teaching, which, according to Ferguson (2012:179), should concentrate on communication and on "how to adapt what one wishes to say to the needs of the interlocutor through paraphrase, repetition, exploitation of redundancy, through variation in lexis, through the exploitation of shared plurilingual resources (e.g. borrowing, code-switching, cognate lexis)". What Ferguson thus recommends is a focus on pragmatic strategies and raising awareness for ELF. The need to raise awareness for ELF has also been observed by Dewey (2012), who examined teachers' attitudes towards ELF as well as the way they informed their teaching practice. Dewey's study revealed that teachers' awareness of ELF only marginally influenced their teaching (Dewey 2012:145). What is hindering current attempts to introduce ELF-informed teaching practices to classrooms worldwide, he argues, is the perceived lack of stability and codification (Dewey 2012:151-152). He suggests that potential objectives for an ELF-informed approach to teaching English should focus on the communicative environment as well as the cultural contexts of communication, striving for frequent exposure to a variety of Englishes. Additionally, he suggests discussions about the variety in the use of English on a global scale as well as the spread of English. Communicative strategies should be prioritized over ENL norms, and the use of innovative forms should not be met with skepticism if communicatively effective (Dewey 2012:163-164).

As far as the material chosen for teaching English is concerned, Widdowson (2003:105) argues to provide students of English with material that is "real for themselves" and emphasizes the fact that what is real to NS of English may not be real to learners of English (Widdowson 2003:114). As concerns the

appropriateness of material used for English teaching, he states that "in the context of the classroom, appropriate language is language that learners can appropriate" (Widdowson 2003:115). With a view to ELT, the following section deals with the question of the potential of the use of Internet memes for raising awareness of linguacultural diversity on the one hand, and diversity as concerns the use of ELF on social media websites on the other hand.

As I have outlined in section 2, 9gag is receiving a lot of traffic from outside of its original homes in Hong Kong and California. The examples in (15) and (16) revealed that 9gag is visited by users from Austria, which is why it might be safe to assume a high degree of popularity of the website among Austrian learners of English. As around 61% of Austrians stated to resort to English when watching and reading content online, and 42% reported using English for written purposes, ELF as it is used online is a reality for Austrian students. Therefore, the introduction of Internet memes as a means of raising awareness of ELF and linguistic diversity could be a motivational factor. In Widdowson's (1994:387) terms, it is not "authentic only because it belongs to somebody else and expresses somebody else's identity", but instead, the use of Internet memes to raise awareness for ELF allows students of English to experience diversity online and express their own identity, which they might even already be doing outside of classroom settings. While the value of Internet memes for increasing student motivation in the context of ELT has already been acknowledged by ELT professionals aiming at Standard norms [6], its potential has, to my knowledge, not yet been exploited in order to raise awareness of ELF and linguistic diversity. Linguistic diversity has also been stated to as being a major goal of the European Commission[7]. Its language policies are aimed at "supporting language learning and linguistic diversity". The value of linguistic diversity for a united Europe is highlighted in their mission statement:

> Languages define personal identities, but are also part of a shared
> inheritance. They can serve as a bridge to other people and open
> access to other countries and cultures, promoting mutual

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[6] Lucija Dacic of Cambridge University Press shared a lesson plan aiming at improving speaking skills via the use of Internet memes for ELT: http://www.cambridge.org/elt/blog/2014/11/language-learning-digital-video-using-memes/

[7] For the European Commission's policy on linguistic diversity, please refer to http://ec.europa.eu/languages/policy/linguistic-diversity/index_en.htm.

understanding. A successful multilingualism policy can strengthen the life chances of citizens: it may increase their employability, facilitate access to services and rights, and contribute to solidarity through enhanced intercultural dialogue and social cohesion.

(Linguistic Diversity: http://ec.europa.eu/languages/policy/linguistic-diversity/index_en.htm, last accessed May 23rd, 2015)

ELF does not only build bridges among speakers who do not share any other linguistic resources and enable intercultural contact, but it also helps to sustain linguistic diversity (Hülmbauer & Seidlhofer 2014:399), being one of the major aim of the agenda for linguistic diversity of the European Commission. Social media constitute such platforms of identity construction on an international level (Wright 2004:159) and could thus be used in order to provide students with the possibility to encounter linguistic diversity and develop an awareness of ELF. By doing so, students could eventually be made aware of "different ways of speaking English, of language variability and change – and about offering choice to them" (Cogo 2012:104). To conclude, it needs to be kept in mind that communication online is a day-to-day reality for students of English, and given the interconnectedness facilitated by the Internet, they are likely to encounter linguistic diversity online. This will necessitate the application of various strategies of accommodation to their audience, and the use of Internet memes in ELT in order to confront ELF-using learners of English with ELF and linguistic diversity might lead to heightened motivation. An ELF-informed pedagogy does not aim at imposing any norms, but rather, it emphasizes the students' ability to choose which model best caters for the communicative purposes they wish to fulfil. As Dewey (2012:145) highlights, it is teachers who first need to develop an awareness of ELF and the way language shapes identity before being able to offer their students the possibility to make informed choices of linguistic models.

6. Conclusion and research perspectives

By means of a qualitative analysis of Internet memes, this thesis set out to investigate the use of English as a lingua franca with a particular interest in its lexico-grammatical features as well as the role of users' plurilingual resources within an ELF framework. Based on this investigation, I was able to detect and describe lexico-grammatical features as observed by Seidlhofer (2005:RQ92) and Cogo and Dewey (2006) with a main methodological difference being my focus on written communication which, along a continuum, can be located close to orality. Furthermore, this thesis also contained an analysis of attitudes and beliefs about Standard English and deviation from it as expressed by users of ELF.

Preceding the empirical part of this thesis, I established a theoretical framework of key concepts of ELF research which I deemed relevant for developing an understanding of ELF communication in the context of social media. The examination of literature outlined how ELF emerged as a response to the inability of previous notions of ownership of English residing within the inner circle of NS to account for the growing number of speakers who use English as a shared means of communication. I described how, due to the spread of the virtual language across territorial boundaries, speakers can no longer categorized by means of stable and fixed speech communities, and instead, are united in communities of practice, both online and offline. I then proceeded to show how the territorial and the cooperative imperative are reconciled in an ELF context in order to achieve successful communication before discussing the role of speakers' linguacultural identity in a linguaculturally diverse environment. This was followed by a review of multilingual practices within ELF conversation, taking into account the fact that the linguistic repertoires of ELF users operate simultaneously and can enrich conversation in ELF. With a view to my research question in mind, I provided an overview of the role of the Internet for communication in general, and computer-mediated communication in particular. It was found that English seems to be highly prominent in online communication, however, it coexists with other languages and should thus not be considered a threat to linguistic diversity. Since my research focus was on the investigation of

ELF communication in Internet memes, an overview of the origins of the term *meme* as it was originally understood, referring to a replicator human culture in an analogy to Darwinian evolution, and its use in popular culture to refer to *Internet memes* as relatable experiences shared online for entertainment purposes, was provided.

After having established the theoretical background as a base for this thesis, the research methodology and corpus were described. In the course of doing so, it was found that ethical considerations mainly concerned with data protection and users' right to privacy online had to be respected at all times in the course of this thesis, which resulted in the choice of a non-intrusive approach for the analysis. The small-scale study was found to be incapable of covering the vast potential for linguistic analysis the medium 9gag provides for researchers interested in ELF as it is used online, however, by narrowing down the research questions to investigate formal and functional features of ELF communication, I hope to have contributed to the research into ELF.

With a focus on lexico-grammatical features as suggested by Cogo and Dewey (2006) and Seidlhofer (2005), this thesis described formal features and functional motivations. It was found that communication on 9gag exhibited the use of pragmatic strategies such as adding or exploiting redundancy as well as increasing clarity and enhancing explicitness. Due to the fact that 9gag represents a synchronous mode of communication allowing for features of orality to emerge, similar lexico-grammatical features as described in analyses of corpora of spoken conversation were attested. Mass nouns were pluralized using the plural –s marker, resulting in regularized plurals such as informations deviant from ENL norms, but illustrative of efficiency of expression in ELF conversation. Following developments in nativized varieties of English, zero marking was used for third-person singular verbs. Moreover, the use of demonstrative pronouns, prepositions and articles was found to differ from ENL norms. Verbs with high general meaning were found to be used in innovative collocations with an extended meaning. The use of zero derivation in order to change word class illustrated efficiency of expression, and redundancy was reduced by means of ellipsis of objects and complements. The appearance of these lexico-

grammatical features generally did not result in misunderstandings, but at times triggered a *Grammar Nazi phenomenon* which in itself constituted a practice within popular culture.

As I have outlined previously, I was particularly interested in investigating the role speakers' plurilingual resources in an ELF environment, and in light of the diversity of languages used in posts online, 9gag was found to be a linguaculturally diverse community of shared practices, shared cultural repertoires and mutual purposes. Within an ELF context, users of 9gag exploited their multilingual resources at a lexical, phrasal and clausal level. For a better understanding of the examples of speakers' use of their multilingual resources, it was found that these switches within an ELF context need not be based on speakers' L1, but also concerned their LN. With 9gag being a social media website mainly used for social bonding and entertainment, speakers often humorously exploited their LN for displays of their plurilingual repertoire at varying levels of proficiency. For the purpose of this thesis, plurilingual phenomena of language contact were intentionally described with a view to their functions instead of using traditional labels, which were found to be incapable of accounting for descriptions of ELF communication (Hülmbauer & Seidlhofer 2014). In line with Klimpfinger's (2009) analysis of language contact phenomena in ELF, this thesis used a functional classification of plurilingual phenomena following Gumperz (1982). The analysis revealed that, similarly to Klimpfinger's findings (2007:57), users of 9gag who exploited their plurilingual resources in an ELF context (at times simultaneously) specified addressees, provided new ideas, asked for assistance and signaled cultural identity. Based on these findings, various functions were shown to cooperate in the process of making meaning. The function that was most prominent was the signaling of cultural identity, with users constructing their identities as members of a global community of practice while at the same time re-localizing them, which was often achieved by means of social bonding with their primary linguaculture.

Differently than what one might expect in a social media website frequented by users from all over the world united in diversity, Standard English ideologies were detected to be deeply entrenched in the minds of users who were eager to correct

utterances which have been considered communicatively effective. By doing so, the territorial imperative was realized in a way that excluded both NS and NNS whose linguistic production deviated from Standard English norms. To be more precise, the critique of NSs' non-norm-abiding utterances on the one hand and the often humorous apologies on behalf of NNS for *the English* can be interpreted as a power struggle in favor of utterances that are communicatively effective, irrespective of the speakers' status according to hierarchical models.

It was also discussed that a large number of members used 9gag as a platform to share and create their identity as part of a local community on the one hand, and an overarching global community of practice on the other hand. The potential of social media as platforms of identity construction by means of language was suggested to be used in order to raise awareness for linguistic diversity and ELF in the context of language teaching. Differently from traditional models of ELT, ELF is moving towards a post-normative approach in pedagogy (Dewey 2012), focusing on learners' choice according to functional needs. Internet memes could be used in an ELF-informed pedagogy to raise awareness for the omnipresence of English used as a shared linguistic resource by speakers across territorial boundaries. With a view to the European Commission's language policy aiming at celebrating linguistic diversity, users of ELF and learners of English could discover the potential residing in the exploitation of linguistic diversity on social media websites. By doing so, the current misconception of ELF as a threat to linguistic diversity could be exploited for a better understanding of the potential of linguistic and cultural diversity.

After having outlined the outcomes of my investigation of Internet memes, I hope to have contributed to research into ELF in computer-mediated communication. As it would have exceeded the scope of this thesis, I hope to have set a spark of linguistic interest in the growing field of research of Internet memes with a view to possible long-term analyses of phrasal templates as linguistic replicators. Due to methodological considerations, space constraints and the choice of a non-intrusive analysis of communication, I was unable to investigate speakers' linguistic backgrounds and attitudes towards the use of ELF, which might be considered relevant by future researchers into ELF in online communication.

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Internet memes

(1)   Amazing idea! Hopefully more countries will follow their lead...

 http://9gag.com/gag/ae0nb9O , last accessed April 17th, 2015.

(2)   GG France

http://9gag.com/gag/aNZEGMG , last accessed April 19th, 2015.

(3)   After the Egyptian goddess

http://9gag.com/gag/adYGvYQ , last accessed April 2nd, 2015.

(4)   What your drink says about you

http://9gag.com/gag/ar4L6x5 , last accessed March 25th, 2015.

(5)   Anyone shares my thought?

http://9gag.com/gag/ay0g0By?sc=meme , last accessed March 4th, 2015.

(6)   "Fastest man alive", ready to go

http://9gag.com/gag/aB3AYKD , last accessed March 3rd, 2015.

(7)   Hi. sorry abt the bad English.

http://9gag.com/gag/aD36WMO/hi-sorry-abt-the-bad-english , last accessed
April 16th, 2015.

(8)   Amazing idea! Hopefully more countries will follow their lead...

 http://9gag.com/gag/ae0nb9O , last accessed April 17th, 2015.

(9)   Just Europe things

http://9gag.com/gag/awKEZ6x , last accessed May 30th, 2015.

(10)   I'm having wi-fi for lunch

http://9gag.com/gag/am04214#comment , last accessed April 3rd, 2015.

(11)   Childhood vs Adult Fears

http://9gag.com/gag/avgNwYE , last accessed May 4th, 2015.

(12)   When I tell someone I'm an Arab and they ask

http://9gag.com/gag/a33XQ11 , last accessed April 6th, 2015.

(13)   Only string instrument musicians will understand

http://9gag.com/gag/a8YneqQ , last accessed May 4th, 2015.

(14)   Fellow German and Belgian 9gaggers, your beer is the best

http://9gag.com/gag/azEWg6j , last accessed April 19th, 2015.

(15) Sausages in Germany, books in Istanbul and office supplies at the
university. But no one beats Austria!

http://9gag.com/gag/axZqvvb , last accessed May 10th, 2015.

(16)   This street in Germany

http://9gag.com/gag/a8YQnGe#comment , last accessed June 1st, 2015.

(17)   Can't argue that

http://9gag.com/gag/aMrLvOM , last accessed May 12th.

(18)   I'm having wi-fi for lunch

http://9gag.com/gag/am04214#comment , last accessed April 3rd, 2015.

(19)   Bruhh…

http://9gag.com/gag/a5P0yjN/bruhh , last accessed May 4th, 2015.

(20)   Scumbag native speaker

http://9gag.com/gag/3412376 , last accessed March 20th, 2015.

(21)   Wedding cake in Quebec City!

http://9gag.com/gag/aYWXAOw#comment , last accessed April 7th, 2015.

(22)   I saw this in my French textbook and couldn't stop laughing

http://9gag.com/gag/aLP7Bex , last accessed April 6th, 2015.

8. Appendix

List of figures

Zusammenfassung

Die vorliegende Diplomarbeit sieht sich als Beitrag zur Erforschung von Englisch als Lingua Franca und untersucht Konzeptualisierungen der englischen Sprache im Hinblick auf Internet Communities. Die Forschung der letzten Jahre brachte zwar wertvolle Erkenntnisse in Bezug auf die Charakteristika der Verwendung von Englisch als Lingua Franca in Weblogs und Foren, jedoch blieben soziale Medien dahingehend relativ unbeachtet. Das Ziel dieser Diplomarbeit ist es zu beschreiben, wie Englisch als Lingua Franca als eine der zahlreichen multilingualen Ressourcen, die den Sprechern zur Verfügung stehen, die Identitätskonstruktion in virtuellen Gemeinschaften beeinflusst. Dazu wurde die Community *9gag* analysiert, um Erkenntnisse in die Rollen von Kultur, Identität und multilingualer Praktiken mit Hinblick auf Englisch als Lingua Franca zu gewinnen. Zu diesem Zweck wurden eingangs grundlegende Konzeptionen von Englisch als Lingua Franca präsentiert. Da das Kommunikationsmedium großen Einfluss auf den Inhalt der Kommunikation ausübt, wird Hintergrundinformation zur Sprachverwendung im Internet geboten. Darauf folgt eine Abhandlung der Rolle der Memtheorie aus linguistischer Perspektive sowie deren Eignung für eine Untersuchung von Internet Memes. Für den empirischen Teil wurde für die Dauer eines Monats ein Korpus humoristischer Posts der Internetseite 9gag erstellt. Anhand dieses Korpus wurde eine qualitative Analyse der lexikogrammatikalischen Charakteristika, der Strategien erfolgreicher Kommunikation typisch für die Verwendung von Englisch als Lingua Franca, der Anwendung multilingualer Praktiken und der Rolle der Kultur im Rahmen der Lingua Franca Kommunikation durchgeführt. Die Analyse lässt die Schlussfolgerungen zu, dass Sprachverwender von Englisch als Lingua Franca lexikogrammatikalische Strukturen verwenden, die von der etablierten Norm abweichen und ihre primäre Linguakultur betonen, während sie sich mit Englisch als Lingua Franca identifizieren. Obwohl Standardideologien nach wie vor präsent sind, können Sprachverwender von Englisch als Lingua Franca als multikompetent beschrieben werden, da sie sich mehrerer ihnen zur Verfügung stehender sprachlichen Ressourcen bedienen. Diese Erkenntnisse wurden wiederum verwendet, um mögliche Schlüsse auf eine Verwendung von Internet Memes in der Pädagogik von Englisch als Lingua Franca ziehen zu können.

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