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Media linguistics in the post-digital era and the Global English paradigm—an interview

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Abstract

In the inaugural article of the Journal for Media Linguistics, Ulrich Schmitz (2018) posited that all linguistics should be media linguistics since all language is mediated. It appears that the time is ripe to revisit Schmitz's claim, as this special issue does by asking: in the 'post-digital condition', where digital mediation is unremarkable rather than exceptional, does media linguistics still need a separate label, or has it quietly become 'linguistics'? The present article sets out to explore whether digital English research over the past decades has effectively been English as Lingua Franca (ELF) research all along, and whether the ELF paradigm is indispensable, or indeed the only viable framework, for the study of digital English going forward.

Keywords: digital English, post-variety, speaker identity, English as a Lingua Franca

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Introduction (*Daria Dayter*)

In the inaugural article of the Journal for Media Linguistics, Ulrich Schmitz (2018) posited that all linguistics should be media linguistics since all language is mediated. An uncontroversial stance, it seems, if we accept the broad scope of meaning for the adjective 'mediated'. Linguists have certainly acted on this insight for a long time. The medium through which language travels shapes what that language looks like and how it is received, hence the succession of disciplinary labels: *media language* (Bell 1991), *computer-mediated communication* (Herring 1996), *internet language* (Squires 2010), *digital discourse* (Thurlow/Mroczek 2011). The same logic underpins the foundational division of corpus resources into spoken and written, and of Translation Studies into translation and interpreting.

But the participatory web and the internet of things have been disrupting the assumptions behind traditional sociolinguistic study: identifiable speech communities, distinctions between native and non-native speakers, the spoken/written divide, well-delineated private vs. institutional contexts. Take the distinction between 'online' and 'offline' communication. As early as twenty years ago, Yus (2005) questioned our assumptions about speech communities and social networks, pointing to the increasing hybridization of physical and virtual interaction—a hybridization that, he argued, eventually makes the offline/online divide meaningless (Yus 2011). The divide has blurred further still in a world of ubiquitous social media and augmented reality, where a conversation moves from a messenger app to face-to-face in the course of minutes.

The time is ripe, then, to revisit Schmitz's claim, as this special issue does by asking: in the 'post-digital condition', where digital mediation is unremarkable rather than exceptional, does media linguistics still need a separate label, or has it quietly become 'linguistics'?

Given the nature of my research, I am particularly interested in the version of this question that accounts for the role of English online, which introduces several complications. First, the digital platforms that mediate language run overwhelmingly on English. Even as the user-facing side grows more multilingual, with Arabic, Portuguese, Persian and Turkish becoming more visible in recent years, the infrastructure remains English. Second, the majority of the digital world's English users are plurilingual speakers for whom English is one language among several. Mair (2023: 30) observed that global English is at the same time becoming more homogeneous in its use on formal or public occasions and more heterogeneous in its lingua franca uses. But as discussed above, the boundaries between speech communities and contexts of production are less and less clear-cut: a customer service chat in English for a Finnish-based

company connects the client with a local L2 employee who uses norms previously unthinkable for an encounter between English-speaking strangers, such as first-name address and strings of emojis. What counts as a formal occasion requiring standard English is being constantly renegotiated. Finally, in internet-first datasets, we often cannot reliably establish the linguistic background of the person whose output we are analysing, beyond relying on optional and unverified geotagging.

Then, perhaps, English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) needs to step forward to a much more prominent position than it has occupied so far in the standard sociolinguistic models?

This is what the present article sets out to explore: whether digital English research over the past decades has effectively been ELF research all along, and whether the ELF paradigm is indispensable, or indeed the only viable framework, for the study of digital English going forward. The question is not new. Scholars of digital English have already made the case for Digital English as a Lingua Franca (Taronna 2023), Virtual English as a Lingua Franca (Sindoni 2023), and Computer-Mediated English as Lingua Franca Communication (Bosso 2020). More broadly, research on English in digital media and research on global English, first pursued as separate enterprises, have been converging. Seargeant/Tagg (2011) argued in *World Englishes* that online English use does not fit national variety categories, proposing instead a 'post-varieties' approach. The edited volume by Androutsopoulos (2014) theorised how mediatisation reshapes sociolinguistic variation; the special issue by Lee (2020) brought the two fields into direct dialogue, and most recently, Friedrich (2025) and Rüdiger et al. (2025) confirm that the convergence has become a shared research agenda. What becomes clear across these works is a readiness to let go of three assumptions: that Standard English is the default benchmark, that native speakers are the primary reference group, and that speech communities are geographically bounded. Digital contexts challenge all three at once. The choice of analytical framework (ELF, World Englishes, or some combination) therefore is a decision with real analytical consequences.

When I teach students how to write a literature review, I invite them to imagine a dinner party (a metaphor gratefully borrowed from Kamler/Thomson 2006). Each cited scholar is a guest at the table; as the host, you decide the seating plan, open the conversation, and make sure that contrasting voices engage each other productively rather than talking past one another. For this special issue, I have adopted the same method. Rather than offering a single synthesised argument that neatly sorts out the main themes for the reader, I have set the table for an exchange among three colleagues who approach the problem from different, and occasionally rival,

vantage points: Christian Mair specialises in World Englishes and global English, Maria Grazia Sindoni in social media and digital discourses, and Elina Ranta in English as a lingua franca. Their contributions take the form of guided interviews, and I have deliberately left their points of friction visible.

Three questions structure the conversation. The first is conceptual: Does the global reach of online interaction make ELF an implicit baseline for all digital English? The answer matters, because it determines what counts as variation and what counts as a norm.

The second question is methodological: can digital language data be meaningfully analysed without considering linguistic background, given that nativeness is often indeterminate in online settings? In a Reddit thread, we typically cannot tell whether a commenter or an original poster is an L1 or L2 English speaker, and often, neither party cares about anything other than successfully getting their point across. The question then is whether treating all digital English as ELF by default gains us analytical insight or costs time-proven sociolinguistic scaffold.

The third question is disciplinary and returns us to the motto with which this special issue opens: what follows for media linguistics as a field if speaker identity and nativeness are opaque or fluid? One answer is that these conditions dissolve its boundaries into general linguistics, making the prefix 'media' redundant. We could also argue that media linguistics is becoming indispensable precisely because the mediality it has long foregrounded has, with the emergence of digital discourse, become a pervasive condition of language use, with digital mediality constituting one important, though not exclusive, focus of the field.

A fourth question was not posed separately in the interviews, but it surfaces throughout the conversation: after ‘post-national’ and ‘post-variety’, we may need to consider language that is post-human (Schneider/Heyd 2025). Machine translation output is already present throughout digital communication in ways we can barely track, and generative AI is accelerating the trend. If a growing share of the English we analyse was never produced by a person, our existing categories may need rethinking from the ground up. My ‘dinner party guests’ raise this problem without being asked, which suggests it is rather pressing.

The contributions that follow do not aim for consensus, and that is by design. My hope is that they make visible points of convergence and disagreement and start a productive discussion. I would like for this conversation to have the readers contemplate together with us when “digital English” is fruitfully understood as ELF, when it is better framed through World Englishes or platform registers, and how these choices shape the kinds of insights digital linguistics can offer.

I will let readers judge for themselves how the evening went—but think the guests had plenty to say to each other.

How do you see the relationship between digital (digitally mediated) communication and English as a lingua franca? Does the global nature of online interaction make ELF an implicit default in digital linguistics?

Christian Mair:

My answer to the first of the two questions is that there is no way around ELF in the study of digital communication, not only because large proportions of it are carried out in ELF, but also because ELF influences digital communication in other languages in direct and indirect ways. Digital information and communication technologies (ICTs) have provided a massive further boost for the one language in the world that needs this least, namely English. Within English, lingua franca use (ELF) is likely to have expanded even faster in cyberspace than English as native (ENL) and as second language (ESL). When I teach English as a Global Language to beginners, I usually start with a paradox: "English is the global lingua franca, but a clear majority of the world's population has no idea of it." Assuming a global population of eight billion, a generous estimate of people capable of participating in fluent ELF interaction is two billion. Among this group, less than half a billion come from the ENL 'Inner Circle'. Assuming an inclusive definition of competence in English, a further billion have ESL backgrounds of various kinds. The rest is from the EFL 'Outer Circle' (to use Kachru's traditional term, though I suspect that if Braj Kachru was still alive, he would be the first to accept the pointlessness of trying to draw a strict line between EFL and ELF today).

Even offline, ESL and EFL have long leaked into ELF. In continental Europe, since the end of World War Two in the West and the collapse of the Soviet Union in the East, hundreds of millions of people have been initiated into English through classroom-taught EFL, which for many has seamlessly morphed into ELF in adult life, with ever earlier onsets and ever widening domains of ELF use, for professional as well as recreational purposes. ESL morphs into ELF in Europe for large numbers of immigrants from ESL countries in Africa and Asia, as I have been able to show for West African immigrants to Germany in a recently completed research project on

"West African Englishes on the move: New uses of English as a Lingua Franca in Germany."[1] In their case, the transformation is neither seamless nor painless. Coming from an ESL environment in which English is the uncontested language of prestige and privilege, they have to recognise that this promise of English holds only very selectively in the German ELF environment, where German remains the default lingua franca on the national and local scales. English has no doubt begun to compete with it in this latter function (Mair 2024), but mostly in prestigious domains of communication (e. g. academia, as a language of publication, but increasingly also for teaching; corporate business; tourism; culture), but not in public administration, the asylum process or at the job centre, that is institutions that immigrants typically interact with from arrival. ELF is normal in the boardrooms of banks and corporations, but not among the usually highly multilingual cleaning and catering crews that service them. Nor is it the norm in care homes for the elderly and warehouses of a large Scandinavian furniture maker, two other domains that are notoriously short of labour and hence potential points of entry for African immigrants into the German labour market. ENL speakers do not live on a different planet, so that they are part of the current digitally driven ELF boom, too. That said, I suspect that many of them are not fully aware of it. They seem happy to reap the benefits of ELF ('the whole world' communicating in their language), but are on the whole less willing than ESL and EFL speakers to accommodate to ELF norms negotiated by digital communities of practice in diverse local contexts. Even usages completely acceptable in other national standards of the pluricentric global language may be misclassified as errors by American speakers. Many British speakers do not see the need to suppress, in the interest of smooth ELF interaction, all those cricket idioms (*knocked for six*, *sticky wic*ket, etc.) that are a mystery even for many native speakers of English and much of the rest of the world.

To sum up: In the offline world, English is the undisputed global language, with ELF use being a crucial factor in this. As such, English is dominant, but not the world's default language.

In contrast to this, English is the default language in cyberspace even now, currently accounting for around 60 per cent of all web content.[2] This dominance of English has attracted and will continue

1 Funded by *Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft* (DFG) through grant MA 1652/12-1. See Mair 2022 and the final project report available at: https://publikationen.ub.uni-frankfurt.de/frontdoor/index/index/docId/89893.

2 These are three estimates that I would consider broadly reliable, because they (a) converge with regard to the broad trends and (b) explain their methodology in some detail.

to attract masses of non-native web users to English content on the web and thus help create more and more ELF-based digital communities of practice. Quite frankly, though, I have my doubts whether this is enough to set the default for English to ELF.

Just like EFL and ESL leak into ELF, ELF combines with ENL in a great variety of constellations, and both combine with other languages in hybrid registers and multilingual lingua franca repertoires. If we set the default to ELF, we would gain little in terms of concrete linguistic analyses of our data. For the time being, the default that we should assume for English in cyberspace is that it presents itself as a huge and growing mass of noisy data with patchy metadata. All of us agree that this data is worth serious (socio)linguistic study, for the often fascinating linguistic creativity and complexity it displays and for what it tells us about modern life and contemporary cultures. More below ...

Maria Grazia Sindoni:

The question can also be read in reverse order: does the global nature of online interaction make ELF less defined as an epistemological category? In my view, while the global reach of English in digital environments is undeniable, what becomes increasingly visible online is not a stable "default English", but a communicative orientation in which intelligibility and functional success tend to override native-speaker normativity (see, among others, Seidlhofer 2011; Jenkins 2017). In digitally mediated exchanges (often fast-paced, interactionally compressed, and multimodally layered) users seem to prioritise mutual understanding over formal correctness, which corresponds with long-standing ELF definitions.

At the same time, I do not think ELF should be treated as the "implicit default" of digital linguistics, because online environments also highlight how profoundly democratised English has become. As far as I understand it, ELF is not the property of native speakers but a universally available resource that users reshape to meet situated communicative needs, frequently developing local interactional norms within communities of practice (Böhringer/Hülmbauer/Seidlhofer 2009; Dewey 2012). In that sense, ELF is less a bounded variety than an emergent phenomenon: it remains under construction, adapting to contexts, purposes, platforms, and audiences.

Statista: https://www.statista.com/statistics/262946/most-common-languages-on-the-internet/;
WTS: https://w3techs.com/technologies/overview/content_language;
Visual Capitalist: https://www.visualcapitalist.com/the-most-used-languages-on-the-internet/.

Crucially, digital spaces make the multilingual and translingual character of ELF difficult to ignore. Translanguaging practices, the mobilisation of repertoires beyond "English-only", and hybrid lexicogrammatical patterning are often integral to interaction rather than peripheral deviations (Ho/Li/Sindoni 2025). Recent work explicitly focusing on trans-digital communicative spaces, where online/offline boundaries blur, shows how ELF users negotiate cultural identities through multi-scalar, translingual, and multimodal resources (Boumaza/Baker 2026). This is consistent with findings from research on digital languaging practices in a range of global contexts, where English may be present but not necessarily central, and where multilingual resources are mobilised as a normal part of meaning-making (e.g., Dovchin/Izadi 2023; Zhang/Cassany 2023; Li/Wu 2025; Sindoni/Ho/Li 2025).

From my perspective, what carries over most productively from ELF scholarship into digital contexts is the emphasis on communication strategies and collaborative meaning-making. ELF interaction has always foregrounded negotiation of meaning, accommodation, simplification, and repetition as pragmatic resources for achieving mutual understanding (see, for example, Cogo 2009). Digital interaction arguably amplifies these strategies, because participants must manage intercultural diversity alongside platform affordances and real-time participation. Effective ELF use online therefore presupposes interpersonal sensitivity and cognitive flexibility, an openness to innovative linguistic forms and semiotic assemblages, rather than an orientation to native-speaker correctness.

Finally, in my own work on Virtual English as a Lingua Franca (VELF), I have argued that digitally mediated interaction intensifies the multisemiotic ecology in which English operates (Sindoni 2023). My point there is not to replace ELF with yet another label, but to stress that, online, English is rarely "just language": it is entangled with visuals, layout, audio, platform conventions, and other languages. For this reason, I would treat ELF as a still-useful heuristic for a great deal of digital intercultural interaction, especially in academic and professional spheres, while resisting the idea that it is an implicit default. In my opinion, what we need is a view of ELF as a flexible, adaptive, and democratised orientation to intelligibility and collaboration, embedded in broader plurilingual and multisemiotic environments.

Elina Ranta:

The question is, indeed, very relevant and lends itself to various viewpoints. For sure, global digital communication in English is all about accommodation, multilingualism, creativity, and emergent

new forms of language use—just as ELF is. However, as an ELF researcher, I would still argue that if we adhere to the basic definition of ELF, not all digital communication is necessarily ELF. ELF is often defined primarily as communication between L2 speakers in a cross-cultural context, where linguistic accommodation is required from all participants and where the cause for interaction does not pertain to "nativeness" in the language (see e.g. Gnutzmann 2001). Yet, it is likely that there are forums where the majority of participants are native speakers of English, in which case the occasional L2 (or ELF) speaker is likely to adapt to the native-speaker practices of the forum but not vice versa—making the communication non-ELF. Conversely, there are also predominantly international forums where also the native speaker presumably needs to adjust their communication to the majority of L2 users to achieve their communicative goals – making the interaction genuinely ELF.

In practice, though, it is admittedly very difficult to decide who (L1 or L2 users) are in the majority on a particular digital platform, and considering the overall larger number of L2 speakers of the world's English users, it may well be that in many cases L2 speakers dominate the numbers on the digital fora anyway. However, clear exceptions to seeing "all" digital communication as ELF exist – such as sites and applications for English learning where L2 speakers, for example, seek native speaker guidance with their English, or dyadic interactions between L1 and L2 speakers, which are speech events typically excluded from ELF research data. Thus, even if the general mass of digital English could be seen as ELF, particular communicative situations may not, strictly speaking, fit the definition.

That said, digital (English) linguistics in its global nature certainly comes close to ELF conceptually as both English as a Lingua Franca and digital English essentially consist of sets of functional domains of language use (as opposed to being geographic entities). As phenomena they deserve to be studied in their own right as what they are despite their ill-fittingness with existing linguistic definitions or categories (such as native/non-native speaker, speech community etc.). Yet, from a purely ELF research perspective I can still see some caveats in equating the two.

In your view, can digital language data be meaningfully analysed without considering the speaker's linguistic background? Or does the impossibility of determining nativeness push us toward treating all digital English as ELF?

Christian Mair:

To be honest, this question strikes me as a little simplistic, because it disregards two things. First, zero information on speaker background is possible in digital language, but not the norm, as I will demonstrate with a few examples from my own research experience below. What we have in many cases is more or less dirty data, with incomplete or incorrect metadata (see above). But this is not a situation that is exclusive to digital English; I see no fundamental difference here between research on Middle English and digital linguistics.

Secondly, and more importantly, the question does not consider the current and future impact of AI-based language technologies on norms and standards, which will profoundly change the current relationship among ENL, ESL and ELF. When ENL, ESL and ELF speakers increasingly rely on AI-based language tools for translation, transcription, text generation, summaries etc., the result will be massive homogenisation and levelling among all kinds of English, as these AI tools have a well-known tendency to narrow the corridor of variability in natural languages, generally promoting US/North American norms, which do not necessarily coincide with traditional prescriptive North American notions of good English usage. The default is thus not ELF, but—if you want—a machine-generated "voice from nowhere."[3]

In fact, as I hinted above, I do not consider ELF as a useful default for digital English even now. Given the range of ELF domains and uses, taking simple ELF as the default would be much too general to be useful. Let me illustrate this with snippets from the Cameroonian, Nigerian and Jamaican diasporic web forums my team and I worked with throughout the 2010s (Heyd/Mair 2014, Moll 2015, Honkanen 2020). The Jamaican data feature English and Jamaican Creole, the African ones English, Pidgin and indigenous languages, plus, in the case of Cameroon, French and Camfranglais. Example (1) and (2), from the Nigerian forum, are request and response from the same thread in a conversation.[4]

3 I borrow this phrase from Gal/Woolard (1995), who use it to somewhat hyperbolically refer to classic supraregional standard varieties.

4 All quotations from the forum are given in the original spelling.

(1) I am an Italian white man who has met this beautiful Ibo girl. [...] i am going through a divorce, unfortunately, because i had married an English woman, but we are incompatible. this girl i am in love with, she is married too to a English man, but he doesn't treat her the way she should be. we are very closed friends and [...] any help from you Ibo people will be really appreciated. i thank you all in advance for all your advises.

(2) Are you sure you are not on the rebound? Cause you sound sort of desperate. Also the chick is married and you dare disrespect her marriage by involving herself in it? C'mon now fella, i know you smarter than that. My diagnosis, is for you to lay off the chick, and really think to yourself that you ACTUALLY LOVE her, not infatuated by her.
For your future reference, it is Igbo not ibo.

If Daria were to press me, I'd be happy to concede that this is ELF. The requester (1) – who goes by the name "italiano" (profile info: "sono di Taranto ma vivo in UK") – produces exactly the kind of lingua franca English one would expect from this type of speaker (compare, for example, "all your advises"). The response comes from "onyinye2" (from Igbo 'gifts'). According to her profile, she is based in the US, which is also plausible, considering the American colloquialisms in her post. The general communicative context is thus clearly an ELF one, but this assessment will not really help us much when we turn our attention to what is really interesting about this piece of data, namely the question of how mobile speakers use mobile linguistic resources from ENL, ESL and ELF. Example (3), from Cameroon, shows truncated ELF embedded in French:

(3) you know what /i have learned just ANGLISH one and a half year ego.i did my all school in BELGIUM that is WhY!! dont think all kmers dont'need learn ANGLISH but he depens where you have been educates.now i leave in TORoNTO.i did'n have a chose

But once again, classifying this as a broadly ELF constellation does not help us make sense of the veritable salvo of hostile responses that are triggered by this post from "babu". Here are three illustrations:

Bon BABU on a alors compris que tu es au Canada , et puis koi ? Laisses ns ça . Tu frimes pcq tu es en amérique ? Laisses ça dis donc

> YOU ARE THE STUPID ONE WITH ALL THOSE STUPIDS WORDS!! I THOUGHT FRENCH WAS BETTER, EVEN THERE IT LOOKS WORSE, MY DEAR!!! AND ARE YOU LIVING IN TORONTO??? GOOD MORNING FOR FACTORY JOB, IF WRITTEN IS WORSE IN BOTH LNAGUAGES, WHERE ARE YOU GOING TO GO GUY??? (Adia)

> Babu ferme ta gueule petite analphabète , pourquoi tu n'apprends pas à bien écrire avant de venir ici , petite villageoise

Babu's truncated ELF variety displays strong signs of interference from French, as we would expect. But the way these features are evaluated by the others shows nothing of the cooperative spirit and joint negotiation of meaning characterising ELF generally. Instead, it takes us straight into one of the darker zones of postcolonial language ideologies, namely the use of fluency in the colonial languages as proxy for competence and achievement. That Cameroon's postcolonial language rivalries between anglophones and francophones are here played out in Canada, a nation with its own complex English-French bilingualism (ESL and ELF and ENL, respectively), is one more complication that could not be addressed in a default ELF framework.

In view of data like this, do we need a general default for digital English, or aren't we better off with enlightened theoretical eclecticism, using all the terms and tools in our kit intelligently and self-critically: a sort of ethnographic-linguistic/Third-Wave sociolinguistic approach (with occasional quantification where useful)?

Maria Grazia Sindoni:

In addressing this question, I would first interrogate the very premise of "nativeness." The notion presupposes that languages can be owned by pre-assigned categories of speakers, often on the basis of geopolitical accident rather than lived linguistic experience. In increasingly mobile, hybrid, and digitally mediated societies, such assumptions become difficult to sustain. As far as I am concerned, the idea of a stable, clearly identifiable "native speaker" rests on ideological foundations that have long been critiqued, even if they continue to shape institutional thinking.

The persistence of native-speaker competence as an unquestioned benchmark in English language education (Llurda 2018; Rudolph et al. 2015) reflects what Phillipson (1992) described as the "native speaker fallacy," later reframed by Holliday (2005) as "native-speakerism." These critiques demonstrate how deeply embed-

ded the idea of linguistic ownership is within professional and academic cultures. Even when deficit views of non-standard varieties are explicitly rejected, the assumption that native competence constitutes the ultimate target often remains intact. This ideological background matters because it subtly informs how linguistic legitimacy is evaluated, including in digital contexts.

Digital environments intensify the fragility of this construct. Online interaction frequently obscures biographical trajectories: we rarely know who is behind a username, what their linguistic history is, or how their repertoire has developed across time and space. In many instances, determining nativeness is simply impossible. More importantly, I am not convinced that it is analytically necessary. Meaning-making can be examined through interactional practices, pragmatic strategies, and multimodal configurations without first categorising speakers according to "origin" or, more broadly, sociodemographic categories.

From my perspective, what becomes central across many digitally mediated contexts is not a homogeneous "digital English" but the situated functional use of English within specific communicative ecologies. This does not imply that digital communication constitutes a homogeneous domain of language use; rather, digital environments host highly differentiated communicative settings, shaped by platform affordances, participant configurations, and interactional goals. In many such settings, communication succeeds when interlocutors achieve intelligibility and shared understanding rather than approximate an abstract native norm. Participants may simplify, clarify, reformulate, repeat, and accommodate in order to move the interaction forward, often drawing from multilingual repertoires and integrating resources from other languages when useful. The impossibility of determining nativeness does not, in my view, justify treating all digital English automatically as English as a lingua franca. Such a move would risk collapsing distinct communicative settings into a single label. However, digital communication does encourage us to shift our analytical focus away from speaker identity and toward communicative practice. Instead of asking who a speaker "is," I find it more productive to ask how semiotic resources are mobilised, how participants manage diversity, and how intelligibility is achieved within specific digital ecologies.

In many online settings, English operates within broader translingual and multisemiotic configurations, although the specific forms this takes vary considerably across platforms, genres, and domains of practice. It coexists with other languages, visual elements, platform conventions, and culturally specific references. What we observe is less a stable variety tied to speaker origin than an emergent process shaped by interaction. In that sense, digital environments

expose the limitations of nativeness as an explanatory category. They foreground collaboration, adaptability, and the ongoing negotiation of meaning.

For these reasons, I would argue that digital language data can indeed be meaningfully analysed without foregrounding the speaker's linguistic background. This does not mean that biography is irrelevant in all cases. Rather, it means that nativeness, as traditionally conceived, is no longer a necessary starting point. What deserves analytical priority is how English functions within plural repertoires and how communicative effectiveness is achieved across contexts where identity is fluid, opaque, and continually reconstructed and how it emerges from texts (along with the use of speech, writing, image, and other semiotic resources for meaning making).

Elina Ranta:

As I indicated above, I see similarities between the fields of "digital English" and "English as a Lingua Franca" in that both study a phenomenon that is difficult to define along the lines of traditional English variationist concepts and theories. Both are primarily functional varieties that investigate the use of English in a particular context, and not among a particular, well-defined speech community as such. In ELF research, the definition dilemma has been addressed by acknowledging the nature of the research object and by admitting that "ELF is what it is" in any given situation (from tourist interactions to academic communication and beyond) with the understanding that it mainly involves L2 use of English in a non-language learning context.—Native speakers may sometimes be present but they are not the main focus. "Digital English", in turn, can—as far as I can see—be also seen as a functional variety in its own right where perhaps the question of nativeness does not play a central role at all. Digital English might best be seen as a blend of (predominantly) native and (predominantly) non-native interactions, where the speaker's language background may not ultimately matter as the participants form their own local language practices anyway. In this sense, I would argue that not knowing the speakers' backgrounds does not render analyses of digital language data meaningless in any way. The unidentified backgrounds are inherent in the nature of the phenomenon. At the same time, however, I would not say that the unidentified language backgrounds automatically make digital English ELF—for the reasons outlined above in Question 1.

On the other hand, if the research perspective assumes that 'real' digital English is only that produced by native speakers, or if the aim is to examine the differences between native and non-native digital

English, problems are obviously bound to arise if the speakers' language backgrounds cannot be determined. In ELF research some preliminary findings have suggested that written (digital) English used by non-native speakers indeed differs structurally in certain respects from written English produced by native speakers (e. g. Laitinen 2016, Laitinen 2020). In these studies, the ELF data consisted of a corpus comprising, for instance, blog texts, and the non-nativeness of the writers was controlled for and taken into account during the data collection phase. Based on these preliminary studies, then, there seem to be differences in native and non-native uses of the written English medium (online). Whether such differences are ultimately relevant for digital English research, however, depends on the research questions being asked. If digital English is studied as an entity in its own right with the multitude of voices it consists of, then in my view, the speaker background seems to be an irrelevant cause for concern.

What implications does digitally mediated discourse, where speaker identity and nativeness are often indeterminate, have for media linguistics as a discipline, both theoretically and methodologically? Could it reshape how we define its research boundaries?

Maria Grazia Sindoni:

In my view, digitally mediated discourse forces media linguistics to confront a deeper epistemological question: what exactly are the categories on which our analyses rest? If speaker identity and nativeness are frequently indeterminate, then analytical frameworks that presuppose stable linguistic subjects become increasingly fragile.

Traditional linguistic paradigms have often relied on relatively clear distinctions, such as native versus non-native, first language versus second language, standard versus non-standard. Even when critically examined, these categories have structured research design, data interpretation, and methodological choices. Digital discourse complicates this architecture, as online interaction rarely offers stable biographical coordinates. In these scenarios, identities are layered, strategic, partially concealed, and sometimes deliberately constructed. Under these conditions, identity cannot function as a secure analytical anchor.

For media linguistics, this has both theoretical and methodological consequences I discussed at length elsewhere (Sindoni 2026). Theoretically, it pushes us away from essentialist understandings of language and toward a view of communication as situated practice.

English, for instance, cannot be assumed to represent a bounded system tied to particular speaker types. As discussed earlier, it operates within plural repertoires and multisemiotic environments. What becomes analytically relevant is not who owns a language, but how resources circulate, combine, and acquire meaning within specific digital ecologies.

Methodologically, this implies a shift from speaker-centred categorisation to practice-oriented analysis. Instead of coding data according to presumed linguistic background, researchers may need to prioritise interactional dynamics, platform affordances, multimodal layering, and strategies of meaning negotiation. In other words, what can be directly observed. Digital discourse analysis, in this sense, requires attentiveness to process: how participants manage intelligibility, how they respond to ambiguity, how they recalibrate their language in real time. These are observable phenomena that do not depend on determining nativeness.

I would go further and suggest that digitally mediated communication destabilises not only traditional linguistic categories but also disciplinary boundaries. Media linguistics has often positioned itself at the intersection of linguistics and media studies, examining how technological affordances shape discourse. However, if we accept that digital interaction blurs distinctions between language, image, sound, layout, algorithmic structuring, and platform governance, then our object of study expands beyond language when narrowly conceived. The discipline may need to define its research boundaries less in terms of medium and more in terms of semiotic assemblages.

This of course does not mean abandoning linguistic analysis. Rather, it means recognising that linguistic phenomena are embedded within broader communicative infrastructures. The instability of speaker identity in digital spaces exposes the limits of categories inherited from earlier sociolinguistic paradigms. It invites us to rethink what counts as data, what counts as context, and what counts as meaningful unit of analysis.

In my opinion, digitally mediated discourse does not simply add new material for media linguistics to study. It challenges the discipline to reconsider its epistemological foundations. If nativeness becomes analytically secondary, and if language appears as one resource among many in fluid digital environments, then media linguistics may increasingly define itself through methodological flexibility, sensitivity to emergent practices, and openness to interdisciplinary dialogue. Its research boundaries, in that sense, are not fixed lines but negotiated spaces, much like the communicative practices it seeks to understand.

Elina Ranta:

I am afraid this question is beyond my expertise, as I am not familiar enough with the field of media linguistics. From a lay person's perspective I can only repeat what I have said above that as far as digital English is concerned, I believe that letting go of the idea that only natively produced English can serve as valid data for media linguistics is both a necessary and productive starting point for digital media studies. Instead of focusing on whether media linguistics can be studied without information about the speakers' L1 backgrounds, I think viewing digital English as it actually is—a blend of native and non native interactions—could help delineate the boundaries of the research field in a more accurate and truthful manner in relation to the object of study.

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