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Interview with Professor Barbara Seidlhofer

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Background

Professor Barbara Seidlhofer is a professor of English and applied linguistics at the University of Vienna, Austria. Her research and teaching focus is on English as a lingua franca (conceptualization, description, theoretical implications), the nature of intercultural communication and multilingualism, and sociolinguistics and pragmatics more generally. Professor Seidlhofer is the founding director of the Vienna-Oxford International Corpus of English (VOICE), which provides a basis for empirical research into English as a lingua franca. She is past editor of the International Journal of Applied Linguistics and the founding editor of the Journal of English as a Lingua Franca. Some of her major publications among many are Controversies in Applied Linguistics (2003) and Understanding English as a Lingua Franca (2011), both published by Oxford University Press. She recently visited Tabriz (Azarbaijan Shabid Madani University) and delivered a talk at a conference organized by this university. An interview was conducted with her by Dr Davoud Amini (Assistant Professor of TEFL at Azarbaijan Shabid Madani University). Below DA stands for Davoud Amini and BS stands for Barabar Seidlhofer.

DA: Thank you dear professor Seidlhofer for kindly accepting our invitation both for visiting Iran and taking part in this interview.

BS: *It's my pleasure.*

DA: Yesterday, you and professor Widdowson attended an academic event at Azarbaijan Shahid Madani University here in Tabriz. Is there any particular impression you would like to share with us concerning Iranian applied linguistics academics?

BS: *Well we were really impressed with the great openness we encountered here. What struck me very much at the event at the university yesterday was just how much into all those applied linguistics issues people were, both staff and students. And all the urgent questions we were getting were very well-informed and targeted and very specific. You know sometimes it was a really quick encounter between taking photographs and signing books, but there were such good and precise questions with a solid background of reading. I was really impressed with that.*

DA: At the outset, may I ask you to tell us about some of the outstanding points in your academic career and professional life that you might feel like sharing with our audience.

BS: *Well, we have just heard from Henry Widdowson, and how he started his career in South East Asia. I haven't taught in so many different places. I come from Vienna, Austria. That's also where I studied. But maybe my first English degree was a little bit similar to an English degree here in Iran. So I did a very comprehensive degree, with literature, language and linguistics. Do you combine subjects for teacher degrees if you want to be secondary school teacher? Do you only study one subject or you have to study two?*

DA: No, they just do one.

BS: *Aha, with us, we had to combine two. So I chose Italian in addition to English and also Russian because of my family history. And while I was studying, I was asked by the linguistics professor to work in the department as a kind of young assistant. What I missed in my studies was that although we were being educated for becoming a teacher there was no applied linguistics there. We are talking about the 1980s. We had one or two methodology classes but they were really like recipes, what to do on Monday morning for listening comprehension or something, and I felt there must be some thinking behind this that we are missing out on. So I was lucky enough to get a British Council scholarship to do an MA in Britain because that's where you went for applied linguistics, and I went to London to do this amazing MA in Language and Literature in Education, which was really like one year that completely changed my life and gave me things to build on and think about – all hereading we did there, for example the Edinburgh Course in Applied Linguistics, was there at the beginning. And so I could really take something new back to Vienna and build on it. This course was presided over by Henry Widdowson, and Christopher Brumfit was there too. We really had some very good teachers. Then I wanted to do a PhD and I also needed it for my job. And again to cut a long story short, I did my PhD in London as well on discourse analysis in language education and was very fortunate to be supervised by Henry Widdowson. Then I went back to teach in Vienna. One important thing that was foreshadowed in all the talking and discussing we did in London was that we were beginning to question the native speaker standards in English language teaching, in the sense of, you know, you could only be a good English teacher if you were a native speaker of English. There were people who were clearly very able, very good in English, understood how the language worked, but they were a bit frustrated because there were so many Brits or Americans without any teacher education who could go anywhere in the world and just get the job because they were 'native speakers'. So, that was the primary motivation for my research interest in English as a lingua franca. This thinking combined with an interest in corpus linguistics, which you had to use in order to be taken seriously as a descriptive linguist. I was also looking at corpora of learner language, which were intended to help learners of English to become more like native speakers, but I felt that this really could not be the primary aim in the case of English, which on a global scale has far more non-native than native speakers. So that's why I proposed to build a corpus for looking at how people actually communicate in English as lingua franca. This was first of all a programmatic move in order to be taken notice of, because people could always*

say, oh yes ELF exists but it isn't a language, so we don't need to look at it; that is not a variety with a clearly-defined community of speakers living in a territory together with a lot of daily face-to-face contact. This is what counts for linguistic description, you know and that goes throughout the history of sociolinguistics and the ethnography of speaking. Wherever you go, you have this notion of a community and the community defines which variety it speaks and, you know, linguists say this community speaks this variety and that is worth describing; unless you have something like this, don't bother. So the ELF corpus did work, but it also meant that people completely focused on forms and they even asked such ludicrous questions like if I use this form, is this ELF, and you cannot say that of course; you know ELF is the function, it is not formally defined. Just now, we are using ELF, we could not be conducting this conversation unless we had ELF. Then you look at which functions work in which way, and that becomes interesting and it was then that we compiled the VOICE in Vienna over many years, with a lot of funding from the Austrian Science Fund. Then I got an expression of interest from Andy Kirkpatrick, who was then in Hong Kong at the Institute of Education, that he would also like to build an ELF corpus but with an Asian focus - because we had a lot of European speakers, and that I thought was a very good idea. Andy at the time had an offer from a big publisher that they would fund this, and he wanted to use the same architecture and the same software that we had devised for VOICE. I said to Andy look we are very happy to give you everything; we can fly people to Hong Kong and set it all up with you, but you have to do the same as we did with our project which is to be open access from the beginning and he thought about it and said yes I'm going to do this. So he did not accept the funding that would have made his corpus very exclusive, and therefore only people who pay a lot of money or write textbooks for this particular publisher could have had access to it. And now there are two open access corpora with the same design that you can investigate ELF interactions with.

DA: Talking about ELF Corpus, you are the founding director of VOICE, the Vienna-Oxford International Corpus of English. I'm asking this question specifically on behalf of young researchers. How can they gain access to this corpus and how this corpus would help them with the empirical research they carry out?

BS: *Yes, thank you for this question. It's easy. When you Google "VOICE corpus" you can find it, the url is <https://www.univie.ac.at/voice/>. One thing that we are really proud of is that everything is extremely well-documented. We have been very careful about this. Once you go to the website you get a lot of help there. As I said, you only need to get an ID, log in and you can work with it. In addition to, or instead of, using the online corpus, one can also download the corpus in XML and there's also a part-of-speech-tagged version. Obviously what you get in a corpus is forms. So you need to be aware of why these people are communicating with each other. So we have showed very clearly that there are different domains where there are things happening. For instance, there is the professional domain, a context that you know very well: professional organizations in the sense that a university committee or perhaps a European language policy committee would be having meetings and discussions. But there are also less formal meetings. You get business negotiations that sometimes go on for 3 hours. You get service encounters that could be just 2 minutes, like students at the university accommodation office asking for help. So that's some of the domains that we included. There's the Michigan Corpus of Academic Spoken English and that was quite helpful for us as a kind of model for thinking about domains and speech event types. So, apart from education, we have professional business, but there's also the leisure domain, like young people sitting in a pub and having a conversation; something like that. Apart from domains, there are also different speech event types; casual, conversational, very formal meetings that are recorded, but everything in there is spontaneous and non-scripted English as lingua franca speech which was recorded and minutely transcribed. And one more decision that was important for us was that we recorded entire speech events with as great a combination of first languages as possible and transcribed the whole speech event. In a way when you work with a corpus you go in sideways and there's a little bit of linguistico-text for the researcher, but what we wanted people to be able to do because of this important function of ELF, is not to just look at the forms. This is why we give a description of what speech event this is and it is always there and easy to find in the header. So you know why these people are sitting together talking. You know who they are, and what the relationships are between them. Are they familiar or not? Is this a very formal meeting or not? All these things you can read about and get familiar with the context before you get into the speech events. Some of the speech events have the sound files there as well. That was limited by considerations of sound quality and anonymity. So sound files that were difficult to anonymize we couldn't publish. But with some of these*

speech events you can listen while you read transcripts and make judgments; let's say about people's pronunciation if you are interested.

DA: So there are a lot of communicative details there. And there's one last question I would like to put forward to professor Seidlhofer and that's about Persian. Iran, you know, is a multilingual nation. Yesterday we had a conference and people from different parts of Iran were attending the conference and they used Farsi as lingua franca. I just want to see whether you have any special suggestion for researchers in Iran in choosing Farsi as a lingua franca?

BS: Yes that's a very interesting question. There's not much I can say about Farsi because I really do not know enough about it. My feeling is that the thinking that we are now doing about English as a lingua franca is because simply it is the one that offers itself first on the global scale as the dominant lingua franca. But I think it is important that this thinking should be done and also the way the world is these days, I mean, with all these affordances of technology and people going from place to place, and really face-to-face communication is retreating to the background because we communicate so much more via the Internet and all these means that we have now. So I think that the lingua franca functions of all these more regional big languages are really important. I think this is well worth bearing in mind because generally we have been thinking of a language always tied to a community, and now so much is influx in the world that the lingua franca functions of many languages are becoming much more important. So we should think pretty much of any wide-spread language as a possible lingua franca.

DA: Thank you very much for your time.

BS: It has been very rewarding for me to be here at your university.

DA: Thank you

