

# Mutual understanding in love is attainable with non-native English

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Kaisa Pietikainen. Credit: Bjorn Trygve Thorbjornsen

As the number of intercultural marriages rises, more couples use English as the relationship's lingua franca.

"It's often thought that when the partners learn to speak each other's [native languages](#), they will pick either [language](#) as their shared language.

But when one is used to speaking a certain language to one another, it becomes difficult to change," says researcher Kaisa Pietikainen from the University of Helsinki. She has studied the interactions of these so-called ELF couples in her doctoral dissertation.

The language of ELF couples is, however, not restricted to English. "These couples have an open attitude toward language mixing. Features from other languages become such an integrated part of their 'couple tongue' that after a while, they may not even notice when they switch languages," Pietikainen says.

ELF couples identify mainly as English-speaking couples, but they are also aware of the presence of other languages in their interactions. "The previously held idea that a [lingua franca](#) can't become a language of identification or that one can't use it to express feelings doesn't hold true when it comes to ELF couples."

Pietikainen says that misunderstandings are not very common in ELF couples' conversation. The couples invest in practices that support understanding. For example, they paraphrase difficult words and check whether the partner has understood them. ELF couples even utilise onomatopoeic expressions and drawing as an aid for achieving mutual understanding.

## **Silence matters in couples' conflicts**

Silence in ELF couples' conflict interactions does not only mean that the partners disagree or that one is offended by what the other one has said or done. It can also be used to avoid giving self-incriminating answers, or in resisting the [partner's](#) attempt to defuse the conflict with the use of humour.

"These observations have, however, nothing to do with the fact that the

partners use non-native English between them. I'm sure these kinds of silences are very familiar for every long-term relationship," Pietikainen adds.

Provided by University of Helsinki

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