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May I Kill the Native Speaker?

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I read the September 1984 issue (Vol. 18, No, 3) of the *TESOL Quarterly* with special interest. I was attracted by Richard A. Spears's "Comments on Mary Temperley's 'The Articulatory Target for Final *–s* Clusters' " and Temperley's response. Especially interesting are the comments regarding native speakers as performance models for learners of English.

As both writers have pointed out in various ways, there is no question that teaching has to be adapted to the individual needs of learners, taking into consideration personal, social, and sociolinguistic factors. After 20-odd years of designing dictionaries for native speakers and speakers of other languages in Canada and the United States, I also do not hesitate to agree with Temperley that "pronunciation texts and dictionaries are often unrealistic. " I would even go a step further and point out that they are sometimes so academic in their orientation that using them is like forcing artificial feeding formulas on Third World infants when natural milk is readily available, which is not quite so farfetched a comparison if you look at the question dispassionately.

The use of IPA, for instance. In the 1960s, when I was using it in Canadian dictionaries, my consultants and I were so taken up with vowel qualities and quantities (we used to debate topics like the insertion of a parenthetic *t* in *-nce* words and how native speakers pronounce a word such as *tasks)* that we decided, in one particular case, after some study involving the use of spectrograms and data supplied by naive and non-naive informants, that "the middle, open vowel of 'various' was relatively short [ɪ] for native speakers of Canadian English in British Columbia but 'long' [i] in the speech of Saskatchewan and Ontario informants" *(The Winston Dictionary of Canadian English—Elementary Edition* 1975:v). We did not quite solve every problem, but we ended up indicating pronunciations in two styles for each entry word, using diacritics for the benefit of so-called native speakers and IPA for francophones and such "learners." We might as well have compiled separate dictionaries in

the usual way, but the differences justifying this procedure seemed academic even in those days.

I feel I have learned somewhat over the years. My dictionary for the 1980s, *The New York Times Everyday Dictionary* (1982), avoids pronunciation respelling systems using abstract symbols. These I have come to consider artificial feeding formulas, quite unnecessary for natives and non-natives alike when unadulterated natural milk is available. By natural milk, in the context of indicating pronunciations, I mean the very spelling handed down to us by the great medieval scribes who taught us to spell!

Starting with the assumption that language is learned primarily not from grammars and dictionaries but from other speakers by processes such as imitation, osmosis, and absorption in stages, we give everyone who resorts to a dictionary credit for knowing how to read at the primary level and how to decipher and pronounce certain basic words of the language. The number of words in such a primary vocabulary varies. But any native or non-native user of an English dictionary should have no problem pronouncing and distinguishing key spellings such as *paid* and *pad* (the traditional long and short *a)* and the more complex sounds represented by *pair, par, part, ah,* and so on—to take just the first vowel and letter of the alphabet.

This must already sound quite unacademic to some of our readers and more like something familiar out of *Time* or *Reader's Digest.* You got it. But the sense of relief that comes from doing away with questions such as what to do about clusters, the parenthetic *t,* and "the legitimacy of the continuum of consonant reduction" can be enormous. Such questions bother you only when preparing artificial formulas; as we all know, they just do not arise in breast milk.

Take the word *steward* for example. Dictionary users who know how to read *stew* in their own dialect (whether native or acquired) only need to know that *steward* is pronounced in the same way as *stew* with the added syllable pronounced *-urd,* as in so many other similarly spelled words that they already know. A question such as whether the word is pronounced *styoo.urd* or *stoo.urd* then becomes academic. As to how you glide from the first syllable to the second and where to put the stress—such questions get settled automatically. What is more, there are no symbols to master and split hairs over.

Our keyless system involves the understanding of only about three conventions on the learner's part and some care on the lexicographer's to eke out the respelling with an occasional note when the long and short *oo* and the hard and soft *th* might be in question; that is, if the dictionary is meant for a really low level of learner. My belief that the system has been successful is based in part on many

pages of encouraging comments from consultants (nearly 80 professors of education and high school teachers of English from Hawaii to New England and from Florida to Newfoundland), who field-tested the book in their classrooms over a period of several months.

The reader might ask, But aren't you dealing with native speakers rather than speakers of other languages? The answer is, Such a distinction cannot be shown to exist. If you look at it closely, the native speaker/foreign learner distinction will appear as artificial as infant feeding formulas. To change that metaphor before it gets overstretched, I would like to call the distinction a linguistic apartheid imposed on us by theoreticians.

When theoretical linguists claim an innate facility for grammatical competence on behalf of the "native speaker" (I am using the term here in the sense of mother-tongue or first-language user, not in the sense of arbiter of grammaticality, which is what is to be proved), it seems like a white South African's claim that he can walk into a railway station in Pretoria any day, purchase a first-class ticket, get into any first-class coach, occupy a window seat, and travel all the way to Cape Town without getting thrown out at the first stop, as though a black or colored could not do it. Some competence. Apart from man-made restrictions, as everyone knows, there is just no rational evidence to back up such claims to exclusivity or for separateness of consideration.

In my view, learners of any variety of English include all of us. So-called natives and foreigners, black and white, English and French, Indians and Inuit, speakers of other languages and dialects—everyone belongs to the same subspecies of human being that I would call *Homo loquens anglice*. There are individual, social, and regional differences in English used at any given time and place, but these affect the so-called native speaker and the foreign learner alike. The errors made by the latter with reference to a particular variety of English cannot be shown to be different in kind from the errors made by the typical ill-educated, native-speaking freshman using the same variety of the language. There are genuine differences attributable to learning stages, as when the native-speaking child and the foreign learner begin to learn. The rest seem merely differences of degree, frequently compounded by prejudice on the one hand and lack of tolerance on the other. As Vann, Meyer, and Lorenz (1984:432) show, the real problem is that "the more 'foreign' the error, the less it will be tolerated by native speakers."

There is need for tolerance in language performance standards as in other walks of life, if only because you cannot eliminate certain differences. You tolerate them. As for the notion of native speakership, I think the acid test would be if someone could come up with a

battery of tests of basic linguistic competence which could be applied without bias to a wide spectrum of people from various parts of the English-speaking world who claimed English as their mother tongue or first language and if such tests showed that these people were categorically different from those for whom English is a second or foreign language. The tests would probably only show that "native speaker" is a fuzzy notion and the term, as used by linguists, merely means "competent user," with no essential connection with parentage, place of birth, first language, and other circumstantial differences in language acquisition.

This question had bothered me since student days. To study it in some depth, now that I have the time, last year I sent out a short memo headed "Anyone met a native speaker?" to two dozen linguists, lexicographers, philosophers, and psychologists on this continent and in the United Kingdom. The responses were quite revealing. The longest was over 1300 words, and it came from no less a linguist than Noam Chomsky.

Chomsky starts out saying that

> questions of this sort . , . begin with what seem to me incorrect metaphysical assumptions: in particular, the assumption that among the things in the world there are languages or dialects, and that individuals come to acquire them.

Some of us thought that was an empirical fact and not an assumption. Professor Chomsky sums up:

> So then, what is a language and who is a native speaker? Answer, a language is a system L_s, it is the steady state attained by the language organ. And everyone is a native speaker of the particular L_s that that person has "grown" in his/her mind/brain . . I think that looked at this way, the questions you raise no longer seem puzzling, and in fact dissolve.

To me, it raises fresh questions. The first in my mind is whether it is such a native speaker that Chomsky means when he says, "the sentences generated will have to be acceptable to the native speaker" (1975:48).

Asked whether my questions really dissolve, one of Britain's leading linguists, David Crystal of the University of Reading, responded:

> To say that all people are native speakers of whatever it is that they have learnt doesn't "dissolve" the question: it just turns it into a different question, which it suits Chomsky to answer. Chomsky doesn't address the primary descriptive validity of the term, which I think shouldn't be dismissed so lightly.

So the question remains who this native speaker really is. I think it might well turn out to be everybody's Abominable Snowman!

I have put together the responses I received from the two dozen scholars I asked (which includes the late Raven McDavid, Jr., psychologist John B. Carroll, Professor Randolph Quirk of London, philosopher Willard Quine, to name a few) into a light-hearted colloquy of about 60 pages (complete with two pages of references) which I shall be glad to send any interested TESOL member to enjoy during spare moments from teaching English.[1] Here is how it starts off:

Inquirer: Dr. Gleason, can you give mean honest definition of the term "native speaker" as used by linguists? It is not in the dictionary you used to work for, *Webster's Third,* you know.

Prof. H.A. Gleason, Jr.: Oh, that is a very difficult term to define. I don't think I can help, Viola Waterhouse once wrote a paper on the subject. I think it was in the fifties. It seems some Mexican children learn Spanish as first language and their mother tongue as second language.

Inquirer: Thanks a lot, Allan. You are the first linguist I have asked who has expressed any doubt about what this term means.

Personally, I believe there is no such animal as a "native speaker. " The more I study it, the more it seems a myth propagated by linguists.

After some 30,000 words of a lively debate, Chomsky returns with a 1000-word reply in which he refers us to philosophers from Plato to Ludwig Wittgenstein, all the while ignoring the question of what type of native speaker he has in mind when he invokes this person as the arbiter of grammaticality of sentences.

The concluding remarks are by Professor Paul Christophersen, who now lives in retirement in Cambridge, England, after having published widely on language learning and taught English in Europe, America, and countries in the Third World. Says Christophersen:

> Something in the nature of a Copernican revolution is required in our linguistic outlook. Unlike the naive cosmology of the "flat-earthers," the Ptolemaic world picture made sense and hung together; it was scientific in conception, but the theory was complicated to a degree and became increasingly so as more and more facts came to light and had to be fitted into the picture. Copernicus proposed a simpler way of explaining the

[1] Readers interested in obtaining a copy of the colloquy (a charge for photocopying and postage would apply) may write to the author at Paikeday Publishing, 1776 Chalkdene Grove, Mississauga, Ontario, Canada L4W 2C3.

same set of facts, yet it was centuries before his theory was commonly accepted—partly, I am sure, because Ptolemy's explanation appealed to man's anthropocentric instinct. A similar feeling accounts for the popularity of the idea of a "native language," one's "own" language which nobody else must presume to treat as if it belonged to him. This is a nice comforting way of looking at things, a safe shelter in which to hide from the increasing complexities of our modern world. Long-cherished notions are often an unconscionable time a-dying.

Reactions of readers of the *TESOL Quarterly* might prove enlightening to the profession. The best I have received so far is from my good friend David Guralnik, who has been compiling *Webster's New World* dictionaries from Cleveland, Ohio, for over 40 years. He wrote:

> I wouldn't want metaphysical views on what I now see as a question that has even more political and sociological overtones than linguistic ones. I am inclined to think that many, if not most, of the adherents of "native intuition" are motivated by unconscious—or even conscious—notions that are elitist, perhaps racist.

Of course, Guralnik and I have no stakes in "native speaker," being just descriptive lexicographers.

Teachers and dictionary makers may want to consider some of this the next time they start splitting hairs over articulatory targets and native speakers as performance models.

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