

On the Death of Native Speaker: A Revisiting Stance

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Abstract

The notion of native speaker has recently become a heated debate. Much of the dialogue concerning the death of native speakers refers to the lack of control on the part of a dominant language in consolidating its standardization. If a language controls its standardization, it is plausibly apt to have native speakers. In fact, to the paper, nativity is not the big concern among scholars in defining the notion of native language. What results in the demise of native speaker appears to be the loss of identity in a given language. In the last three decades, several languages (e.g., Singapore English, Indian English...) appear to be respected standard. In fact, what makes language global is not the concept of nativity, but it is the concept of internationality. To the present writer, what makes scholars think of the decease of native speaker is the truism that many languages in the world appear to consolidate their standardization. Henceforth, the current paper, reevaluating the stance of the native speaker, holds that the notion of native speaker should not be nonchalantly passed by.

Keywords: competence, native speaker, L2 user, standardization

I. INTRODUCTION

Long has been heeded to the notion of native speaker. In recent decades, the role of native speakers in second language acquisition (SLA) research has become a source of concern. Nevertheless, as to Cook (1999), despite objections to the notion of native speaker, the given concept "remains firmly entrenched" (p. 189). Overall, the term native speaker suggests an individual is born in a country whose language is spoken. In fact, as to Davies (1991), the given individual acquires the language from the birth. Nevertheless, being born in a country cannot be

a guarantee that the individual will be a native speaker of that language (Lee, 2005). There is a large infrastructure of social and cultural elements that determine the notion of nativity.

Regarding the issue of nativity, the term native speaker in the world of practical affairs is a matter of untenable issue. But what makes language global is not the concept of nativity but it is the concept of internationality (Fahim, Nili, & Shakouri, 2012). In a sense, the frequent and unquestioning appeal to the so-called myth of nativity in today's societies is undoubtedly the product of globalization. As to Crystal (2005), designating English as a global language provides an excuse for L1 speakers of English to avoid learning another language. One likely reason for a native speaker to feel unnecessary to learn a new language is that the native language of a dominant language gives individuals identity. To better delve into the concept of native speaker, and better appreciate the notion of L2 learner or user, it is felt a need to have a critical look at the notion of native speaker.

II. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

A. *On the Definition of Native Speaker*

It goes without saying that the most appropriate models in SLA comes from individuals' native language. Whether a plausible definition of the term native speaker is readily available is a matter of issue. Davies (2003) claims the concept of native speaker can be elaborated from several aspects: Psycholinguistic, linguistic, and sociolinguistic. That non-native speakers use a separate cognitive system from that used by native speaker is a theoretical question that can be answered from psycholinguistic aspect. Linguistic aspects of the native speakers deal with whether native speakers and non-native speakers have different grammars. And from the sociolinguistic perspective, scholars are concerned with the extent to which being a native speaker is a social construct, a choice of identity, and a membership determined as much by attitude aspect and symbolically as by language ability and knowledge.

Without doubt, the native speaker knows other than linguistic competence (Hymes, (1970, cited in Davies, 2003). As to Hymes, they are capable of using what they know. Parallel to this argument, Stern (1983) states that native speakers have (a) a subconscious knowledge of the rules, (b) an intuitive grasp of meanings, (c) the ability to communicate within social settings, (d) a range of language skills, and (e) creativity of language use.

In this regard, to Chomsky (1965), native speakers appear to be the authority of the grammar of their native language nevertheless, considering native speaker as only the arbiter of grammatically correct sentences has been long respected as misleading by several scholars (e.g., Nayar, 1994; Paikeday, 2003). As Nayar (1994) maintains, native speakers are not "ipso facto knowledgeable, correct, and infallible in their competence" (p. 4).

Nevertheless, a native speaker, as to Davies (2003), probably takes advantage of several features in their language. To Davies, "native speakers can vary what they are saying; andcan

repeat a message in another form for the sake of clarity or to disambiguate" (p. 200). Moreover, to Davies, native speakers exhibit an adequate control over processing capacities. Further, "Normal native speakers therefore do not get frustrated because they cannot encode their ideas" (Davies, 2003, p. 201).

Traditionally, as it can be expected from linguistic perspective, a native speaker refers to someone gifted with special and often infallible grammatical insights into the specified language. Along the same vein, Cook (1999) defines native speaker as a monolingual person who still speaks the language they learnt in childhood. In much the same way, Chomsky (1965) asserts that a native speaker is capable of identifying ill-formed grammatical expressions in his/her language, even though s/he may not be able to explain exactly why they are ill-formed. Accordingly, in Chomsky's generative grammar, as to Anchimbe (2006), the native speaker is the backbone of Chomsky's (1965) ideal speaker-hearers. To Hymes (1972), Chomsky's monolithic, idealized notion of linguistic competence is inadequate. As Hymes maintains, the competence that the native speaker must possess must include the ability to handle linguistic variation and the various uses of language in the context. In fact, a native speaker, to Hymes, is an individual who is communicatively competent.

Paying attention to the notion of native speaker has become a constant appeal to applied linguistics. This appeal, as Davies (1991) claims, is necessary for the need for models, norms, and goals. No one denies that a native speaker has a special control over the language spoken. But what has become a matter of issue is that "Is it tangible for a nonnative speaker to become proficient like a native to his mother tongue?" If so, it appears to be plausible that the notion of native speaker is demised. The death of notion of native speakers is not a simple issue that cannot be nonchalantly passed by. Henceforth, the need for such an extended discussion of the native speaker is worth reminding the scholars to deeply delve into it.

However, it can be claimed that being a native speaker is no guarantee for competence in communication. There is a large infrastructure of social and cultural elements that determine what must be said and how it must be said (Anchimbe, 2006). Paikeday (2003), also, contends that what Chomsky refers to 'native speaker' as an arbiter of grammaticality is "systematically misleading" (p. 11). As he goes on to claim, "the native speaker in the mistaken sense never existed; there is no real *corpus delicti*" (p. 11). Even claiming that a native speaker has the capacity to write creatively is not completely accurate (Lee, 2005).

B. Birth and Situation: Determining Factors?

In traditional concept, birth and situations are determining factors in the definition of native speaker. However, it is not without its criticism. Birth does not determine language identity. Imagine a person, for example, who was born in Poland and grew up in Austria but spent the rest of his life in Jamaica and spoke Jamaican. Which language gives him/her identity? The second problem that is in contact with language identity is situation. Again imagine a boy

whose father is German and his mother is American. If parents live permanently in Australia, the boy becomes a trilingual speaker. Can we claim the boy is the native speaker of English? Furthermore, is Australia qualified to be considered as among native speaking countries? From an educational perspective, it is claimed there is no such a thing as native or non-native speakers (Paikday, 2003). Paikday claims that the concept of native speaker is dead. This term – native speakers and non-native speakers – are more considered as jargon used by specific groups of people. Also, there is not a border to make a distinction. In fact, that the term native speaker has become a myth is an assumption rather than a measure (Davies, 2003). Another reason that questions the legitimacy of the concept of native speaker is the fact that the number of second and foreign language speakers of English far exceeds the number of the first language speakers of English implies that Standard British language and American English is no longer the privilege of native speakers.

Today, arguably, the goal is to be an ‘English-knowing bilingual’: a French or Greek or Brazilian or German national, who can also function competently in English. Ur (2009) has some guidelines in this regard: try to learn internationally acceptable English rather than a particular native variety; accept the equal rights and worth of different varieties of English worldwide; not try to think in English: accept that we are native speakers of our own language, and use it, where appropriate, to help us learn English better (compare, translate etc.); read any literature written in English (including, in some cases, translations); learn about all sorts of different cultures that can find expression through English.

C. L2 Users Not Native Speakers!

Many teachers and learners today still prefer a ‘native speaker’ model. But native speakers are often limited to their own local dialect, may not be aware of international usages; and many English speakers who were originally non-native are today ‘fully competent’. Non-native fully competent speakers have the advantage of being an appropriate role model; and the language proficiency level of the non-native fully proficient speaker is, by definition, achievable. Cook (2003) asserts by this definition, however, it is impossible for an L2 user to become a native speaker – one reason why so many L2 users think of themselves as ‘failures’ and so many SLA researchers treat them in the same way: ‘learner’s language is deficient by definition’ (Kasper & Kellerman, 1997). Cook (2003) outlines three arguments against the use of native speakers as the norm against which L2 users should be measured are: (1) the rights of L2 users; (2) the number of L2 users; and (3) the distinctive characteristics of L2 users. Henceforth, Cook (1999) contends “language teaching would benefit by paying attention to the L2 user rather than concentrating primarily on the native speaker” (p. 185). Cook maintains that L2 users should be viewed as multi-competence language users rather than as deficient native speakers” (p. 185).

Cook (2003) argues that the L2 user is a person in his own right not an imitation of someone else. A language user – nota language learner – is not as an approximation to a monolingual native speaker. Thus, one group must not judge other people as failures for not

belonging to their group in terms of race, class sex or language. This look which is prescribed by those who felt the sense of ownership of first language is called norm-biased approach (Sifaski & Sougari, 2003). By the same token, a native speaker of English who considers himself as the right owner of the foreign language implies their tendency to uphold a set of rules that map their competence and performance and against which non-native speakers competence and performance will be measured. Thus, whether one L2 user is going to be the consumer of one's L1 is not to be subordinated.

D. Loss of Standardization

In the last three decades, several languages (e.g., Singapore English, Indian English...) appear to be respected standards. A simple glance at the present status of native speakers proves that what makes scholars think of the decease of native speaker is the truism that several languages in the world appear to consolidate their standardization. Kachru (1985) insists that 'the native speakers [of English] seem to have lost the exclusive prerogative to control its standardisation' (p. 30). What makes language global is not the concept of nativity but it is the concept of internationality. In fact, what English native speakers take pride of is that their language has become an international means of communication, not because they are native to that language. However, as the number of second and foreign language speakers of English far exceeds, the number of the first language speakers of English implies that Standard British language and American English is no longer the privilege of native speakers. Thus, to Kachru, it is a totem to claim a native speaker has an omniscient power and he/she is always considered as a yardstick for measuring a non-native speaker' competence. Along the same line, Rajagopalan (2004) holds that the native speaker as a consummate speaker of the language is an incredibly impoverished sense. This anti-cognitive perspective towards language acquisition comes out the facts that nativity is not a matter of genetics but training and practice. Thus, educationally, it is not a bold claim that English has no native speakers.

Recall that the widespread use of English around the world is undeniable. In much the same way, no one exactly knows how many monolingual native speakers in the world are, and also no one knows the exact number of those who use English as their second language. As to Cook (2003) while the construct of the native speaker competence may be appropriate in first language acquisition as all human beings attain it, the concept of idealized bilingual competence can be extremely misleading since so few L2 users attain it.

III. FINAL REMARKS

Native speakers exist, yet the goal in SLA is not to become a native speaker. Reality is far from ideality, assuming that the notion of native speaker is dead is at the expense of losing the significance of what Chomsky and his followers claim. As Stern (1983) puts forth, "the native speaker's competence ...is a necessary point of reference for second language proficiency

concept in language teaching" (p. 341). "Competence is a neutral term in linguistics for the native speaker's knowledge of language; it does not involve a judgment about whether such competence is good or bad according to some outside criterion" (Cook, 1999, p. 190). To Chomsky (1965), when a child is born, s/he is born with an innate set of principles that make him or her distinct from nonnative speakers. This is enough to claim that native speakers are distinct from non-native ones. In the long run, the point for us surely is that standardness can be a plausible indicator of the concept of native speaker. As Davies (2003), "Our searches for the native speaker have returned...to the question of the standard language" (p. 214). Davies goes on to hold that if Singapore English [for instance] can claim to be a standard language, then it makes sense to regard a speaker of Singapore English as a native speaker.

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