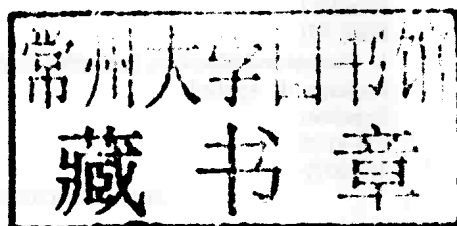ALAN DAVIES

Native Speakers and Native Users

Loss and Gain

Native Speakers and Native Users: Loss and Gain

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Preface

We lead our lives in imagined communities. We take for granted that the world is divided neatly into homogeneous groups which exhibit internal cohesion ('we are all the same') and external differentiation ('they are all different'), those axioms of nationalist movements. But internal cohesion is a fiction: we are not all the same, individuals differ. Yet the need for the imagined community is so powerful, the urge to belong so insistent, that we accept the normative constraints which require us to accommodate to common ways of behaving, common beliefs which the long process of childhood acquisition inculcates in us.

And so there is for all of us a tension between the self in all its particularities and conforming to the mores of the group to which we belong. Or wish to belong. It is that tension which manifests itself in the limiting cases of the exiles, those suffering from anomie, the alienated, those between two worlds. I say 'in the limiting cases' as though such oddities were exceptional. They are not. They are the individuals who choose not to – or cannot – conform and in their dramatic particularity remind us what it is to be human.

I have suggested that those who feel they do not belong could be regarded as misfits. But that is just part of the picture. For those, no doubt the lucky ones, it is possible to belong to more than one group. I do not mean a group of, for example, bee-keepers and a group of bell-ringers. Such combinations are common and unremarkable. No, I mean two cultures, two languages which can provide the tension I've suggested. The lucky ones are those who find themselves enriched and more whole by their membership of two or more cultures in which their individuality is seamless. A good example of such comfortable fit is provided by the Scottish academic and writer, David Daiches, whose *Two Worlds* recounts his Scottish and Jewish childhood and student years in Edinburgh. He writes in his Foreword to *Two Worlds* (1987):

one of the reviewers of the first edition of the book remarked that it was clearly a record of happiness, in spite of the cultural tensions it documents. That is on the whole true. Further, it is perhaps wrong to talk of cultural tensions, for the two cultures of my childhood did not fight each other but dove-tailed into each other. That is certainly how I saw them. I am always surprised when people misquote the title of the book as *Between*

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Two Worlds as the whole point of my story is that I was not between two worlds but equally at home in both. That was my good fortune and I have never ceased to be grateful for it.

The subtitle of this book is: 'Loss and Gain'. Daiches represents the gain that two cultures, two languages can provide. You can be, as I suggest in the book, an African Anglophone writer and remain wholly African. You can learn to be a Quaker and not lose your identity as whatever else you were. But there is another story where what is focused on is loss. The African Francophone writers and poets I discuss in Chapter 2 are much concerned with their loss of négritude, the essence of being African. These African Francophones are native users of French who have gained native-like proficiency in French which makes them anxious and alienated, unlike the Anglophone African writers who had no such doubt as native users of English.

What I argue in the book is that membership can change, it can be added to. Of course, application is needed: membership requires work. The native user is a learner who keeps on learning, keeps on gaining. That is equally true of the native speaker who must also keep learning, who comes to group membership from his/her idiolect and gains access to the group through control of the standard language, the gift and the opportunity of education, as it also is for the native user.

No doubt for some, those who leave one culture and never wholly gain admission to another, the classic case of the permanent shuttling immigrant, no doubt for them the gain does not compensate for the loss.

Defining the native speaker leads to a kind of reductionist circularity: the native speaker is a universal condition. We are all native speakers of the language/dialect/code/lect we come to first in childhood. But to say that is unhelpful because it tells us nothing about capacity or capability; it simply says that being a native speaker is to possess the faculty of language, the normal human condition. That condition is of interest only when compared with a non-native speaker or, in this book, a native user. What is it that the native speaker has or can do that the native user does not have or cannot do? That is the question I address. As I show, for Second Language Acquisition Research, the native speaker and the native user are categorically different. But there is other evidence, which I consider, which suggests that the two may not after all be quite so incommensurate.

Acknowledgements

Contents

1 Introduction

The book attempts to problematise the native speaker (NS) of English in relation to the native user (NU), the non-native speaker (NNS) who lives his/her life professionally and often socially in English. The book will seek to demonstrate with empirical evidence that on international English-language proficiency tests there is no significant between-group difference between native speakers and native users. It is further argued that the cognitive and Second Language Acquisition Research (SLAR), which maintains that there is an absolute difference, should be queried by virtue of the native-speaker informants it uses, all of whom are highly educated and therefore atypical of the native-speaker population(s). Such educated native speakers present a somewhat idealised view of native-speaker competence, an idealisation that is based on a description of an educated variety which is what we mean by the Standard Language. The book will conclude that the academic construct of the native speaker is isomorphic with the standard language. The implications of the argument are: (1) since mother-tongue speaker comes to represent the idealised native speaker through education, the L2 learner can also, again through education, attain a similar native-speaker idealisation (hence the overlapping NS–NNS samples in the Birdsong (2004) research); (2) while the book concludes that there is no evidence for the absolute distinction, that does not mean that one does not exist or that one may never emerge. For one to emerge, what is required is for a native-user speech community to grow sufficiently in self-confidence to describe its own variety and publish its own norms. It would then establish its own separate standard language (following Australia) which would make any distinctions between British and, say, Indian or Nigerian English more likely and more demonstrable. So far, contemplation of such an eventuality has been resisted on the grounds that distinct norms are found only in a first-language (L1) speech community, not in a second-language (L2) community such as Singapore, India, Nigeria. This is a comment about transmission: in principle there is no reason why a largely L2 community should not create its own norms; and, if such a native-user community were to thrive, the likelihood is, no doubt, that in time the L2 (in this case the local native-user English variety) would become the L1 for children born into that community, thereby normalising the

situation in the sense that US, Australian, New Zealand and Canadian English (each with its own norms) are normal.

Current doubts about the unique status of the native speaker as the norm for language-learning tend to be directed at English and are perhaps more a political than a linguistic appraisal. Differences of approach to the native speaker by SLAR and by Applied Linguistics are considered: SLAR is more committed to there being a fundamental difference between the native speaker and the proficient non-native speaker while Applied Linguistics prefers the idea of a continuum. Reconciliation between these seemingly incommensurate views may be found in the concept of the Standard Language. The Standard Language is appealed to by both SLAR and Applied Linguistics as the criterion for their research and practice. It is also the goal of all language-learners, both NS and NNS. For both, the language-learning norm, the goal to which they aspire, is the idealised native speaker. Test evidence for the lack of a gulf is provided in Zhang and Elder (2011) and by the present author (see Chapter 6) in a comparison of NS and NNS raters of speaking and writing performances by Belgian and Malaysian NNS. As with Zhang and Elder no significant difference was found between the NS and the NNS raters. It is concluded that between NS and NNS there is a continuum and not a gulf, and that what unites them is the Standard Language.

The native-speaker dispute

Thomas Paikeday (1985) was undoubtedly angry when he published his attack on the native speaker (*The Native Speaker is Dead!*). Many others have subsequently agreed with him (Braine 1999, Edge 2006, Holliday 2008), maintaining that we no longer need the native speaker as a norm, that there are models in World English varieties, in proficient second-language speakers and even, more radically in *lingua franca* varieties such as English as a *lingua franca* (Jenkins 2007, Seidlhofer 2010).

Two aspects of these attacks are noteworthy. The first is that they all come from sociolinguistic, applied linguistic, educational scholars. Little attention in this debate seems to be paid to the research of psycholinguistic and second-language acquisition scholars (Sorace 2003) who take the view that there is a cognitive disjunction between native speakers and non-native speakers. The research of Hyltenstam and Abrahamsson (2003) is particularly convincing.

The second aspect is that most of the research that agrees with Paikeday refers to English which, because of its worldwide growth, first through colonisation and settlement, then through business, finance and media interests, has spread in three ways (Kachru 1986; Crystal 1997): first as a more or less unitary Standard English, mainly recognised for writing; second as a range of, generally mutually intelligible, first languages (L1s) (Scottish, English, American, Australian...),

and third as a growing number of post-colonial lects (Singapore, Nigerian, Indian...) (Davies 2003a).

The native speaker is attacked even more widely. The American, Charles Ferguson, first Director of the Center for Applied Linguistics, wrote:

> Linguists ... have long given a special place to the native speaker as the only true and reliable source of language data ... much of the world's verbal communication takes place by means of languages which are not the users' mother tongue, but their second, third or nth language, acquired one way or another and used when appropriate. This kind of language use merits the attention of linguists as much as do the more traditional objects of their research ... the whole mystique of native speaker and mother tongue should preferably be quietly dropped from the linguists' set of professional myths about language. (Ferguson 1983: vii)

And Chomsky goes even further: 'the question of what are the "languages" or "dialects" attained and what is the difference between "native" and "non-native" is just pointless' (Chomsky 1985). Should we acquiesce? Is the native speaker dead?

Characteristics of the native speaker

What is it that is thought to distinguish the native speaker from the proficient non-native speaker? The native speaker (and this means all native speakers) can be characterised in these six ways:

(1) The native speaker acquires the L1 of which s/he is a native speaker in childhood.

(2) The native speaker has intuitions (in terms of acceptability and productiveness) about his/her idiolectal grammar.

(3) The native speaker has intuitions about those features of the Standard Language grammar which are distinct from his/her idiolectal grammar.

(4) The native speaker has a unique capacity to produce fluent spontaneous discourse, which may exhibit pauses mainly at clause boundaries (the 'one clause at a time' facility) and which is facilitated by a huge memory stock of complete lexical items (Pawley and Syder 1983). In both production and comprehension the native speaker exhibits a wide range of communicative competence.

(5) The native speaker has a unique capacity to write creatively (and this includes, of course, literature at all levels from jokes to epics, metaphor to novels).

(6) The native speaker has a unique capacity to interpret and translate into the first language (L1) of which s/he is a native speaker. Typically, international organisations require interpreters to operate one way – from their L2 to their L1. Disagreements about an individual's capacity are likely to stem from a dispute about the Standard Language (Davies 2003a).

How criterial are these distinctions in supporting the idea of a gulf between the native and the non-native speakers? All except (1) are contingent issues. In that way the question: can a second-language learner become a native speaker of a target language? reduces to: is it necessary to acquire a code in early childhood in order to be a native speaker of that code? Now the answer to that question, and this is where the circularity lies, is to ask a further question: what is it that the child acquires in acquiring his/her Ll? But I have already answered that question in my criteria (2)–(6) above, and so the question again becomes a contingent one. However, we need in (2) and (3) above to ensure a cultural dimension since the child Ll-acquirer does have access to the resources of the culture attached to the language and particularly to those learnt and encoded or even imprinted early. Still, having said that, what of subcultural differences between for example the Scots and the English; of different cultures with the same standard language (for example the Swiss, the Austrians, the West Germans and the East Germans)? What too of International English and of an isolated Ll in a multilingual setting (for example Indian English)?

Can a non-native speaker become a native speaker?

English varies widely even within the confined space of the UK, such that Glaswegians, for example, and Londoners, may have difficulty understanding one another. And yet they are all native speakers of English. That being so, it does appear that the post-pubertal second-language learner has a difficult but not an impossible task to become a native speaker of a target language which can contain such wide diversities. The answer to the question of L2 learners evolving into native speakers of the target language must therefore be 'Yes': but the practice required, given the model of the child Ll-acquirer who for five or six years spends much of his/her time learning language alone, is so great that it is not likely that many second-language learners become native speakers of their target language. The analogy that occurs to me here is that of music where it is possible to become a concert performer after a late start but the reality is that few do.

It is difficult for an adult non-native speaker to become a native speaker of a second language precisely because I define a native speaker as a person who has early acquired the language. However, the limitations imposed by the later acquisition, when it is very successful, are likely to be psycholinguistic rather than sociolinguistic. The adult non-native speaker can acquire the communicative competence of the native speaker; s/he can acquire the confidence necessary to membership. What is more difficult is the cognitive problem, to gain the speed and the certainty of knowledge relevant to judgements of grammaticality (Sorace 2003; Hyltenstam and Abrahamsson 2003). But as with all questions of boundaries (for the native speaker is a boundary that excludes) there are major language differences among native speakers. Native speakers may be prepared

to make judgements quickly about grammaticality but they do not necessarily agree with one another. And so I am left asking to what extent it matters. If a non-native speaker wishes to pass as a native speaker and is so accepted then it is surely irrelevant if s/he shows differences on more and more refined tests of grammaticality. That may be of interest psycholinguistically but for applied linguistic purposes I maintain that it is unimportant.

Native speakers may have a cognitive advantage over native users but that does not mean that they necessarily have an advantage in its uses: thus a native user of English who is a professional scientist will always have the advantage of the language of scientific English control over the non-scientist native speaker of English. In other words, both native speakers and native users of English have to learn the language varieties and uses that they need: being a native speaker butters no parsnips. It is therefore revealing to consider examples of specialised language use in Chapter 7 and 8, equally open to both native speakers and native users in order to argue that all social occasions are typically ritualised through specific language uses, uses that need to be learned.

Native speakers are presented with their first language as a gift, but they can lose it too and one of the enduring questions today, especially in the Minority Language field, is just who owns the language: native speakers, or proficient learners who may considerably outnumber native speakers. The native user gains the language over many years which make him/her proficient, indeed fluent, especially in formal registers. The issue at the heart of this book is whether the native speaker and the native user are separated from one another by a fundamental difference or by a continuum.

In Chapter 2, I examine the literary aspects of the native speaker, paying particular attention to the négritude views of Aimé Césaire and more generally to questions of identity. Autobiographical accounts of growing up with more than one language (and identity) are considered. I also examine accounts of language learning by those who seek what they (may) regard as their (lost) identity.

In Chapter 3, I discuss the status of post-colonial Englishes (for example Singaporean English), with particular attention to Indian English and to English as a *lingua franca*, and consider their relation to Standard English. In Chapter 4, I examine the distinction between studies of second-language learning and of second-language acquisition. In Chapter 5, I suggest that what is striking about the spread of English in current times is not its variability, of which, admittedly, there is a great deal, but its stability (Sedlatschek 2009). In this chapter, I suggest that there are two such forces that encourage resistance to change: the first is language norms (Bartsch 1988) which members, those who (wish to) belong as speakers of language X, recognise and practice. Not to do so would imply a wish no longer to belong. The second such force is the Standard Language which comes under attack precisely because it represents a normative position

and, like other modernist grand narratives, it is an easy postmodern target. I examine the arguments of those for whom the Standard Language is a social fact as well as a useful linguistic device, and the arguments of those who view the Standard Language as a hegemonic instrument of political control. I argue that social institutions such as education require norms and that therefore the Standard Language, like the native speaker, performs a useful function.

In Chapter 6, I return to the argument I put forward in the earlier chapters, that the English code which native users learn and which they aspire to perform in daily life is Standard English or an approximation thereto. The question that then has to be asked is how far this view is borne out empirically. In part answer to that question, I present three studies (and refer to a fourth) in which I have investigated whether the model or norm that native users work to in their English performance is the same or different from that of comparable educated native speakers of English.

The three studies are: (1) Davies, Hamp-Lyons and Kemp 2003; (2) Hamp-Lyons and Davies 2008; (3) 'Judgments by educated native and non-native speaker raters of performance by native users of English' (a study funded by the Leverhulme Trust 2007–8 and conducted in Edinburgh, Belgium and Malaysia by Alan Davies).

In Chapters 7 and 8, I discuss specialised language use. In Chapter 7, an empirical study of ministry in Quaker Meetings for Worship is reported. Quaker Meetings for Worship take place in silence, a silence that may be broken by ministry, spoken messages that all are free to utter when they feel called on to contribute. There is no programming of such contributions, no liturgy, no order of service: indeed, Quaker worship is reckoned to be spontaneous, regularly ritualised, which must mean that how to do it and what to say have to be learned.

Chapter 8 takes on an equally problematic use of language, this time the situation of the hoax. Following Goffman (1974), the chapter argues that the act of hoaxing reveals by its ready acceptance how much we take for granted in our primary frameworks of spoken and written interactions. The chapter examines four well-known hoaxes and points out that in its uncovering of what we so readily – and perhaps necessarily – take for granted, the hoax, like the analysis of Quaker ministry in Chapter 7, emphasises the importance in the social lives we lead of learning. A hoax is an error in learning. It reminds us of the importance of continuing to learn so as to avoid such errors. A hoax beguiles us into thinking that our knowledge is perfect: it isn't; learning is always partial, our use of language is always incomplete.

Chapters 7 and 8 take somewhat recondite examples of the native user: the Quaker skilled in ministry is the proficient native user who may, of course, also be a native speaker. And the hoaxer, and the critical reader or listener who sees through the hoax, they too are proficient native users who may also be native speakers.

In Chapter 9, I draw the arguments I have presented together, noting that in spite of the powerful sentimental attachments to local varieties of English and in spite of the powerful rhetoric in their favour, local inertia at present stands in the way of the institutionalising of these varieties. As Schneider (2007) comments: 'Obviously, Postcolonial Englishes have more in common than one might think at first sight' (5). And what they have in common is Standard English. With that in mind, it does seem that what separates the native speaker and the native user is a continuum and not a gulf.

In this chapter, I discuss how language loss can lead to a sense that identity has been lost. For Francophone writers in the 1940s and 1950s, this expressed itself as a loss of their négritude. This language-identity association has echoes of the Linguistic Relativity Principle. Anglophone writers avoided this insecurity, clear that whichever language they thought in and even, perhaps, wrote in, they were always themselves. It seems possible that the very different colonial philosophies of Britain and France may have encouraged these very different views of the colonial language. For some scholars such as David Punter (2000), hybridity is not an answer: his pessimism requires him to focus on the untranslatable, those experiences which he regards as lost when the colonial language, whether it is English or French in Africa, in Wales or in Brittany, takes over. They are lost because there is no language in which to express them. Here again is linguistic relativity writ large, giving language too important a role by asserting that it wholly shapes one's identity. In terms of the NS–NU distinction what differentiates the Francophone and the Anglophone writers of the 1950s and 1960s was that the Francophones were dissatisfied with their native-user status in French and convinced they had lost their native-speaker status in their African languages, while the Anglophone writers were content with being native users in English and remaining native speakers in their mother tongues.

When old settlers say 'One has to understand the country,' what they mean is 'You have to get used to our ideas about the native.' (Doris Lessing 1950: ch. 2)

> Breathes there the man, with soul so dead,
> Who never to himself hath said,
> This is my own, my native land!
> Whose heart hath ne'er within him burned,
> As home his footsteps he hath turned,
> From wandering on a foreign strand.
>
> (Walter Scott 1805: *The Lay of the Last Minstrel*, canto 6, st. 1)

Native, it seems, is about ownership, origin, identity. The quote from Doris Lessing makes very plain the extension of ownership to what one does not own

and the resulting guilt of the old settlers that they may be blamed for taking away ownership from the 'real' originals. This is a central colonial problem, especially in those areas where the incomers are richer economically and racially different from the indigenous 'natives'. Indeed, in North America, these 'natives' are (or were) known as 'Native Americans', the American Indians. And so, from being derogatory, the term can be used as a mark of pride to indicate difference, as in James Baldwin's *Notes of a Native Son*.

The quote from Walter Scott embraces identity: 'native' is contrasted with 'foreign'. The speaker *belongs* in this place, which is hard on those with a convoluted heritage such as Afro-Americans, yanked away from where they were native to a new land where as slaves they had no rights, a land which they were not permitted to regard as theirs. Which means that Baldwin was being both brave and provocative by insisting that he, though a descendant of slaves, he too belonged, he was a *native* son.

Native as belonging also applies to flora and fauna. In the early days of settlement in Australia, plants and animals, including birds, from Europe were introduced, no doubt to remind the settlers of their *real* identity in the old country, which for many was the UK. These invasions of plant and animal life have in recent years been much criticised: today's Australians are confident as to where their home is, that they have an Australian identity, that they are native sons and daughters, and so there is a movement to remove the plants (less perhaps the animals – sheep and cattle have become Australian just as the settlers have) which are said to be destroying the native varieties. Rather like the settlers themselves: in their case, it is the aborigines who have been destroyed. The settlers are not going to be destroyed but cherishing the native plants may promote their sense of identity. Of course, there is something of a logical dilemma to the claims of nativeness. What does 'original' mean? We see this in an acute form in New Zealand where present-day politics accepts that the Maori people were the original inhabitants, the natives. But there are those who maintain that the country was already settled when the Maori arrived in New Zealand about a thousand years ago. Does that mean that the Maori, like the nineteenth and twentieth century European and Asian settlers are not native, not indigenous? While plants and animals cannot make that decision for them-selves, why should the products of human generations in the new place not be seen to be native? If it is difficult to determine who was first, perhaps it should be acceptable for all those resident to claim that they are native. But there is a condition to this and the condition is that the incomers, of whatever vintage, must wish to identify with the place they are in. In other words, to be native is a matter of self-ascription – as James Baldwin (1955) demonstrated.

In Scotland, where I live, many powers are devolved from London to the Scottish government. At present, the political party in government in Scotland is the Scottish National Party (SNP). It is obvious that the SNP government is